



**Nathan
and
Alexander:
Vagabond
Brothers**

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Nathan and Alexander: the vagabond brothers

**An action/adventure/thought piece set in 1870
for
Young adults and adults**

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Family of Man Press

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CHAPTER ONE

Alone

It was not the first time thirteen-year-old Alexander had walked the eighteen miles from his home in Parkville, Maryland to Owings Mills to visit his seventeen-year-old brother, Nathan, but it was the saddest time.

It was Mid-September, 1870. The War Between the States was over. Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated. Ulysses S Grant was president. Women still did not have the right to vote except in Wyoming. Alaska had just been purchased. The first transcontinental railroad was completed six months before and trains had become the preferred mode for long distance transportation. The telegraph spanned the continent, but the widespread use of the telephone was still more than a decade away. The general use of electricity in homes was still five to ten years in the future. Local transportation was provided by horses, buggies, and wagons. The pony express had come and gone years before. A few stagecoach runs were still struggling to survive. For young men, as it has always been for young men, legs moved them through their world.

Nathan and Alexander's parents were German immigrants – Otto and Olga Hoffman – who settled in north central Maryland and worked as field hands in the thriving

produce farming industry in the area. The American dream had not come true for them. They remained quite poor, earning little more than thirty dollars a month between them. When Nathan turned thirteen they arranged with a Mr. Sherwood to take him on as an apprentice and learn his trade as a wainwright – a builder of wagons.

He paid the parents six hundred dollars, a typical sum for a male apprentice of that age. It had been nearly the equivalent of two year's wages for the family. Nathan was obliged to work for Sherwood until his twenty first birthday. Sherwood was obligated to feed him, shelter him, clothe him and teach him the trade. Like many tradesman, he treated his apprentices poorly – often beating them for falling behind in their work or producing substandard products. Nathan lived in a room with five other boys. They slept on blankets on the floor and one glance indicated they were fed less than boys their ages required. He remained thin and pale. The institution of Apprenticeship was the North's dirty little secret, too infrequently compared with slavery in the south. By 1870 the slaves had been freed; the apprentices had not.

Nathan was permitted a two hour visit each month with his family, provided they came to him. Alexander was used to taking food to him – bread, fruit, and carrots – but there would be none on that trip.

Alexander and his parents lived above the stable at the farm where the parents had worked for many years; it was where he and Nathan were born and had grown up. The night before – Sunday, September 18th – there had been a stable fire. By the time the blaze had been discovered it had engulfed the entire old wooden building. Alexander's father had dangled him out the window and dropped him onto a straw filled wagon below. His parents were to follow. Before that could happen, the floor collapsed beneath them and they perished.

Alexander was taken to the minister's home where he was consoled, put up for the night and outfitted with a new set of clothes. Reverend Miller assured him they would find a good home for him during the coming weeks. Being shuttled off to a new home with strangers was nowhere in that thirteen-year old's plans.

Before dawn he let himself out the window and set out to find his brother. Knowing the air would be chilly, and having no coat, he bundled up in a thick blanket; it was his intention to return it – someday. Hoffman boys did not steal.

He was used to making the trip alone; his parents worked on Saturday and they would not miss church on Sunday. So, there he was once again following the roads that had become so familiar to him those previous four years; Parkville west through Pikesville to Randallstown, then north to Owings Mills. His route crossed generally flat terrain – mostly between vegetable fields and meadows. Much of the last leg, north, was cross-country since the roads were less than direct. It would be an eight-hour walk, in his mind a far shorter day than visiting days, since it would not include the eight hour return walk as well. Alexander figured he had seen the last of Parkville, which meant the last of the farm that had always been home, the last of the school he prized, the last of his friends, and of course, his parents.

He should have been hungry and yet he wasn't. His mind had been focused on making his plan rather than on food. He was mostly just sad – terribly, terribly, sad. He was sure Nathan would know what to do so he had not allowed fear or helplessness to get a grip on his mind. His big brother had always taken good care of him – in the days of smiles and laughter back before he had been displaced from their home.

Although he loved his parents, Alexander harbored bad feelings toward them for having sent Nathan away. He understood about the money. He understood about the training. What he didn't understand was how grown-ups could have willingly torn the family apart that way, especially since they had to have known the sort of hurtful environment into which they were condemning him – everybody knew that.

Once west of the town limits he allowed his tears to begin flowing. They weren't quiet tears like from a scraped knee or losing a race, they were chest heaving, sob out loud, wet the front of his shirt tears that blurred his vision and sorely magnified the brightness of the morning sun. He was on his way to find his brother; beyond that he had no clue about what life had in store for him.

With the sun at eight o'clock in the eastern sky,

Alexander understood that his absence would have been discovered and more than likely his destination would have been reckoned as well. He left the roads when others approached him from either direction and hid behind trees or laid flat in the tall grass and under the low bushes.

Alexander was slight of frame but tall for his age. His blond hair hung below his ears, not out of style considerations, but because winter was upon them and it would help keep him warm. He was fluent in both English and German and often still translated written documents for his parents. In that part of the country it was not an unusual situation since many of the parents were immigrants. Which was unusual was that he attended the local secondary school. Alexander was one of only twelve other boys in his class. The vast majority of boys were working in the fields by that age. His parents had recognized that he had a gifted mind and had been determined to nurture it in classrooms for as long as they could. Alexander assumed the money from Nathan had helped make that possible.

The other boys in his class admired him for his skill in sports and physical competition, and the girls were taken by his good looks, vivid blue eyes, and gentle, courteous manner. He had begun sneaking an occasional look back at the girls, although that infatuation had not yet blossomed into the all-consuming, fully confusing compulsion it would in the coming months.

At mid-morning, the minister and a man he didn't know galloped west along the road between Pikesville and Randallstown. They pulled up to rest and talk not ten feet from where Alexander was bellied down behind a long-fallen log. Alexander had two reactions: he was pleased that he was important enough to them so they had come looking for him, but, that never, under any circumstances, did he want them to find him.

That was most certainly confirmed after he heard them talking together. The large man riding with him, who Alexander was quite certain he did not know, was speaking.

"First we make the church his guardian. Then you sign him over to me for his apprenticeship – the church receives five hundred dollars. The boy gets a home and a trade and

the church becomes debt free. My offer holds whether we find him today or later. Eventually he'll surface and I'll take care of him."

'Take care of me, indeed,' Alexander thought to himself. 'Work me twelve hours a day, feed me slop only fit for pigs, and take your belt to me when I fall behind. No thank you!'

Nathan had intentionally not spoken about the worst of the poor conditions – not wanting to concern his brother – but Alexander picked up on things.

The men soon rode on. Alexander decided it was time to leave the roads and head out northwest across the fields toward Owings Mills. The plan worked well. Eventually, he came upon a sunny spot in an orchard next to a spring. With water to drink and apples to eat he stopped to rest. He had been making exceptionally good time. He had become immediately embittered toward Reverend Miller – a man whose sermons and illogic had always scared him, anyway; he had promised him a good home and instead was planning to sell him off like so many bags of potatoes. The building anger seemed to temper his grief and quell the tears. Even at his age he recognized that was not necessarily a wholesome tradeoff.

By 2:00 he had Mr. Sherwood's place in sight. It sat in a shallow valley just below where Alexander had situated himself, his back against a large old tree at the edge of a forest. He needed to work out a strategy. He had been there for a visit just two weeks before so he could not use that as his reason for being there – it would not be allowed. Even coming to deliver the sad news about their parents might not work – Sherwood was heartless.

There were several buildings in the compound. The main house where Sherwood lived with his wife was on the far west end (his left as he sat there), the stable where a dozen horses were cared for sat on the opposite end, and the 'works', as Nathan had referred to it spanned the area in between. It was a long narrow building inside of which the wood was cut, the metal was formed, and the wagons were built. The boys' room was on the second floor of the 'Works' at the far eastern end – the right as he looked down on the

area. He knew which window. Besides the fact that Nathan worked from six a.m. to six p.m. seven days a week, Alexander knew very little about his life.

He figured there would need to be two main elements in his plan; first, to get a message to his brother, and second, to help him escape. A third might be to prepare a place for them to run to and hide. Nathan had told him about the armed guard and the four bloodhounds Sherwood had trained to recapture runaways – apparently, it happened often. That would put Sherwood at an advantage – knowing the possible hiding places and such. He had an idea – Alexander always had ideas – and searched the tree tops in the area with his eyes. On his way to the spot where he was resting at that moment, he had come through a sizeable woods with hundreds of tall old trees – many over 75 feet tall. Bloodhounds didn't climb trees although an armed guard might not need to.

The plan began taking shape. He needed a way to divert and confuse the dogs. Sherwood would give them something containing Nathan's scent so they could track him – his blanket or pieces of clothes, perhaps. Suddenly, the plan had all come together.

He found the perfect tree. It had well-spaced limbs to climb and an abundance of multi-colored leaves still clinging to the branches, which screened the very top from view of anyone on the ground. His plan was to build a small, flat platform upon which they could lay high in the tree, hidden among the leaves and limbs. He broke a dozen, slender ten foot limbs from fallen trees and stripped them of their branches. One at a time he toted them toward the top of his tree. With a sharp rock, he had cut fifty or so feet of thin vines from the sides of the trees and used that to tie the lengths of wood together and secure them flat out across nearby limbs. It took several hours, but in the end, it seemed perfect.

It was four o'clock. The sun would set between 7:15 and 7:30. By then the boys would have eaten and would be in their room. That much he knew about the routine and *that* was when he would contact Nathan. The window was nearly fifteen feet above the ground – making it too far for his brother to jump. The ground beneath it had been strewn with large,

sharp rocks to further discourage attempts at jumping. He set to braiding a rope from vines. It would be ten feet long with a four foot, wooden, crossbar at one end. With the window open, the crossbar would span the frame on the inside and allow the rope to hang down the outside wall. Nathan could let himself down and drop the final few feet.

There were other preparations to tend to. Alexander bound twelve inch sections of inch-thick branches together so they would fit under a shoe and tie in place – like mini snow shoes. He made four – two for Nathan and two for him. With one on each of their feet it should eliminate their scent on the ground – at least that was Alexander’s fervent hope.

He also selected a sturdy twelve-foot branch – stripped it to a more or less straight pole – to use to lift the escape rope and bar up to the window. When younger, they had built a tree house and had established a secret knock: two raps, one rap, three raps. His idea was to tap that signal against the window using the long pole and get Nathan’s attention.

The night before there had been no moon. His lingering discomfort with darkness was one reason he had waited until morning to leave. Alexander was counting on that darkness to work in their favor. He needed paper and pencil. He slipped down the gentle slope to the compound and made his way to the stable. He figured some sort of records probably needed to be kept there – hence, paper and pencil. He was right. Problem. There was a man inside distributing food to the horses in the stalls. He entered through the double door that had been left ajar and hid behind a barrel. While the man went about his task, Alexander surveyed the area. There appeared to be a small room – an office perhaps – just to his right. The door was closed.

Always prepared, Alexander had a contingency plan in mind. If he were discovered, he was going to yell, ‘Fire!’, and make it look like he was helping remove the horses. There was no lock on the office door. Inside he found several things he could use; the paper and pencil he was seeking, a knife with a six-inch blade, a coil of rope that looked to be thirty feet long, a dark colored horse blanket and a small box of wooden matches.

He rolled his finds inside the blanket without a trace of

guilt, which momentarily surprised him. He was soon back atop the hill, well out of sight among the trees. First, he wrote a note to Nathan.

Trust me. You must leave through the window one hour after sunset – eight o'clock or so. I have worked out the plan. Drop your underpants out the window, NOW. If you have a coat or blanket bring it when you come later. I will get a rope to you at the moment of escape. Handle things with the other boys. They can leave, but have them wait at least five minutes. Alexander PS. Eat this note.

From what Nathan had told him, their routine was identical day after day. Stop working at six sharp. Meal finished by six fifteen. Locked in their room for the night at six twenty. His plan was to attach the note to one end of the pole and deliver it at six thirty when it would still be light enough to read it. The hill should provide deep shadows by then that would help hide Alexander wrapped in the black horse blanket.

At six thirty, Alexander was in position with the note attached to the pole. He raised it and delivered the secret rap code against the glass. He had to repeat it twice. That had not been unexpected. The window opened and Nathan's head appeared. Alexander put his finger to his lips. Nathan took the note. A minute later the underpants dropped to the ground and the window closed. Nathan tied the undergarment to one end of a ten-foot length of rope and dragged it along the ground. Sticking to the shadows and bushes, he made his way to the dog kennel on the far side of the compound. He circled it several times. He talked with the animals in a low voice. They seemed playful and offered nothing more than a few whimpers. Keeping to the shadows he continued dragging it around the area and eventually back to the stable. There he looped the free end of the rope around the neck of one of the horses. At the time of the escape he would spank the horse on its way, dragging the garment to who knew where. The idea was that the bloodhounds would follow that scent. Providing the horse didn't climb the hill to the boys' hideout in the tree, the plan seemed flawless to Alexander.

At 8:00 Alexander lifted the vine rope and crossbar into place. At 8:02 Nathan's feet hit the ground. Alexander

immediately tied his brother's shoes into the special tree-twigg soles. Nathan didn't ask. Alexander pointed up the hill and specified his brother's destination. They parted. By 8:05 Alexander had made his way to the stable and sent all twelve horses on a stampede toward the house. By 8:15 he had joined his brother up at the edge of the woods. There was no time for explanations. At 8:25 they were laying on their backs on the sturdy, if uncomfortable, platform high above the ground, listening to yelling men, snorting horses, and four howling, if very confused, bloodhounds. In the midst of so much confusion it was doubtful any of the other boys tried to escape.

"Hello," Nathan said at last, turning his head to look his little brother in his face.

"Hello, to you. I got some terrible news, Nathan. *Mutter und Vater sind tot.*" (Mother and father are dead.) It seemed appropriate to deliver that message in their parent's language.

Nathan held his younger brothers gaze and reached out beside him and found his hand.

"How?"

"The stable burned last night. Father lowered me out the window. They didn't make it. I ran away to come to you. We're all we have now – each other."

Nathan nodded.

"Well, we are *mostly* all we have. There is Dad's brother – Uncle Hermann."

"I did think about him, but we don't know where he is, do we?"

"In Kansas, I'm pretty sure," Nathan said still thinking.

"That sure pinpoints it. A huge area fifteen hundred miles away. What do we do, walk up to the state line, cup our hands to our mouths and call out, 'Uncle Hermann, where are you?'"

A remark like that between them would have usually been the cause for smiles and prolonged laughter. Not that night since it had perceptively summarized the dire nature of their problem.

"We'll have to do more thinking about it," Nathan said. "Something happened between him and Father. They

haven't communicated for fifteen years or more."

There was a period of silence, then Nathan spoke. It was a question.

"You walked?"

Alexander nodded, then, realizing it was pitch dark added, "Yes. Started before daybreak."

He went on to relate his time at the minister's house and his encounter with him and the large man on the trail.

"You did the right thing. I'll never let you get trapped into being an apprentice. I do have to ask. How did you manage to set the compound into such a state of uproar and what was it with my underpants?"

Nathan managed a slight smile into the darkness. He explained the details.

"You are so smart. Your brain makes ten of mine even you're your having a bad day. Thank you, you know. At least now Mr. Sherwood can't go back on Mother and Father for the money he paid them. I'd have left on my own long ago if it hadn't been for that."

"Oh, here's an apple," Alexander said. "I got more. I know where there's a whole orchard full of them some ways back."

They munched on for some time, mostly in silence. Alexander had brought five apples. He had one. They were soon all gone. It made Alexander sad and prompted his next remark.

"We have to find a way to put some meat back on your bones, Nathan. Can't see how you could put in a full day's work as skinny as you are."

Nathan knew full well the 'how' of it, but would not burden his brother with tales of perfect work *or else* belts and fists. Perhaps later. Most likely not.

"We have to find a way to do a lot of things," Nathan said. "I don't even know where to begin."

"I think we have two main priorities, right now, Nathan – find food and stay free. With those two things going for us, we'll find ways to handle everything else."

"Right as usual."

Nathan understood it would be a partnership like it always had been between them. They would work out the

roles as they went along. He knew one thing for sure; he would not try to be a father to Alexander, but he would protect him with his life.”

* * *

Both were exhausted, Nathan from a twelve-hour day’s work and Alexander from hours on the road and many more in hard physical activity preparing things. They were soon asleep.

They were awakened by the early-morning sun as it made its way in among the rustling orange and gold leaves above them.

“I guess we’re really here,” Alexander said. “For a moment there I thought it was a dream.”

Nathan had been awake a few minutes longer and had spent the time trying to pull the several aspects of their situation into focus. He had the practical, in the moment mind; Alexander was the dreamer never considering anything impossible.

“We are here together,” Nathan said. “I think there is one important thing we need to get straight in our minds right from the beginning – we have to see this as a wonderful opportunity to build a fantastic life for ourselves and not allow feelings of sadness or helplessness to take us over.”

“That sounds a lot like my big brother. Let’s shake on that here and now.”

There had always been a handshake between them on things of major importance, like when nine-year-old Alexander had promised to visit Nathan on every visiting day, the last time they saw each other before Nathan was taken from their home.

“How will we decide where to go from here?” Alexander asked, sounding more like his brother than himself.

“I have an idea. Jacob, one of the other boys here, has an older brother that works at a river boat yard up in Brownsville, Pennsylvania. From what he tells, it’s a good place for carpenters. In my four years here, I’ve learned just about everything there is to know about making wagons and wheels. I’m thinking that should transfer to boat building pretty easily.”

“How far is Brownsville?”

“About two hundred miles, I guess. I think the idea has a good side and a bad side.”

“What do you mean?”

“The good is that it is far away from here and in another state. That should put me out of Mr. Sherwood’s reach. The bad is that two hundred miles is a really long walk, and it’s north, so it will get lots colder.”

“Remember our agreement: no bad stuff. It will be a safe place and the walk will strengthen our bodies and give us a chance to put that meat back on your bones.”

“Does it sound to you like we have changed places this morning?” Nathan said. “You the practical one and me the planner.”

“Maybe it just indicates we are becoming more like each other. That can’t be all bad.”

Nathan nodded and smiled.

“You know how to get there – to Brownsville?” Alexander asked.

“Not the foggiest. We need to find a library or a school with maps.”

“Pennsylvania is north,” Alexander said. “What about we head north from here and find a town with a map?”

“How about we detour back to that orchard first and start work on filling out these skinny bones of mine?”

“Take more than apples, but I suppose that’s a good start.”

Together they divided the few possessions between them. Each would have a blanket to draw around his shoulders, with one spare. They needed to get coats immediately. Their list was growing: food, maps, coats.

It was a twenty-minute walk back to the orchard. The air was colder than the night before so they alternated between walking and trotting – the trotting to keep warm, the walking to conserve Nathan’s energy.

As they approached the orchard, the boys said it as one: “Oh, oh!”

There was a team and wagon sitting at the near edge. A man – older from what they could tell at a distance – was up a very tall step ladder picking the apples.

“It was easier taking the apples before I knew who they belonged to,” Alexander said.

“Maybe he’ll let us work it off – pick for him a while in return for a dozen or so,” Nathan said.

“I guess we can try. You do the talking, okay, big brother.”

It was not unexpected since it had been their long-time arrangement – Alexander did the thinking and Nathan did the talking. They moved across the meadow toward the trees.

“Morning, Sir. Nice looking apples.”

The man looked down at them from near the top of what, up close, they could see was a fifteen-foot step ladder.

“Good morning, boys.”

He paused, continuing to look them over.

“Nothing about you two looks right, you know.”

It wasn’t what they had expected in response to their greeting.

“The blankets, you mean?” Nathan said speaking just to buy time as he tried to quickly arrange a story.”

“The blanket, no hats, summer britches, shoes – not boots – miles from a town, at least one of you too young to be out on your own.”

“You are observant,” Alexander offered. “We met with some problems on the trail a way back. Rather not discuss it – makes us look like fools.”

The old man chuckled.

“Get used to it. Bein’ your ages and lookin’ like fools go together. I suppose you’re lookin’ for a handout.”

“Oh, no, Sir. We were wondering if you’d let us work off the price of a dozen new apples plus six old ones.”

The man let the odd statement pass for the moment.

“I see. And if I hadn’t been here you’d have just taken them?”

“Yes, sir. I already took six yesterday – that’s the extra six I mentioned.”

“A strange sort of honesty,” he said beginning to make his way down the ladder.

On the ground, he called out. “Maggie!”

Presently a woman his age appeared, her apron was filled with apples – apparently, she was picking up the ones

that had fallen to the ground.

She offered a wonderful smile.

“What do you have here, Mitchel?”

“Can’t rightly say. Just looked down and there they were shivering their behinds off.”

“Mitchel! Watch your language. There’s a woman present.”

The boys looked at the ground, not used to being caught between a man and his wife. She noticed their discomfort.

“Just teasing, boys. It’s what we do. Keeps us young.”

“They’re lookin’ for a job, Maggie. What do you think?”

“I think first of all they need coats and hats. Let me take them home and get them outfitted. Then you and them can talk work.”

Mitchel hitched his head at the boys, meaning go with her. She walked to the wagon and emptied her apron into the back of it. She made a move to mount to the seat. Although still confused about what was taking place, Nathan was immediately by her side offering assistance.

“You see that, Mitchel? These are classy young gentlemen. Take a lesson from them.”

They shared a loving smile and the old man moved back up the ladder.

“You boys climb in back – don’t squash the apples.”

It had been Maggie.

“I will be happy to take the team, ma’am,” Nathan offered.

“You two just hunker down back there and keep warm. I suppose you have a story.”

“I suppose we do,” Nathan said, flashing a smile.

Both boys had wonderful smiles and they offered them freely.

“Case closed, you’re saying?” she said.

“Sorry, but yes. For now, at least. We’re not dangerous if that’s what was on your mind.”

“Think I’d have started out alone with two strong lads if I had thought you were dangerous? I may be old but I’m not stupid.”

The boys grinned, uncertain how to respond.

It was no more than a five-minute ride. They arrived at a two-story farm house, which sat in front of a once red barn. Chickens roamed free, pigs squealed from a muddy enclosure, cows grazed in a meadow, and the horses headed directly for the watering trough.

“Come inside. We have a closet full of clothes that will fit you boys.”

“I suppose you also have a story,” Nathan said, referring back her earlier statement.

She offered a bitter sweet smile that told of great sorrow. Nathan was sorry he had spoken the way he had even before she began to speak.

“Two boys. Lost them both in the War Between the States.”

“We are so sorry. I shouldn’t have said what I said.”

“Nonsense. Of course, you should have. They were seventeen and twenty – a few years older than you, I’m thinking. The younger one was small for his age. His things should fit . . .”

“I’m Alexander. We apologize for not introducing ourselves. I’m thirteen, but tall for my age. My brother is Nathan. He’s seventeen and just about right for his age.”

“What wonderful names – Nathan and Alexander. Our sons were William and Frank. I’m thinking you already caught ours.”

“Yes ma’am. Mitchel and Maggie.”

“Let’s get upstairs and see what we can find.”

Nathan felt he needed to make sure she understood about their finances.

“We have no money, but like we said, we’re willing to work off whatever we will owe you.”

“That’ll be between you and Mitchel.”

During the next fifteen minutes Maggie outfitted the boys with winter weight trousers and shirts, stockings, boots, coats and hats. There was even an old carpet bag to keep their current things in.

Back downstairs, Maggie had just one more thing on her mind.

“Now, we need to get a man-sized breakfast into you boys if you’re going to put in a day’s work for Mitchel. He’s a

kind and gentle man, but he expects a generous hour's work for less than a generous hour's pay."

The boys would not turn down a meal even if it meant a week of apple picking.

Thirty minutes later they returned to the orchard ready for work. Mitchel gave them quite specific instructions on how to go about picking the apples. They understood he was serious about the procedure and, frankly, neither had given the matter any thought before – a right and wrong way to pick apples. The solid, good looking apples with no spots, bruises or worm holes were to have short stems left on them – an attached leaf would be a good thing. They would be sold as produce in stores. The rest – the bruised, malformed, and spotted were to be picked without a stem. They would become jam or cider and there was no place for woody stems in such products. Making that difference as they were picked saved time later on.

They worked from noon to dusk. Mid-afternoon they had visitors. Nathan was at the top of a ladder and saw the pair approaching on horseback some time before they arrived. Without explanation, he hurried to the ground and took Nathan by the hand. They ran across the orchard and out of Mitchel's sight.

CHAPTER TWO

The First Encounter

The men on horseback set an easy pace toward the old man.

“Looking for a runaway apprentice. I’m Eldridge Sherwood, the wainwright, over at the Sherwood Wagon Company. Seventeen, slender, long blond hair. Probably without a coat or hat.”

“A runaway? My. My. Why on earth would a young apprentice want to run away?”

It had been delivered with more than a hint of sarcasm. They exchanged looks. Sherwood’s suggested it was none of the old man’s business how he treated his workers. Mitchel’s had made it clear he understood about the terrible conditions at his business. It also defined the level of cooperation Sherwood could expect and *that* they both quickly understood.

“Well, you seen him?”

“These ol’ eyes ain’t what they once was, but I believe I’d know a boy if I seen one. Afraid I can’t be of assistance.”

“That’s a lot of apples for one old man to have picked in a morning’s time,” Sherwood said urging his horse closer so he could look down into the wagon.

“Who said they were all picked today?”

Sherwood surveyed the area, snorted, kneed his horse and they rode off toward the east.

Maggie had witnessed the exchange. She went to join her husband and put her arm through his.

“I suppose that explains *half* our question.”

The taller, skinny, half, I’m thinking,” Mitchel said.

Maggie nodded.

They both turned and looked in the direction toward which the boys had run.

"Names are Nathan and Alexander," she said. "Think they'll come back."

"Time'll tell, I suppose."

Mitchel was not one to dawdle over things he could not control so he climbed the ladder and went back to the task of picking apples. It was also a better vantage point from which to keep an eye out for both friends and foe. A half hour passed. Alexander returned, moving with some care and stealth among the trees. He approached Maggie first.

"So?" he asked in a quiet voice.

The one word asked many questions: Had they found out about Nathan's recent past? How were they going to react to his running away? Did they want them to move on immediately so they would no longer be involved? What about the things they had given them? Did they have any suggestions?

"So, we assume *you* are not the one Mr. Sherwood is looking for," Maggie said.

Alexander nodded.

"Thanks for not sicking him on us."

Mitchel climbed down and walked to them.

"I'm not objecting to what Nathan did, mind you, but you do know what he has done is illegal."

"We understand. We also understand that what Mr. Sherwood has been doing to him is inhumane and immoral."

"You'll get no argument from us."

"If you want us to leave, we'll understand," Alexander went on. "It is not our intention to put you in an uncomfortable position or in any danger."

Mitchel spoke again.

"Well, I do want you to leave, but only back into the middle of the orchard where you won't be seen by passers by. We'll set you up with baskets and one of the ladders."

"You are very kind. No amount of work we can do will ever repay you."

Alexander put his fingers to the corners of his mouth and whistled three times. Presently, Nathan appeared.

Alexander gave the short explanation. Nathan added his thanks and they set about moving the equipment.

By dusk they had filled the wagon and were all four standing near it.

"I pay by the day," Mitchel said. "Fifty cents a day. I believe you said eighteen apples at a penny each is eighteen cents off of fifty cents salary times two, leaves forty-one cents apiece for today I figure."

"You forgot to add in the breakfast and the clothes," Alexander said. "I figure we owe you nearly a week of work."

"Did you ask for the breakfast or clothes?"

"Well, no."

"That's right. You asked for the apples and you'll pay for the apples. The rest is yours because we want you to have it. We will understand if you move on now, but we could sure use your help for the rest of the week if you want to earn some more money for your . . . trip, I suppose we can call it."

"I can tell your sons were fortunate to have you for parents," Nathan said. "We'll have to confer about your offer."

They moved several yards away and spoke in low tones.

"What do you think?" Alexander.

"Sherwood has already looked here. You suppose he'll come back?"

"Hard to know," Nathan said. "He won't easily give up on retrieving a runaway, I can tell you that for sure. The man who was with him is Cantrell. He's the guard and the one who lays on the belt. He's a mean person by nature."

"The belt?"

"I let that slip. Sorry. I'll tell you about it later. We have our first big decision to make. What do you think?"

"Five more days at a dollar a day between us is a lot of money, Nathan. It would be a good stake for our 'trip' as Mitchel put it."

"There is a risk if we stay."

"I know, but with Mitchel and Maggie looking out for us I'd say it is a very minimal risk."

"We stay and work, then?"

"That's what it sounds like," Alexander said.

It was noteworthy enough to require a hand shake and

that's what it got. They turned and walked back to the old couple.

"Okay. It looks like we'll take you up on your kind offer, but we will need to move on after no more than five more days."

"Let's get these apples back to the barn, then," Mitchel said, depositing forty-one cents into each of their palms.

"How does a ham and yams dinner sound?" Maggie asked. "It's Mitchel's favorite."

"We can't just keep eating your food, ma'am," Nathan said. "I mean, we appreciate it more than you can know, but . . ."

"But nothing. You are clearly well bred boys so you know better than to offend folks by refusing their friendship."

"You drive a hard bargain," Nathan said, "forcing us to eat your good food."

Mitchel ribbed him with his elbow. "Just wait 'til she insists you stay overnight up in the boys' room."

He chuckled. His eyes met hers and they shared another sad smile. Alexander began to suspect that his brother just may have not been the first apprentice this couple had helped escape. He would not bring it up, however.

While Maggie cooked, Mitchel and the boys arranged baskets of apples in the living room and they set to polishing them. Nathan began with a damp cloth, cleaning off the dust; Alexander was next with a dry towel, and Mitchel then polished them to a sheen with a wool rag. He arranged them in a basket ready to deliver to a grocery store. The process went surprisingly fast. The boys understood they were off the clock, so to speak, and that was just fine with them.

Dinner was finished by nine and the boys were directed up to the bedroom which had held the clothes.

"Breakfast at five," Maggie called after them. "And, Alexander, leave your shirt and trousers in the hall beside your door. I can see I need to shorten the sleeves and legs."

It was the largest, softest, best smelling bed either boy had ever experienced. There were two pillows, two sheets, a blanket and a heavy comforter. Alexander wanted to talk, but Nathan was immediately asleep. (Alexander always wanted to talk and Nathan was always immediately asleep!) Little

brother understood and soon closed his eyes as well. It had been four years since they had slept beside each other in a bed and for Alexander it was an important occasion.

The week went by rapidly. They're backs ached from standing in unnatural positions on the ladders, leaning one way and the other to reach the apples. Alexander was amazed at how much Nathan could eat. Just watching pleased him into grins and chuckles at every meal. It was never explained.

Alexander was also impressed with how strong Nathan was despite his generally gaunt appearance. The years of work with saws and hammers and carrying the heavy beams of wood had concentrated his brother's body mass in his arms and upper chest. The task would be to get the rest of his six-foot frame to catch up.

The boys worked through to Saturday evening. The vast majority of the apples had been picked, polished, and primed for market. They would miss the bed and the good meals, but most of all they would miss Mitchel and Maggie. They were the best kinds of friends – wise, but not ones to force their wisdom on others.

They left early Sunday morning with new-to-them knapsacks filled with supplies and food enough for several days. The boys had discussed leaving the money they had earned behind on their bed, but figured that would hurt their new friends' feelings.

Mitchel had a book of maps and Alexander had spent time copying sections of two that showed the area north from Owing Mills to Brownsville. Mitchel had given them the name and location of a livery company that he thought had a regular run north and south in the general area they had described to him. Perhaps they could work part of their way north. They had carefully avoided indicating the destination so it couldn't inadvertently slip through their old friend's lips.

As it turned out, several things about Nathan's estimates regarding the trek to Brownsville had been inaccurate. It lay much further west than he had been led to think.

It would be nearly 110 miles to the western border of Maryland and then 75 miles north into Pennsylvania. There

would be several chains of north to south Appalachian hills to cross in the process so actual foot ahead of foot distance would be a good deal further. They would keep traveling west and hit Frederick where they would get on the Cumberland Road. That would take them west through Hagerstown, and Cumberland in Maryland and then northwest through Uniontown, Pennsylvania and eventually to Brownsville, which was south of Pittsburgh on the Monongahela River.

The morning air was cool, but thanks to their recent benefactors they were prepared in every way. According to Alexander's map Reisterstown, the first settlement they would come to, was some twelve miles almost due west. Their plan was to stick to the back trails and the flat valley floors at least that far, rather than risk unwanted encounters on the main roads. It would add a little distance and time, but they could make good use of that getting reacquainted. Despite a week together already, they had very little time to just catch up, privately, between them. They had worked long days and slept long nights. Up and down ladders three hundred times a day turned out to be exhausting. They both admired Mitchel's stamina.

Nathan's story was fairly monotonous – work and sleep, although as time went by he would have many skills and a fine store of knowledge to share about various woods and working them. There was also an untold story; one he might or might not reveal to his brother at some later time. There had been six of them – two older, one other seventeen-year-old and two thirteen. One of the younger boys had just come to replace the oldest who had turned 21 and left a month earlier. No two of them would have been friends under other circumstances. But, they, were what they had. Bickering was not tolerated so they made the best of it. When they talked at work it had to be strictly about things necessary to the tasks at hand. Anything else would give them a mark. After supper each night, Cantrell laid on one strike to their buttocks with the belt for each mark they had been assigned during the day – the exception being that the first mark of the day was always worth five strikes. Other things for which strikes were meted out included poor workmanship, wasting material, falling behind, and muttering. Complaining outright

or talking back resulted in an immediate beating, which involved slaps to the face and fists delivered hard and deep into the boy's mid-section. Life as an apprentice at the Sherwood Wagon Company was a terrible thing to endure.

Alexander had many things to relate and Alexander always enjoyed relating things. Most of them were positive and that helped Nathan begin leaving his hate-filled and fear-filled self behind. For the first time in years it allowed him to believe in the possibility of a future built in hope and purpose. Just the detailing of things from Alexander's life gave Nathan a wonderful feeling inside. There were fewer than two dozen students in the newly formed public secondary school which he attended. It provided services to a four-county area and was attended primarily by boys from wealthy families. Most other boys were working by that age. There was a teacher qualification program which was mostly studied by girls – one year of study beyond elementary school, which resulted in a certificate to teach. Alexander had been in the general curriculum, studying mathematics, world history, philosophy and natural science. Modern languages were a requirement, but he had done well enough in a test of his knowledge of German to skip that. He had substituted advanced Grammar and Composition. Maggie had included several school books for him when she saw his interest. At thirteen he was well ahead of others his age, on schedule to complete the third year of studies by January of that school year.

Alexander had chattered on, filling the hours with his happy stories. Nathan was pleased his family's life had been so good. He had struggled not to blame his parents for his situation. He tried to tell himself it was a way he could contribute to their wellbeing and to prepare him for his future. Some days between six fifteen and six twenty it was difficult to maintain that perspective.

By noon they could see Reisterstown. They stopped beside a trail to eat and rest. The calves of their legs were sore from the ladders and they laughed about walking like old men. Laughter had been a staple in their home and they had learned to see the humor in things both outside and inside of them. For Nathan, that had been put on hold for those years with Sherwood, and he found himself reluctant from habit to

laugh and smile, fully expecting Cantrell and his Mark Slate to arrive to intimidate him.

“We’ve only averaged two miles an hour, Nathan. That puts us ten days away from Brownsville on foot.”

“I’m hoping that once we leave ‘Sherwood territory’ we can find ways to hitch rides – liveries, boats, I’m not sure what will be available.”

“We have a little over five dollars, but I’m thinking we should save that for food,” Alexander said.

“That’s a good plan. Wish we had Papa’s rifle, we could have rabbit and squirrel every evening from the number we’ve been kicking up.”

“I suppose we could use the money to buy a gun to provide our food,” Alexander said.

“Better give that some serious thought, first. Think we could get a gun for five dollars?”

“A used one, I’d think,” Alexander said. “Then there would be balls and powder and caps, too.”

“Shall we go into town and see what we can find?” Nathan asked.

“I suppose that’s the only way to find out.”

The town turned out to be very small. There was a general merchandise store, which looked to be right out of an old west Main street. It appeared to be the best bet for a rifle. They entered. The proprietor was an elderly man.

“We’re thinking about purchasing a used rifle,” Nathan offered as a conversation starter.

“Just got one, a old Richmond. I’m told it seen all four years in the war. I fired it. Good accuracy. Moderate kick. Got a split stock and no strap. Comes with a Army ammunition pack – a dozen or so balls and powder.”

It sounded like he was talking down the price before they even started talking deal. He removed it from pegs behind the counter and offered it to Nathan for examination.

“We were hoping for something better than this,” Nathan said beginning the negotiation.

“Like I said, only one I got – plus I’m throwing in the ammunition.”

“What you think it’s worth?”

“Six dollars and that’s a bargain.”

“Lots better deals over at Frederick, I’m told. Thanks for your time, though.”

He put the gun on the counter and turned to leave. Alexander, not really understanding the process of bargaining, followed, puzzled. The old man spoke again.

“What you going to use it for?”

“Rabbit and squirrel along the trail. We’re heading for Baltimore. Need to eat along the way, you understand.”

“That’s quite a way. You on foot?”

“On four of them, actually.”

The old man chuckled and nodded.

“What you prepared to pay?”

“Three, tops. Money’s hard to come by at our ages.”

“You be willing to work off two dollars?”

“Have to be on our way. Could probably stick around long enough to work off one.”

The old man looked at Alexander.

“I’m guessing he’s nobody to play poker with.”

“Oh, you’re right there. You seem to have a keen sense about people.”

“Any good with a hammer and saw?”

“We can manage. What you thinking?” Nathan said.

“Need a set of steps finished – to the upstairs – outside.”

“Can we see the project before we agree to it?” Alexander said.

The old man turned and headed for the rear door. The boys followed him out back.

“Got it framed up but having trouble getting it finished – climbing ladders ain’t compatible with my old bones no more.”

“You have all the material there the way it looks,” Nathan said giving the whole scene a once over. You have the tools and ladder?”

“All in the basement – through that door.”

“Will you give us a minute to confer?”

“I’ll be inside.”

“We can have this completed by sunset,” Nathan said. “What do you say?”

“Sounds like a good arrangement to me.”

They returned inside and agreed to the terms. The

boys set to work. By seven o'clock, according to Nathan's prediction, the flight was finished. Alexander brought the old man outside to examine their handiwork. He studied it for some time.

"That's first-class work boys. Finished like cabinets. Much more than I was expecting. I could get you lots a work around these parts if you have a mind to stay a while."

"You're very kind, but we must be on our way in the morning."

Alexander, the keeper of the finances, handed over the money in exchange for the gun and leather ammunition pack.

"I suppose you could stay in the room at the top of those steps you built if you need a place out of the cold tonight," he said. "No heat but inside's better than out."

"That's very kind," Nathan said. "Thank you. We'll take you up on that."

* * *

The next morning, they were on their way at sunup. Nathan had slept well; a blanket on the floor was what he was used to. Alexander not so much, but he managed enough sleep to set him up for the day. They each felt an interesting blend of excitement and something else. It was more nebulous, less fear and more uncertainty – the first time they had reason to define them as separate. They intentionally skipped any discussion of it.

"Well, here we go," Nathan began as they stepped off west on the main street of the little town.

"I've decided to think of it as 'here we continue'," Alexander said.

He had been doing some deep thinking while not sleeping and went on to explain.

"What I mean is, we've both had the lives we've had up to this point and now whatever lies ahead of us will just be a continuation. It's sort of like a test to see how well the first years of our lives prepared us for the rest of it."

"Interesting. I like that. So, it will be then. Here we continue!"

It should have been the occasion for a handshake, but for some reason wasn't. Perhaps that ritual had lived its life and was not following them into their 'continue'.

“You fascinated me how you bargained down the price of the rife. Somebody teach you that or did you just discover it on your own.”

“Some of both I suppose. Does it matter?”

“It doesn’t have to matter to you, but it does to me. People are always asking me who taught me this or who taught me that, when usually I’ve just figured it out by myself. I hate that. It’s like nobody gives me credit for being able to think – like if you have some skill or idea somebody else must have given it to you. Burns my risibles!”

Nathan smiled.

“You’ve been saying that risibles thing for as long as I can remember, but I never really thought about what they were til now.”

“Some undifferentiated portion of my gut that catches fire when somebody tries to foist their ignorance on me.”

“Foist?”

“Impose on me, force on me.”

That sort of exchange was common between them, Alexander using a word or phrase with which Nathan was not familiar and Nathan asking for clarification. It was never an, ‘I’m smarter than you’, or put down. It was just one of the realities of life between them – like Nathan always winning foot races or wrestling matches. (Although like all little brothers before him, Alexander looked forward to that first time he would be fast enough or strong enough to pull off a genuine victory.)

According to the map Alexander copied, the road out of town would cross the famous Cumberland Road within just a few miles. Although unmarked in any way, they knew what it was the moment their feet first touched it – a ten-foot-wide, graveled road set between six by six inch treated beams resembling railroad ties – longer. It was the most modern cross-country road in the whole United States – parts of it closer to Baltimore had even been surfaced with macadam (a precursor to black top).

“We could follow this all the way to Illinois, you know,” Alexander said not really making it a suggestion.

“How far is that, do you know?”

“Six hundred and twenty miles give or take several

feet,” Alexander said, grinning.

Within the family, he was known for being overly precise about things. It was never ‘a few minutes after ten’. It would be ‘eight and a half minutes after ten’. The more he got teased about it the more he felt compelled to continue – it became a part of his definition of himself. Other people’s reactions do that – help us define ourselves.

Nathan reached out, removed Alexander’s hat and ruffled his hair unmercifully. That hadn’t happened for years – touching was not allowed during visits at the Wagon Company. For Alexander that act provided a kind of reassurance that things were going to be just fine. For Nathan, it defined his new level of responsibility for his younger brother. He gladly accepted it and hoped he would somehow find ways of living up to it.

“The first hundred and fifty miles is actually the Baltimore Pike. It was started as a business enterprise – private companies building portions of it and charging a toll for its use. We’re on that now. Won’t officially become the Cumberland until just west of the city of Cumberland. From there on west it was originally financed by the Federal Government, but once it was built each state became responsible for its upkeep.”

“How far we go on it?”

“Up to Uniontown, Pennsylvania. That’s 160 miles from where we are. Then it’s just fifteen miles on up to Brownsville. Brownsville is on the Monongahela River. It runs north and meets with the Allegheny River – which flows south – to form the Ohio River which runs west to the southern tip of Illinois where it enters the Mississippi.”

“I’ll bet the boats I’m going to help build probably sail the Ohio, don’t you?”

“I’m sure they do. You sound excited about building boats.”

“I am. It’s somehow special to think I will actually be able to put everything I’ve learned to good use. I hated it all so much the past four years that it’s very difficult for me to think about it as something to be thankful for – you understand – of course you do, you understand everything.”

“Continuation, remember!”

“I’m trying to. You may need to remind me sometimes.”

“I’ve been known to be capable of such a thing.”

It was cause for grins. Until he turned nine his nickname within the walls of their home had been, Perfect Pest. They refrained from abbreviating it for obvious reasons. He had never been sure if that meant he embodied the essential qualities of the worst kind of pest or, as pests went, he made outstanding (perfect) contributions to the family. He preferred to assume the later.

The hills became higher and steeper and although the road had been laid out to provide the easiest route available, hills and mountains were still hills and mountains. By late morning (10:53 according to Alexander) they realized that it had been sometime since they had eaten. There had been some discussion about which one should be the marksman. It had always been Nathan before, of course, but he hadn’t fired a shot in over four years. Alexander hunted for game almost every weekend. It was decided he should take the first shots.

One shot, one rabbit, one lunch.

They were on the road again within the hour. The next time they would allow the meat to cook a bit longer. It was all part of coming to grips with the new – continuing – phase in their lives.

By sundown they were just about to come upon Frederick, a far larger town than Reistertown. The hills were wooded and the boys soon found a place to camp near a tiny stream, probably fed by a spring not far away. The creek bed was mostly rounded, gravel size rocks and the water pure. They had found the one canteen Mitchel and Maggie had provided didn’t hold enough water for the two of them for a whole day. A second was added to their ‘we need this’ list.

They soon had a nice size campfire going and had the meat from the two squirrels Alexander had bagged, sizzling on flat rocks in the center the circle of flames. Their campsite occupied a small opening in a grove of chinquapin trees and they soon had picked the lower branches clean of nuts. It was a small sweet nut on which squirrels – and apparently, boys – thrived.

At about the same time as they were licking their fingers clean from their evening meal they heard an unfamiliar

sound out of the darkness. It vaguely resembled the low, continuous growl of a dog – though not really. Before they could confer about what it might be, it showed itself at the far edge of the ring of light from their fire. They had both seen pictures. There was no doubt – a gray coyote; a gaunt gray coyote, tongue hanging out, dripping, pacing back and forth as if measuring its own supper.

CHAPTER THREE

“Nuts to you, Coyote!”

“Think the fire will keep it away?” Alexander asked scooting back a bit.”

“I’d rather count on up a tree than near a fire,” Nathan said. “We can get a good ten feet off the ground in this one behind us.”

“The rife is on the other side of the fire,” Alexander pointed out.

“I still think up a tree without a gun is better than on the ground loading a gun while being dragged out into the night by a vicious beast.”

No response was required to the cogent suggestion. They moved slowly, scooting backward toward the tree. Nathan urged Alexander up first. Chinquapins had branches well down the trunk, but they did not grow tall and their close knit upper limbs were often neither large nor sturdy. Nathan followed. He had grabbed the only equipment within reach – the coil of rope. He had no idea what assistance it might be.

They were no more than five feet off the ground when the small limbs began to bend under their weight. The Coyote moved to the base of the tree from the side opposite the fire.

“Give me one end of the rope,” Alexander said with some urgency.

Nathan reached it to him.

“I’ll tie it here above me to this limb. Then, you cinch it once around the trunk and up over there around your limb. Make it good and tight and it should distribute the weight so the tree will hold us as we climb higher.”

It took only a few minutes and provided exactly what he

had hoped. They soon inched their ways up another six feet and the branches remained stable. The Coyote made a few attempts to reach up the trunk with its front legs and launched one feeble attempt at leaping up at them. It lay down at the base of the tree as if planning to wait them out.

“Seems to be a patient animal,” Alexander said.

“A known man-eating monster, gnashing her teeth and dripping saliva three yards from us and you characterize her as a patient animal – could just as well be describing a grandmother.”

“Well, she doesn’t seem *impatient*, would you say?”

“I guess not. How about a practical suggestion, however, since I doubt she’s going to don an apron and serve us milk and cookies.”

“You mean something like this?”

Alexander picked a nut and hurled it at the animal. It hit her on the neck. The intruder whimpered and changed positions. Within seconds the two of them were pelting the animal with nuts clearly inflicting a good deal of irritation if not pain. It stood and paced, continuing to yelp from direct hits. In the end, it looked back giving them a final once over and trotted off into the darkness.

“Well, that was an informative and useful encounter,” Alexander said thoughtfully.

“What? How?”

“We learned at least two good lessons: always keep the rifle at our side and always have the rifle loaded and ready to fire.”

“So, you’re saying we really should be thanking the coyote for holding that educational exercise for us?”

“Well put, big brother.”

The boys remained in the tree for a half hour. The fire began burning low. They returned to the ground and built it up significantly. While the coyote was there ‘holding class’, it had not moved within ten feet of the flames, which, in the boys’ minds, translated a bigger fire into increased safety.

“Surely there are critters more to her liking out there than us, don’t you think?” Alexander asked.

“Let’s hope she finds something soon so she won’t be back,” Nathan said. “I hadn’t counted on anything like that. In

fact, I heard they were on the decline in these parts.”

“I guess that one didn’t get the message!”

It was worth grins.

“I suppose, considering everything, we should sleep in shifts with a loaded rifle,” Nathan said.

“I will vote for that and will offer to take the first watch. You seem to be able to go to sleep regardless of the malevolent forces at work in your life.”

“This is me, your brother, Nathan, kid. If you’re going to use nickel words instead of penny words, you’ll have to offer a running set of definitions.”

“I know your secret, Nathan.”

“What secret?”

Nathan offered a grin.

“That you often play dumb just so I can look smart. I’ll bet you our remaining three dollars and eighty-two cents that you figured malevolent meant evil right from the start.”

“Actually, I guessed ‘bad’ but I suppose that’s close enough, huh?”

“You know I don’t do that to put you down, right – use those kinds of words?” Alexander said fully serious, clearly needing a response.

“Of course. You are who you are and I am who I am and that’s good – the way God intended us to be.”

Alexander could have enjoyed a good discussion about the reality of god at that moment, but thought better of it, suddenly feeling the belief was important to Nathan. He would not take that away. He nodded and loaded the gun while Nathan arranged his blanket – close to the fire. As predicted by little brother, he was immediately asleep.

There were no further encounters with their scruffy, gray haired intruder. It would be a good story to tell their grandchildren: the night the two of them held off a pack of starving coyotes with nothing for weapons other than nuts and the great courage of George Armstrong Custer.

The next morning Nathan was again awake and stirring first. He had been conditioned to be up and ready for work by six every morning – or else.

He was sitting, legs drawn up under his chin, gazing into the fire when Alexander opened his eyes.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You deep in thought or just warming your eyeballs, big brother?”

“I wonder if anybody in the whole history of human language has ever asked somebody if they were warming their eyeballs.”

“Like you said, I am what I am and proud not be just like anybody else.”

“In answer to your question, I was just enjoying how great it is to be here with you instead of back at Sherwood’s. Every day when I wake up it’s like the greatest realization all over again. I don’t want that first wonderful moment of my day to ever fade away.”

Alexander nodded, realizing he could never really understand the full significance of what his brother had said.

“Let’s look at what Maggie sent along for food. Salt pork, carrots, potatoes and apples, I’m guessing.”

Nathan reached out and pulled his knapsack close.

“Right on, plus radishes, hard rolls and jam – amazingly, apple jam.”

They each managed a sizeable breakfast from her offering and were on the road again by seven.

“Probably a ten to twelve-hour trek to Frederick,” Alexander said refolding his map to show his brother the section they would be walking that day. “Think we’re completely away from Sherwood yet?”

“Cantrell hated my guts. If he has a say in it he’ll keep looking.”

“Will he have a say?”

“I imagine so. He and Sherwood go way back – not sure just how. He’s ten or so years younger than Sherwood.”

“You going to share with me why he hates your guts as you so delicately put it?”

“I’d never make a sound or twitch a single muscle while he was laying on licks. That made him furious. I’m sure he gave me more than I’d earned because of it, but I was determined not to let him win.”

“I hope it was worth it.”

“It was the only way any of us could win at anything. I’d

rather not spoil a beautiful day talking more about it. I'll answer all your questions later on – I really will."

Alexander nodded and looked off into that beautiful day his brother had just mentioned. It was clear with a full sun sky. There was no breeze to speak of and the air temperature was already well into the sixties. It had been known to hit eighty degrees in mid-September in that area. They shed their coats and hats, rolling them so they could strap them under their knapsacks on their backs.

The morning passed more or less uneventfully. They met several lone riders and three wagons heading back east. A group of three riders passed them going west. The boys left the road into the brush when travelers appeared behind them. The sun was directly overhead when Nathan pointed and spoke.

"What's that up ahead?"

They stopped to survey the situation.

"Looks like a toll gate," Alexander said. "Didn't know they still charged tolls this far west."

"I suppose we could leave the trail and bypass it," Nathan said more as a possibility than a suggestion.

"It's at a narrow neck of land, there – sheer drops on both sides," Alexander said. "An ideal spot for a toll gate. Have to move down a steep slope on this side and travel up an impossibly sheer cliff over there to get beyond it. I suggest we see what the toll is."

They walked on, approaching the gate. Alexander read the sign out loud.

"Horse and rider, ten cents. Team and wagon, twelve cents. Walker, five cents."

Nathan spoke to the old man who was wearing a straw hat, seated on a bench there beside the gate. He was struggling to light his pipe in the sudden breeze.

"Morning, sir. Beautiful morning."

"Tis that. Bad weather still six weeks out, yet. Be blowin' snow by then. Temps won't git out a the forties."

It had been an unexpectedly long greeting, but had actually provided useful information.

"What will it cost for the two us – me and my little brother?"

The old man looked them over.

“Brothers, huh? I can do seven cents. No less.”

It sounded like there just might be room for some haggling over the fee. It was then that Nathan noticed the problem with the gate.

“How long the gate been broken?”

“Since last week. Just the swivel bar – the axil. Broke in the center. Makes it really hard to lift, I’ll tell ya that.”

“I can imagine. What it be worth to you if we’d fix that for you?”

“Worth? You, carpenters?”

“Four years, now,” Nathan said. “Won’t take two hours.”

The old man removed his hat and scratched his head.

“I suppose I could give you passage.”

“That mean no toll?” Alexander asked wanting to be clear about terminology.

“That’s right.”

“How far the toll take us?” Alexander continued.

“All the way to Cumberland. This here’s the last toll you’ll come across.”

Alexander turned to his brother.

“That’s about eighty miles. Seems like a good deal.”

Nathan turned back to the old man.

“I think we have a deal, then. Do you have any tools?”

“Mallet, crosscut, auger with several bits, chisels, a few other things. I keep ‘em here to repair wagons.”

“I’m Nathan. This is Alexander.”

The boys offered their hands for shakes and lowered their packs to the side of the road.

“Looks to be a heavy old oak beam,” Nathan said. “No offense but I’m surprised you can lift it.”

“Been needin’ the help of whoever was passin’ through.”

Nathan nodded.

“We’ll have it fixed in no time. Problem is somebody went the easy route and installed a soft pine axil.”

The man looked a bit sheepish as he produced the tools from a large box behind the bench.

“I got some old oak pieces over there if that’ll work

better. Oak's the devil to cut once it's dry like it is."

Nathan looked over what was available, and selected a three foot long, four by four.

"This should work fine. You're right, oak's hard to cut, but strong as iron."

An hour later they had removed the broken swivel rod with the chisel and mallet and had cut a four-inch round replacement axil two feet long. Nathan and the old man held the gate beam in place so the hole in it was positioned at the hole in the support pole set deep into the ground. Alexander manned the mallet and the rod was soon driven into place. It was a perfect fit.

"This is still a pretty heavy lift," Nathan said. "For a dime, we can add a weight to the tail end on the far side of the support pole that will make it light as a feather for you to lift."

Nathan illustrated what he meant with a stick and stone. The old man nodded.

"A nickel apiece is as high as I can go."

Alexander snorted wondering how he would not know two nickels equaled the dime Nathan had requested. He didn't comment. Two nickels would work fine – he'd even be willing to settle for ten pennies. His smile continued.

The modification took less time than Nathan had predicted. They found a large, rectangular rock that weighed close to fifty pounds. Using wire from the tool box they fastened it in place at the very rear end of the gate pole. The added weight there did just what Nathan had promised – well, perhaps not as light as a feather, but the old man could easily lift the beam with one hand. He was both amazed and appreciative. Now if he could only get his pipe lit.

He handed over the two nickels and opened his new, improved gate for them to pass. They shouldered their knapsacks and were ready to step off.

"I suppose I need to relate one thing to you, boys."

They were puzzled and turned, looking back at him.

"There was a man through here traveling west earlier this morning. Looked bad as sin. Said he was lookin' for a runaway apprentice that looks a lot like you, Nathan – according to his description – height, hair, eyes, woodworking skills. He offered me a five-dollar reward for information. Said

he'd be back through this afternoon headed home."

"Thanks for the heads up, Sir. You're clearly a kind person. Not confirming the information, you understand."

"I understand. This is your lucky day."

"How's that?"

"Every Tuesday my memory fails me somethin' awful. I'll just bet by the time you're a mile up the road I'll clean forgot you was ever here."

"We'll always remember your several kindnesses."

Nathan turned to Alexander:

"I suppose we should return his money to him."

"What money would that be?" The man said having overheard the comment. "You talkin' Tuesday money? Be on your way and be careful. That guy looked like he'd trade his own mother for a five-dollar gold piece."

Nathan wanted to say, 'for less than that,' but he figured there was no margin in confirming what the man already suspected.

"One suggestion for you, Sir," Alexander said. "Tuesday or not, that brain of yours needs to come up with a foolproof story about how your gate got fixed during the time that man was gone – and it needs to be a really good one – not involving boys. Thanks again."

They turned and headed west.

"Good after thought, there, little brother. Our work could have certainly been a dead giveaway."

The encounter had for some reason invigorated them and they set a steady pace.

Although Alexander was within a few inches of being as tall as his brother, he was short from the waist down and tall from the waist up. Nathan was built tall from the waist down and short from the waist up. It made it a chore for Alexander's shorter legs to keep to a fast pace with his brother setting long strides.

"So, how does the Cantrell information change our plans?" Alexander asked.

"I was just asking myself the same question. We can't risk running into him, that's for sure."

"Do we take to the woods and keep going or do we stop and wait in hiding for him to pass back to the east?"

"I suppose those are our choices."

"I'd rather err on the side of safety, even if it means losing a day's travel time," Alexander said.

"There any other roads or trails showing on your map?"

Alexander took it out from his rear pocket and studied it as they continued to walk.

"One to the north a mile or so. Probably pretty rugged in through here, however. Plus, if we know about it don't you imagine Cantrell will, too."

"You're probably right. Find a place to wait out the rest of the day, then?"

"I'd suggest to the south away from all the roads and trails," Alexander said. "The land flattens out a bit just ahead."

They headed south for some fifteen minutes into a fairly thickly wooded area, eventually coming upon a small clearing.

"This look good?" Nathan asked clearly thinking it was, since he was already mostly out of his knapsack.

It didn't seem to require a response.

"Fire or not?" Nathan asked.

"If we're erring on the side of complete safety, I'd vote no fire."

Nathan nodded. It had really been his thought as well.

They folded their blankets for seats and made themselves comfortable, side by side, backs against a large fallen tree.

"Sleep or talk?" Alexander asked.

"Haven't slept during the day in four years. Doubt if I could."

"I doubt if your 'doubt' is accurate, but you know me – talking is always good."

"So, how have mama and papa been – back, well, you know what I mean."

"They were pretty much like always. At supper, they'd ask me what I'd learned at school – just like they always did – and sometimes I'd talk on for hours. They had been good students back in Germany, you know."

"I assumed so, but I guess I didn't really know that. Were they well?"

"Mostly, yes. Nothing bad in a chronic sense. They were always tired after a day in the fields, but I suppose that's

just the way it was for them. I hadn't paid any attention to it when I was younger. They seldom brought your name up in my presence. I think they felt terribly guilty over what they had done. I talked about you lots – remembering about how we had been and how things would be when you reached twenty-one. I figured it was a healthier situation to keep you a part of the family. I think they understood that and never tried to make me retreat from it.

"I'm pretty sure they got a raise, but you know they never talked about our finances in front of us. We started having more meat to eat – that's what made me start thinking that. I believe they still had most of the money from Sherwood – just used it for my school books and supplies – maybe school clothes. The boys dressed better in secondary school than before – tuck-in shirts and ties, knickers, long stockings, high top shoes. They were mostly rich kids. None of them ever really tried to be friends with me. I think they resented that I did so much better than they did in our studies. *You* never let that bother you, did yo – that I did well in shcool?"

"Never. Like mama and papa, I was always proud of your achievements. When you weren't around, papa used to joke that you had the quickest head in Baltimore County. Mama would always add, '*Im Bundesstaat Maryland, dass Sie*' (In the state of Maryland, you mean)."

"So, you seem to really enjoy being a wood worker – a carpenter, am I reading that right?"

"I guess I do. Hadn't thought much about it. *Like* and *not like* hasn't played any part in my life for a long time, Alexander. I just did what I was told to do, when I was told to do it and in the manner and at the speed I was told to do it. You know I always liked to work with my hands. Remember the tree house we built? Of course, you do; you used our secret code to get my attention.

"That was such a great moment – when I heard it. At first I figured it was some coincidence – a tree limb rapping against the glass. I got a picture of it all back in my head right at that moment – the floor, the walls, the roof – the ladder that should have killed us just from using it. Then the second time it really got my attention and the third time I was sure it had to be you."

"I guess you never know what little things may make a difference later on."

"Like saving my life, you mean?"

"I need to make one thing clear, Nathan. I wasn't saving your life when I did it. Selfishly, I was just taking care of myself. You were all I had left. I needed you."

"Well, it's the very best selfish thing you've ever done, then. I can never repay you, you know."

"Oh, yes you can and I'll haunt you with it every day of your life to guilt you into doing things for me. That's what little brothers do when they grow up."

They both understood the purpose behind Alexander's statement – to provoke an all-out, wrestle-'til-one-calls-uncle, tussle. It had been a long time. Alexander wondered how his increased strength and size would affect such a match. Nathan wondered the same thing. They were about to find out.

It went on for some time amid smiles and laughter and memories of times past. In the end Nathan was on top, but he immediately rolled off.

"Truce, little brother," he said lying there on his back.

"Okay, this time, but next time expect to have your butt whipped good and proper."

Alexander immediately understood he had selected a most unfortunate phrase – butt whipped. He sat up.

"Hey, I'm sorry about that, Nathan. I wasn't thinking. It was a really dumb thing for me to have said."

"Not to worry. As I recall it's not the dumbest thing you've ever said and I'm betting it won't be the last. Just forget it."

Alexander *would* worry about it and he would never *forget* it, but he nodded and stopped talking, which he figured was really at the base of Nathan's words. He lay back down.

The silence went on for some time as they both remained there, allowing their breathing to calm to their needs of the moment.

"We have done some dumb things, haven't we," Alexander said turning his head toward his brother.

"I thought we were speaking about the dumb things *you've* done."

Alexander smiled and ignored it, continuing his train of thought.

“Remember the day you dared me to cross the creek on the tree that had fallen across it during the thunder storm the night before?”

Nathan became immediately serious.

“That was the scariest day of my life. You were how old – maybe only seven? I don’t know what I was thinking. Smack dab in the center you slipped off and fell into the water. The current was running high and fast after all that rain and before I realized what was happening you’d been swept thirty yards downstream.”

“All I remember is trying to keep my head above water. It was rushing on so fast that trying to swim didn’t accomplish anything. A couple of times I saw you running along on the bank. I still don’t remember you pulling me out.”

“I ran on ahead to that rock ledge that reached out over the water and I jumped in just ahead of you. The stream widened there and the current became slower. I managed to get us to shore. You were sputtering and coughing. I thought for sure you were going to die on me right there and then.”

“Fortunately, I didn’t. I suppose I thanked you back then. If not, thank you.”

“Thank me for sending you to perform a feat I knew you couldn’t do? Just about the most thoughtless thing I’ve ever done. *I’m* sorry, is what should be being said.”

As he often tended to do, Alexander became philosophical.

“My main teacher in school was in his sixties. He once told me it was a marvel that any *boy* ever reached adulthood because until they turned twenty, they were among the most careless beings God ever breathed life into – of course he didn’t end his sentence in a preposition that way.”

He offered a quick grin. Nathan took it up.

“He probably has something, there. Probably about male hormones that require us to act first and think about it second. Maybe left over from our caveman days when safety was important on a moment to moment basis. Anyway, let’s keep that in mind as we get on with the next few years of life. According to your teacher I’ll be safe in just three more years.

You still got seven, but then you also got a lot more common sense than most boys have at any age. I imagine that makes us about even.”

Alexander decided not to point out the several fallacies in Nathan’s logic, so he just nodded. He smiled thinking that by deciding not to pursue it, he may have just proved Nathan’s illogic to be right. What a remarkable quandary to ponder. (He figured it was okay for him to use nickel words while he was thinking!)

They talked on, remembering and wondering and what-ifying until they became hungry. They made due from what was left in Maggie’s sack of goodies. It looked to be two o’clock – it was difficult to tell looking up through the trees.

“We’ll need to be thinking about food,” Nathan said at last. Probably not a good idea to hunt yet this afternoon. Wish we had some of way of knowing when Cantrell passed back to the east.”

“We can look for a hidden spot up close to the road and keep watch, I suppose,” Alexander said. “If he’s planning on being back at the Wagon Company by nightfall he’ll need to be back this way by when – three o’clock or three thirty at the latest?”

“About that I suppose. Okay. Let’s see what we can find up there.”

They re-rolled their blankets and strapped them to their knapsacks. Nathan carried the gun. He wanted in the worst way to get in a few practice shots. Alexander understood and would suggest he hunt for supper if they decided taking shots would be safe.

They conducted their search for a spot well back from the road. Eventually they came upon a wooded place on a low rise, with thick brush back no more than ten yards from the road. They could remain well hidden and have a long look down the road to the west. Cantrell would have to ride directly toward them if he had stayed to that road.

They cleared out several small branches and were soon set up with a clear view and good backrests. They had timed their plan well. No more than thirty minutes after settling in they saw the tall, familiar figure – dressed in a long black trail coat and black felt hat with a silver band – riding in their

direction on a large black horse. Could have been Father Death, himself.

Alexander heard Nathan gasp and saw him clench his fists, but didn't comment. His experiences with the man must have been horrendous. He was deeply saddened, but that was not the time to consider feelings. The boys hunkered down to make certain they were fully out of sight.

Cantrell passed. Breathing began coming more naturally again. They waited ten minutes to allow him to be well on his way before they would chance reentering the road. Presently, they exchanged nods signaling they were ready to continue and reached for their belongings.

It was at that moment they both heard it. There was something back in the woods coming in their direction. Could it have been the Coyote or one of his relatives? Could it have been Cantrell circling back to catch them off guard?

Nathan raised the gun and turned around. Part of him really hoped it was Cantrell. He massaged the trigger ever so lightly with his index finger waiting for his chance.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sometimes Ugly Just Won't Go Away

Alexander sensed it, but didn't understand it – the sudden intensity about his brother. It was obviously different from the heart pumping fright he was, personally, experiencing. In an instant Nathan's characteristic, unruffled appearance transformed into red faced, hard breathing, seething anger. It was not an appropriate reaction and added to Alexander's own growing distress. He whispered.

"You be careful, now, Nathan. Easy does it. Be sure you know what's going on before you fire that thing. Once the bullet leaves that barrel you can never call it back."

His delivery had been calm and gentle – a manner that in no way reflected the panic that had commandeered the whole of his young being. There were two considerations: the frightening aspect of the new, unknown, and possibly dangerous threat emerging from the shadows of the woods; and the abrupt, frightening turn in Nathan's mien and manner.

Suddenly, the intruder appeared through the bushes, low to the ground and whimpering. It was neither the evil man from Nathan's recent past nor was it the wild beast with its gnashing teeth. It was a dog, its coat a twisted matt, laden with spiny burs.

Nathan lowered the rifle. His cheeks paled to their more usual, pasty tone and his breathing slowed toward normal. Appreciating his sudden feeling of relief, Alexander sank to his knees and motioned to the animal – slapping his knees.

"That has to be the gosh-awfulest looking canine I've ever seen," Nathan said some of his left-over rage clearly

being released in the animal's direction.

"What I think you mean is that he is the most unique looking member of his species you have ever had the privilege of gazing upon."

Alexander was trying to distract his brother from any lingering, disagreeable feelings.

"No, I'm pretty sure my head was going for, UG-LY!"

"Listen to him, he's whimpering and look, he's cowering. This is one scared animal. Oh, oh. There's blood – a gash in his side. He needs us, Nathan."

"Just what we need, of course. A wounded, cowering, whimpering, mangy looking dog to eat our food, command our attention and require our care."

Regardless of the words, they began reflecting his more characteristic tone.

They had never been allowed to have a dog – a pet of any kind. It had been a rule of the farmer for whom their parents worked. It would have also been an expense to feed, which would have reached beyond the family's means. There were never dinner scraps at the Hoffman's.

The dog inched his way forward on his belly and eased his chin up onto Alexander's lap, his eyes studying the boy's face.

"We're going to name you, *Whimper* – it will be *Whimp* for short."

"We can't be responsible for a dog, Alexander. We haven't even figured out how we're going to be responsible for ourselves."

It had been the first, fully contradictory remark he had offered against his brother.

Alexander looked up at Nathan, his face sad and his eyes wide.

Whimper looked up at Nathan, his face sad and his eyes wide.

"Now you're ganging up on me. Not fair. What make of a dog is it, do you suppose?"

"Make? I think you mean breed."

"Whatever."

"I'm thinking its mother had to be a mixed breed mutt, but its father, obviously, was . . . a mixed breed mutt. I see

terrier, beagle, maybe even a little bloodhound – look at those long, lippy ears.”

“Is lippy even a word?”

“You understand what it means?”

“I guess. Yeah.”

“Then it’s a word. Let’s try for two. I, also, say he’s splotchy – patches of brown, black and white short hair and the stub of a tail so short it hardly qualifies as one.”

“So, a brand-new breed: Whimp, the lippy, splotchy, short-haired, near-no-tail, droopy eared, multi-colored, pooch.”

Somewhat humorously, Whimpy raised his head slightly and barked softly. Alexander continued to gently pick the burrs from his coat.

“I think he approves of his new pedigree,” Alexander said mounting an ear-to-ear grin. “You certainly can’t just dismiss the little being who you have so perfectly described, pedigreed, and called by name, now, can you, best big brother in the whole world?”

“Your shrewdness is insidious, sibling!”

“What! Shrewdness? Insidious? Sibling? Who are you and what have you done with my Nathan?”

Nathan offered an impish grin and a shrug.

“I read sometimes.”

“I thought you only read the captions under the pictures of naked ladies in that card deck I found in your things.”

“You found them, did you? I suppose by now you’re old enough to appreciate them.”

“If by appreciate you mean really, really enjoy, why *yeah!*”

“Sorry I couldn’t be there to answer your growing up questions.”

“Never fear, brother dear. I still have lots of them so you’ll get your chance, yet.”

“Papa give you his talk about such things?” Nathan asked.

“Oh, yes!”

“What did you take away from it?”

“Mostly that having to give it represented the most difficult and embarrassing five minutes of his entire life.”

“We certainly got the same one, then, although I doubt

if mine took nearly that long. I'm sure I still don't know everything, but you know I'll share what I do know. One of the boys I've been living with shared lots of his experiences – boy and girl stuff. I imagine most of it was lies, but it still provided useful information I'm thinking.”

Alexander nodded, not sure where to go with such a conversation – the topic being brand new between them. What he did know was that having his big brother back was wonderful in many ways. It was good to know they still had things to learn and that they would be doing it together – some of those things would apparently be far more interesting than others.

Nathan sank to his knees and put the rifle aside. He examined the wound.

“Looks to be no more than a fairly deep scratch, maybe.”

He handed the canteen to Alexander.

“We'll both take a good drink and then use what's left to clean out the cut.”

Drinks taken, they carefully worked on the scratch and soon had it washed out to their satisfaction. Whimp . . . well, whimpered, but allowed it.

“Alexander looked at the sky.

“Looks to be about three. We can probably still get in a good four hours on the road today.”

“We'll need to see if we can find a canteen in Frederick that we can afford. That will take a little time.”

Alexander nodded.

“Think dog can keep up with us on the road,” Nathan asked getting to his feet and slipping into his knapsack. Alexander followed his brother's lead.

“It's Whimp not Dog and I guess we're about to see.”

Whimp stood up and looked back and forth at the boys as if waiting to find out what was next on the agenda. The boys moved onto the road and headed toward the town. From a quarter mile away, they could see it was a good deal larger than the last one.

Whimp followed at a distance of some fifteen feet, his head still lowered. Alexander spoke of it.

“He's back there still cowering like he's not sure about

our intentions.”

Nathan glanced back and patted his left leg. Whimp trotted up beside him and licked his hand.

“Dog, I’ll say this just once, ‘Don’t ever slobber all over me again. It is without a doubt the most disgusting trait of your species’.”

Whimp had been looking up at him as he spoke, as if hanging on every word. His response to Nathan’s words was to lick his hand again.

“Seems he doesn’t speak human. How’s your ‘dog’, brother?”

Alexander grinned and laughed out loud thinking the exchange had been quite humorous.

He received a quick fist to his shoulder. He met it with a grin, also. Things were rapidly getting back to normal between them.

Alexander had been worried about that since the moment his feet hit the road that morning on his final walk to Owings Mills. They really didn’t know each other anymore – their monthly visit was not enough to allow that in any meaningful way. Their lives had been following two very different paths.

Nathan had never given it much consideration since he figured his situation meant he’d be away from home until he was twenty-one and at that point he would be expected to leave home and be on his own. Rebuilding their relationship had actually entered his mind for the first time that morning on the platform up in the oak tree as he sat there watching his brother sleep. He understood they would be different people from before and would require some revised sort of connection. Before, they were mostly innocent of the grown-up aspects of life. They had kept no secrets – they knew each other’s minds. That was not true anymore and was probably more the way it really should be – two personalities and two sets of skills that should actually make them a far stronger team than when they were younger.

Whimper was also working on his own new relationship and trotted alongside his ‘Nathan’ clearly convinced he had found his new person. It tickled Alexander. He had always been the animal lover; Nathan went out of his way to avoid

them.

They continued into Frederick on the road, which became the town's Main Street with several dozen buildings facing each other across it. A hitching rail extended the length of both sides of the street. It was set just out from the raised, eight-foot-wide, wooden sidewalk, which was covered in most places by roofs extending out from the mostly clapboard store fronts.

Whimp ran ahead to the wooden horse trough located in the middle of the street and drank his fill. There was a well with a pump. They pumped the trough full, shed their shirts and set to washing the road dust from themselves, as was the custom for travelers in that day. When they stood back up, waiting to air dry, they surveyed the buildings with more determined eyes.

A middle-aged man descended a set of stairs between two buildings. He was carrying a small, black, leather bag and started across the street, diverting himself in their direction when he caught sight of them. He stopped and offered his hand.

"I'm Doc Murray – the town's sawbones. You traveling through, I assume," he said pointing to the shirts and trough.

"Yes, we are. I'm Nathan and this is my brother, Alexander.

"Where you two young men headed?"

Doc was just making friendly conversation. It had not been a question for which they had taken time to devise a story. Alexander gave it a try.

"We have an Uncle who lives out past Cumberland. On our way to visit him for a month or so."

Doc nodded and spoke again.

"Where you from?"

Another of those predictable, but unprepared for questions. Alexander would try again. He was composing their story on the fly.

"Back near Baltimore – our parents are farmers – produce for the city."

Doc nodded and glanced at Whimp.

"Unique dog you have."

It was the word Alexander had used and it produced a

smug smile and nod in his brother's direction as he responded.

"Not really ours, Sir. He just sort of took up with us a ways back."

"I see he has a wound. Let me take a look at it."

He sank to one knee and gave it a fairly complete examination.

"We did what we could to wash it out," Alexander explained.

"And a good job you did. Shouldn't need any more than that. Dogs and cats heal in a hurry. You know how he got the wound?"

"No, sir. He is new to us. He found us and just stayed. He came to us with the scratch."

"That looks more like skin cut buy the lash of a bull whip than a scratch."

"A bull whip – like lion tamers use?" Alexander asked.

"Like that, yes. See the edges – clean and even. A scratch, almost by definition would have uneven, jagged edges. This one is laid open cleanly. Made by something thicker than a knife. Let me put some salve on it. Won't help it heal, but it smells so foul no self-respecting fly or gnat would dare allow itself to land on it. Now that we're learning more about germs we need to be careful about such things."

"I have studied about germs and bacteria in school," Alexander said. "Absolutely fascinating that such incredibly infinitesimal creatures can cause such devastating maladies."

Doc stood up and looked at Nathan.

"I see you travel with your own Daniel Webster's Dictionary of Seldom Used Words."

"That I do. He isn't for sale if that's what you're thinking – unless, of course, you're offering a substantial yearly payment for the rest of my life."

Doc turned to Alexander.

"And I see you're traveling with your own Mark Twain – funniest writer of our time."

He chuckled just thinking about it.

Nathan turned away, not certain how to react to the compliment. It was then the other two saw them for the first time. Five long scars across the width of Nathan's back –

clearly Cantrell's belt sometimes rose higher than his buttocks.

"Is there something you need to tell me about those scars on your back, son?"

Nathan was taken by surprise. He hadn't considered the problem. While toiling in the works the boys went shirtless. It was always hot, if not from the summer heat, then from the iron smith's fire.

He turned back facing the others and slipped into his shirt.

"No sir. The matter is well in my past now and the perpetrator is out of my life."

Alexander felt the need to defend the reputation of their parents.

"It was not done at the hands of our parents, Sir. They never lifted a hand against us in anger the way those scars had to have been made."

Doc accepted the joint explanation and again offered his hand.

"Nice to have met you. Be careful and take good care of each other. When you come back through be sure to look me up. I'm always looking for exceptional talent to apprentice with me in medicine."

He pointed to his office upstairs over the grocery store and continued across the street.

"Should we have offered to pay him?" Alexander whispered as he slipped into his shirt.

"I think he'd have been offended. Nice people just do nice things because they want to and Doc is certainly a nice person."

Alexander understood and noted the response as having been wise. He figured he wasn't old enough to be wise yet, so felt a degree of comfort in assuming some such thing had at least begun to find its way into Nathan's mind, or heart, or wherever wisdom took up residency.

Nathan pointed at a building.

"An Outfitter Store. I imagine that means they sell the kind of supplies long-run travelers need. Probably have a canteen."

They shouldered their knapsacks with a single strap and moved down the street, mounting the sidewalk right in

front of the store.

“You stay out here, Whimper,” Alexander said.

At the word, ‘stay’, the dog immediately lowered itself to its belly and cowered, head down on its outstretched front legs.

“I tell you that dog has been badly mistreated,” Alexander said. “He’s terrified by a simple . . . s-t-a-y.”

Nathan acknowledged the probable truth in his brother’s concern with a nod, but didn’t react further. They left their knapsacks and the rifle beside Whimper and entered. Inside they found pretty much what Nathan had predicted – wagon wheels, tongues, axils, barrels, boots, clothes, pans, skillets and coffee pots – and that was just on the left side of the store. The canteens hung on the back wall.

Alexander examined two and removed the larger one from its peg, handing it to Nathan.

“Bigger than what we have. Canvas over metal to keep the water cool when kept wet. Heavy leather strap. Fifty cents. It’s a necessity, so I’d say let’s get it, even for that much money.”

“Okay, then, I think we’ve just made a purchase.”

In Alexander’s mind, it was a whole lot more than just a purchase. It told him pretty clearly his brother valued his opinion and saw him as an equal partner in their new life. He stood taller and suddenly felt more up to the challenge than he had before.

He could hear his mother saying: “*Holen Sie nicht die großen Kopf, sich jetzt*” (Don’t get the big head, now!). He smiled, but kept it private. Nathan noticed, but would not intrude.

Feeling he was on a roll, Alexander moved to the pots and pans, which hung nearby. Good cooking over an open fire with no utensils was nearly impossible. He examined a thick, shallow, metal pot with a lid, clearly made for cooking over a fire. He also eyed a small skillet – he figured a regular size skillet would add too much weight to one of the knapsacks.

Nathan joined him. He had been momentarily distracted by a girl about his age who was accompanying her parents. The family was standing together on the other side of the store. They had exchanged smiles.

“I’ve been thinking about things like that, too,” Nathan said looking at the pan.

“Yeah you have, you Romeo!”

Alexander snickered.

Nathan blushed.

“The pot and the skillet come to a dollar and a half,” Alexander said.

“It would mean we could fix wild vegetables and make soup and stew to add some variety to our meals,” Nathan added as if providing Alexander’s own reasoning. I think it is a very good idea.”

Girl or no girl, he *had* been paying attention. They approached the clerk with their three purchases. Nathan took them from Alexander who offered up a frown. He immediately figured his brother had something up his sleeve as he placed them on the counter – upside down.

“We need to know what your reduced prices are on these items.”

“Reduced? I don’t understand.”

Nathan pointed at the bottoms.

“See. They are black. Been used. I suppose the price on the wall is for the others, which I assume are all new. So how much for these?”

Alexander did his best not to grin. The clerk stammered several meaningless phrases. Nathan picked them up and handed them to Alexander, pointing back to shelves on which they had been sitting. He turned away. The clerk spoke.

“I don’t know how such a mix-up happened, but you’re right of course. I can let you have all three pieces for . . . a dollar and a half.”

“Throw in two tin cups and you have a deal my friend,” Nathan offered with a broad smile. “I see no reason to tell the other customers about your error.”

With some reluctance – and understanding he had been had – the clerk took two cups from the shelf behind him and placed them on the counter. Alexander was at the ready with three fifty cent pieces.

As the transaction was completed the father of the girl from across the room approached the clerk.

“*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*” (“Do you speak German?”)

The clerk shrugged, obviously not understanding. Alexander spoke.

“He asked if you speak German. I take it you don’t.”

“Yes er no, I don’t.”

Alexander turned to the man.

“Was Sie?” (What do you need to say?)

“Vielen Dank. Ich muss wissen, ob er einen schweren Wagen zu verkaufen hat. Wir verloren uns im Fluss.)

(Thank you. I need to know if he has a heavy wagon for sale. We lost ours in the river.)

Alexander turned to the clerk.

“He speaks German. He is in need of what he calls a heavy wagon and wonders if you have one for sale.”

The clerk nodded and his face brightened at the sudden expectation of such a large sale.

Alexander turned back to the man.

“*Ich nehme an, Sie verstanden, dass.*” (I suppose you understood that.)

The man smiled and nodded. Alexander took it upon himself to ask the clerk the next two logical questions so he and Nathan could be on their way.

“Where can he see it? How much money?”

“Behind the store. Sixty-five dollars.”

“*Hinter dem Laden. Fünfundsechzig Dollar.*”

Then, as an afterthought he added, “*Ich würde ihn bieten fünf und fünfzig und feilschen.*” (I would offer him fifty-five and haggle.)

The man smiled and nodded. Alexander figured he could take it from there. The boys turned to leave.

“*Danka, danka,*” (Thank you, thank you.) the man said and offered his hand for a shake.

The clerk pointed to the back door and the family moved toward it. The clerk came out from behind the counter and slipped the three fifty cent pieces into Alexander’s shirt pocket.

“Sorry about everything. Thank you.”

Nathan turned to Alexander.

“*Mutter und Vater wäre sehr stolz auf dich dafür gewesen.*” (Mother and Father would have been very proud of you.)

Alexander nodded and offered a smile, which suggested his acknowledgement of the compliment as well as a degree of sadness. They left with three hefty purchases that had not lightened their bankroll a single cent. Alexander's knapsack was the heaviest – it contained the two books – so they managed the new items into Nathan's.

Whimp remained where they had left him. He made no move to follow them as they stepped down onto the road.

"I'm thinking he'll stay there 'till we're out of sight if we don't give him the right command to come with us," Alexander said.

At the word 'come' Whimp was on his feet and immediately as close to Nathan's left leg as was humanly (well, 'doganly') possible.

"You're the one speaking 'dog' to him. Why does he keep coming to me?" Nathan asked more amused than really upset about it, regardless of his attempt at appearing perturbed.

"Don't know. I suspect you must remind him of his mother."

Wisely, Alexander took off down the road as fast as he could run. Nathan was immediately in pursuit. It was a fascinating sight, one boy with a rifle chasing another down the middle of the street, right past the front door of the police station, and nobody seemed to give it a second look. What sort of town was Frederick, anyway?

Little brother maintained a lead all the way to the city limits sign. By then Nathan was upon him. Tagging him on the back seemed to be enough that time and no fist was thrown, no shoulder was damaged. They slowed to a walk, breathing heavily through their smiles.

They walked on side by side laughing and butting into one another's hips like a couple of drunken sailors. It had proved to Alexander that he was just about a match for his brother and that provided a good deal of self-satisfaction. To Nathan it demonstrated just how far his brother had developed during their time apart and he felt a sense of pride about it. None of that was shared, of course – they were brothers working out a new relationship.

Whimp had loped himself through the contest with

easy, leisurely strides while the boys were running their hearts out. (He expressed no increased self-esteem or pride concerning it all, but did seem elated to have been a part of whatever it had been.)

It was nearly four o'clock. Nathan spoke.

"She sure was pretty."

"Yes, she was. Long blond hair, like yours. Beautiful blue eyes, like yours. Too bad we had to leave her behind. The two of you would have made such beautiful babies together."

THAT was reason for a fist to the shoulder. Alexander noted for further contemplation that the sting from his brother's blows always felt like love. He was close to being ready to attempt offering that kind of affection himself – he figured he could probably muster a fairly man sized punch when the situation called for it. He clearly still needed to work on his escape speed, however. He smiled, wondering if, in such a situation, Whimp would come to the aid of his mother – that is, Nathan. It was worth a private chuckle and received one.

By seven they began looking for a place to camp for the night. Although the amount of time they had spent together could be easily counted in hours, they each recognized their new relationship had begun recapturing the nearly four years they had been separated. Being brothers, even vagabond brothers, was a very good thing.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Brownsville, at Last!

“So, we need meat for three,” Nathan said as they settled into a small clearing on the bank of a narrow, slow-moving creek.

“You or me?” Alexander asked.

“Let’s make it a contest. We’ll alternate taking shots. The one who uses the fewest loads by the time we have three critters will be the Supreme Marksman of the whole world.”

“Sounds like the old days, for sure. You’re on! You can have first shot.”

Putting first things first, they started a fire and arranged their gear up off the ground on nearby tree limbs. Not twenty yards downstream they came upon a sitting rabbit. Nathan aimed. Nathan shot. The rabbit hopped away into the brush as if, perhaps, to escape a bothersome gnat.

“I’d say you put the fear of God into him for sure, big brother.”

Alexander mounted an ear-to-ear grin. Nathan met it with some semblance of a smile – required, he suspected, under the embarrassing circumstances. It was Alexander’s turn.

Another rabbit in the sight. Another squeeze of the trigger. The first third of supper had been bagged.

In the end, Alexander had fired twice and bagged two thirds of their meal. Nathan had fired three times. With the final shot he redeemed himself. They would each eat that night.

“So, does the second-place contestant have to bow to

the winner or kiss his hand or what?" Alexander asked teasing to the limit he thought was fitting considering his brother's lack of recent practice.

"Second place agrees not to pound on the winner if he won't rub it in."

"That certainly sounds fair and just, and far more comfortable than the alluded to alternative."

"Do we skin the one for Whimp?" Nathan asked, mostly wondering out loud.

"I'd say no. Let's try it as is and see what he does."

Alexander took the smallest catch some distance away from the fire – he thought watching a dog attacking his supper would be disgusting – and dropped it on the ground, patting his leg to get Whimp's attention. Whimp went to him with some reluctance, but just lay down beside the carcass looking back expectantly at Nathan.

"It looks like you're up, big brother."

"What do you suggest?"

"From my vast knowledge of 'Dog', I'd suggest e-a-t."

Nathan shrugged.

"Eat, Whimp."

It had been the magic word.

"I'm coming to think you were some sort of dog in a former life, little brother."

"Undoubtedly a handsome and ferocious specimen – probably king of the pack with four wives and ten dozen offspring."

They smiled and each set to cleaning his third of the evening meal. Their minds wandered a bit toward more intriguing thoughts.

They went for pan frying, that night, to break in their new skillet. It took some longer than on a skewer over the direct flames, but time was not a real consideration that evening.

Alexander had something on his mind, left over from earlier in the day.

"I have something to ask you."

"Shoot!"

It had been a more appropriate response than Nathan could have ever imagined.

“Earlier, when we both expected Cantrell to appear out of the woods at any second, I got the idea you were not only ready to shoot him, but that you would have taken great pleasure in it.”

It was not something Nathan was expecting. He looked away from his brother and poked at the fire with a stick, offering a series of slow, thoughtful nods.

“I suppose you are right on both counts. For what it’s worth I’m glad it wasn’t Cantrell and that I didn’t kill him. You’re right, I would have. I had even planned it out all within those few seconds we had, waiting there – one nice big .58 caliber steal ball right into his heart. I’m not proud of it. I’m not proud that I hate him so much I’d have done that without any remorse.

“The other boys and I used to make detailed plans about how we would go about killing him. They usually involved some period of torture before the final blow. I’m glad you’ve never had a situation come up in your life where such a hate had to establish squatter’s rights in your belly. It is terrible to hate. It’s the one thing I’m afraid I can’t control about myself and that is frightening – to think there is something inside me that I have absolutely no influence or power over. I believe I would act on it even if I were sure that doing so would cause me to lose my life.”

The boys sat looking into the fire for some time. Whimp returned and moved in close beside Nathan, as if he recognized his sadness and felt fully confident that his mere presence would make it right. Nathan reached out and ran his hand up and down its back – slow, even strokes. It went on for some time. They relaxed there together.

Alexander did not relax. His brother’s explanation was at once frightening and saddening. He felt helpless – wanting so much to ease Nathan’s pain, but having no idea how to go about it. He wondered if, as time passed, the hate would go away or if it would just sit there, full blown, waiting for the necessary moment to pounce – explode, more likely. He wished he hadn’t asked and yet he was glad he had. Most of all he wanted to understand his brother. Life as a grownup was clearly not going to be easy.

Their mama would have said, “Auch dies wird

vorübergehen,” (This, too, will pass), except Alexander had no reason to believe those words at that moment. It made him wonder if they had ever truly been accurate or just wishful thinking on mama’s part. He was coming to understand that his mama had engaged in lots of wishful thinking.

Nathan wasn’t finished.

“I heard the words – the cautions you were saying to me back then – easy does it, think before you do anything. I thank you for them. I understood and knew you were right, but I also knew I was going to do what my screaming heart was telling me I had to do. I felt helpless to do what I knew was right.”

“I’m sorry. I have to believe there must have been a lot more terrible stuff than you’ve told me.”

“I can’t see how it would help either of us for me to tell you. Not now, anyway.”

“Okay then. Thank you for sharing what you shared. It really helps me – partly what you said, but mostly just that you said it – to me. You know I’ll be here if you decide more might help.”

Nathan tuned his head and looked Alexander directly in his face and nodded. It said thanks. It said the discussion was over – for now.

“How starved are you?” Nathan asked breaking a sudden smile.

Alexander grinned. It was a game they played as little boys, often as they were making their way home to supper from some all day, Saturday adventure.

“I’m so starved . . . I could eat a bear.”

“I’m so starved . . . I could eat a bear and both his brothers.”

Nathan’s response had been a reference to Robert Southey’s original 1837 version of *The Three Bears* in which an ugly old woman entered the home of three bachelor bears while they were away.

“You win, like usual.”

“And don’t forget it, ‘Alley Cat’.”

It had been Nathan’s way of sending Alexander into a rage when they were small – Alexander, Al, Alley Cat. It was a brother thing. That evening, little brother could accept it as a

harmless memory – perhaps, even treasured. He was, however, even after all those years, still trying to extract some similarly heinous name from Nathan – none had ever emerged. He had tried ‘Nahtan Doin’, but Nathan never caught on it was his name backward.

They ate. They slept. Whimp wormed his way in between the boys. Rather than wanting to be close to both of them, Alexander figured he was just plain jealous of any attention big brother might give to little brother – they did spend an inordinate amount of time making noises back and forth between each other during the days.

Alexander had always wanted a dog and it would have been easy for him to be jealous of Nathan, or angry at Whimp, or disturbed with himself for not having properties that immediately endeared him to the animal. Alexander tended to overthink things – really overthink things. In the matter of Whimp and Nathan, however, he was able to just be happy for his brother if, maybe, just a *tad* jealous of Whimp.

It took half a day to reach Hagerstown and then two more to reach Cumberland. There, at the beginning of the actual Cumberland Road, it widened and the gravel was fresh and well maintained. The road turned northwest and would take them right into Uniontown which sat a mere fifteen miles south of their goal for the first leg of their trek – Brownsville.

By dusk, Alexander figured they were just about at the state line with Pennsylvania. They began looking for a sign to that effect and walked on until they found it. It would be the first time either had been outside of Maryland. It held some degree of excitement for each of them even though the actual stepping across the supposed line was disappointingly not life changing.

They had been setting a good pace since leaving Frederick. Typically, Alexander chattered on, Nathan listened, and Whimp explored the byways, chasing up quail and giving rabbits a good run for their money. Mistreated or not, it became clear Whimp was smart and had been well trained.

It had been unseasonably warm that day – into the mid-eighties. They were tired and dirty from days on the road. It would have been an even contest about which one smelled worse – Nathan, Alexander or Whimp.

“Let’s find a spot to camp by water, tonight, if we can,” Nathan suggested. “We need to wash off the crud we’ve gathered along the way.”

“I have an idea,” Alexander said.

He knelt down, called Whimp to him, poured a small amount of water into his cupped palm and held it out. Whimp was happy to lap it up.

“Now, Whimp, go find water.”

Whimp turned around a number of times like a pup who had just discovered its tail. He stopped and looked up at Nathan. Nathan repeated the command, “Whimp, go find water.” He threw his hand into the wind.

The dog stopped and held his head high, perhaps sniffing at the air. He looked back at Nathan as if to say, ‘Follow me, pal,’ and took off on the trot northeast through a stand of tall old pine trees. The boys followed.

After a hundred yards or so they began hearing it – splashing water. Then they heard Whimp barking as if to admonish them for having lagged behind. Another twenty yards and they came upon just what they were looking for – a lazy creek which, just downstream, began to tangle with an area of white water rapids. That was what they had been hearing.

They built a fire, anticipating their chilly exit from the stream. Although the temperature had fallen some, the water still felt good and they lingered in it for longer than necessary. Whimp clearly enjoyed the activity having been in and out a dozen times before the boys finally left to dry off by the fire.

They had fried squirrel left over from the morning and Alexander put that in the skillet to warm.

“Those wild carrots, aren’t they?” Nathan said pointing toward the edge of the clearing.

“Carrots *and* potatoes. Campers must have left their garbage last year and planted us a very nice vegetable garden.”

Before long they had dug a good supply. Nathan washed enough for supper and they would wash and dry the rest to take with them. They cut them into small chunks and mixed them in with the squirrel. Before long they had a very tasty frying pan stew – less gravy – going. During those past

few days they had learned that where food was concerned, Whimp could take care of himself – and, in fact, preferred it that way. Apparently *human* boys didn't understand what culinary delights *dog* boys preferred out in the wild. Whimp knew the signs. When the boys began fixing a meal, he was off hunting for himself. They were happy not to know what he feasted on.

Whimp was always happy to receive strokes and other sorts of attention from Alexander, but when push came to shove, Nathan was clearly his main man.

The next morning, they were awake and on their way before sun up. The sky was clear and the moon approaching full.

Alexander took out the map and refolded it to show the area they were crossing.

"Uniontown is exactly northwest from here, right on the road. Two long days, I'm thinking. I've read about the brick and steel factories there. They will have very tall chimneys that we should be able to see from a distance of five or ten miles."

Nathan nodded. Alexander continued.

"Brownsville is on up another fifteen miles northwest. It sits on the bank of the Monongahela River – but you knew that, of course."

"I sure hope after all this walking there really are jobs available, there," Nathan said.

"I've been thinking about that. What sort of job do you think I'll be able to get?"

"You will be in school, little brother. I'm going to spend my life making my way with my hands. I'm prepared to do that. You're going to make your way using that super-sized brain of yours. You know how important it was to mama and papa for you to get an education. I'm telling you here and now, **THAT'S** how you will be spending your time."

Clearly, there was no room for discussion. Alexander would not press the issue at that time. It was the first time he had envisioned Nathan as his boss. He reconfigured 'boss' as his 'wise person' instead, and it all seemed to sit very well.

The next several days were uneventful. They met a number of families in wagons going west and lots of riders –

alone and in small groups. Although they really felt safely out of Cantrell's grasp by then, they still viewed every rider with caution until they were certain it was not he. It could have been possible that the kid from the wagon company had told Cantrell that he had mentioned Brownsville as a possible destination. It wouldn't have come out short of the worst sort of beating, but it could have come out.

Whereas Uniontown had been a sprawling, dirty town, Brownsville was more compact, huddled in grassy steps up the east side of the river. It had wide, graveled streets, and lawns and white fences in front of the well-kept houses. Such things seemed to reflect an obvious sense of pride.

There were several ship building companies – all right on the river.

"I guess I just go find the boss and ask for a job, huh?" Nathan said not really asking for a response.

He got one anyway.

"I suppose so. Maybe there will be help wanted signs or something."

"Something?" Nathan asked spreading a grin. "Like somebody holding a sign that reads, 'Nathan Hoffman, please apply here'?"

"Yes. Something just like that."

For some reason the exchange of foolishness had helped Nathan relax. He had not realized it, but the closer they got to Brownsville, the more nervous he had become. Their future depended on his being able to get a job. Probably not, really, but that's how it seemed to him.

They walked the river area for some time. Several places did have help wanted signs. One, in particular, looked promising – the Parker Boat Works. The sign suggested it was a new company hiring for all positions. It said to see, Parker. They went inside and asked for him.

The man they had met pointed to a door. They knocked.

"Open," came the response from inside."

Clearly what he had meant was, 'unlocked, come in', rather than 'open', but Alexander would just keep that to himself.

"Good morning, Sir. I am looking for Parker."

“Found him.”

He looked up from his desk where he had been entering figures on an accounting page.

“I have four years of experience as a wainwright and I am looking for work.”

“Any good?”

It seemed like an odd question. Who would not answer yes? Alexander wanted to respond, but kept quiet. It needed to be up to Nathan.

“Best you’ll find in a seventeen-year-old, sir. I’ll soon be a good deal better working beside experienced boat builders. I learn quickly.”

Alexander was impressed. Apparently so was Parker. He stood and offered his hand across the desk.

“I’m Nate, by the way. This is my brother, Al.”

Alexander noted the modified names. If the purpose had been to disguise their identities from Cantrell he would have selected very different ones – perhaps Boris and Nikita – but what was, was.

“You looking for work, too, Al?”

Nathan answered.

“No, sir. My intention is to get him into school – third year secondary.”

“Sounds like you are traveling alone.”

“Yes, sir. Recently orphaned by a house fire.”

‘Good going big brother,’ Alexander said to himself, becoming more and more impressed every time Nathan opened his mouth. Perhaps back on the trail he should have spent less time talking and more time listening.

Parker asked several questions about tools, processes, and wood. Apparently, Nathan passed the quiz.

“Ten hour days. Six days a week. Forty cents an hour. Forty-five after a month if you demonstrate good skill and dependability.”

As one, the boys gulped. They had never heard of such a high wage. Alexander had to check.

“That’s forty cents *an hour*, you said?”

“I’ll be honest with you. You could get more at one of the older companies, but what I’ve offered is the best I can do. I’d not want to lose you. Most who apply are river bums.

Don't last two weeks."

"My father once suggested that getting in on the ground floor of an enterprise was a good thing," Nathan said.

He held out his hand. Parker shook it. Apparently, the deal was settled.

"Need a day to get to get settled in?" the man asked.

"Yes, that would be good. Can you point us toward the school?"

With the instructions in hand they both thanked the man and left. It called for no little jumping and whooping into the wind – they were, after all, in most ways, typical teen males.

"Can you believe that?" Nathan said.

"If you work six days a week that's sixty hours or 24 dollars – right at a hundred over the next month."

Nathan, sufficiently calmed down from the celebration, began to plan out loud.

"Two things, to begin with: Get you enrolled in school and figure a place to live."

Whimp was waiting more or less patiently. He wasn't used to being separated from them except on his own terms. They walked west on the street getting acquainted with the community as they moved toward the school. Alexander pointed at a large house.

"A room for rent. Three dollars a week. That seems pretty reasonable considering your wages."

"Let's take a look, then."

The house was well above average in size, design, and care. It had two stories with large windows in the steeply pointed attic area. There was some sort of larger outbuilding behind. The lawn was green and freshly mown.

They mounted the porch and knocked at the front door. An elderly, yet certainly not feeble looking, woman answered. Her worn face offered a wonderful smile and bright, inquisitive eyes. Again, Nathan did the talking.

"Ma'am. I am Nate and this is my brother, Al. I have just signed on to work at the Parker Boat Works. I'm a carpenter. We are in need of a place to stay and were wondering if you had anything less expensive than that three-dollar room."

'Here he goes again,' Nathan thought to himself.

She looked them over.

“I’m Estelle. No parents?”

Alexander chose to respond.

“Sadly, we just lost them in a house fire and are starting out on our own.”

Her face responded with a momentarily look of pain and sadness. Then brightened.

“I’m very sorry for you. I only have the one room. You’re a carpenter you say?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She paused clearly thinking about something, turning back into the house and then to them again. Eventually she spoke.

“There is space in the attic my husband always said we should finish into another room to rent out. Maybe we could make some arrangement where you remodel the area a little at a time for free rent for some period.”

“I think that’s worth talking about,” Nathan said. “The work would have to be done evenings and Sundays – I’ll be working days.”

“That would be fine. I’m a night owl and I spend Sundays at church.”

Alexander, taking a lesson from Nathan’s negotiating skills, tried his hand – although in a less obvious manner.

“May I ask how expensive groceries are here in Brownsville?”

“Everything has gone up so much the past few years with the boom in boat building. I’m not sure how to answer you, Al. Things are cheaper at the farmer’s market, but you have to buy larger quantities.”

Alexander nodded and left it at that. He figured he had set all the right elements in motion.

“May we see the area upstairs, before we agree to the arrangement?” Nathan asked.

“Certainly, follow me.”

They climbed the stairs to the second floor. At the rear of the central hall was a set of open steps up to a trap door in the ceiling.

“Up there,” she said. “I’ll let you go look. My old legs don’t climb so well anymore.”

They were soon upstairs. The area was floored and had four windows – two front and two rear – that flooded the area with wonderful light. It was thirty feet square with a steeply pointed roof, allowing good head room over a large central area.

“Look over here,” Nathan said. “Tacked here to the wall is what looks like a floor plan for the remodel. Maybe her husband got that far with the planning.”

They assumed he had died although that had not been said.

Nathan examined the plan for some time.

“I can build this. It’ll take some time.”

“I can help, can’t I?” Alexander offered more than asked.

“I would have to count on it.”

“So?” Alexander asked.

“I say we take her up on it. Hard to beat free rent. What was all that about groceries? I figure it was more than just something about, well, groceries.”

“I’m thinking we will both find out about two minutes after we rejoin her down stairs.”

Nathan still had no clue. They made their way back down the steps, closing the door above them.

“I’m quite sure we can handle it,” Nathan said. “I assume the floor plan on the wall is how you want it.”

“Yes. Albert bought the wood – it’s out back in the shed. We can get whatever else you will need at the lumber mill. I have a horse and wagon.”

“I guess we have a deal, then.”

“There’s a bed and some other pieces of furniture in the store room in the basement. You can use any of it you want.”

“Very generous of you. Thank you,” Nathan said.

Apparently, they were to live in the room as they built it around them. That was fine.

There was something on Estelle’s mind.

“I was doing some figuring while you were up there. I think if we went together on groceries and I cooked, it wouldn’t cost you more than five dollars a week. What would you think of that?”

The boys looked at each other. Alexander gave

Nathan a private wink. Suddenly he understood what had been behind the odd groceries conversation earlier.

“I’d say you have a deal, ma’am,” Alexander said.

“Wonderful. It will be like having a family again. I just love to cook. And I’ll be more comfortable as Estelle or Grandma than ma’am if you can manage that?”

“Yes, ma’am, Estelle, Grandma,” Nathan said. “Clearly it’s going to take a little time.”

“I’m way too nosy – you’ll find that out – but I have to ask; you both speak such fine English. Were your parents educated?”

Nathan had no idea how to respond. He just assumed Alexander would so he looked at him.

“They were immigrants and had finished secondary school before coming to the United States. They had taken ten years of English back in Germany. They worked as farmers here. Our education and being first class Americans was important to them.”

Nathan continued.

“When I finished 8th year, they saw that my future was as a craftsman and provided training as a wainwright. They realized that Alexander had a super-sized brain and kept him in school. He was close to finishing third year secondary when – well, you understand. We were on our way to find the local school when we got sidetracked by your sign.”

“I thought I detected a bit of an accent when we first spoke.”

“Our early experience with English was largely from our parents. They had an excellent command of the language, but it came with their ready-built accent. I think it dissipated for Nate and me over the years as we spent time among other children.”

“Thank you. I’ll try to rein in my nosiness.”

“No need for that,” Nathan said, “if you will just understand there are some things we are not prepared to speak of.”

“Oh! Men of mystery! How exciting.”

They had no idea how to respond and fortunately they did not have to. She moved on.

“I see you have a dog. He can stay in your room with

you. Jackson gets on well with most dogs.”

“Jackson?” Nathan asked.

“My cat. Spends most nights out courting the ladies. He’ll be no bother to you.”

The boys felt very comfortable with her. Although they had never had either an Estelle or a Grandma in their lives, they opted to try out Grandma. ‘Grandma’ seemed delighted.

With a fourth in their lives, perhaps a fifth if Jackson chose to join them, Whimp would just have to learn to share.

CHAPTER SIX

Wrinkles, Building and Budget

By the time they carried things up from the basement – a wide, four poster bed and mattress, a dresser, a small table with two chairs and four small throw rugs – it was nearly seven o'clock. They had failed to ask Parker when Nathan was to show up for work the next morning but figured seven should handle it. One of the rugs was green and thick with long, yarn-like knap. They had put it at one side of the bed. Whimp claimed it as his own spot, and stretched out across its length. Whether it reminded him of grass, was actually comfortable, or was positioned as an extraordinary spot from which to supervise, had not yet been determined.

The boys also stretched out – on the bed – and had soon voiced their approval:

“Feels pretty good. Probably better than the one we had all those years at home.”

“Any mattress feels really good to me. Sometimes it's still hard to believe I'm free of that cell.”

“Cell?” Alexander asked.

“It's how we referred to our room. I haven't really taken time to think about the others I left behind, you know. I'm sure they're happy for me. They're probably having to work an extra hour a day to make up for me. I hate that.”

“Won't Sherwood replace you?”

“Yeah, but it takes three months before a new kid knows enough to be of any real help.”

“Them still being back there is not your fault, you know. You must not let yourself think that way.”

“I know that’s true, but it’s easier said than done. We were all we had – each other. We thought of it as us against them even though ‘them’ had all the power and always won.”

“Like best friends, then, I suppose.”

“Not really. I can’t say I’d have chosen any of them to be my friends. Most of them were there because they were trouble makers their parents couldn’t control. Regardless of that, being mistreated as a regular part of the training just wasn’t right.”

With that, Alexander understood that little by little he would learn about Nathan’s life at the Wagon Factory. He just needed to be patient and let it happen at his brother’s pace. There was one thing he wanted to clear up immediately.

“My comment about the mattress was insensitive and I shouldn’t have said it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Here you lived four years without one and I was making comparisons about the ones I’ve had in my life – which one was better. I’m sorry. Like I said, it was thoughtless. It does make me appreciative that I had a mattress – something I’ve never considered before.”

“You said ‘insensitive’ but I’ll accept ‘thoughtless’.”

They exchanged grins; the role reversal seemed immediately humorous to both of them.

There was a knock on the trap door in the floor – more like a rap or a banging. Its intensity and the fact it had not been expected startled them to sit upright on the bed. Whimp sprang to his feet and approached it, offering a low, sustained, rumbling growl.

“It’s Grandma, boys,” came Estelle’s voice through the floor. Supper is ready,”

Nathan hurried to open it.

“I suppose we need to find a better way of communicating,” she said, giggling and looking up into his face.

She had rapped against the door with the end of a broom, which she continued to hold at the ready.

“We’ll get right on to figuring something out,” he said. “I guess we hadn’t expected a meal this evening. We haven’t given you any money yet.”

“You turning down pot roast with all the trimmings?”

“Oh, no, ma’am – Grandma,” Nathan said. “Let us get our boots on and we’ll be right down.”

“Stocking feet is fine in this house.”

Nathan nodded. They made their way down the steps.

“We need to wash up,” Alexander said as his stockings hit the floor.

Whimp was right behind him. He had learned he no longer needed permission for such moves.

“I guess we also need to figure out how to feed Whimp,” Nathan said. “It hadn’t crossed my mind until this moment.”

“There will always be table scraps, evenings. He’ll make out just fine.”

Cleaned up, and never out of Whimp’s sight, they were soon seated around the dining room table. Nathan noted to himself it was Cherry with perfectly matched, mirrored grain patterns. The dish cabinet with glass doors – he knew there was a fancy name for it, but couldn’t recall – was matched in wood and pattern with the table. He concluded money had probably not been a problem in that household.

It reminded Nathan they needed to make out a budget – a long term budget that would get them all the way to Kansas. Alexander would be better at that than he would. Suddenly there were lots of new responsibilities in his life. Before, his responsibilities had not really been his. He had to do his assigned tasks perfectly and rapidly. Those things assured Sherwood quality wagons. Nathan’s responsibility was to make Sherwood look good. As frightening as all the responsibilities connected with striking out with his little brother were, he welcomed them as a grand alternative to the helplessness that had defined his life. He recognized it would take some time to learn how to handle things, but he was determined to make it work.

Conversation flowed easily during supper. It was soon obvious that Grandma knew how to both cook for and converse with hungry boys. As much as she liked to talk they were certain her story would eventually come out and probably sooner rather than later. There were apple dumplings for desert with caramel sauce – and lots of scraps for Whimp.

They learned she had been a teacher and her husband had owned the local 'fittings store'. It turned out that was a combination hardware store and horse and wagon equipment store – apparently, a common combination in those parts. When he got sick – no indication was offered of how long before that had been – he sold some part of it and arranged for Grandma to continue to have an active partnership in its operation and profits.

They also learned about a problem regarding Alexander's studies. The local school only went through tenth year and he was already well beyond that. Grandma said she'd work on it and get back with them later in the week.

They insisted on helping with the dishes – it was a chore through which they had regularly fought every evening of their lives as young boys. It typically gave birth to harsh words which kept them from speaking the rest of the evening, suds in the hair that had to be washed out, and a wet floor they then had to mop. There had clearly been several layers of wisdom in their mother's late evening family plan – quiet, well bathed boys in bed, and a freshly mopped kitchen floor. That night, however, it was a fully friendly undertaking. They were each fully amazed, and although both wore smiles because of it, neither mentioned it.

As had been required by his life in recent years, Nathan's eyes popped open before six the next morning. He sat on the edge of the bed stretching himself back to life. What he saw amused him to the point of laughing out loud, which woke Alexander.

"What?" Alexander asked, turning up on his side, supported by his elbow.

Nathan pointed to the floor. Where the red rug had been on his side of the bed when they went to sleep, lay the green rug occupied by its new lord and master. Alexander turned and looked at the floor on his side.

"At least he was considerate enough to tote the red one over here for me. You realize how smart that dog is, Nathan?"

"In life, you learn to do what you have to do to survive with the least amount of pain. It seems that Dog and I have both learned that lesson pretty well."

That sad characterization of life consumed Alexander

and unexpected tears formed in his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. Nathan noticed, of course – the tears, not entirely sure about the true reason for his brother’s response.

“Hey, little brother, *sad* is past for both Whimp and me and *happy* is all that lies ahead for us – in our continuing. Smile for us. Things are good.”

After breakfast, Grandma had a sack lunch ready for Nathan. Again, it had been unexpected. He had not given lunch any thought. The man was still a youngster in at least several ways. After breakfast, Alexander had come downstairs with Nathan to see him off and wish him luck. He waved him out the front gate onto the road. Whimp wedged his way through Alexander’s legs and trotted after his person.

As they closed the door, Grandma had several things on her mind and expressed them.

“First, we have to get some meat on his bones and some color on his skin. I assume you two have not been living together recently since you are by contrast so well built and tanned. More immediately, we need to get your clothes washed and pressed. You have others to change into?”

“Yes. I kept the better ones back and wore the sturdier ones on our trek. The others are clean, but probably badly wrinkled.”

“Bring them down first. You know how to iron?”

“Not really although I often watched mama. I used to read to her out of her German books while she’d iron in the cool of the evening.”

“Be prepared to learn. A bachelor needs to know certain things.”

He immediately understood, even though it was the first time he had characterized himself a bachelor. He also understood it was Grandma’s intention that he would not move on from that house before he became properly prepared for bachelorhood. He enjoyed her way and had to grin. By the time he returned, Grandma had set up the ironing board in the kitchen and had two flat irons heating on the range. She spread a recently washed and therefore well wrinkled handkerchief on the ironing board.

“For practice. Keep the iron moving or you’ll scorch the fabric, but don’t move so fast that you don’t do serious

damage to the wrinkles. For stubborn wrinkles on stiffer fabrics we sprinkle a tiny bit of water. Too much and you'll be ironing all day to dry it up. Too little and you might as well not have wet it at all."

Alexander was intrigued that he actually had learned all those things just by watching his mother. Grandma graded his first handkerchief an A- and offered a wonderful smile. Alexander was not used to getting minuses behind his A's so he asked a series of pointed questions about how to improve his product.

He received answers. They had been excellent answers. He figured she had been a fine and perceptive teacher. In his experience, there were two kinds of good teachers. Those who knew their subject matter and those who knew their students. When both of those things were present in the same person it produced an exceptional learning experience.

Before nine o'clock he was wearing his freshly ironed clothes, and his dirty ones were washed and drying on the line in the back yard. He had actually helped his mother wash on Saturday mornings, so he was better prepared to help with that. He figured he deserved an A+ although no grade was offered.

He was interested, and oddly, just a wee bit embarrassed, that his underpants were just hung up on the line right between his shirt and trousers. Back home they had to be hung inside the trousers because it was considered obscene to allow them to be seen fluttering in the breeze. Grandma's way seemed immediately reasonable. He took time to wonder how many of the ways he had always known to be correct, might well not be the only proper ways. It also made him wonder about beliefs and values. Alexander, remember, was given to over thinking.

Whimp had accompanied Nathan all the way to work that morning. By ten he had returned and Grandma heard him scratching at the front door. She opened it. He moved just inside the entry hall and stopped. He sniffed the air and made his way up to the attic room where Alexander was combing his hair using a comb and wall mirror Grandma had provided. She said they were going to visit the School Master later that

morning. He was making himself presentable.

Whimp nuzzled Alexander and whimpered for a few seconds.

“Nathan will be home this evening after work. In the meantime, you’ll have to choose to either be alone, or be with Grandma, Jackson or me. So humorously that he had to laugh, Whimp left for the back yard where, after an initial period of mostly cordial sparring, he and Jackson came to some sort of understanding and curled up together.

Whimp spent a good part of the day sleeping, which made Alexander think he had remained awake standing guard over them all night in the strange, new, surroundings. Although years before Alexander had given up on the concept of guardian angels and the idea they assumed various forms, he did pause to give it a moment’s reconsideration.

Estelle was clearly respected at the school. What Estelle asked for, Estelle got. Alexander was given library privileges and an hour a week with the head master for a period of study planning and evaluation. The school had several of the books he had been using that year and Estelle had other suggestions. They agreed on a four hour a day study schedule at home and Estelle would assist when that was required.

Back home they arranged a study area at her desk in the dining room. He would be mostly on his own and that was fine. His experience had been that most teachers just held him back; they spent far too much time talking about the things that he could read about in a quarter of the time. He also figured people who became teachers liked to hear themselves talk. There were no other boys his age attending the school – it was a working-class community and boys went to work early.

He took pencil, paper and Grandma’s atlas into the back yard and found a spot under a tree. He and Whimp began working on a basic budget. He estimated a route to Kansas and measured out the distance. Kansas was a long state, east to west. If they only needed to go to the close end it would be only seven or eight hundred miles. If all the way to the western border, it could be a thousand miles or more. He’d figure things on the longest distance. Walking, they

could make at least twenty-five miles a day – provided Nathan didn't take a fancy to too many girls along the way.

He chuckled out loud. Whimp barked. He often did that in the presence of laughter. Alexander wondered if he sensed a response was required or if it had been such a rare occurrence in his life that it felt in some way threatening. Sometimes he really wished he could speak dog. Just think off all the things he could learn.

At any rate, at twenty-five miles a day, they could cover the distance in forty days barring any unforeseen occurrences. He had read that Kansas had windblown, snowy winters. If they stayed in Brownsville four to six weeks to earn their stake, it would put them in Kansas just before the first of the year – snowy, blowy, December most likely.

Figuring forty days at two dollars a day in expenses – that would allow one overnight a week inside with a bath and a bed – they would need at least eighty dollars. Nathan would easily make that in a month's time. It would depend on how well he did at the boat works. Alexander expected he would be an outstanding employee. During the several times he had observed him with wood and tools, he had been impressed.

They still had more than the five dollars they owned Grandma. He would suggest to Nathan they give that to her at supper.

The night before Nathan had made a list of which kinds of the lumber they would need to begin the remodeling project. Alexander figured if he spent the afternoon toting it upstairs they could begin that very evening.

At noon, he and Estelle had sandwiches and fruit on the picnic table in the back lawn. There was lemonade to drink and cookies for afterward and, of course, with Grandma present, there was lots of conversation. By one o'clock Alexander figured he had spilled all their private beans that he dared without checking first with his brother.

In the shed – a small barn that housed a stable for the horse and room for the wagon – he located the wood and tools and a wooden block and tackle. He had seen one in use in town as a child. It consisted of a set of double pulleys which, when properly threaded with a rope, made lifting heavy objects relatively easy. He secured that outside and above

one of the large, rear windows in the attic, and using a coil of half inch rope, also from the shed, soon had an easy and efficient method for raising the wood upstairs. Grandma was impressed. Whimp watched with interest, but expressed no feeling one way or another.

When Nathan arrived at a little after five that afternoon, he washed up and changed clothes – Alexander had them waiting for him in the wash room. Supper was ready earlier that evening – six o'clock. Both boys chattered on about their days. Grandma was happy just to listen and watch. Nathan felt he had a very successful day, relating that his skills were as good as any man there. He still had to learn how to apply them to boat building, but had discovered a boat was really not much more than a big wagon that floated. As Nathan left work for the day, Parker had made it a point to tell him what a good job he had done. It had been unimaginably important to Nathan as illustrated by the fact it found its way into the conversation several times.

“So, what did you learn that will improve my life?” Alexander asked. It was a question his father had asked each of them every night at the evening meal.

“Well, for one thing that if you call the Monongahela River the Monongahela River everybody laughs at you. Around here it's apparently just called the Mon.”

He looked at Grandma for verification.

“I should have forewarned you. Most of the young children in the community don't even know its proper name.”

With supper finished Grandma asked Nathan for his clothes.

“Let me put your work clothes in a wash. They'll be ready for you by morning.”

“I can do that, Grandma,” Alexander offered.

“Need you two working on that room.”

Nathan nodded and replied.

“We'll probably only get wood carried up there this evening. I assume you have some tools.”

Alexander interrupted.

“I got the tools upstairs – three trips worth of tools. I figure Noah didn't even have as many. You'll see when you look through them. Grandma says if we need others we can

get them at her store.”

Grandma nodded, unnecessarily confirming the point.

Again, they offered to do dishes.

“You two want to make an invalid out of me. Be gone!”

She had offered it with an intentional flair of the dramatic and the boys enjoyed it. When they were young, their mother had recited verses to them that she had learned as a little girl and always made full blown productions out of them. The boys would always clap.

Nathan urged Alexander upstairs ahead of him. At the top, he stopped and looked around. Whimp forced his way between his legs and arrived second, going directly to the pile of lumber, laying there as if claiming all credit for its arrival.

“Busy boy, the way it looks.”

Alexander pointed out the window to his rope and pulley arrangement. Nathan went over and examined it.

“Very clever, little brother.”

“I got a budget idea worked out, too, but we can talk about that after we get into bed.”

By ten o'clock they had the studs set in place for five-foot-high walls on both sides of the large, area. When finished, the room would be long and narrow, fifteen feet wide by the thirty-foot length of the house. They would leave the ceiling inside pointed like the roof outside and lay up one-by-six inch, tongue and groove boards on the horizontal for the walls and ceiling. That would be a job for other evenings.

Alexander went to the floor plan still tacked to the outside wall.

“There’s a second sheet under this one – did you notice it?”

“No. What’s it about?”

Alexander raised the front sheet and they studied the other one.

“I don’t understand this,” Alexander said pointing. Does it show a double wall? Boards on both the front and the back of the studs we just put up?”

“It does. I know about such things. It leaves a space in between – called an air-stop. It helps keep the heat inside better in the winter and the heat outside during the summer. We built several ice-delivery wagons and they required that

form of construction.”

“I’ve read about that,” Alexander said. “A builder in Baltimore is experimenting with filling that space in between with wood shavings, packed in tightly. He claims it cuts the need for heat in winter by up to fifty percent. Puts it in the ceiling as well. Calls it *insulation*. Just think of all the wood we wouldn’t have had to chop if our place above the stable had been built like that.”

“The boat works probably makes ten cubic feet of shavings every day. I’ll ask Parker if we can have them. They’re just burned, now.”

They called it a night and got ready for bed. Alexander talked about the budget and they made a list of the things for which they would need money.

“We need to find out about railroad and river boat fares,” Nathan said. “Parker says that with more boats on the river the fares are getting lower – competition, I suppose. The same with trains.”

“I see. More trains on the river, too.”

He got hit in the face with his brother’s pillow. Why violent acts such as that were always causes for laughter between them, Alexander had no ready answer. Nathan wouldn’t have even wanted one.

“I can do that tomorrow. When do you get paid?”

“Monday afternoon, for the previous week. I’ll have four days in by Monday.”

“Twelve dollars. It will be like being rich!”

“I was thinking about that today. Do you know that I’m earning more in a week than papa earned in a month?”

“Hadn’t made the comparison. You know how proud of you they’d be!”

“I suppose so. It puts my head in a very difficult place.”

“How’s that?”

“I’m coming to realize that in the back of my head I’ve held it against them for forcing the whole apprentice thing on me. In fact, I guess I’ve blamed them for all the bad stuff that’s happened to me. But now, because of those four years, I have a trade that I’ll be able to use all my life to support myself and my family when I have one. For that I have to thank them. A difficult place for a seventeen-year-old head to

be, you see.”

“I do. You do understand they didn’t send you to Sherwood as punishment, right?”

“Oh, yes. I know that. I’ve never thought about it that way. I do understand. I can even tell myself they did it so I could have the good life they hadn’t been able to provide for us, but the good stuff in my future gets all jumbled up with all the bad stuff in my right now – right then. I guess we have a lot of sorting out to do.”

“We?”

“Yeah, we. Between the two of us you’re the best thinker. I’m sure you’ll understand how it can be sorted out well before I will.”

“Two things, then. Of course, I’ll help, but it will be on your schedule – you’ll have to be the one to bring it all up.”

“That seems right. I’m tired. Good night.”

It was not one his brother’s traits that Alexander had ever learned to appreciate – just stopping in the middle of a good discussion and going to sleep. He would never choose to just stop any discussion before its meaningful conclusion. But, he had long before concluded he had to accept it even if he couldn’t understand it. It seemed like there were lots of things like that popping up.

Alexander’s head ran on for some time. After considering and reconsidering things, he would suggest a budget of eighty dollars for spending and another twenty for unforeseen expenses.

It meant that in a little over a month – more like six weeks – they would be ready to move on. That was the up side. On the down side were the facts they would be leaving Grandma and it also put pressure on them to finish the room. Nathan hadn’t given an estimate of how long it would take although he had indicated the work was progressing quite a bit faster than he thought initially. He figured it would take as long as it took and could just let that happen as it would.

With that, Alexander could close his eyes.

Whimp seemed able to relax a bit more than he had the night before and, from time to time, even caught a few winks. Having two young humans in his care was often just *plumb* exhausting. (Apparently, he was a southern canine.)

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Escape Plan

The following day was a bright, if breezy and chilly, Friday. When Nathan and Whimp left for work, Alexander settled into his studies. He had recently been finding some solace in the Greek Gods – they had such power at their immediate command. He thought reading about them might afford some sense of security – *his* seemed to be flagging. It only made him feel even more helpless by comparison. So much for that grand idea.

As he had done the day before, Whimp returned at ten, entered through the front door and, making his way immediately into the back yard, he and Jackson curled up together for a nap. Neither was good looking, but clearly neither seemed to feel that in any way diminished their self-worth. Jackson clearly saw himself as king of the world and Whimp would have liked himself whether he had been king or pauper.

Never before having been around a cat, Alexander was amazed by the large percent of his life it wasted sleeping. He figured many of the older boys he knew would have made great cats – their goals in life seemed to be entirely consumed by eating, sleeping, and courting the ladies. He had to admit he was eager to learn more about the third portion of that life style and hoped he could find some way to get Nathan to share the wealth of information about such things he had reason to believe one of his colleagues at Sherwood's had passed along to him.

That morning Nathan suggested that Alexander move

the rough-cut strips of lath upstairs. They would go on the back side of the interior walls. He would attend to that after lunch. Again, he and Grandma ate outside. They enjoyed their time together. They found it easy and comfortable to chat on like a boy and his . . . well, grandmother. Little by little she revealed things about herself.

She had grown up in Massachusetts and had attended a two-year teacher education program. Having earned highest honors in her classwork and praise for her skill, she had been hired to teach there in Brownsville when she was eighteen. She recounted her desire to experience life on the western frontier and at that time Brownsville seemed to meet that requirement. By twenty she was the Head Mistress of the school program and under her administration the enrollment tripled as she made an effort to help the parents see the advantages of allowing their boys to remain in school at least through sixth grade.

At twenty-five she married a man twelve years her senior – not unusual at the time – and continued to teach for twenty more years. Many in the community looked down on her for wanting and pursuing a career outside the home. Rumors abounded and she smiled at each one. Jumping to outlandish conclusions, when not malevolent or otherwise hurtful, was one of the human specie's most humorous traits, she thought.

Much of the library at the school to that day was actually her private collection, which she purchased with the salary the town paid her to teach – fifty cents a day, in the beginning. She said, "A book that remains on a shelf not only gathers dust but, sacrifices its power to inform or entertain or stimulate and that is one of the greatest sins of all."

Actually, she had many sayings, which Alexander noted were undoubtedly of her own making. Another one he especially liked was, "A quality idea left to stagnate on the edges of one's mind is a sin against all humanity."

"I think I'd like to look around Brownsville for a while this afternoon. That be okay?" he said/asked as he helped take the dishes back inside.

"I'm your landlady not your keeper, Al. I do appreciate knowing when you're leaving. Old ladies tend to worry."

Assuming she didn't worry when he was there in the house, he had to believe she enjoyed worrying – why else would she want to know when he left her safe sanctuary. He didn't pursue it, but figured she would also be intrigued by the conundrum.

Alexander nodded, still another important realization beginning to take shape – his independence and the responsibilities to others that come with it. Back home he had been given a great deal of freedom to come and go. He knew if he didn't show up in time for a meal there would be none. That tended to keep a growing boy pretty well on schedule. But the responsibility to be home on time to eat – other than the implied consideration to other family members – paled in comparison to the ones he felt stacking up on his shoulders those past several weeks. There were finances, safety, education, caring for Whimp, food, clothes and supplies – the list kept growing.

He and Whimp spent the early afternoon walking the several streets of the little town. Actually, with more than 1,500 residents it was the largest town in which either boy had ever spent much time. The business district was set just up from the river on a narrow sandy plane – locally they called it a shelf. The main residential area was still higher up the slope on another shelf back to the east and north east.

The railroad track followed close to the river on a flat plane, which was where Alexander found the train station. He was amazed by the large map that showed all the places the railroads traveled across the country. The area east of the Mississippi river was black with lines – not nearly so much on the west coast and virtually none in the center of the country. Less than a year before the transcontinental railroad track was completed tying the east coast with the west by a single set of tracks. It was generally thought it would soon toll the death knell for long-run stage lines.

With just a little study Alexander figured there were train connections all the way from Brownsville to Topeka, Kansas. He approached the man with the green visor on his forehead who stood behind an expensive looking mahogany counter with several open windows each covered with thin vertical black bars, which suggested some degree of security

must be required.

Alexander explained the itinerary – at least the destination. The man asked several questions: First, second, or third class? Sleeper or day coach? Others. After a short time, he had the information he needed for the least expensive fare: third class tickets (absolutely no frills and an actual seat was not guaranteed). There were no through trains. The best the clerk had to offer was a route with four train changes and long layovers. To Alexander, it seemed to all be on the upside, however. Four or five days, depending on how the trains were able to make connections, at a cost of \$22.00 for each third-class ticket. He thanked the man and left.

He stopped at one of several steam boat offices to see what they had to offer. There were connections all the way to St. Louis, Missouri. He soon understood, however, that would be way out of their price range. One office said there was the possibility of hiring on as crew, but lots of experienced men were available in Brownsville and they would be hired first.

On the way back to Grandma's, he stopped at her hardware store and walked the aisles. It was a huge store for the time. He was surprised to find it sold wagons. There were two on display inside, and a sign indicated several more could be seen in the barn out back. He looked them over. One of those inside the store had been built at the Sherwood Wagon Company. Seeing the little oval metal name plate on the side sent a series of strange feelings thorough him. It might have been a wagon his brother had helped build. That would make it quite special. On the other hand, he knew it represented the equivalent of slave labor and mistreatment, and that infuriated him. He did take time to look it over in some detail, thinking he would be able to talk with Nathan about it more intelligently should the topic ever come up. It certainly looked well made – superior to most he had come across. At \$100.00 each, he assumed they were top of the line products. He wondered how long it took to build a wagon and how many of them Sherwood's boys could build in a month's time. He figured the man had to be very wealthy.

Before he realized how much time had passed, it was three o'clock. He still had lots of lumber to get upstairs before Nathan arrived. He trotted home. Whimp clearly enjoyed

running. He would move way ahead and then turn and come back for him. For Whimp the goal seemed to be just the pure joy of running with a friend. If they ended up somewhere of any consequence, that was just a wonderful coincidence.

At home, Alexander changed into his work clothes and by the time Nathan arrived he had a good supply of the lath upstairs. Before bed time they had both walls fully lathed. They built a small door that allowed access into the crawl space behind each wall. It hadn't been planned, but as they worked on the back side they realized they would soon have themselves sealed in there with no way out. That insight was worth prolonged, sit on the floor and hold their bellies, laughter between them.

Alexander could tell the long, double work days were wearing on Nathan. He didn't know what to do about it. Nathan clearly really liked the work at the ship yard and he and Parker seemed to be growing close. He was glad his brother had found a good man to replace the ruthless ones that had been in his life those past years.

At nine thirty Grandma called upstairs. She had apple fritters still hot from the oven – or from wherever fritters would be hot from – and glasses of milk ready downstairs. They brushed themselves off and went to the kitchen, eating and talking until the platter and pitcher were empty.

It was half past ten before they were in bed – later than they had planned. The room was beginning to take shape. Nathan had spoken with Parker about using the shavings and they could have all they could haul away. Grandma had offered her wagon. The plan was to get the first wagon load the next afternoon. Alexander would meet him at the dock with the wagon when he got off work. They would lay a canvas tarpaulin in the deck of the wagon so they could tie the four corners together and hoist the whole load up into the window at once – that had been Alexander's idea. They would fill the space and tamp down the shavings as they laid up the side of the wall facing into the room.

* * *

By the end of the weekend they had both walls up and insulated. The following week they worked the tongue and groove boards up the ceiling to the peak, filling them with

shavings like they had the inside walls. The next weekend they finished the outer walls – around the windows, floor to peak. By Saturday night they had it all painted. Sunday morning, they helped Grandma up the steps so she could see the finished product.

“I am just amazed, boys.”

She went to the walls and ran her hands across them. She turned around several times taking it all in, her hands pressed together in front of her chin as if holding a clap for many moments.

“We followed your husband’s plans pretty much exactly. We added the doors into the crawlspaces – there and there – out of necessity when we discovered we had built ourselves into an area with no escape route.

Again, it caused prolonged laughter and just a little back and forth shoving between them.

Grandma watched and smiled. She offered an observation.

“I believe you boys are destined to have wonderfully happy lives.”

“May I ask why you think that?” Alexander asked absorbing one last bone crushing shove from his loving older brother.

“Time and time again I have heard you taking delight in your own foibles – the little mistakes and errors you make. A person who can enjoy his own imperfections will always have a happier life than those who take themselves too seriously. Some people believe they have to be perfect and since that is humanly impossible, it can only lead to very unhappy and disappointing lives.”

“I’ve never heard it put just like that before,” Alexander said, “but I’m sure you’re right. Mama and papa were like that – the laughing at their foibles part – and we had a wonderful life with them. Meal time was always filled with laughter and smiles and happiness. It’s probably what I really miss the most.”

* * *

Nathan had worked ten full days, and that afternoon – Monday – he had earned \$40.00. They had paid Grandma \$8.00 for meals. Figuring in the few dollars they had left from

before, they had \$36.00. They felt rich.

It was late afternoon on Monday. Alexander and Whimp had gone to the grocery for Grandma. On the way home Alexander noticed a large, pasteboard advertisement tacked to a post along the walk. It announced a side show coming to town – a small carnival of a kind. It had pictures of the various attractions. One was of a dog – a dog that was called, ‘Simba the African Wild Dog’ – a dog that looked exactly like Whimp.

Alexander and Whimp took the alleys the rest of the way home, thinking if the dog really was that Simba dog, he and Nathan had some big decisions to make. Before they reached the house, Whimp sensed it was time to go meet Nathan. He took off without so much as a good-bye or a look back. Alexander knew trying to recall him would be futile.

When Nathan entered the house, Alexander led him directly upstairs to discuss the new situation.

“So, what do we do? Do we have to return him?” Alexander asked more than a bit of panic in his voice.

“Well, face it, there just can’t be two dogs that look like Whimp,” Nathan said beginning to think it all through. “That would suggest he should be returned. On the other hand, Doctor Murray said his wound had been from a bull whip and anybody who would use a whip on a dog doesn’t deserve to have him.”

“*Shouldn’t* have him,” Alexander agreed with some emotion.

“When does the show come to town? Did the sign say?”

“This coming weekend – Saturday afternoon and evening.”

“I imagine we have a day or so, then, before any of that group will be in town. I suppose we could keep Whimp inside and just let him out in the evening to take care of his business.”

“Grandma will be suspicious if we do that. We’ll need to let her in on the problem.”

At supper, they explained things to her. She listened without comment until they finished.

“The dog clearly believes you are his people,” she said. “I have no doubt he would jump to your defense if he sensed it

was needed. I agree if he had been mistreated he shouldn't be returned. However, we can't know when or from whom he received the wound you speak of. It could have happened after he got separated from his owner."

"A good point we hadn't considered," Alexander said, clearly disappointed at having to put such a possibility into the mix.

Nathan nodded and offered a question – the essential question.

"How can we possibly find that out? If it was the owner he'd probably deny it if confronted."

"What do you think we should do, Grandma," Alexander asked.

"What I think is of no consequence. This is one of those decisions you boys have to make."

"That stinks," Alexander said. "I didn't mean what you said stinks. I know you are right. It just seems like the sorts of decisions we have to start making now that we're out on our own are really hard."

Grandma raised her eyebrows, tilted her head and shrugged her shoulder, the universal gesture for 'that's just how it is, kids. Get used to it.'

The boys did the dishes and went up to their room. They sat on the bed beside each other, backs against the headboard.

"We did a great job on this place," Nathan said. "We could probably make a good living doing things like this."

Alexander nodded, but didn't pursue it. He wanted to get on to something else.

"I saw a Sherwood Wagon at Grandma's store. The little metal sign."

He used his hands to form an oval about the right size.

"I wondered if it was one you had worked on. What you were doing takes real craftsmanship – ten times more than the best we could ever use on something like this room. I mean just by the nature of the task your skills would be wasted."

"You can tell if it was my wagon."

"Your wagon? What do you mean?"

"One of us was put in charge of each wagon – we were supervised of course, but one of us was held responsible for

the work all the boys did on it.”

“How can I tell if it was yours?”

“There is a removable back on the seat. It slides down into holders – metal brackets. We put our first initial and two-digit year on the bottom of the right leg on the back – one of the two that slides down into the seat.”

“Why so hidden?”

“Sherwood and Cantrell didn’t know we do it – did it – you know what I mean. It was our rebellion, I guess you could say. Apparently had been going on for years – passed down from one group of apprentices to the next.”

“Is it alright if I check?”

“I can’t see why not. The initial will be ‘N’. The date between 68 and 70.”

“But you were there four years.”

“A boy had to serve a year and get good work reviews before he gets – got – to be in charge.”

“I think I’ll look, then.”

Nathan shrugged, then as an afterthought he added a word of caution.

“Bill Dorffman is Sherwood’s salesman. He makes the rounds to take orders from stores. He’s probably been given my description – maybe both me and you – and told to be on the lookout. He’s a very short man with a long, thin nose, eyes set close together and bushy, black eyebrows. He rides a small red horse with silver trimming on the tack.”

Alexander took note and moved on to a related topic.

“I was thinking earlier today – the thing with Whimp made me start – that we probably should have a – I don’t know what to call it – like an escape plan – a backup plan. Like if the carnival guys give us any problem or now, if Dorffman does. I’m suddenly uneasy – doubly bad, I suppose, because I had let myself become so comfortable here.”

“I’m suddenly feeling it, too. I love my work at Parker’s place. Did I tell you he’s already moved me up to a finisher?”

“No, and if you *had* told me, I’d have had no idea what you meant.”

Nathan flashed his wonderful smile.

“A finisher does all the top surface finishing. I carve scroll work on the banisters and see they are baby-butt

smooth, for example. I fit the windows so rain and wind can't enter. I make sure the railings are smooth and secure. It's a lot of responsibility. I'm used to that – another thing I owe to my training. Boy, that's confusing. Parker says I'm about the best he's ever seen – finish carpenter. I just have such confused feelings. I've been able to get that good because of Sherwood's training. I guess I have to be appreciative about that regardless of how I feel about him. He does know his trade, I'll have to give him that."

"Are you sure he knew how rough Cantrell was on you?"

"Oh, he knew. Once he just stood there and watched Cantrell beat me unconscious. I had split a finish piece when I drilled a hole in it for the final screw. Then the two of them drug me to the horse trough and dumped me in it to rouse me. Five minutes later I was back inside, soaking wet and expected to continue working. I was in no shape to stand by myself let alone work. I made mistakes. I got seven more marks that day – eleven stripes with the belt. That's the night I also got the whip lashes to my back. 'These are for good measure,' Cantrell said – the scars you saw."

By the time Nathan had finished, tears were streaming down Alexander's face.

"Oh, Alexander. I didn't mean . . . Oh, I'm sorry. My mouth just ran away without my thinking."

"I'd rather know how it was," Alexander said. "You're my brother. I want to know all about you."

They sat quietly for a few minutes. Alexander eventually broke the silence with a long sigh.

"So, what about an escape plan?"

"Got any ideas? Of course, you have ideas – you're Alexander."

It was met by a faint smile – forced but it qualified.

"For one thing, we should keep our clothes in our carpet bag and our other things in our knapsacks instead of in the dresser. We might not have time to pack and it wouldn't be good to lose what we have been able to acquire. And keep the rope fastened outside the window if we need to beat a rapid retreat."

"Okay," Nathan said nodding. "That's a good start for

any plan I suppose. The two big questions remain: Where will we head and how will we get there?"

"We need to keep moving west in the direction of Kansas, I suppose. I checked at the railroad station and we can get tickets all the way to Topeka Kansas for under twenty-five dollars each. It's less than a week-long trip. Sometimes the train gets up to fifty miles an hour, can you believe that? There would still be the cost of food to add in."

"Sounds like you've really been giving this some thought, little brother."

"Papa used to say I tended to be over prepared. Mama said it was good that I planned ahead. They gave me a mixed message. I went with caution and safety over reckless abandon, I guess."

"What about Whimp? How much to take him on the train?"

"I didn't ask about that. I forgot."

"You can find out tomorrow. Not including that how much more money do we need, then?"

"We have thirty-six dollars. We need to give Grandma five for meals this week. That will take us down to thirty-one. I think we need at least sixty so that's twenty-one more – that's five more days of work."

"So, once we save that back we can make it our escape fund and not touch it. By next Monday we'll have that in place. Will that make you feel better?"

"It will, but the carnival people will be here in a few days."

"Probably need to keep Whimp inside, then beginning when, Wednesday?" Nathan said.

"That sounds about right, I guess. We need to explain that part to Grandma at supper. I have a bad feeling growing inside me."

"Want to move on right now, then?" Nathan asked.

"No. You like your work and my school setup is ideal for me. If we can handle it here, I think it will be best."

Nathan nodded and tried to make sure he understood what they had decided.

"So, phase one, keep our things packed. Phase two keep Whimp inside during the day until the carnival leaves

town. Now, phases three and four – where and how.”

“If we had to leave today, it would have to be on foot and probably couldn’t be back on the Cumberland – we’d be exposed to both of our problems, Cantrell and the carnival guys.”

“How about if you work the atlases tomorrow and find some alternative routes for us?”

“Sounds good.”

Whimp knew his name – well, as it suddenly seemed, his *new* name. Each time he heard it during the boy’s conversation he inched his way a little closer to the bed. Nathan patted the bed and they immediately had a revolving visitor arranging himself between them like a fox settling down in the tall grass of the wild.

“What do you think about saying the dog’s name on the poster and see if we get any reaction from him?” Alexander said.

“You really want to know?”

“No, but I think it will make planning easier. If he reacts we’ll know for sure we may have a problem about to inundate our peaceful domain.”

Nathan smiled at the words and responded.

“Makes sense, I guess. Go for it.”

Alexander took a deep breath and spoke the name on the poster – “Simba”.

Whimp sprang to his feet and off the bed positioning himself some ten feet away facing them. He lowered himself onto his front legs and curled his lips, showing his teeth. He growled his low, rumbling snarl. The transformation was frightening to both boys and they pulled up straight on the bed.

“I suppose that sends us a message,” Nathan said.

“I suppose!” Alexander repeated with a good deal more emotion.

Nathan tried to fix things.

“Whimp, Whimper, Whimpy Old Man. Come here. Come back to us.”

He patted the bed.

Slowly, the growling ceased and his lips closed. He lay down on the bare floor where he had been standing. They hoped they hadn’t broken the trust they had developed with

him.

“Cherry pie, boys,” came the by then familiar voice of Grandma up through the opening in the floor.

“Thanks. Be right there,” Alexander said.

They stood and prepared to go down stairs.

Nathan approached Whimp and bent down to pet him. Whimp allowed it and whimpered his high pitched mournful whine – the first sound they had heard from him on that day beside the road. Before long the three of them were in the kitchen. Things appeared to be back to normal.

They explained the whys and wherefores of their plan for Whimp beginning on Wednesday. Alexander would stay inside with him. Nathan went ahead and related what had happened when they had used the name on the poster. It verified the boys’ fear. It seemed to be what Grandma had expected.

The boys had been raised to be honest and always do the right thing. The decision had pitted ‘honest’ against ‘right’. Neither had considered there could be such a disconnect – such a fundamental difference in meaning and intent. ‘Honest’ had always been held up to them as being ‘right’. Clearly it was not always so. In Alexander’s terms, it stunk!

* * *

The next morning, after Alexander finished studying, he and Whimp were again off on a mission – to examine the Sherwood Wagon. On the way, they came upon several new signs touting the arrival of the carnival. What Alexander saw on one of them sent chills up his back and angered his young soul until it boiled. It showed a picture of Whimp – Simba – in a large cage with a man snapping a bull whip as if trying to get him to take a place on top of a tall stool in the center. The dog was portrayed just like Whimp had appeared in their room the night before – lips curled, teeth showing, saliva dripping from his mouth. The caption read, ‘Simba – The wild dog from deepest Africa’. It confirmed everything they had not been able to confirm. Whether the dog’s demeanor in their room had been a genuine angry reaction to the name and the memories surrounding it, or merely the performance he had been trained to give at that command remained to be seen. Alexander would believe the first of those possibilities.

He entered the hardware store. Whimp remained outside. By then the clerk knew about his relationship with Estelle so allowed him the run of the place without question.

“May I try out the seat and look it over from up top?” Alexander asked pointing to one of the wagons.

The clerk nodded and shrugged as if it the question had been unnecessary.

Alexander went about examining this and that, not wanting to show his hand immediately.

Eventually he removed the back rest.

Eventually he turned it upside down.

Eventually he discovered what he was searching for – N-70. He wanted to embrace the back rest and hold it close knowing Nathan had touched it – built it – probably even set in place right there where he had just found it.

As he replaced it – with a kind of gentleness not often seen from a boy his age – the bell rang up front, signaling a customer had entered. With the back rest again in place, Alexander turned to look. It might have been someone accompanied by a teen age daughter. It wasn't, in fact it was not a customer at all. Stepping to the counter was a short man with a long thin nose, beady eyes, and bushy, black eyebrows.

‘Dorffman’, he said to himself.

He let himself down the opposite side of the wagon and casually made his way further back into the store searching for a rear door. He found it.

He rounded the front corner of the building and called to Whimp. Five minutes later they were back home.

It was nothing he could talk about with Grandma – he and Nathan had kept that part of his life private from her. He went to her atlas and drew out some alternative routes west. The two very best looked to be following railroad tracks more or less straight west, or following the Mon River north to where it joined with the Allegheny River to form the great Ohio River up near Pittsburg. He folded the sheets and put them into his rear pocket.

There were suddenly two, too many frightening aspects to life. He went upstairs and packed their things. Half an hour later there was a knock at the front door.

Alexander looked out the window. From the attic room, the porch roof was in the way and he couldn't see what was going on. He quickly made his way down to the second floor and knelt behind the railing near the top of the stairs. They rose from the entry hall and he had a clear view of the front door below.

Estelle opened it. There he was – beady eyes, pointed slim nose, bushy eyebrows and all.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

It Really Stinks!

Alexander could hear every word.

“How may I help you?” Grandma asked.

“I’m looking for two boys about seventeen and fourteen.”

“And why would you come to an old lady’s house for that?”

“The clerk at the hardware store said a boy about the age of the younger one I’m looking for was staying with you.”

“I still don’t understand how it could be any of your business if my youngest grandson is staying with me.”

“Grandson. Where’s he from?”

“That is most certainly none of your business. I’ll ask you get off my front porch now. Come back and I’ll summon the police.”

She shut the door, then peeked through the curtains, which hung at the long narrow window beside it. She stood there watching for some time. Alexander didn’t know whether he should acknowledge what she had done or just return to his room without letting on. He chose the latter.

He thought her answer had been cleverly put: “I still don’t understand how it could be any of your business if my youngest grandson is staying with me.” She had told no lie about the circumstances. It gnawed at him over the next few minutes. She now knew they were wanted by someone. He figured she had already probably wondered about the full truthfulness of their story – she was a wise woman.

By lunch time he had made a unilateral decision to lay

out the whole story. She was now involved and that seemed like the only honest and reasonable thing to do. He felt certain Nathan would approve. Clouds had rolled in and she had set the table in the kitchen that noon. Alexander took his seat and after a short, uncomfortable moment of quiet, he spoke.

“I know somebody came to the door a while ago and I know it raised some questions in your mind. I think I need to fill you in on the rest of our story – unless you’d rather not know.”

“I will be happy to know whatever you feel the need to tell me – no more than that.”

Alexander nodded and took a bite of his sandwich searching for the best place to begin.

“Everything we have shared with you about us is the truth – we’ve just left out a part of it. I guess it’s a big part of it.”

He went on to tell her the whole story about the apprenticeship, and Rev. Miller and the man on the trail. He told her about Cantrell and Dorffman. He told her again about how they had acquired Whimp and the potential problem posed by the arrival of the carnival.

“My. For two such nice young men you have certainly endured a good deal of sadness, hardship and fear.”

“And danger, Grandma. A lot of danger right now, I’m thinking. Nathan – that’s his real name, I’m Alexander – and I are ready to leave on a moment’s notice if things begin looking too chancy here.”

“I see. I understand. Your safety must be our uppermost concern.”

She folded her hands, elbows on the table and leaned forward. With that, Grandma had clearly dealt herself into the resolution of the problems.

Alexander had not mentioned the financial side of things, thinking that should remain their private business.

“So, your plans are minute by minute at this point,” she said trying to get a handle on the state of things.

“Nathan doesn’t know about Dorffman’s appearance, but he suspected it would happen – he warned me to be on the lookout for him. Thanks, by the way, for how you handled it.”

“I’m not at all sure your Mr. Dorffman bought my story.”

“It sounded like he only knew about me and not Nathan, is that how it seemed to you?”

“Yes, looking back on it, I think you are correct. He may have assumed more, considering the story you just related. You are more experienced in these cat and mouse games than I. You’ll have to make suggestions for me about how I can help.”

Alexander figured it should have been reassuring that he had some skill the wise older woman didn’t, but he had let himself come to think of her as his rock, his go to adult, and the realization she didn’t actually have all the answers was disturbing, alarming, distressing, troubling, upsetting – he could have gone on.

He managed a partial smile and nodded. It had been meaningless to him, but hoped it sent some useful signal to her.

“I’ll meet my brother at the boat works when he gets off so we can take a circuitous route home – in case Dorffman is still around watching, and I have every reason to believe he is. I imagine Sherwood has offered him a sizable reward if he returns Nathan to him.”

“We need to go shopping,” she said. “Right now if you have time.”

“Shopping. Sure. I’ll hitch up the horse and wagon.”

Alexander figured he understood, and by the time they returned he knew he had been right. They had purchased a small ham, dried salt pork, hard tack, apples, and carrots. She was preparing to see they wouldn’t want for food for at least a week if they left. It would all keep, regardless.

At four thirty Alexander and Whimp left for the boat works. Whimp would run ahead and then stop as if he had forgotten he had a companion. It represented a change in his accustomed routine. It wasn’t easy for him to balance anticipation of adoration from his main person with the responsibility and consideration for his other person. (Well?)

Nathan was pleased to see them.

“Hey! Want to see the boat. It’s ready for its shakedown cruise. That means a trial run. Then it’ll come back and we’ll fix anything that needs fixing. After that, Parker

will turn it over to the new owner – Allehy-Mon Cruise Line.”

Alexander could see it meant a lot to his brother to show him his handiwork.

“That would be great! Is it okay with Parker?”

“He suggested it, in fact. He asks about you. I think the pair of us intrigues him for some reason.”

Alexander saved his concerns for later. Parker shook his hand and held it for some time as they made conversation. It was a warm and friendly, yet strong and commanding shake. The sort that was really meaningful.

“You keeping up with your studies?” he asked.

Surprised at the comment – at the fact *he* had obviously been a topic of conversation – he provided an answer.

“Yes, sir. Greek mythology the past few days. I’ve let math and language slip a bit.”

“Your brother sure is proud of you.”

Alexander knew that, of course, but there was something special about knowing he shared those feelings with other people.

“That feeling is mutual, you know,” Alexander said coming back through a broad grin with exactly the proper response

“Give him the grand tour. Note any suggestions you may have, young man. I’m given to think you often have suggestions.”

Alexander grinned and nodded. He understood it had not just been words to be saying words. The man meant it.

The boat had two decks each encircled by a narrow walkway with guard rails toward the water and windows on the vertical plank wall to the inside. The decks contained passenger rooms, suites, a dining room, and a large open room for dancing and entertainment. It was a stern wheeler so the engine room sat at the rear on the first – lower – deck. On the very top was a large, flat, open expanse with chairs and tables and colorful umbrellas. It was enclosed with a substantial, waist high, guardrail. There were two large, side by side, smokestacks near the rear that extended fourteen feet above the boat. It sported a white surface with tan trim and stacks.

“How big?” Alexander asked.

“Size? Thirty feet wide and seventy-five long. It’s bigger than average, built more for vacationing than transport. Twenty-one feet bottom to top. Draws only four feet of water.”

“Draws?”

“Only four feet of it is submerged below the water when it’s fully loaded. That’s considered better – less – than average for a boat this size. Less draw the faster it can go. The joke about this design is that it can make the run from St. Louis to New Orleans on little more than the morning dew.”

“How fast is that?”

“It really isn’t built for speed. Parker figures it should make at least twelve miles an hour upstream. That’s one of the things they’ll be checking out on the shake down run. With the long, sleekly pointed front end I’m thinking it might do some better than that. Sort of wish I was going on the trial run even though I haven’t really been a part building much of it.”

They met Parker as they left the boat.

“You two better come along tomorrow. Be gone five days if all the essential parts work – all the way down the Ohio to Cincinnati and back. Pay you half salary – for each of you. Have to work some, of course.”

“By when do you need to know?” Alexander asked.

“Leave out of port at nine in the morning. Just be here.”

They thanked him for letting them look around. Nathan had proudly pointed out things for which he had been responsible. Alexander was impressed and proud of his big brother’s exceptional skill.

Back on the street, Whimp was waiting patiently. Alexander was impressed by how he always seemed to wait patiently – no pacing, no grouching about, just patiently waiting, trusting his people would return. Alexander thought human beings could learn a lesson from that.

Alexander began sharing the new, less than pleasant, revelations as soon as they turned north toward Grandma’s house.

“I shared our stuff about Sherwood with Grandma. I know I should have consulted you, but things started moving pretty fast and I felt she needed to know.”

“You did the right thing. I have to confess that I also

shared our Sherwood stuff, as you call it, with Parker. He wanted to begin training me to be a foreman and I didn't think that was fair to him – if we had to suddenly take off. He understands. The offer's still there. Turns out he was an apprentice himself at my age. He understood without me ever having to share . . . stuff, you understand?"

Alexander nodded.

They walked on in silence for the remainder of the block.

"It's stay or leave decision time, I guess," Nathan said at last.

Alexander nodded again, still wishing there could be some way to scuttle the inevitable (remain a while longer, for those living outside his head).

Whimp began acting strangely. That low growl developed slowly. He barked repeatedly. Suddenly he broke away and ran on ahead – not a trot, but a full out, fully extended legs, dash toward a wagon moving on the street half a block ahead of them. The boys gave chase and arrived just in time to see Whimp leap up onto the seat and attack the driver. They did what they could to control him. It was a man in his late thirties alone in the wagon.

While Nathan held Whimp with both arms back down on the street, Alexander spoke to the man.

"Are you alright?"

"How'd you get that animal?" came his angry reply as he held his neck where Whimp had left teeth marks.

"Why would that be any of your business?"

"Because he's mine. That's Simba the wild dog from Africa."

"Can you explain why he would attack his owner?"

"Because he's wild and untamable. Dangerous. You saw what he did."

"In all the time he's been with us he's never exhibited such behavior toward anybody. I'm thinking you've given him reason to hate you."

"Don't matter none. He's mine and I demand that you turn him over to me right now."

"What's your name, just so we know who we're talking about when we tell our friend the Police Chief about all this?"

“Zimmerman. I own the show that’s coming to town. I’ve come to make the final arrangements. Look at the poster on the side of my wagon. It has a picture of that animal on it.”

Whimp continued his low rumbling growl and remained tense in Nathan’s grasp. A policeman rode up slowly on his horse. A young neighborhood boy who had witnessed the attack had run to get him.

“What’s the problem, here, gentleman.”

“These ragamuffins have stolen my dog.”

He pointed to the picture.

“Boys?” the policeman asked turning toward them from where he sat in the saddle.

Alexander provided the response.

“We most certainly did not steal the dog. He found us a week or so ago while we were walking the Cumberland Road on our way here. He was severely wounded from a bull whip, the doctor said. With doc’s help, we nursed him back to health. We have found him to be a gentle animal. He is staying with us at Estelle’s.”

He pointed to the big house.

The policeman nodded.

“Estelle? I’m sure she will offer a truthful account. Boys, I must say the man has the picture going for him. Can’t be many dogs in the world that look like . . . that.”

They continued up the street to the house where Estelle verified the boy’s story and the gentle disposition the dog had exhibited.

“I’ll have to take the animal to the police station and let the chief sort things out.”

“Tommy, you mean?” Estelle asked. “He was one of my very best students. Wish him well for me. He hasn’t stopped by for coffee in a coon’s age.”

Alexander figured the tables were at least even – Estelle’s testimony vs the man’s picture. Whimp would not go with the policeman.

Estelle suggested Nathan take him to the station until they could get things straightened out. She understood that legally Zimmerman had things pretty well sewn up. They needed time for a strategy session.

Nathan delivered Whimp. They could hear him howling

all the way home. It was heartbreaking.

The three of them discussed the situation over supper. Grandma assured the boys the police chief was a fair man and would do what he felt was right under the law.

“That’s depressing,” Alexander said. “Clearly what’s right under the law is that Zimmerman gets Whimp back so he can continue to mistreat him.”

They picked at the bread pudding – they finished it, of course, but it took a good deal of picking to accomplish.

“It presents another of those dilemmas you are coming to hate so, Alexander,” Nathan said. “In this case, what is legal versus what is right.”

Alexander had been well ahead of him on that, but still nodded. He had two runaways on his hands and the law was against him in both cases. And, for all he knew, Rev. Miller may have already signed him over to become the fat man’s apprentice.

The boys continued talking up in their room and by dark had a plan in mind. They left through the window, letting themselves down the rope they had used to lift the lumber. There was just one hotel in town and they assumed Zimmerman would be there. They went to the livery stable behind it to find his wagon. It was there. Up to that point, the plan seemed to be working.

The back of the long wagon had been covered with a tarp. It still was. They loosened it and pulled it back. There were dozens of the posters. There was a carrying cage several feet long, properly sized to fit Whimp/Simba. There was the stool from the picture and laying down in the bed were six, eight-foot-high sections with steel bars, which, when set up, would form the cage shown in the picture. The bull whip lay on the floor.

None of that was incriminating – it all properly belonged to the show according to the pictures on the advertisements. Nathan took the whip and shoved it under his belt, covered with his shirt.

“For safe keeping,” he said.

Zimmerman could buy another, of course. It was more a symbolic, if illegal, gesture and he understood both of those things.

“What’s going on here?” Came a man’s voice from out of the darkness.

Zimmerman moved close enough to be seen. He carried a hand gun.

“Well?” he continued.

As in most situations where rapid, on your feet thinking was required, Alexander was up to bat.

“We have taken a sample of the blood on the end of the Bull whip and will have the Police Chief send it to the Sherriff’s scientific lab. They can match it to the blood of a specific animal. When the results come back you will be cited for cruelty to animals and the dog will be taken away from you.”

“I never heard of any such thing,” Zimmerman said.

Of course, neither had Alexander, but he was going for broke.

“I’m sorry you choose to remain ignorant about scientific breakthroughs.”

Zimmerman had not seen the whip under Nathan’s shirt.

“By the time you get your science statement my show will be long gone.”

“That sure sounds like a confession of cruelty to me. How about you big brother?”

“Absolutely. You think he would really risk shooting two unarmed boys already known in the community as kind, gentle, honest souls?”

“I don’t know. He appears to be pretty stupid, all things considered.”

Why he had added those final three words, Alexander didn’t know, but they seemed to have carried some meaning for Zimmerman who put away the gun.

“You two stop meddling. Let all this be or you’ll find out just how far I’ll go to keep that awful looking, ill-tempered beast. He’s my livelihood – a very good livelihood.”

Nathan turned to Alexander.

“I wonder what would happen if Zimmerman here was forced to get into that cage with ‘Simba’ without the whip. You think Simba would seize the opportunity to tear this terrible little man to shreds?”

“That would certainly be my guess. I’m thinking he

carries that gun as back up in the cage, however.”

“So, you’re saying if that happened he’d have to kill his livelihood – is that what he called it?”

The boys had no way of making any of that happen, but just the litany of possibilities seemed to have shaken Zimmerman. The boys turned and soon disappeared into the darkness.

“He’ll probably leave,” Nathan said.

“Not without Whimp he won’t,” Alexander said.

“So?”

“So, I don’t know. There are other acts in his show I expect people will pay to see.”

Nathan began chuckling

“What was that science line you spun back there?”

Alexander joined him with chuckles of his own.

“Total gibberish, but I figured a traveling scum bag like him wouldn’t have any way of knowing that.”

“You were great, I’ll tell you that. What’s next?”

“I think we have to wait until the police give Whimp back to Zimmerman – it’s the only legal way for them to go. Then, we have to find a way to free him. If he chooses to come with us that certainly isn’t stealing, right?”

“Sometimes I marvel at how devious that mind of yours can be. I think you’d make a good preacher. They have to come up with answers to fully unanswerable questions all the time.”

“The day I’m a preacher is the day Whimp will have Zimmerman in the cage, forcing *him* up onto the stool with the whip.”

“That I’d pay to see, little brother. *That* I’d pay to see.”

“It seems to me the sooner Zimmerman gets Whimp back the sooner we can get onto the next leg of our adventure,” Alexander said.

Nathan sighed. He really didn’t want to leave Parker’s employ. He really didn’t want to leave Grandma yet. But most of important of all, he really didn’t want to get caught and go back to Sherwood.

“I guess I agree. It’s time to move on.”

“To move on with Whimp and without Dorffman,” Alexander added.

“So, how can we speed things up?” Nathan asked.

“How about if we go to the police station and say we no longer want to pursue the matter of the dog’s ownership – that Zimmerman can have him?”

“I’d say that should do it,” Nathan said.

“Let’s go see what we can do – I know it’s late, but police stations never close.”

“One thing we probably need to do first,” Nathan said.

“What?”

“Go back and fix that cage on Zimmerman’s wagon so Whimp can get out.”

“How?”

“Watch and learn, little brother.”

They returned to the hotel’s stable. Zimmerman was gone. It was dark, but their eyes soon adjusted and they found the wagon. Nathan handed Alexander several pieces of chewing gum – something Parker handed out at work as rewards for good work as he made the rounds during the day.

“Chew these.”

Alexander’s puzzled look was lost in the darkness, but he went right to work on the gum.

“I need your knife.”

Alexander removed it from his boot and handed it to Nathan who, by then, was up in the wagon with a mouth full of gum himself.

During the next few minutes, using the knife, Nathan separated the rusting hasp lock on the cage from the frame. He plastered its back with the chewing gum and pushed it back into place.

“If it goes as planned, he’ll put Whimp in the cage and lock it. Whimp will push on the door, the gum will give way and he will make his escape.”

“Ingenious. Only one question. Why is this the first time you’ve shared your chewing gum with me?”

It had not been entirely a joke, but received nothing more than a grin.

They proceeded to the police station and gave up claim to the dog, then hurried toward home. The officer on duty said they would contact Zimmerman first thing the next morning. It was nearly ten o’clock by then. The boys opened the front

door.

“Will Grandma still be up?” Nathan whispered. “We need to let her know what’s going on.”

“We’re both gone, at night, without telling her. You can bet she’ll be up.”

She was, with German chocolate cake and whipped cream topping. They sat at the kitchen table and talked into the wee hours of the morning. Grandma asked more helpful questions than she offered advice. The plan was set. The boys would leave, hopefully on the new boat and ride as far as Cincinnati. Nathan was sure Parker would allow it. The boat was scheduled to start its shake down cruise at nine. Whimp was to be returned to Zimmerman sometime early in the morning. Grandma agreed to go to the police station and see that happened as early as possible. When Whimp returned – insisting on following them – they would board the boat and be off – hopefully to safety.

They rearranged their knapsacks so they had room for the food Grandma had prepared. Alexander left the books Amy had given him and in exchange took three of the new books from Grandma’s library – Natural Medicine and Gray’s Anatomy, both medical books – and the smallest atlas of the United States. They divided the money between them. They would carry it in their stockings a place they felt sure would be secure.

There was very little sleep at that house that night. At Grandma’s urging the boys tried, but even Nathan had trouble. At seven, Alexander left for the boat. He was to explain the new plan to Parker while Nathan waited for Whimp at the house. The most worrisome possible problem they had anticipated would be if Dorffman could actually serve legal papers claiming Nathan was a runaway apprentice. The authorities would be obliged to turn him over for the trip back to Sherwood.

Nathan had witnessed the treatment of returned runaways and he would not submit to such prolonged and severe treatment. He was sure Dorffman would have telegraphed Sherwood about what he suspected and he expected Cantrell to show up at any moment. He had kept the rifle with him. Alexander had taken the rest of their things.

Estelle left for the police station, which sat just three blocks away. Nathan hid in a thick stand of tall, shrubs that separated Grandma's place from the house to the south.

At eight o'clock Estelle returned. She nodded in the direction of Nathan's hiding place indicating Whimp had been returned.

Eight fifteen and still no Whimp.

Eight forty-five and still no Whimp.

At eight fifty-five Whimp had still not returned. Nathan left on the run for the boat. It had been the plan. Whimp was important, but at that moment in their lives they had to selfishly look out for themselves. Nathan heard the steam whistle sound its three long blasts, signaling the boat was ready to get underway. Dock workers had begun rolling the boarding ramp back onto the pier as Nathan approached. He kept to a full run up the ramp and jumped the final five feet onto the deck.

Seeing he didn't have Whimp, Parker said, "We can wait another fifteen minutes."

"Probably not," Alexander said pointing.

Dorffman was riding toward the boat waving a paper in the air and screaming something unintelligible from that distance. He was accompanied by a uniformed policeman who seemed in no hurry as Dorffman kneed his mount to a full gallop.

Parker gave the signal to the wheel house and the big paddle wheel at the rear began to turn. The engine had been under a full head of steam for an hour as the final checks were completed on it. Slowly, the boat began to move. The three of them waved at Dorffman – it seemed the only courteous thing to do since he was obviously waving at them. The policeman waved back and pulled up ten yards in front of the dock.

Back home, from the front window of the boy's room upstairs, Grandma, waved them on their way. She knew they couldn't see her, but it was something she needed to do. They had worked their ways into the fabric of her life and they would always remain there.

"It stinks," she said breaking a slight smile and stomping the floor, Alexander style.

Her handkerchief would not be dry for several days.

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CHAPTER NINE

The man steadied his gun in Alexander's direction.

On deck, it was mixed feelings in a way that mixed feelings had never before been felt. They had escaped Dorffman, but they had lost Whimper – not only lost him, but they had sentenced him to a life of mistreatment back at the hands of Zimmerman.

It didn't seem like there was much, 'fair', in the World at that moment.

Or was there?

"Hear that?" Nathan said moving back to the railing closest to the dock.

"It's Whimp!" Alexander called out. "Look at him run! Come on boy! We're here! Come on!"

The boat was making a ninety degree turn. It had been docked long ways next to the river bank. It needed to swing out heading directly into the river to avoid other piers and other boats docked at them. Only the huge paddle wheel remained facing the shore.

Whimp slowed not one smidgen. He continued to the end of the pier and leaped into the mist boiling up from the wide, churning wheel.

"He'll get sliced to bits in that wheel," Parker said.

The three of them ran toward the rear. They heard a single yelp – clearly indicating pain. There was nothing more. They searched the mist with their eyes. There was nothing but mist for a long moment. Then, there he was. Shaking off the wet and trotting toward them bearing only the slightest limp. The boys knelt, arms wide, and Whimp overwhelmed them

onto their backs. A tongue had never licked so hard. Two faces had never been so thoroughly licked. The water from Whimp's fur covered the boys' tears, but even if it hadn't there would have been no shame.

"I declare, you two must have a Guardian Angel," Parker joked.

Alexander winked at Whimp. He was very sure Whimp winked in return, a clear set back in the boy's religious journey.

Alexander removed his knapsack and opened it, removing a small package wrapped in brown paper. Grandma had sent along 'leavings' for Whimp, figuring he had gone without food for a considerable time. He was appreciative.

"You boys have breakfast?" Parker asked. "Food is always available in the dining room. All that has to be checked out, too. It will be a big part of your job – testing the food."

"Yes, you had mentioned work," Nathan said. "We're ready. Where shall we stow our things?"

"In your cabin – 202."

"Cabin?"

"They have to be checked out, too. By three this afternoon I want a complete assessment of the 'sleepability' of the beds in that cabin. Now, git. You look like you haven't slept in a week. Be sure to sample breakfast on your way. The strawberry tarts are the chef's speciality."

He walked off to attend to business. The boys looked at each other and shrugged. It was not at all what they had expected. They sampled the tarts which were delicious, but not really boy size, so they added several sweet rolls – they decided to take their work seriously – and were soon fast asleep in their cabin. Whimp positioned himself across the door, inside. He had his precious people back and would see that they didn't wander off again.

They slept through lunch and groaned back to life about two. It appeared that Whimp had not moved. They hoped he had slept. The uncertainty of the night had presented him no opportunity for sleep, either.

Outside they asked for Parker and were directed to the wheel house. It sat at the front on, and extending above, the

upper deck, protruding out over the walkway below. With windows front, rear and sides it commanded a complete view of the river and everything on it. It mainly housed the six foot tall wheel that was used to guide the boat.

Nathan knocked as he peeked inside the small room through the window on the back door. Parker was there with a man Nathan didn't know. He opened the door.

"Now, you almost look like human beings again. Boys, this is Max. He's from the company who will be paying me far more than he will tell me the boat's worth. Max, these are Nathan and Alexander, my right-hand men on this voyage. And that would be their inseparable, four-legged brother, Whimp."

Gradually, their role was acquiring some definition – food tasters, bed testers, and right hand men. They could live with that. Mainly, they figured, they were there to be companions for Parker. He clearly had great compassion for Nathan and what he had been through as well as respect for him as a first-class craftsman. Alexander could see they had formed a strong friendship and figured he was just there riding on his brother's shirt tails. He could live with that – for the time being.

Before they left the wheel house they both had a chance to take command of the big, mahogany, wheel and guide the boat for a mile or so. Holding the wheel perfectly still didn't seem like much of a challenge to Alexander, but he didn't bring it up for discussion.

"Time for you to take a snack up to the guest deck and try out the chairs. I'll need a report."

They obliged, with knowing smiles. The snack was great – a dozen of the smallest tuna fish sandwiches the boys had ever seen, with potato salad and lemonade. They managed a sandwich for Whimp as well. Although Alexander had been aware of it, Nathan was surprised at how tired he was. He dozed off in a lounge chair. Alexander walked the decks. He had major thinking to do. Whimp stayed with Nathan.

It was a long way to Kansas. They might eventually get far enough west so they could afford the train for the final leg. From Cincinnati it would still be a good 600 miles to Kansas.

Since it was locally known in Brownsville that the shakedown cruise went as far as Cincinnati, Alexander wondered if it would be safer to get off some place prior to that – in case Sherwood was persistent enough to actually still be tracking them. If he were, it was clearly more *revenge* than *return* that was on his mind. Alexander would consult the atlas later.

He was perplexed by several concepts that had always seemed so clear before. Fair vs unfair. Right vs wrong. In his mind, fair and right were cousins and they sat in the positive corner. Unfair and wrong occupied the negative corner. The disturbing realization was that they were not absolute concepts – they were relative – seeming to change with the situation. John Wilkes Booth who had assassinated President Lincoln, believed he was doing right. Most of the citizens thought he had done wrong. It appeared that Sherwood and Cantrell and Zimmerman defined right and wrong, fair and unfair in far different ways than he and his family did.

But more to the point, he had essentially just stolen a dog from its rightful, legal owner. He had stolen a seventeen-year-old apprentice from Sherwood who also had legal – therefore rightful – claim to his brother. He had done those things because he believed they were the right things to do. Which should win out? Stealing was wrong and yet protecting another being from horrendous mistreatment was right. How was he supposed to know which ‘illegal fair thing’ was more acceptable than which ‘legal unfair thing’? Which of the wrongs might really be right? Which of the rights might really be wrong? He wondered how judges could enforce laws in instances where doing so clearly harmed someone unfairly. The choices grownups had to make every day seemed impossible. He had said it before. He would say it again. Growing up stunk!

He was sorry he hadn’t given Grandma one final hug. Things had moved too fast at the end. He would never forget her and hoped he would see her again. He would write.

He wondered about Kansas – mostly the people. He had studied its geography and knew there were hills in the east near the Mississippi River and that it was flat to the west. He knew in some places out there, men still wore side arms

and had it out on main streets at high noon. He wondered where in all of that large state his uncle Hermann lived. What did he do for a living? Did he have a family? Would his problem with their father – Hermann's brother – make a problem for them? Had life treated him better than it had his father? He wondered if the man ever thought about Nathan and him. He wondered if he even knew about them.

The questions went on. Mostly he wondered how they would ever find the man. He had read there were more than 350,000 people living in Kansas. That would be a lot of doors to knock on. Maybe he was governor – that would make it easier. He couldn't even smile at his own humor.

He spent time watching the water kick up along the boat as if it were a thousand foamy white tongues licking at the side, each one pushing and shoving, trying all quite selfishly to reach higher than the others. He looked the dirty water across to the opposite shore; it was a wide expanse that seemed to be standing still as the boat matched its speed. He felt momentarily overwhelmed when he considered that every single person hidden from him across the way had his own story – his own joys and sorrows and goals and successes and loved ones and friends and adversaries; they were all stories he would never know, as if none of them had ever existed. He wondered if you could really have a friend that you didn't love or if you could love a person you would never choose to have as a friend. Perhaps there needed to be several kinds of love – for mates, siblings, for friends, for people in general. He supposed he didn't love all those unknowns across the water there; he wondered if he should.

If Alexander had a favorite pastime it was thinking. He liked to think about things that were real, things he thought needed to be real, how the world would be different if some little thing had gone differently along the way, and the unknowns that lay ahead in his life. He even enjoyed indulging in out and out fantasies – unicorns, the ability to fly, being king of the world, holding a beautiful girl close and kissing her. Recently, however, thinking had become an unrelenting muddle that charted its own erratic course and focused on the most discomforting things about life – and

death. He wondered if that was just an inevitable part of transitioning to adulthood – perhaps the initiation necessary to prepare one for life beyond childhood. If it were necessary, he would find ways of coping with it. If not, he wished he could leave it behind, right there in the murky depths of the endless river.

Nathan sometimes spoke of the occupation he would pursue – some form of woodworking. His eyes lit up and he displayed an air of confidence and contentment – happiness about it before the fact, even.

Alexander had no idea what his own professional pursuit would be. He had always assumed it would involve more education – that was clearly what his parents wanted for him. Being on their own, he had to wonder how he would be able to manage that – the expenses, primarily, but also getting himself prepared academically for college entrance. He had but hints about what fields were even available for him to pursue with an education: the ministry, law, medicine, science? The first two were definitely out; the purveying of religion was based on myth and he could not be a party to that; the second, he was coming to believe, was more about who spoke the most eloquently rather than anything about actual truth and justice. It probably left medicine and science for him. He figured they were pretty much a package – they had merged during the past hundred years or so. Of all Grandma's books, he *had* chosen medical books to bring along. He realized that the prospect of getting to see naked women as a doctor played a larger role than could have been considered noble.

He wondered if there were colleges that taught science and medicine in Kansas.

He returned to sit beside his brother. Whimp still got excited each time one of his people came into view. What tail he had, vibrated enthusiastically. Alexander reached down and petted him – he preferred long strokes to actual patting. Alexander figured *he* did, as well.

Touching, chained to thoughts of girls, which chained to things over which he suddenly had no control, so he changed those thoughts to memories of helping his mother make blackberry jam. It really didn't provide an adequate diversion,

but did make him hungry. Nathan was in a deep sleep so he left on his own and returned to the dining room. Since there were only about a dozen men on board, the cook – the chef, Parker had called him – kept a buffet going. Alexander chose a banana and a bunch of grapes. Eating them first made the slice of cherry pie with whipped cream and a pocket full of cookies feel legitimate. At home, he had to clean his plate before dessert – on those infrequent occasions when it had been available.

He made his way from the dining room to the flat, lower deck that spread out forward into a narrow point. Parker was there reattaching a fitting of some sort that seemed to have come loose.

“Nathan and I expect to do actual work, Sir. That was our agreement.”

“Then hold this metal plate right here while I screw it back in place.”

Alexander was quickly there assisting.

“You and your brother are a rare breed.”

“I don’t understand – one human mother and one human father like everybody else, if what my papa told me about such things was true.”

Parker chuckled.

“Not in that way. As personalities.”

That hadn’t helped and the boy’s expression showed it.

“You want to earn your ways in the world. I see so many young men today who seem to think the world owes them – a living, respect, a soft life, happiness. But not the two of you. I suspect you had fine parents.”

“The best, I believe. It’s not something you really think about while they are being your parents, I guess. Now, I think about it often. When I was young, being a parent seemed like the easiest thing on earth – give orders and the kids did what they said. I can see now that a good deal of behind the scenes thought and planning went into raising us – preparing us for later on – like now, I guess. I never got to thank them, you know, and that is sad. If I were back with them now, and I knew the things I’ve learned the past month or so, I’d thank them for being such good parents every single day.”

“Believe me, Alexander, when your parents saw the

fine young men you were becoming it was thanks enough for them.”

“I hope so. I must admit I had never thought about it in that way. We were always respectful of them. We seldom defied them. I suppose that was sort of like a thank you, wasn’t it.”

“It most certainly was.”

“May I ask if you have a family, Sir?”

“You may and I don’t.”

“That’s too bad. Nathan says you would make an excellent father.”

Parker turned away. At that, so did Alexander. It had not been his intention to create an emotional moment. Alexander moved quickly to change the topic.

“So, how’s the boat checking out so far?”

“Good. Really good. We hit nineteen miles an hour the first hour, but then we’re going down stream. The speed test that counts will come on the return trip from Cincy, churning against the Ohio’s relentless current pushing against us from upstream.”

“About that. I’ve been thinking it might be better if Nathan and I left the boat before we hit Cincy – in case somebody is still searching for us.”

“A good move I’d say. You might consider Maysville. It’s actually on the south side of the Ohio in Kentucky. Last major port before Cincy. I’m sure going to miss your brother – well you, too, of course.”

“I understand. If he had his choice he’d work for you forever, you know. That’s just not how life can be for us right now.”

“What’s out in *your* future, Alexander? Nathan says you have a really smart head on your shoulders and I can see he’s correct.”

“I’m not sure. Just really begun thinking seriously about it. We met a doctor on our journey who really impressed me. The only one I ever really knew. We couldn’t afford such care in our home. I brought some medical books with me from Grandma’s – Estelle’s – library. I figure by the time I work myself through those nine hundred pages I should have a better idea about it. It’s an exciting field. New discoveries are

being made every year. It was only a few years ago we didn't know about germs and now surgeons are using antiseptics to kill them and ether and chloroform to render patients unconscious during operations. It's almost unbelievable what is taking place. I read it's now possible for a surgeon to open up a man's chest and watch his heart beat, can you believe that?"

"It's an amazing time we live in, that's for sure."

"Nathan said you were also an apprentice, Sir. May I ask what craft?"

"Wainwright, like Nathan. Started out building packing crates. Then barns and houses. Lucked into this line when the tradesman I belonged to lost me in a card game to a boat builder up near Pittsburg. One thing led to another and here I am."

"I'm glad life is working out so well for you. I imagine it wasn't always like that."

Alexander felt he had allowed an opening in case Parker felt like sharing.

"I was in the apprentice system nine years – twelve to twenty one. I was resold twice and, like I said, 'transferred' that last time. Some places were very good places – good treatment and food and hours – and some weren't. My last Tradesman was a fine man. I think of him like a father."

"The doctor back in Frederick said he was looking for an Apprentice to study medicine with him. I'm thinking that would be one of the better situations for an apprentice, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. I'd think so. From what I know about it, medical apprentices can leave any time they want to – no money changes hands, no contracts, nobody owns anybody."

"I didn't know that. Thank you. I may have to look into it. I'm not sure how I should prepare myself for that."

"Could you write the doctor you spoke of and ask him?"

"You employed Occam's Razor. Very good."

"I'm not familiar with what you are talking about."

"It means the simplest answer tends to be the correct one. The direct approach to the doctor is certainly the simplest. My father said I tend to overthink things. He was correct. I need to keep old Occam in my hip pocket."

Parker began to more clearly understand Nathan's reference about the big brain. He also understood that Nathan's was not really far behind. He would be sorry to lose them from his life.

As it turned out there really was very little 'work' for them to do on the trip. Nathan was called on to adjust several things and he drew out a design for a new way to disengage the paddle wheel from the engine.

The boat did everything the buyer expected and more. The sale was assured. Parker would begin work on another, even larger one, the following week.

They left the boat and Parker at Maysville. Parker insisted on paying them according to his initial agreement. The boys felt bad taking it, but they could see he really wanted them to have it and, of course, they would make good use of it. They shared hugs and 'good lucks'. It was as sentimental as men and near men got at such times – on the outside, that is. Inside the feelings were sad that they were parting, but joyful that life had allowed them to stumble across one another for even such a short time.

Alexander knew a few things about Maysville. Daniel Boone had been one of the founders of the community and its slave auction block was featured in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Up to the time of the Civil War it had been a primary part of the Underground Railroad (called the Underground Road, locally) where slaves from the south were smuggled to freedom across the river into the free state of Ohio.

It may have been a smart move from the standpoint of safety to disembark in Kentucky, but it meant at some point they would have to cross the Ohio to the north side. Continuing west, south of the river, involved crossing rugged terrain including the Ozark Mountain range in Missouri and Arkansas.

It was six o'clock in the evening when they stepped off the boat onto Kentucky soil. The chef had been given orders to feed the boys well and sack them up a few days' supplies of food for their journey.

They walked the dock area west until they were just beyond the city limits. Nathan had inquired about bridges.

There were none, but he had been given the places where several ferries made the trek back and forth several times a day. They walked on until they came upon the first of the landings. The ferry boat was not there – apparently crossing or, more likely, Nathan thought, moored for the night on the Ohio side of the river. They found a mostly secluded spot to camp up on the bank just back within a wooded area.

Alexander had noted the crossing fees carved into a wooden sign at the dock.

“Fifteen cents apiece. If you were my wife I could take you along for a nickel. Brothers are such a terrible expense sometimes.”

“What about Whimp?”

“No information. A horse and rider are twenty-five cents so I doubt if he’ll cost more than a dime.”

“That’s forty cents,” Nathan said. “It seems like a lot, but I suppose there’s no alternative.”

The sixty-five-degree warmth of the day dropped rapidly as the sun set. They slipped into their coats and built up a fire, spreading their blankets close to it. Nathan broke out the two bundles of food, thinking they should work on the most perishable items first.

“We have a lot of food here,” he said as he handed over a wrapped sandwich from grandma’s sack. “Egg salad on buttered bread tonight. Apples and grapes for later.”

“I forgot how heavy the knapsacks are,” Alexander said. “We’ve been spoiled with a house and bed and all the modern conveniences.”

“We’ll soon get used to them again.”

Alexander nodded. He removed the little atlas and opened it to a map of the upper Midwest – Ohio to western Kansas. It was the exact area they would be crossing. They lay it flat on the ground near the fire and bellied down side by side so they could study it.

“Crossing the river here will put us about there, not far south of Cincinnati,” Alexander said setting the stage for the discussion.

“Look how the river loops north up to Cincinnati and then back south again,” Nathan said, tracing the river with his finger. “What would you say to remaining on this side of the

river and walking straight west from here and meeting up with the river again here, just across from Madison, Indiana? One of the other ferries is located in there somewhere.”

“It would save miles and it would keep us well away from Cincinnati,” Alexander said more or less thinking out loud. “I say let’s do it.”

The plan was set. They lay back looking up at the stars. Whimp returned from finding his supper and worked his way between them. Nathan immediately reached out and put his arm around him. He moved his hand in small circular strokes. Alexander wondered if that’s how it would feel to hold a girl close. They would both be warm. You could feel both of them breathing and sense their hearts beating. He wondered if that’s what his brother thought about when he held Whimp close like that. He thought better than to ask.

He did have something to ask, however.

“You think about mama and papa often?”

“Every day. You do, too, I suppose.”

“Yeah. Sometimes it’s good and sometimes it’s sad. The last thing I remember about them was laying there in the straw looking up at the burning building and seeing papa’s face slip away from the window when the floor collapsed. I got out of the wagon and tried to go inside to get them, but the fire was too hot. I felt guilty not just going ahead anyway. Mr. Anderson grabbed me and held me back. I remember fighting against him, but he was way too strong for me to escape.

“I didn’t hear anything – they didn’t cry out or scream. I’m thinking – hoping, I suppose – that they got knocked unconscious when they fell so they didn’t know what was happening. It is a terrible image in my head. I don’t want it there, but I don’t want to lose it, either. It’s the last I have.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. It must have been terrifying.”

“It was, and the rest of that night didn’t get any better. Looking back, I suppose Reverend Miller really tried to help me with what he said, but it didn’t – heaven and hell and angels and devils. If I hadn’t known I had you, I don’t what I would have done. Thinking about you saved me, I think.”

“Did you sleep that night?”

“I must have, because I woke up. I already had my

plan to come and get you. I waited 'til near daybreak because I still don't like to be in the dark by myself. Dumb, I know, but it's how I am. In the fall and winter, I used to run most of the way home after my visits with you, trying to beat the darkness."

Nathan could think of nothing to say he thought would be helpful so he remained quiet. Selfishly, he figured, he had never given any real thought to how bad those moments at the time of the fire must have been for his brother. Or, for that matter, how difficult it had been for Alexander to make that trip to see him every month. He felt guilty on both counts.

"I suppose we need to sleep and get an early start in the morning," Alexander said – uncharacteristically – not really ready to bring the conversation to a close, but feeling too much pain about it to continue.

"I suppose," Nathan said.

Nathan tossed him an apple. They munched on in silence. Whimp liked apple cores and seemed happy life was back to normal; walking together, building warm fires, hunting for supper, and ending the night with an apple core. Life was good.

"Goodnight, big brother."

"Good night, little brother."

They arranged their blankets around themselves and made ready to sleep. Nathan had something left over. He didn't move but he spoke.

"You really are not a *little* brother anymore. Mind if I start saying just, brother?"

"Sounds great, in fact. Let's try it again. Good night big brother."

"Good night, brother."

They each smiled into the darkness and were soon asleep.

* * *

They awoke with a start to Whimp's growl.

'Surely, Cantrell hasn't been able to find us here,' Nathan thought to himself.

The fire was still burning brightly so they knew they hadn't been asleep long.

Whimp was on his feet, barking. A man entered the circle of light. He was a stranger to the boys. He had drawn his side arm – a six-shooter from a holster. The boys sat up.

“I’ll take what money you have,” the man said calmly – politely, even.

“We’re just kids. What money do you think we have?” Alexander said at least giving it a try.

The man steadied his gun in Alexander’s direction.

CHAPTER TEN

Doc and the Pirate

“Take off your boots,” the man said motioning with his gun and sounding irritated for the first time.

An irritated man with a gun in the dark was not a good thing. They did as they had been told.

“Take off your stockings.”

The man seemed to know their secret. Perhaps it had not been such a clever idea after all. The money – the bills – fell out onto the ground. The man picked them up and shoved them into his vest pocket.

“Have a good night,” he said tipping his hat.

He backed out into the darkness.

They heard him mount up and gallop away, back toward Maysville.

“I suppose we just learned a lesson,” Nathan said.

“I suppose so. How much do we have left in coins?”

They each had some in their pockets. Pooled, it came to three dollars and twenty-two cents, significantly more than either had figured.

“Better than being flat broke, I guess,” Nathan said.

“Better, yeah. I feel pretty dumb.”

“I know what you mean.”

“I suppose, really, if we just learned a good lesson we should feel smart – well, smarter at least.”

That had come from the thinker, of course. They sighed one joint, brotherly sigh and covered up again. Nathan laid down and was soon back asleep. Alexander doubted if he would ever sleep again. He added some wood to the fire and pulled Whimp close as he sat watching the flames. Whimp

laid his head in Alexander's lap. Apparently, stroking from Alexander was something better than snoring from Nathan.

Presently, Alexander laid back down on the off chance he might salvage at least some sleep from their disastrous first night in Daniel Boon's much touted great state of Kentucky.

Nathan shook him awake at daybreak. He already had breakfast laid out.

"So, how far over to the ferry at Madison?"

"As far as 80 miles depending on how straight a line we can manage. Looks mostly flat between here and there with some hills here at the start and then some more as we get closer to the river again."

"Can we make that in three days?"

"I doubt it. I have no idea about the hills or roads or trails. Better count on four."

With breakfast out of the way, the fire put out and their bag and knapsacks ready to go, Whimp stood and suddenly assumed a watchful stance. He looked down the slope toward the road at the river's edge and began his low, guttural growl. Nathan pointed back into the cover of the trees. They moved quickly and waited. They could see perhaps ten yards on each side of the ferry landing.

It was a man on foot – baggy brown trousers, a blousy blue shirt tied just above his waist and a blue bandana across his forehead, tied in back. He wore high brown boots and carried a ten-inch knife in a sheath from his belt. His black hair was shoulder length – longer than the boys' – and a well-trimmed beard and moustache encircled his mouth.

"Looks like a pirate right out of a high seas novel," Alexander whispered.

"Maybe a river sailor of some kind," Nathan came back.

The man – looking to be in his mid-thirties – took a seat on a log at the ferry dock. He began whittling and whistling. The sudden reflection of the early morning sun against the blade caused Whimp to bark. The man, remaining unruffled about it, looked up in their direction. They had not taken steps to really hide themselves, thinking the shadows and being well above the road would be sufficient. Truth be told, they had just plain not thought it through having been more interested in seeing him than not being seen by him.

Figuring it was time to begin making the best of the situation, Alexander raised his hand and waved.

The man waved back and stood to face them. Alexander began the descent to the road and, characteristically, began to speak.

“Hey. Good Morning. See you’re an early riser like we are. I’m Alexander. This is my older brother, Nathan. Dad will be along in a few minutes. Nature called to him early this morning.”

The man laughed and nodded.

“I’m Jack. No brother. No father. No one of a kind dog-sort-of-looking-animal.”

“Heading across the river are you,” Alexander continued.

“I handle the ferry one day a week so Adam – the owner – can have some time off. You gentlemen crossing? Ferry will arrive in a few minutes.”

“No. We’re walking west. Figuring to cross at Madison. There is a ferry down there, we understand.”

“It washed away in the flood last May. Have to go clear down to Louisville to catch the next one. What’s wrong with here?”

“We’re heading west through Missouri and didn’t want to have to go any further north than necessary.”

Jack nodded, looked at Whimp and bent close as if addressing him.

“Does the tall, good looking young man, there, ever talk or is he just along for decoration?”

The boys grinned. Jack already had them figured out – well, somewhat.

“I can make myself understood, sir. Alexander just tends to jump in first.”

Jack nodded.

“I can arrange a good fare. Forty cents for the four of you.”

“Four?” Alexander asked before he thought.

He grinned and shrugged.

Jack spoke.

“I figured there was no father, but I admire your quick mind. And that call of nature thing was exquisite!”

"If I may say, sir, you talk like a teacher, but you look like a sailor right off a Yankee Clipper ship. Have you sailed the ocean?"

"Indeed, I have. All the way from Portland Maine to Boston, Massachusetts."

Alexander broke into a smile.

"That can't be a hundred miles."

"And let me tell you that was nearly a hundred miles too far. The ship got caught up in a nor'easter and we came close to being driven into the rocky shores on multiple occasions."

"Truth?"

"Mostly. I've told it so often my mind seems to believe it. I do think it is at least true that I was on an ocean vessel, under full sail, however."

The boys chuckled. Whimp barked.

"First dog I've ever known with a sense of humor. What's his name again?"

"Whimp, short for Whimper, which he was doing when he first found us. He was wounded."

"He has a wonderful face – intelligent, but somehow sad."

"Both, although we're thinking the sadness is all behind him now."

"If he's with you boys, I can imagine that's true. There comes the boat. See the smoke? You in or not?"

Nathan spoke.

"So, if it was forty cents for the four of us, I imagine it's thirty for the three of us."

"I see it all now," Jack said. "Alex charms the competition into a trusting state with his high falutin' words and beautiful smile, and then Big Nate steps in and lowers the boom. Okay, thirty, but you may have to help hold the rudder if the current's still as strong as it was last week."

"My brother knows all about boats. He's been building steamboats up in Brownsville – that's in Pennsylvania on the Mon – Monongahela – River."

"Were you, now?"

"Yes, sir. For only a short time, but yes. The Parker Boat Company."

"Looking for work?"

Nathan turned to Alexander, puzzled. Then back.

“Might be. Could be. Know about something?”

A friend and I build flatboats – you know about flatboats.

It was neither Nathan nor Whip that answered and the response was a good deal more than the yes or no required.

“Free drifting, down current crafts used for one way trips. Usually nothing more than a big box. Often carry cargo or families with their possessions hoping to settle further west or south. Recently, some have started having steamboats tow them back upstream adding round trip capabilities. That allows the cost of better built boats with improved accommodations.”

“How do you know that stuff, Alexander?” Nathan asked fully baffled and speaking as if Jack were not right there.

“I read and have wide interests. Besides, I recently had need to learn about such things since you were on track to owning a ship company.”

“He was what?” Jack asked.

Nathan shook his head.

“My brother tends to make things look better than they are. He takes after our mother in that respect. I was just a finish man.”

“Finish man. That’s pretty far up the ladder – just under foreman if I recall.”

Nathan shrugged. Alexander beamed. Whip stood and wagged as if sensing it had been an important moment.

Nathan looked at Alexander.

“What do you think? Since we lost our money last night we could sure use some more.”

Jack listened, but didn’t interrupt.

“Alexander needs to continue his education. What about schools around here?”

“Education. Fine. What field?”

“I’m exploring medicine to see if I’d really be a good fit for it. I have an anatomy book and a basic medical book with us.”

“Would that be *Gray’s Anatomy* and Anderson’s *Introduction to General Medicine*?”

“How in the world could you have possibly known that?”

“I dabbled in medicine myself a few years back. I just imagine I still know enough to help you with your studies.”

Alexander offered a little test.

“What do you think about Clarke’s germ research?”

“It was Pasteur not Clarke. Clarke’s research was in ether and sedatives.”

Alexander looked at Nathan.

“This man will do for me, if he will do for you.”

“I suppose we have a deal then although I’d like to look over the boats you make and the tools and such, before I make a final promise.”

“Our boat works is across the river just south of Grove about five miles – right on the river. My partner’s name is Farley. He’s a huge man, he swears like the Devil himself, has the worst full beard God ever allowed to sprout, and has a peg leg, but he sure knows boat building. I’ll write you a note of introduction to take to him. Don’t let him scare you off; he’s as gentle as a lamb inside.”

Alexander had to wonder if that would be a thousand pound, green, two headed, fire breathing lamb, but kept it to himself.

“We certainly feel fortunate we ran into you,” Alexander said. “The last man we came across – well, who came across us, better states it – robbed us of all our currency – nearly forty dollars.”

“So how do you intend to pay the fare?”

Jack had intended it as a joke. They boys remained quite serious about it.

“We had lots of coins,” Nathan said. “He didn’t even look in our pockets – I figured that would be the first place he’d look.”

“I imagine he went right for your stockings.”

“I guess we are dunces when it comes to such things.”

“Not anymore, I’m thinking.”

It was worth smiles. Some of life’s lessons apparently cost more than others.

“How do you get back to Grove if you end up over here?”

“Adam lives on the other side. He comes and gets me

– like he’s doing now. I take him back. I make a dozen or so runs back and forth during the day and end up back over there all ready for him the next morning.”

“But you’re here on this side this morning.”

“You wouldn’t pry into another guy’s love life, now, would you?”

Neither boy had a response – other than the fiery red hue suddenly ablaze across their faces. Alexander only had the faintest idea of what a love life might be and although Nathan did, neither had sufficient information for a ready response.

The ferry, unlike the ones the boys had known that crossed narrow creeks and rivers on a rope line back home, had a small steam engine, which apparently produced enough power to battle across the current to the other side. It drew no more than six inches of water and was not much more than a floating pier – a raft – constructed of a dozen or so twelve-inch square, twenty-four foot long, pieces of oak with a post and rope railing.

Nathan immediately had an idea to improve the efficiency of the craft, but kept it to himself. It was carrying two horses, two riders, and three walkers. Alexander did some quick figuring; sixty cents per crossing times 24 crossings a day came to – about fourteen dollars a day. Not a bad business, he figured, bringing in over five thousand dollars a year. That Adam fellow was rich!

The trip took less than ten minutes. In the end, Jack refused their money, perhaps because of the robbery, perhaps as an inducement to consider his offer. Maybe, he was just a nice guy. He said he’d meet them at the boat works at eight that evening. He had a place they could bunk until they could make more permanent arrangements.

The boys found it a bit unnerving to be standing right there on the surface of the raging river. The water splashed high against the sides and rolled across the beams. They had to hold their possessions high. By the time they reached the center, the current was quite strong and the rudder had to be set to point the craft in a severe angle upstream in order to maintain a straight course. Nathan offered his assistance.

From that close, the water offered up a disagreeable

odor and had the appearance of swirling, brown, slurry. Piloting such a craft would not rank high on the boy's list of dream jobs. Miracles did apparently happen, however, and they arrived safely on the other side.

As they walked west on the wagon trail along the river they talked. Alexander had become worried.

"Papa always said something that sounded too good to be true probably was too good to be true. This whole thing feels like that. You need a job, you know how to build boats and a boat building job pops up from a perfect stranger. I need to continue studying – medicine of all things – and a former doctor pops up to tutor me and in that same personage as the boat builder guy."

"You want to just keep going? Nothing says we even have to stop and let Farley scare the bejeebers out of us."

"We accepted the free ride on the ferry. Would seem like stealing if we didn't at least look into it."

"What evil motive are you thinking Jack could possibly have?"

Alexander shrugged and went for the joke, "Boy stew?"

They chuckled and Alexander returned more seriously to the question.

"I know what you're saying."

"Sometimes good things just happen," Alexander. "Haven't you been listening to mama all these years?"

"Our parents were sure two very good things that happened to us, weren't they?"

Nathan nodded. He was taken by the fact that he wasn't yet ready to offer a blanket verbal agreement with such a statement. That bothered him.

"Actually, I suppose," Alexander went on, over thinking things, "it was more us happening to them than them happening to us. Hmm. That will take more thinking."

Nathan felt fortunate *that* discussion would be confined to whatever super forces fought such things out within his brother's head. He would prefer watching from the sidelines while holding hands with a beautiful girl – well, most any girl; actually, Whimp would do in a pinch.

"If Farley really swears like the Devil, himself, you may have to explain some of the words to me – if you know them,"

Alexander said in all seriousness.

“Believe me, brother, I’ve heard every swear word that was ever invented and then some.”

Alexander understood that could not be true – he couldn’t know more words than there were words to know – but he’d let it go. He wondered how many times he’d done that – just let things go with Nathan that could have led to interesting and productive discussions. He loved his mind!

By mid-morning they arrived at their destination – ‘*R & F Flat Boats*’. There were two large buildings standing side by side – long, wide, one story high with gently peaked roofs. One had vertical wood siding the other horizontal. They opened out onto a dock beyond, with a wide ramp in the center – like a slide to launch their boats directly into the river, the boys assumed. The moment of truth seemed to be upon them – enter and finally face fearsome Farley.

Had he sported an eye patch and a hook he could have been a pirate captain right out of the history books. Jack hadn’t mentioned his hair and beard were red and he was missing an upper tooth in front or that he stood six, six and weighed three hundred pounds.

Alexander held back and let Nathan lead the way.

“Farley, I assume. I’m Nathan and this is my brother Alexander. Jack suggested we come and see you. I am a boat builder by trade – The Parker Boat Works up in Brownsville, Pennsylvania.”

He removed the note from his front trousers pocket and handed it over. Farley read it to himself at arm’s length – his lips moved – and he looked them over. He took Nathan’s right hand in his, clearly looking for calloused skin. He seemed satisfied. Alexander understood what was going on. He held out his hands, flipping them back to palm.

“I seem to acquire very few callouses from turning the pages in books. I’m still a student.”

Farley rolled his bottom lip and nodded – generally taken to mean approval, but from that large man it might well have just been his way of preparing to eat them.

Presently, the big man offered his hand for a shake and a broad smile.

“So you ran into old Mr. Jack at the train station, huh?”

It had been his own little test.

“Very good, Mr. Farley,” Alexander began. “It is *young Dr. Jack* at the *ferry*. Other than that you had it spot on.”

“Can’t be too cautious, you understand.”

Another interesting expression for Alexander to ponder later. He supposed it might, in fact, be possible to be too cautious contradicting the man’s contention. He let it lay for later.

“So, you looking for work I guess?”

“Actually, I wasn’t until we came across Jack. One thing sort of lead to another. It would only be short term. We are heading west.”

Most folks would have asked, ‘Where, west,’ but Farley let it go. That made him immediately comfortable to Alexander.

“Well, we got a bit behind back during the flood.”

“The one in May?” Alexander asked for no particular reason other than he knew about it.

Farley nodded and continued.

“Still haven’t caught up. Have one about half ready to float. The person who contracted for it will be here in ten days expecting it to be river ready.”

“It is just the two of you?” Alexander asked.

“Yup. We’re a good team. Doc makes the coffee and I do the work.”

He chuckled. The boys couldn’t be sure how much truth there had been in that statement, but both doubted it. Jack had seemed both energetic and hard working.

“What sort of skills would you need from me?” Nathan asked.

“We have it all roughed in. It’s an upscale model designed more for peoples’ pleasure than cargo – odd for a flatboat, I know. It will go both ways on the river.”

“Be towed back upstream, you mean?” Alexander asked needing to make sure he understood.

“Right. Come on back into the assembly room and take a look.”

They had been standing in a small room at the front with a roll top desk on one side, a long table and four chairs in the middle, a potbellied stove by the door, and shelves filled

with books and large rolls of paper – boat plans they assumed. There was a door in the center of the rear wall to which Farley directed them with his arm. They dropped their things and followed his lead.

The assembly room, as Farley had called it, was large, perhaps fifty feet wide and seventy-five long. The ceiling sloped up gently to a ridge in the center. There were a dozen or more large skylights, which flooded the area with natural light. Lots of windows lined the walls. The boat was clearly well on its way to being finished.”

“Looks like fifteen feet wide and forty-five feet long – sticking to the traditional 1 to 3 ratio I see,” Alexander said looking it over.

It had not been an attempt to show off, it was just Alexander being Alexander.

Farley looked at Nathan. Nathan looked at Alexander.

“What? Like I said, I’ve done some research.”

Nathan turned back to Farley.

“He’s like an encyclopedia without page, sire. It automatically begins to respond at the mere mention of most any topic and continues until a hand is gently clasped over its mouth.”

“He and Doc will get along great, then. Doc knows everything. He’s been a little of everything.”

“Everything?” Alexander asked.

“Teacher, doctor, salesman, architect, sailor, you name it.”

“But he’s still so young.”

“Probably older than you think. He has never allowed a worry to enter his head. That probably keeps him young looking. Now, me, I’m only eighteen, but then I do the worrying for both of us.”

“You are kidding of course about the eighteen,” Alexander asked.

“Doc and I tend to enjoy the absurd. You will need to get used that around here. I’m going on fifty, in fact, if I fell forward I’d probably hit it.”

Nathan had begun walking around the outside of the boat.

“Flat bottom for sure. Gently pointed front – a feature

not often seen on flatboats.”

“Reduces drag considerably when being towed. A steamboat captain will take on one like this every time over a blunt nose.”

“Exterior all oak?” Nathan asked.

“Oak planks, two years dried, with cherry pegs. No nails or screws to rust away.”

“Why cherry?”

“They swell just enough when wet to maintain a good seal, but not so much they will crack the oak frame. Strange as it may seem, oak pegs tend to crack oak planking.”

“I know about that. Do you bore the holes in place or pre-bore on an auger table?”

“Some of both – on the table as much as possible. It appears you do know your trade.”

Alexander stood back and took it all in, beaming as his brother went through his paces.

“May I see the tools?”

“Sure. Kept on the wall on the other side.”

They moved to the other side.

“I’m impressed, Mr. Farley. Very good.”

“Mr. Farley was my father. I’m just, Farley.”

The boys nodded. Alexander had a question – well, he had dozens, but he offered just one.

“I assume Jack has a first name.”

“So do I.”

“I guess I don’t understand your answer.”

“Been with him four years now. Don’t recall him ever saying his last name.”

“And you never asked?”

“Not sure how that would improve anything. I call, Jack, and he responds. What more do you need?”

The answer made complete sense, so Alexander wondered why it made him so uncomfortable. His list of fascinating things to think about had grown long those past weeks.

“I’d be happy to work with you if you’ll have me,” Nathan said.

“Aren’t you interested in the pay?”

“If I’m going to work for you I have to trust you will treat

me fairly – pay is a part of that.”

“I’d love to know your parents, boys.”

He left it at that and so did Alexander.

“Ever do finish work?”

“It is actually my specialty.”

“This is beginning to seem too good to be true,” Farley said. “We need help and it just shows up out of nowhere.”

“Oh, I assure you we appeared out of somewhere. Spontaneous generation went out with Louis Pasteur’s experiments.”

Farley turned to Nathan.

“What percent of what he says can you truly say you understand?”

Nathan held up his hand, positioning his index finger and thumb a quarter of an inch apart.

“ ‘Bout that much.”

It had been a joke and Alexander took it in good nature.

“You ready to get to work?”

“Yes, sir – and I’m guessing it was your grandfather who was called, Sir, and that I should retreat to just plain Farley.”

“I can see I’m going to be at the bottom of the totem pole,” Farley said.

“What do you mean?” Alexander asked.

“Words. The two of you outclass me every time you open your mouths.”

They chuckled. Alexander refrained from informing him that actually the most important image was placed on the bottom of totem poles so, according to his own accounting, Farley would find himself at the top.

“Jack said there was someplace we could bunk temporarily,” Nathan said.

“That just might be in the bunk house, suppose?”

Nathan smiled waiting for more.

“A small room we built between the two buildings – that door down there. Sleeps six, stove, table and chairs, pegs for hanging things.”

There was a knock at the door and a man in a suit entered. He removed his hat.

“Mr. James,” Farley said extending his hand. “Good to

see you.”

The boys moved back giving the men room.

“Let me introduce you to Nathan, our new finish man, and his brother Alexander – an encyclopedia in training.”

Mr. James nodded politely, missing the joke and clearly wanting to get down to business.

“Need the boat by next Tuesday.”

“That cuts five days off the time we agreed on.”

“I know. Sorry, but I have some dignitaries that have to be in St Louis in a week.”

“It will be pushing it – here to St. Louis – even if you leave on your schedule.”

“That’s on me. You just see that the boat’s ready.”

The man turned and left, apparently assuming no response was necessary. What Hat Man demanded, Hat Man seemed used to getting.

Farley wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He turned to Alexander.

“You know anything about wood working?”

“Just helped Nathan build a bedroom.”

Farley nodded and looked at Whimp.

“And how about you.”

Alexander’s eyes danced.

“Well, he is an authority on *bark*.”

It was good for a prolonged chuckle.

Farley looked at Nathan.

“What about the kid working with us?”

“I’m his brother not his keeper. We will need to confer.”

“I’m up to it, for whatever I’m capable of doing. I can still read some every day and pick Jack’s brain while we work if that’s allowed.”

“So long as you work steady, you can pick his nose, his teeth and his women for all I care. Now his clothes, that’s strictly hands off.”

More chuckles. Alexander had noticed that Farley had refrained from swearing in their presence. He didn’t understand. In fact, he was some disappointed because he had anticipated learning lots of interesting and educational profane words and phrases, which he had hoped would vastly increase his knowledge of the carnal side of being a human.

He had concluded that swear words typically made reference to one of three areas: instructing God to do terrible things to others, invoking the Devil's assistance, and disparaging the intimate side of human relationships. It was the latter he was hoping to understand better.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Flyer

Farley directed their attention to the diagram of the boat they were constructing. It included a sketch of how it was to appear. Clearly it was a long way from finished. Basically, just the bottom and the outside walls of the cabin had been completed. They got to work.

While Nathan fitted and caulked the six windows on the sides of the cabins, Farley taught Alexander how to use the lathe to make the smaller pegs needed to fasten the wall and floor boards together on the inside of the boat. It was a precise undertaking and he proved to up to it. By mid-afternoon he had completed the five hundred Farley had ordered. Alexander was amazed at what close attention one had to pay to accomplish such an apparently mindless task.

The hull or base of the boat was five feet high, forty-five feet long and fifteen feet wide. Depending on the weight of the load, the bottom one to two feet of that height would be underwater (the draw). Across the front two thirds was the cabin – side to side and thirty-five feet long. Its floor was one foot above the bottom of the hull and it extended eight feet high, raising it four feet above the deck. In front, there was a three-foot-wide deck area. At the rear (aft) was a seven-foot-long, flat deck area under which was an additional storage area for cargo. Passengers and crew entered the cabin down a set of steps in the center of the cabin's rear.

On that luxury model, the cabin was finished to meet the needs of the passengers. There were comfortable seats, tables, fold down bunks with mattresses along both sides and

a small dressing room in the front right corner. The ‘facilities’ were enclosed in the other front corner. The more common model had an unfinished cabin (then, called a hold) and was used strictly for cargo storage. There was a sitting area on top of this boat with steps up to it at the rear and a railing all around. As flat boats went, this one, costing nearly three hundred and fifty dollars, was three times more expensive than its more basic relative.

The main rudder was in the rear – five feet long, two feet tall, attached to the end of a twelve foot, four-inch pole. It adjusted to be set at water level. A secondary rudder could be set into the water up front to assist in guiding the boat in strong or turbulent water. Being flat on the bottom – no sloped keel like in larger boats – it tended to be an unstable craft, easily tossed about in unsteady currents.

Most flat boats were constructed as cheaply as possible. They had originally been strictly a one-way ride downstream. A tent often replaced the cabin. Some were little more than rafts. At the destination, they would often be disassembled and the wood sold to recoup some of the expense or used to build shelter in the new territory.

This one was substantially different and was even going to be painted. Commercially, a high-class boat like that had the potential of being a huge financial success – four trips between Cairo, Illinois and Cincinnati, Ohio, and it would be paid for. The problem was, few ever survived that long. They were unstable and unreliable – *but* they were cheap compared to the steamboats.

They worked into the evening until Jack arrived, bearing food. He was pleased with all they had accomplished.

“Tomorrow we will lay the floor in the cabin, put the ceiling joists across, and start up the inside walls with tongue and groove siding.”

Alexander knew about that, since he and Nathan had just finished a project using it. Mentioning that, however, seemed fruitless to him.

“Alexander is very good at working with that kind of siding,” Nathan said.

Farley noted and nodded. He went on to tell Jack about the change in delivery date.

“Fortunately, the gods have provided four extra hands,” Jack said. “The new deadline should present no problem at all.”

Like Farley had said, Jack didn’t allow worry to enter and erode his life.

“You get any reading done today, Alexander?” Jack asked.

“No, sir. My hands seemed to be needed elsewhere.”

He produced a handful of his pegs. Jack looked them over with great care.

“Excellent. However, I want the first four hours of the day to go toward reading. You can then work the next twelve.”

He maintained a serious look. It took a moment for the boy to understand it had been a joke – the absurdity thing about which he’d been forewarned.

Jack turned to Farley.

“Did you negotiate pay?”

“Nope.”

“Did you stipulate hours?”

“Nope.”

“Fine. Sounds we’re off to a good start.”

They boys enjoyed the humorous banter, but did wonder about both things.

Jack understood.

“We can pay Nathan thirty-five cents an hour and we’ll start Alexander out at fifteen. When he shows us what he can do we’ll adjust that. If his work is too bad, of course, he’ll have to pay us and eat with Whimp.”

That absurdity they caught immediately. Jack went on.

“We work daybreak to exhaustion – eat morning, noon and after work in the evening – meals are on us.”

“That seems very generous,” Nathan said. “What about housing?”

“There are lots of houses in town that take in roomers, but you can stay in the bunk house if it’s not too fancy for you.”

“Again, very generous. Our father was a disciple of the saying, ‘If something seems too good . . .’ I imagine he’s up there looking down scratching his chin waiting for our bubble to burst.”

“I’m sorry. Didn’t realize he had passed on.”

“Mama, too,” Alexander said. “She was always the optimistic counterbalance to Papa. I’m thinking she’s going to get the last laugh in this one.”

“Thank you,” Jack said. “I take that as a vote of confidence.”

As they ate, the boys – mostly Alexander – told the story of the fire and related their odyssey up to that point. He made it clear that the basic purpose of the trip was to find their uncle. He left out all aspects of the apprenticeship, although both men sensed the omission. A seventeen-year-old boy didn’t just come by such skills on his own. No reference was made to it, however.

It was a cordial conversation. It was good food, thick beef stew with hard rolls and fruit.

“We’ll stay here tonight and get back to you in the morning about a place to stay,” Nathan said. “I’m thinking right here, but we always talk things over. Probably depends on your rent compared with the rent in town.”

“Three dollars a week in town. Zero dollars a week here.”

“I suppose you have our answer, then.”

Alexander nodded.

Earlier, the boys had stowed their belongings in the bunkhouse. Although Whimp was used to a good deal more attention than he received that day, he seemed satisfied with the left-over stew and a floor to sleep on beside Nathan. Foreseeing the potential problem, Alexander had taken the upper bunk.

“Goodnight big brother.”

“Goodnight, brother.”

They each had a head full of new things to think about. Nathan’s were soon short circuited by sleep. Alexander thought on for some time. During the previous twenty-four hours they had happened onto three men – one bad but polite, one good and polite, and one good and rather outrageous. Even the bad one hadn’t really seemed evil – Alexander would consider the parameters of ‘evil’ at some other time.

Best of all for Alexander, he was earning his very first money – even though technically it was theirs, it was still the first he had earned from holding a job. At fifteen cents times

the eight hours he would probably be allowed to work that came to one dollar and twenty cents a day or seven dollars and twenty cents a week. Over a year that would be almost three hundred and seventy-five dollars. He could live on that if he ever had to. He felt both proud and more secure. Together they would be earning over thirty-two dollars a week – a great deal more than back in Brownsville. Life seemed very good at that moment.

He also noted they needed to get two letters off within the next few days – grandma and Parker. It was really good to know there were people out there who cared enough about you to be concerned about your welfare. It raised another aspect of the growing responsibility monster, however. If they'd be worried, then they boys needed to keep them up to date. Alexander had to wonder if he were going to be responsible for the wellbeing of everybody he met.

On that note, fatigue took over and he, too, went to sleep.

The following morning it was bacon and eggs and fried grits. The latter was entirely new to the boys. They spread it with butter like the men. Alexander needed something more. He sprinkled it with sugar and had suddenly found what he had been searching for all his life – the perfect breakfast dessert. He would try adding jam when the occasion arose again.

It was another good day for the boys. Alexander did his reading and spent the day pestering Jack for additional information – real world application kinds of information. Jack clearly enjoyed it.

“You two old hens getting any work done down there with all your cackling?” Farley called, winking at Nathan who was helping him set the ceiling joists in place.

The other two were laying the floor, which entailed first measuring and predrilling all the boards, setting them in place over the floor joists, drilling the corresponding holes into the joists and pounding the pegs in place. It was a precise undertaking and seemed to be the exact sort of activity both of them enjoyed.

“With these extra hands, I can see we're going to have the tub ready by Tuesday,” Farley said as they ate that night.

Jack gave him the, 'I told you so,' shrug. The boys smiled, but didn't comment.

"So," Alexander began, "Nathan and I forged our relationship as the result of being born into the same family. Are we ever going to hear how you two got together?"

"Hardly an interesting story," Jack said as if he really didn't want to pursue it.

Alexander sensed that, and wasn't sure how to get out of it. Farley came to his rescue. He became very dramatic – hand gestures – the whole thing. He leaned in close to launch the story.

"There I was, washed ashore on the craggy coast of Maine. My ship had gone down in a ferocious nor'easter. A mast had fallen across my leg and cut it most in two. The world went black with the storm still swirling above me – the waves continuing to crash against me – sometimes shoving my nearly lifeless body further up onto the shore and sometimes dragging me back toward the sea. It was a coin toss where I'd end up – dead on land or dead in the sea.

"I woke up two days later looking up into the face of an angel – Doc Jack it was. He'd found me, carried me to his house where he had his office, and saved my life.

"Now, Doc Jack's not big on bedside manner. As soon as he saw I was awake he delivered the news. 'I had to take your leg off just above the knee. Sorry, but at least you'll live. Lost a lot of blood. Need rest and drink lots of water'."

"Really?" Alexander said, wide eyed. "You did an amputation?"

Jack played it down by trying to turn the tables back on Farley.

"Actually, he was a fully uncooperative patient. I had just obtained my first vial of ether and I was itching to find somebody who needed surgery. But would Farley cooperate? Not on your life. He passed out and stayed passed out clear through the operation and beyond. He was the most disappointing patient I've ever had. Decided to turn in my stethoscope right there and then."

"Your stories sound like multiple choice questions on a test," Alexander said grinning.

"I suppose most of it's true, really," Farley said. "He still

doctors when it's called for."

"And Farley still exaggerates whether it's called for or not."

They shared a look that said they had been through a lot together and appreciated each other more than they would ever need to say.

"Nathan and I have found that danger and adventure bring us closer together."

"We have?" Nathan said surprised at the comment.

"Well, you will once you have time to actually contemplate it."

"It is obvious that you two are very close."

What Jack had not said was that he thought it was a shame their protected lives with their parents had been cut short and instead of getting to fret over how to ask a girl to the dance, they all too early had to learn how to make their own way and defend themselves against the evils and dangers of the world.

After Whimp licked his bowl clean the boys retired to the bunk house and were immediately in bed. It's black tar roof and being positioned up against two buildings kept the little room quite cozy. It was way too warm to build a fire – in fact sheets weren't even required.

Within a few minutes there was a quiet knock on the door.

"Alexander, you still awake?"

It was Jack, speaking barely above a whisper.

Nathan was already asleep with his back toward the room. Alexander slipped down and opened the door.

"Nathan's usually gone long before I am. He needs his sleep and I need my thinking time. What do you need?"

"I found these two books from my library. One is a history of medicine starting back in the days of the ancient Greeks. The other is one I haven't even read yet myself. It's an annual edition that brings practicing doctors up to date on the latest advances in medicine – not very long, unfortunately. I thought they'd bring a little diversion from the really tough stuff you're wading through. I really didn't mean to disturb you."

"Oh, no. I'll be happy to be disturbed by things like this

any time of day or night. You're very kind. Thank you."

"I'll leave you to your thinking then."

He looked back through the door, down at Nathan. Because of the heat in the bunkhouse and he had stripped to the waist. His back was exposed and Jack saw the scars. He winced at what he saw. Alexander understood and ushered him outside, closing the door for privacy. He motioned him to the floor where they sat, backs against the walls.

He decided the story had to be told, so, for a second time, he laid it all out without Nathan's agreement.

In the end, Jack nodded.

"How's he doing?"

"Physically he's gained almost ten pounds and has the stamina of a – whatever has great stamina – a goose flying south for the winter I guess. I really can't say about how things are emotionally. He seems to be fine, but I don't see how he could be. I think he puts all his focus on me and taking care of me so he doesn't have to think about all that. So far, I've let him. He has said he is full of hate for the Cantrell man and is afraid he may not be able to control it. Both of those things – the hate and the lack of control – really keep him tied up in knots – down in his gut. I'm hoping time and separation will help. Not a very scientific statement, I suppose, but it's the best I have."

"It was the very best kind of a statement – one that unrolls from your love and concern. Science isn't all that great for the personal side of life."

"I suppose the other important question is how are *you* doing, Alexander?"

"Better than you might think. I mourn the loss of my parents everyday – when it all first rolls back on me when I awaken. But I think I'm handling that as well as a boy my age can be expected to. It seldom brings early morning tears anymore. For Nathan, I've decided not to press things. Every once in a while, he'll offer little bits and pieces of things. I always make it clear I'm there for him. I'm counting on that to continue. I'm here to support him, but I know I can't solve his personal problems for him as much as I wish I could. As for life, a large part of it is on hold until we work things out about our uncle – find him, see what sort of relationship we can

have, things like that. Until that gets to be certain, it's not really possible to make long term plans except in very general ways."

"And if you don't find your uncle?"

"Nathan and I have talked about it – well not in those terms – but between the two of us we can make a living and pay for my education. I need to know more about medical education and hope we have time to talk about it. I understand some medical students work with practicing physicians and 'read medicine', I've heard it called. Then at some point take an exam and become a doctor."

"That is the most common way of the past. Universities now have fine programs that prepare a student much better than that older approach. We'll talk. You get your sleep now. Thanks for sharing with me."

Alexander nodded.

"Oddly, I feel much better about things. Thank *you*."

Also, oddly, he went right to sleep.

Work continued from day to day. Skills grew. Friendships developed. Once again, life was becoming quite comfortable. That, of course, made Alexander *uncomfortable*. He had told himself he needed to keep in mind it was, by design, just a temporary arrangement.

The boys found time to write the letters – each one contributed part of it. Jack mailed them when he went to town for supplies. He was gone for a good amount of time and Alexander wondered if it might have been related to his love life. He really needed to ask Nathan about that term.

By midafternoon on Monday the final peg had been sunk, the last swipe of paint had been applied, and the furniture had arrived and been placed inside. The new boat was ready to be launched.

The building had folding doors across the end next to the dock. The boat had been built on a huge, low platform supported by twelve, heavy duty, iron wheels along its sides. The front of the boat was facing those doors. A heavy rope was threaded through the pulleys of a winch at the front of the building. It took surprisingly little effort to roll the platform out onto the dock and down the ramp into the water. They secured the boat against the padded side of the dock.

“I think the youngest member of our crew should step foot onboard first now that it’s afloat,” Farley said.

Humorously, Whimp jumped onto the deck.

Alexander, whose system had been revving as he stood there looking it over, willingly stepped out onto the deck.

“Didn’t sink. We must have done something right,” he said grinning and beginning to walk the front deck.

Farley motioned for Nathan to follow.

“So, let’s have an opinion, boys,” Farley said.

“Interestingly less stable under our feet than when it was on land,” Alexander said. “Undulates with the waves.”

“Moves slowly up and down, too,” Nathan said kidding his brother about his big word.

It received the chuckles it deserved.

“Feels like fun to me,” Nathan said, moving up and down at his knees to see if he could ‘undulate’ it even more.

Their reactions had been predictable.

“Have a week’s pay here,” Jack said holding up two envelopes. “Anybody here interested?”

Whimp barked

Back in the building they relocated the mobile platform securing it and making it ready for the next project.

“So, what’s next?” Alexander asked once the doors had been closed.

“A tosser,” Farley said.

“Of course, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Let me take a stab at it,” Nathan said. “My guess is that refers to the cheapest model – a one way tripper – to be tossed away at the other end – a tosser.”

“Give that young man a fur lined bathtub,” Farley said.

“A what? Oh, a joke. For what it’s worth the idea of a fur lined bathtub is disgusting.”

“Perhaps that will teach you not to be so clever then,” Farley came back.

“I believe I am witnessing absurdity on top of absurdity,” Alexander said grinning.

Farley whispered to Alexander.

“And sometimes it even gets worse.”

“How long will it take to build?” Nathan asked ready to get the group refocused.

“If we had the beams on hand, about fifteen hours with two of us working,” Farley said. “With you two helping more like twenty, I’m thinking.”

The boys recognized the humor with a quick smile, but wanted to get on with things. Time was money in their minds!

“So, we need to cut beams and such?” Nathan asked.

“They should be waiting for us at the saw mill. We just need to tell them we’re ready for them and they will deliver.”

“Is that easily accomplished?” Alexander asked.

Jack turned to Farley.

“Seems like these two aren’t going to give us any down time. Can’t they see we are old and decrepit?”

“Quite honestly,” Alexander said, “No, we can’t.”

“If they are so eager, I suggest they be the ones to go and alert the mill,” Farley said.

“Sure makes sense to me, but do you think a couple of east coast kids can find their way from here to there?”

“Hadn’t considered that.”

Jack looked at Nathan.

“Nathan, why don’t you and I make the trip together? We haven’t had much time to really get to know each other.”

“Sounds good to me, if you think we can trust the other two not to get in trouble.”

“Like sink the building, you mean?”

Nathan nodded and chuckled.

Whimp sensed a walk was in his immediate future and was on his feet and panting at Nathan’s side.

There was a chilly breeze following the river south so they slipped into coats and were soon on their way.

Alexander turned to Farley.

“So, what can we do to make ready for the delivery?”

“You can hit the books. I can take a nap.”

“That seems like a fair division of labor to me.”

He opened a book on the table. Farley refilled his coffee cup and sat at the other end.

“You tell tails out of school, do you?” Alexander asked as he paged through the book to find his place.

“Sometimes. What’s on your mind?”

“We’ve been here a week, but we really don’t know much about you two – especially you, I guess. Any

fascinating things you can offer?”

“Like what?”

“Like where you’re from, family, early life, interests – things like that.”

“From Bangor Maine. Only son of deceased parents.”

Alexander chuckled.

“What? I sincerely doubt if you are the son of deceased parents – perhaps the son of parents who are now deceased.”

“I see. A stickler for precision. I shall attempt to deport myself in a more accurate grammatical manner.”

The exchange set a comfortable tone.

“I went to sea as a cabin boy when I was your age and trod the boards some twenty years – four continents – before I lost my leg. Never married, but fell in love dozens of times. Raised on a farm. I enjoyed chasing rabbits, squirrel, and possum until I all quite unexpectedly came upon that significant watershed when I was twelve, and then switched to chasing girls.”

“Thanks. I feel closer to you. Anything you can share about Jack?”

“A city boy, wealthy parents, brilliant student, studied architecture early on, became a licensed physician at twenty-one, married for two years before he lost his wife to a disease he couldn’t cure. Still blames himself. Been a vagabond ever since. Luckiest day of my life was the day the sea washed me up into his life. Been best friends ever since. We’re a good match; he’s the dreamer and the smart one, I’m the practical one and keep him grounded somewhat close to the real world. He needs to be on a very long leash.”

“Sounds like Nathan and me. I got an oversupply of brains and I would dream away my life if it weren’t for Nathan keeping me in the real world as you called it. He tries to make me believe that we are sharing the responsibility for our life equally, but I understand he is really in charge. It is why I ran to him right after the fire. I knew he’d know what we needed to do.”

“You still think that?”

“Well, no. I’ve learned he doesn’t have all the answers, if that’s what you’re getting at, but he has a lot of common

sense and there's nobody I'd feel safer trusting my wellbeing to than Nathan."

Farley nodded. The conversation seemed to have come to a logical conclusion.

"You not a coffee drinker?"

"No. I have tasted it and I cling to the hope it is not a requirement for becoming an adult."

A boy – ten – opened the door and entered.

"Hey, Willy," Farley said happy to see him.

The boy handed over several pieces of mail.

"Willy, this is Alexander. He's here helping us for a while. Alexander this is Willy, he gathers our mail for us every so often and keeps us informed about all the gossip."

"No time fer gossip today. Gotta hand out these here notices. A man paid me a quarter ta put 'em all over the docks. Later."

He was gone as fast as he had appeared.

Farley shuffled through the envelopes. Alexander returned to his book. Each of those acts seemed to define the person. Had they noticed, it would have been worth grins and chuckles.

A few minutes later Farley cleared his throat. Alexander finished a paragraph, marked it with a finger, and looked up.

"You need to see this, Alexander."

He handed him the flyer Willy was distributing. It offered a \$75 reward for the return of a seventeen-year-old male apprentice to one, Emanuel Sherwood in Owings Mills, Maryland. The name was Nathan Hummel, but the description was definitely Alexander's brother."

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CHAPTER TWELVE

A Rain Storm on the Ohio

“Now I understand!” Alexander said. “I once saw the paper our father signed to send Nathan to work for Sherwood. It listed his name as Hummel instead of Hoffman. Our clever father used the wrong name so Nathan could not be held to the contract if it needed to be broken. Not that that will change Sherwood’s determination to take him back. I’m thinking it’s time for the vagabond brothers to be on our way again, Farley. Sorry about not being able to help with the tosser.”

By the time the others returned with the beams and such, Alexander had their possessions packed and up in the front room waiting. Nathan’s broad smile quickly changed to concern as he read the flyer. To add to the confusion the bell rang – a signal from the dock that a boat of some kind had stopped and wanted something. The sign on the river side of the building offered boat repairs and equipment. Their work had been interrupted numerous times by such business. Farley was known on that stretch of the river as the person who was able to fix most anything that might go wrong with any boat. He went to tend to it.

The men from the mill went about unloading the wood. Jack and the boys talked in the front room.

“I guess it’s good-bye time,” Alexander said.

“It came too soon, Jack,” Nathan said. “Thanks for everything.”

“One question,” Jack said. “How am I going to collect that seventy-five-dollars reward if you run out on me? He clearly sees you as very valuable help.”

“Property, is more like it,” Alexander said. “Very valuable property.”

“More like revenge, I’m thinking,” Nathan said. “I’m afraid I made him hate me as much as he made me hate him.”

“Probably not a good thing for you to have done.”

“A guy goes with what he has and that’s all I had.”

Jack nodded grasping the concept although realizing he could never really understand.

Farley returned.

“That, too-good-to-believe-Fairy, may have just hit again, boys. There is a man at the dock alone in flat boat that is much too large for one person to handle. His crew apparently abandoned him during the night. It takes at least three to manage a boat his size – should take four. Says he’ll pay twenty-five dollars for the two of you if you’ll work his boat all the way to Cairo, Illinois with him. You sleep on board in dock. Meals provided. Half the money now, half when you get there.”

“You know the man?” Alexander asked.

“Never seen him before. An older man.”

Nathan looked at Alexander.

“What do you think?”

First of all, he thought the expression, ‘what do you think,’ was worthless as far as precise communication was concerned, but he responded to what he figured the intent had been.

“If we walk, it will take weeks and cost us a good portion of the money we have. If we take the job it will take days, and we will significantly build up our cash supply.”

“So, go?”

“I thought that’s what I just indicated.”

Nathan turned to the men

“Don’t you just love his mind? I guess we’re off again.”

As typically seemed to happen, the good-bye was virtually nothing more than that.

Farley introduced them to Frazier, giving them excellent recommendations. They sealed the arrangement with a handshake and stepped aboard the unpainted boat. Farley had one caution, which he delivered to Frazier.

“A flat boat that size really needs a crew of four,

minimum. Come a good sized current or eddy and you're going to be in trouble."

"I've handled bigger with fewer. We'll be just fine. Thank you kindly for finding these young men for me. Seems too good to be true."

His phrase raised an immediate question in Alexander's mind. *Finding*. Could it be this man had been sent by Sherwood to 'find' them and would put in at a port just downstream away from their new friends, where Cantrell would be waiting?" It made him shiver. 'Over thinking,' he said to himself. 'I am just overthinking.'

He pounded his forehead with the heel of his hand.

Farley pushed them away from the dock with a push pole and they were soon swept up in the current, off on the next leg of their adventure. Although they had just helped build a flat boat, they had no actual experience navigating such a match box through swirling eddies and uncertain currents. They understood the basic concepts and very soon had a reasonable grasp of the applied side.

The craft was larger than the one they had worked on, but had none of the fancy accouterments. The hold (cabin) had one window front and rear. The bunks occupied the front right corner where the dressing room had been on the other one. The 'facilities' resembled the bare essentials of an open outhouse in the other corner.

The roof on top of the hold was loaded with wooden kegs, secured in place with what looked to be a well-practiced arrangement of looping and crisscrossing ropes. Rather than a railing there was a six-inch lip – a two by eight – attached along all four outside edges. They hadn't seen inside the hold at that point. The Kegs were labeled, 'SUGAR'. It made no sense somebody would be transporting sugar down into sugar country, but both boys let it go. Alexander's guess was they were second use kegs filled with nails and screws and washers and such from the iron works on the Monongahela where the sugar had been sold.

Frazier made the assignments and very briefly demonstrated what they were to do. Both tasks were essential, but neither was difficult.

"Keep the chatter to business about the boat. Stay on

your feet. If mine can handle it at sixty-eight, your young ones certainly can.”

With each one attending to his particular job, there was little need for conversation, so no real getting acquainted took place. Frazier manned the rudder in the rear, Nathan the front rudder and Alexander the push poles used to keep the boat from touching other boats that came too close. Especially near ports, that became an ever-present danger. It was the need for a second pusher – or second oarman – that Farley had been referring to earlier as the fourth man.

In calm water or when necessary to navigate into a dock, there were two long oars that could be set in place near the front that the boys, standing, would use to propel the craft. How well that would go remained to be seen. A number of years before, they had won the three-legged race at the church picnic. Alexander figured that showed they could very likely handle the oars. (No one but he would see any meaningful connection.)

From time to time Frazier would call out instructions to Nathan – “More right,” “More left.” Other than that they moved on in silence.

At noon, Frazier instructed Alexander to bring up the lunches from the box in the rear of the hold. In a small, open crate he found four sack lunches marked NOON – he figured that indicated there had been three workers who had skipped boat overnight. He wondered why they left – a cranky boss, not being paid, bad food, a dangerous mission, girls in port available to meet their lascivious needs? (Alexander loved that word – lascivious – but still needed more information to plump out its meaning.) He took three lunches up on deck and passed them around.

“There are some extra meals,” Frazier said. “Feed the dog from them if you want.”

“Thank you. Very kind, sir,” Alexander said.

Nathan decided to wait until evening to feed Whimp, which would follow the schedule they had established and which seemed to satisfy him just fine.

They had each been furnished a canteen and were expected to eat and drink while they kept to their tasks. The instructions had been to relieve themselves over the sides

when nature called. Trash was to be thrown into the river. They would comply with that order, but neither liked the idea of littering the mighty Ohio. It had enough sanitation problems all by itself and, apparently, they were expected to add to them as well.

Frazier said they would make port at nightfall and the boys were to stay on board. He had given Nathan the advance on the salary. Nathan felt uncomfortable carrying all of it.

With the breeze blowing from behind them, it appeared the boat was outdistancing the current – winning, Alexander supposed, if it were a contest. The river was low so it moved slowly, especially at its widest points. Alexander wasn't sure how that affected its odor – from his olfactory observation it surely couldn't have been helping.

Farley had told him the Ohio flowed between three and four miles an hour – over its length – that time of year. Outside of flooding periods, the speed at any point along its length depended largely on width and depth. It was right at three hundred miles on down the river to Cairo. A quick calculation told Alexander about one hundred hours running time on the water. If they traveled ten to twelve hours a day they could make thirty to thirty-six miles a day. That suggested seven to nine or ten days. It intrigued him that it really wasn't all that much faster than if they had walked the straighter course on the Cumberland. Still, there was something exciting about sailing the Ohio – and the money. There would be stories to tell his children – if, in fact, he ever verified his assumptions about exactly how one went about making a child. His father's 'talk' had not allowed for questions.

All things considered, Alexander believed their decision had been a very good thing. It would keep them from crossing paths with Cantrell for more than a week and most likely move them way out of Sherwood's apparently long arm. They should arrive sometime between the middle and end of the following week. That would basically just leave Missouri to cross before they came to Kansas.

With no fuel or water required to produce steam, they had sailed on past port after port. That relieved Alexander's

mind about Frazier being in cahoots with Sherwood or Cantrell. He hadn't shared that fear with his brother coming to believe it had been irrational and based in panic about losing him.

Nathan noted the boat was relatively stable in the water, keeping to a fairly straight course – better than Jack and Farley had speculated. Perhaps using both fore and aft rudders at all times made the difference. It rode quite low in the water, indicating whatever was in those barrels, was really heavy. He had had no opportunity to heft one in order to determine that.

In his head, he had designed what he called a center board. It was an eighteen-inch board running the length of the boat down the center of bottom – under water. It would be on hinges so it could be flipped up flat against the hull when the boat approached low water. He figured that would provide a great deal more stability. He even had a rough idea how to make it flip up automatically when the water ahead was too shallow. He would run it by Alexander who would undoubtedly have useful suggestions. He might send the plan back to Jack and Farley. It kept his mind occupied, at any rate.

By nightfall the boys were tired. It had been nearly ten hours of continuous standing and fighting heavy poles. Alexander decided standing in one place for that amount of time was for some reason more tiring than moving around would be. He'd consult his anatomy book later to see if he could determine why.

That was when it first hit him. He was going to have virtually no time for study. He would have to cram what he could in after supper and before bedtime. That depended on how dark it had to get before Frazier considered it nightfall and made port. While in the cargo hold getting the lunches, he had seen a number of kerosene lanterns so light would present no problem. It would, however, cut into the only time he and Nathan had to talk.

They made port in some tiny settlement with two ancient looking docks extending out far enough to accommodate a half dozen flat boats and perhaps one, small paddle boat at the very front. That night they were the only

boat docked. There were lanterns lit along each pier and on poles some twenty yards in both directions along the bank. That made it appear a good deal more pristine than it probably was.

The dock man that helped them land knew Frazier and once the boat was secured, the two of them walked off toward the little town. He had given the boys no additional instructions. From what he had said earlier they should eat and stay on the boat to sleep. Alexander assumed it was also implied that they shouldn't allow anyone to steal either the boat or its contents. More responsibilities.

The hold was filled with the same kind of kegs as they had seen up on the top. They were stacked three high. A narrow path allowed access to the bunks and facilities.

"Do you think we need to load the rifle for the night," Alexander said.

"Never been unloaded since after that last rabbit bit the dust."

"It would have been good if you had told me that!"

"I thought we agreed to always keep it loaded and handy."

"I guess we did. Sorry if I seemed short about it."

"I know. I got a knot in my stomach, too. I thought the day went pretty well, though, didn't you?"

"On the boat, you mean?"

"Yeah."

Alexander nodded.

He went below and found the supper bags. They perched themselves on top of the kegs, which were secured on top of the hold.

"Plenty of food so far, I'll give Frazier that," Nathan said.

Alexander nodded – his mouth was busy enjoying the roast beef sandwich.

"He's a man of few words," Nathan continued. "It's hard to read a person if he doesn't talk."

"Does that translate to, 'Alexander, you are extremely easy to read'?"

Nathan chuckled recognizing no other response was called for.

"Guess I'll hit the books. Looks like this will be the only

time I'll have to study. I hate it that we won't have much time to talk."

"How about something like this: every time you finish ten pages you put the book aside and we'll talk for ten minutes?"

"I like that. What will you do while I'm reading?"

"I have a gadget I want to draw out. When I'm done I want you to look at it."

"Some boat related gadget?"

"Yup."

"Great. Let's get below."

They lit a lamp and hung it from a hook in the ceiling some five feet from the bunks. That way, there was light on the top bunk for Alexander, on the bottom for Nathan, and on the floor for Whimp to clean up his supper.

The boat rode up and down in the water as the current forced its way against and then under and around the boxy hull. They liked the sound of the water against the sides – gentle, soft, irregular. The lantern cast its soft orange glow, also somewhat irregularly as it swayed gently with the movement of the boat.

Nathan couldn't figure the boat for sure. It was constructed no better than was necessary for navigating the river, but it was well above being a tosser. He figured it floated the river to Cairo, perhaps exchanged its cargo for new cargo needing to move north and engaged a paddle boat to tow it back. What he couldn't figure out, was the sugar heading south.

Alexander read, Nathan sketched, Whimp regularly nuzzled his guy reminding him that he needed lots of petting to make up for having been ignored all day. The boys talked from time to time. At ten Nathan blew out the lantern and they turned in.

"It was a good evening," Nathan said.

"Yes, it was. I'm actually looking forward to tomorrow."

They were more tired than they realized and were immediately asleep.

Sometime later, Alexander, his ear no more than a foot from the ceiling, was awakened by noises above him – outside.

“Nathan,” he said softly, turning and hanging his head over the side of his bunk. “Noises up above me.”

Uncharacteristically, big brother was immediately awake and paying attention – knots in one’s stomach tended to encourage that.”

He stood up and listened.

“Like the barrels moving?”

It had come out like a question.

He knelt in the darkness and located the rifle under his bunk. Alexander slipped down to the floor. Nathan stroked Whimp hoping to keep him quiet. He opened the door, Alexander at his heels. They moved up three of the six steps, turning to look back over the top of the hold. There were two men with knives cutting the ropes that held the kegs.

Nathan positioned his rifle so he could easily raise it into the lantern light from the dock where it would be seen. There was a raft alongside toward the river, tied to the pier. The situation was immediately clear – bad guys were stealing the kegs. He raised the gun.

In the deep voice that had followed him into manhood, Nathan called out in the most commanding tone he could muster.

“Surrender or die!”

Even frightened almost to the wet pants stage, Alexander had to choke down a chuckle. It was so unlike his brother. The amused take on it was soon shut down in favor of concern as he realized it was that same tone he used when speaking of his hate for Cantrell. It was not the time for all that to propel itself to the surface. Still, that tone did get the men’s attention.

A man holding one of the kegs across his chest, turned and looked in Nathan’s direction. The other lowered himself onto the raft. Nathan was concerned they might have weapons down there so he aimed at the center of the keg and fired.

The impact burst the keg sending nails flying with some force in all directions. The impact had wounded the man up top and he fell down. The man on the raft attempted to get a hold on his accomplice so he could pull him off to the safety of the raft. It made the boys believe there were no weapons.

Alexander ran to the pier post where the raft was tied, ready to do what he could to make sure the rope was not removed. Whimp leaped to the top of the hold and demonstrated his patented low rolling growl and gnashing, white teeth routine. The uninjured man raised his hands.

“On your face on the raft,” Nathan said.

The man complied.

By that time the dock man from earlier arrived with a rifle of his own. He was soon followed by Frazier and several other men still pulling up the straps on their overalls as they ran.

The dock man took charge and removed the men. Whimp returned to his gentle version and settled in on the dock beside Nathan. Alexander also moved in close to Nathan. At that point he wouldn't have minded getting petted a little bit himself.

Frazier approached them.

“Very nice work, boys. Very nice.”

“Sorry about blowing up that keg,” Nathan said. “I had no idea that would happen. At best I figured the power of the impact might knock him off his feet and sweeten the river a little bit.”

“No worries about that. They could have got away with several hundred dollars' worth of product on that raft.”

He took out his wallet and removed two five dollar bills handing one to each of the boys.

“A little bonus for your extra service. I'll sweeten that when we finish the run. Never had any problems here before. Guess I'll need to start hiring a guard.”

It was four o'clock in the morning. The boys tried to sleep. Frazier was back to awaken them at six. He had brought the food for the day – in sacks like the day before. They sat together in the hold waiting for the sun to brighten the world enough to get under way.

As they ate, they went through the usual first meeting sort of chit chat, where are you from, where are you going, why are you traveling alone, and so on. By then, the boys had the story down pat. Frazier seemed to listen with interest.

“And you, sir. What can you tell us about you?” Alexander asked thinking it was worth a shot.

“From Uniontown, Pennsylvania. A steel mill town. I buy nails, screws and such from a big manufacturer there and take them to Cairo where I sell them to a man who distributes them on out west – Missouri, Kansas and Iowa. Lots of building going on out there. Lots of people moving west. That’s where things are going to happen, boys. Out west.”

It had not revealed anything about his personal life, but perhaps suggested the business side of things was most important to him. It had presented him as a far more congenial person than they had seen up to that point.

As the dawn broke – later than they had anticipated – they could see the weather had changed. The clear skies from days past had been replaced by dark, fast moving, dark clouds. They would be glad for their warm winter coats and high leather boots.

First, they set to retying the ropes around the kegs up top. Once they understood the system they realized it was perfect for keeping the cargo from shifting. Frazier supplied them with rain gear.

“Black clouds out of the south means rain and wind. If it gets too bad we’ll make port and wait it out.”

Alexander wondered just how bad it needed to become before Frazier would think it was *too* bad.

They were underway by seven. The wind kicked up good-sized waves that swelled across the river, from the south – their left as they faced down stream. That tended to wash them toward the north shore. To counteract that they had to set the rear rudder hard left, which would have normally taken them right into the south shore. Nathan’s job became more important as he was required to modify the position of the front rudder as necessary to keep them headed straight ahead. Frazier said they would trade places if it became too difficult for Nathan. Apparently, he did well since no such thing was suggested. The boys could see it was going to be a more physically demanding day than the one before.

Alexander contemplated the pros and cons of using a sale. He soon discovered that in the uncertain current, it was well to keep as far away from other boats as possible, so he worked from the extreme end of his pusher pole. It meant the pole felt much heavier – being manipulated so far back on the

shaft. His lower arms were tired by noon.

That was also when the rain began, torrents of wind-blown rain. Whimp headed down into the hold wondering why the others were so addlebrained as to stay outside. The wet-weather gear was welcome, but did less than required to keep them dry. By three o'clock they were soaked. The storm had not blown itself out the way Frazier had hoped. If anything, it had intensified.

"We need to head into port," Frazier called, pointing. "We'll hole up on the south bank. More protected there."

The boys nodded that they understood even though the noise of the storm made it virtually impossible to hear back and forth – the heavy waves slapping the sides and the howling wind.

Their focus had been keeping to a steady course ahead, so they had not noticed the small, side-wheeler coming up behind them on the south. Alexander was on the north side of the boat when he noticed it. He ran across the front deck, dragging his pole, hoping to hold them away long enough to avoid a damaging crash. The pole met the ship well in front of the wheel and kept them from touching, but it was moving much faster and before he realized what was happening, his pole became entangled in the paddle wheel. It and Alexander were flipped into the raging water.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Wake Me When We Reach Cairo

Nathan quickly tied his rudder in place and rushed to the south side of the deck. The side-wheeler moved on past, its captain clearly unaware of what had taken place. Alexander surfaced, rising and falling with the swells. He was confused and tried to swim south, away from the boat. The coat and boots added to the impossibility of the task before him.

Nathan called to him with no result. He removed the thirty foot oar from where it was attached to the lip along the side of the top of the hold and extended it toward his brother. A huge wave turned Alexander around and at that moment he seemed to understand what he needed to do. He reached out with one hand, attempting to maintain himself with the other. Another wave forced him beneath the water. He was out of sight for an agonizingly long time. Nathan was beside himself understanding that the undertow could swiftly move him hundreds of yards downstream, all under the murky water. Presently, he popped back to the surface. Nathan called again. Alexander was frightened and exhausted and pawed at the water with some degree of futile panic. He was not at all sure he could manage to reach out one more time although the current had apparently moved him some closer to the flatboat.

Nathan moved the oar closer. With some skill on his part it found his brother's hand. He soon had a tentative hold on it with his left hand. Nathan pushed it into him and Alexander was able to manage a hold with both hands. Slowly, carefully, he pulled himself up a few feet and put the

oar into a bear hug – arms and legs. Then it became Nathan who had to dig deep for additional strength. Alexander closed his eyes against the burn of the water and waited unable to tell for sure what was happening. He couldn't tell if he was crying, but felt it would have been reasonable.

Frazier had not been able to assist. To have left his rudder would have certainly allowed the boat to move away from Alexander and most likely sink. Nathan carefully pulled the oar in foot by foot, yard by yard understanding that the slightest jerk on his part and his brother could slip right back into the raging current. Presently Alexander was close enough to reach the deck. Nathan yelled at him with all this strength his dying voice could muster. Alexander's eyes opened and he pulled himself onboard and lay there, sprawled out face down. Nathan dragged him further onto the deck.

"You okay?"

"Of course, not – well, maybe better than drowned. You just guide this box to shore."

As they drew close to the bank the waves diminished in size and intensity. They were rapidly and somewhat erratically closing in on a spot next to a large rear-wheeler which had already docked. With more luck than skill, they slipped in beside her, their sides more than just brushing. The crew from that boat threw them lines and secured the boat.

Frazier climbed over the hold to where Nathan had Alexander in his arms, moving down the steps into the hold. The man followed, closed the door behind them. He went right to the hand powered sump pump, which would remove what water had entered the hold. Nathan placed Alexander on the bottom bunk. Whimp did what he could to assist.

"So," Nathan said.

"So, back. Thanks."

"Anytime."

"Let's make that never again."

"A deal."

"I think I'm getting your bunk wet."

"That's okay. I'll sleep in yours tonight."

It was sufficient for grins.

Another ten minutes on the pump and the water was gone.

“Will the water rust the nails in the kegs?” Alexander asked.

“Shouldn’t. Water tight. Built for sugar and flour.”

Alexander nodded and closed his eyes.

“Wake me when we reach Cairo.”

He was asleep.

First, they noticed the roar of the wind lessening. Then the sound of the rain on the roof came to a halt. Gradually the violent movement of the boat calmed – not entirely.

Frazier and Nathan prepared to go back up on deck.

“Stay with Alexander, Whimp.”

The dog lay down and inched his way closer to the bunk. Nathan continued to be amazed.

Up top, things were in good shape. Even the oar Nathan had freed to help in the rescue lay across the deck. Together they replaced that into the large metal hooks designed to hold it. They had lost the one pusher pole, but there was a second they could use. They freed the ropes from the steam boat. Raised arms were exchanged with the other crewmen who drew up the ropes.

“Let’s get ourselves separated from the big guy, there, Frazier said.

They worked the second push pole together and soon had ten feet of clearance. They dropped the anchors front and rear. The paddle boat began backing up and after five minutes of close order maneuvering was headed on upstream – apparently, its original destination. Although the size of the waves had subsided, the current continued to gain momentum, signaling there had been lots of rain over a wide area far upstream.

“Look the sides around,” Frazier said.

Nathan followed his lead. The phrase meant to inspect them. There was no noticeable damage – an advantage, Nathan figured, in not having any paint to have been scraped.

“Beatrix here’s seen worse,” Frazier said. “I figured she’d come through a little squall like that without a scar.”

Two parts of that piqued Nathan’s interest – *little* squall and Beatrix. He’d ask about the most reasonable one first.

“Beatrix. That was the name of one of my grandmothers. I never knew her. My mother and father

immigrated to America before we were born. That's a German name, right, or Dutch?"

"German as they get."

"Us too, mother and father."

Frazier nodded and continued.

"My mother's name. She came like your parents."

With that, the man considered the conversation had run its course, leaving many questions for Nathan. Unlike his closest relative, he was not given to pursuing such things once the door had been closed.

It was after four o'clock.

"We'll stay here for the night," Frazier said. "What do you think about Alexander for tomorrow? I mean will he be able and willing to continue or do I need to find somebody to spell him for a day or so?"

"As to, willing, he'll be ready. I see no reason he won't be able physically. He's strong as an ox and quite the young trouper. I fully expect him to wake up momentarily realizing we missed lunch and set up a ruckus over it – just in fun, of course. He's really very even tempered."

Frazier nodded, convinced his question had been answered. He continued talking, however.

"You really acted bravely last night – with the thieves – foolish beyond all reason, but brave."

Nathan didn't understand if he were being praised or bawled out. He responded only with a wrinkled brow.

"It wasn't intended as a put down. Quite the opposite. All boys your age are foolish. A boy has to go through foolish before he can get to cautious, and that comes before careful, followed many years later by wise. At several points in and among all that are periods of absolute terror – first job, marriage, first child. I'd say you're right on course."

"You paint the picture of a less than reassuring path."

"Learn good lessons from each step along that path and you'll do just fine. Can't learn lessons without problems. Building a good life is a cumulative thing. If you don't learn a good lesson every day you're doing it wrong. Derelicts and failures never understand that. People who are afraid to take sensible risks never understand that. You've found the right mix, I'm thinking. "

That conversation, Nathan *did* want to pursue, but the moment was interrupted by Whimp's appearance. He was clearly urging Nathan back down into the hold. Nathan panicked thinking something must be wrong. He hurried to the bunks. Frazier followed. Wimp lay down pleased his humans had been smart enough to understand his message.

Alexander was awake and spoke.

"Did you know if you tell Whimp to g-o g-e-t you, he'll do it immediately?"

"I suppose I do now. What is it your majesty requires?"

"I became concerned because you two missed your lunch this noon."

The other two broke into laughter. They shared smiles and raised eyebrows.

"What?"

"I'll explain later. Could we persuade you to join us?"

"I suppose so, just to be sociable. The water I swallowed was so thick I'm thinking it probably had lots of nutrients in it."

Smiles.

It was a bit early, but Nathan found some leftovers for Whimp. Nathan and Frazier sat on the lower mattress of the second set of bunks which formed an 'L' with the first. Frazier noticed the books.

"Somebody's a reader, I see. I'm guessing it's you, Alexander."

"Truthfully, Nathan can also read, hard as they may be to believe, but prefers to lay back thinking about beautiful girls."

"Not true. I also think about beautiful ladies."

Frazier reached out and Alexander handed him one of the books.

"High class reading."

"I'm investigating medicine as a possible career. Finished third year secondary school back home."

"His second choice is becoming a veterinarian who specializes in river fish. That's why he recently jumped . . ."

POW! A flying pillow to Nathan's face pushed him back against the wall.

"Or, perhaps, a cannon operator," Nathan said raising

his hands and one knee into a defensive position anticipating more than just a pillow.

Thinking better than to stay where he was, Frazier stood and moved aside just as Alexander took a flying header into his brother. They rolled onto the floor and went at it through giggles and smiles for several minutes.

When at last they separated, lying on their backs, Nathan looked up at Frazier.

“See, I told you he’d be ready to go by tomorrow.”

Wimp was only bothered by such a fracas in that he was not appropriately included. He did his part by licking their faces.

They finished their meal and Frazier walked toward the door.

“I’m going to look around up on the shore for a place to stay the night and obtain food for tomorrow. If I don’t return, assume I have been successful.”

He left. The alternative he had suggested was fully unsatisfactory to Alexander – not returning could indicate dozens of terrible outcomes.

“I figure we can switch mattresses for you and come up with a dry one,” Alexander said.

Nathan nodded thinking a dry mattress was the least important of the several events of that afternoon.

“And you better change out of those wet clothes before you catch your death. I was so worried out there this afternoon.”

Alexander began following up on his brother’s suggestion.

“I wasn’t fully content either, quite certain the current was going to suck me under. It was quite a struggle to find the surface. Disoriented.”

Nathan shrugged.

“Of course. It was selfish of me to have stated it as my worry. Anyway, glad it turned out as it did.”

“It’s interesting. I am happy about it, too. But if I had drowned I would be neither happy nor sad. That will need more thought later.”

“I’m very glad it will be *later*. Next time it looks like rain or wind we are going to tie a rope around your waist to keep

you from getting washed away. You have to work so close to the edge.”

Alexander nodded. He had considered the same measure as he felt himself going down for the third time, but would not indicate credit for the idea.

“I appreciate that thoughtful suggestion. Interesting how great ideas often follow tragedy or near tragedy.”

“To you, I am sure it *is* absolutely fascinating. Ready for supper yet?”

“Of course. It’s been, what, twenty minutes since we finished lunch?”

Alexander toweled off and slipped into dry clothes. They exchanged the mattress. They managed only a bit of the supper, putting the rest away for a snack later. It was the first-time Nathan hadn’t eaten everything that had been set before him. Alexander took that as a good sign.

“You can make up some of your reading time if you get right to it.”

“You sound like mama.”

“That bad?”

“No. Sorry if I made it sound that way. I really miss her, them.”

“I know. Me too. They guided us pretty well down the first part of our path I think. They helped us learn many of life’s necessary lessons.”

“Again, I ask, who are you and what have you done with my Nathan?”

Nathan smiled.

“Frazier and I were talking earlier. He’s a wiser man than he appears to be. He was talking about life’s path and how a man needs to learn good lessons from every mistake he makes – at least that’s what I took from it.”

Alexander nodded. It was one of several topics that were high on his list of preferred things to think about.

“It’s like papa used to say; if you don’t wake up smarter today than you did yesterday, you’re doing something wrong.”

“Yeah, it is. I never took time to think about him as being wise.”

Again, Alexander nodded. He stretched out on his stomach on the upper bunk and opened a book. He would

have preferred to continue discussing life – its vicissitudes, pleasures and lessons – but he would settle for learning more about the spleen – its functions, dysfunctions and treatment. He had been taken by the fact that it took virtually no time at all to learn what each organ did, but seemingly forever to understand all that could go wrong with each one. It was the latter that was clearly the domain of the physician – well, what went wrong and how to fix it. That ‘how to fix it part’ seemed woefully lacking. Clearly, he had a lot to accomplish during his next sixty years or so.

Nathan made sure the rifle was dry, loaded and handy.

With the heavy cloud cover lingering into the evening it became dark early. Nathan went up top outside and lit two lanterns – one front and one back – hoping to avoid another incident like the one the night before. He would leave one lit all night down in the hold with them as well so the windows would suggest occupants.

Looking up and down the shoreline he saw there were many boats in dock that night. From a distance their lanterns looked like thousands of fireflies all perched on branches just waiting for lads with jars to come and capture them. Only the largest of the steamboats would be braving the river that night – the current, the debris, and the darkness all contributed to a treacherous night on the water.

He sat on top of the kegs for some time, watching the movement of the clouds above reflected in the water of the river. The current, scrambled the image, and yet his brain somehow compensated for that and he could maintain the picture more or less as it really was. He sat there being amazed. Alexander would have sat there explaining it. Nathan smiled.

Once in a while part of the moon or a small bevy of stars would show through an opening in the clouds. He hadn’t taken time to think about it before, but there he was, a tiny speck in the gigantic universe, and yet of everything there was, everywhere, he was just about the most important thing anywhere – to him. He wondered if that was selfish. He would defend his brother’s safety with his own life if that were called for. He wondered if that meant his brother were really the most important thing in his life. He was pretty sure that for

parents, their children became the most important. His father had pretty well proved that when he saved Alexander's life during the fire.

He concluded that if he followed his father's advice and combined it with that from Frazier, he would be as well prepared as a young man heading into an uncertain manhood could be. Selfishness could be a good thing, he figured. It would keep him taking good care of himself. If he didn't do that he'd be no good to himself or anybody else.

It was a wonderful realization that now, away from Sherwood, he had both time and a reason to think about such things. He had not only been a physical prisoner there, but his mind had been held captive as well. There, he had been forced to live only in the present to avoid pain and survive. Now he was free to think about tomorrow and Saturday and next year and on and on and on. He wanted to shout to the world about his wonderful new feelings of joy and freedom.

He didn't – Alexander would have, but he didn't. He could even smile about that. They had grown up in the same house with the same parents and still they were as different as could be. Who a person became had to do with things above and beyond his experiences. Maybe someday Alexander would discover what those things were. It was a good thing that people were different. A world filled with identical replicas of one another would be . . . he wasn't sure what it would be, but it was so distasteful that it sent shivers up his spine.

Whimp had been asleep when Nathan left. He had come looking for him. Nathan reached out and pulled him close.

"I'm glad you found us back on the trail, boy. In lots of ways you're like another brother – a part of our family for sure. Sorry I disparaged your looks, and we won't tell our brother I used the word 'disparaged'. Sometimes I wonder if you are lonely for the company of other dogs. In lots of ways you seem more like people than dogs. Not sure if that makes a difference. I think if I were forced to live just with dogs I'd miss people – no offence.

"It's funny how you can miss something you have never even really had or known. I miss girls my age. Before I was sent away I had started being attracted to them and had a

general idea why, but I really never knew one very well. But during the last few years' girls have become really important. That wasn't the best way to say it. I think about girls a lot – not always pure thoughts, I'm afraid. Of all the things, I *didn't* get from papa's talk about boys and girls, I did get the idea it was normal for me to have those kinds of thoughts. Here's a thought that sounds like something our brother would think up, Whimp: 'I'm ready to *get* married, but I'm really not ready to *be* married.' I guess our heads may have some things in common after all."

Whimp raised his head just high enough to offer a quiet bark.

Nathan scooted off the kegs and returned to the hold. Whimp followed, exhibiting no further indication of disagreeing with anything his person had said.

Alexander was fully absorbed in his book so Nathan made no move to intrude. He got paper and pencil and began a letter to Mitchel and Maggie. They had gone out of their way to be kind and helpful and he assumed they would be interested in their exploits to date. He never knew how to thank a person who didn't do things for thanks. He would make the letter an exercise in figuring that out.

Eventually, Alexander rolled over onto his side and spoke.

"So, did you and Whimp solve the World's problems up there?"

"Some, I'm thinking."

It had not been the response Alexander was expecting. Nathan continued.

"How about you? Discover any new organs hiding inside our guts?"

"Gallbladder. Produces and holds bile. Seems to be fully unnecessary to man's survival. Can't figure why it's in there. Have to wonder if way back it served some useful function or if it's just waiting patiently in there for some time in the future when man will begin to need it."

"Who but you would ever wonder such a thing?"

"I read somewhere that being able to ask the right questions was the most important step in becoming a successful person. Finding the answers and solving problems

is a relatively simpler next step. I suppose some people spend their entire lives trying to find answers to the wrong questions so they just waste their lives. That's so depressing."

"You worry about the strangest things."

"Good. Thanks for noticing. Perhaps in that way I will discover some of the right questions other people have missed."

"Like I said, you . . ."

He felt no need to continue.

When they had been younger the boys' obvious differences had been the source of friction between them, each one having his ideas about how they needed to spend their time together, for example. Somewhere along the way they had come to accept and even appreciate the differences.

There was one area of great interest they shared of late – girls – and Alexander thought it was time they discussed it in all its various dimensions. He put his book away.

"So, girls?" he asked, climbing down to sit beside his brother.

"Girls?"

"Yeah. Those soft looking beings that seem to have organized a wide-spread movement to avoid us. You said your guy at the wagon place gave you an education about them. Give!"

For the next half hour Nathan held forth on what he thought he knew was probably true. Not nearly precise enough for Alexander, but he listened mostly without interruption.

"That's really disappointing," Alexander said when his brother stopped.

"Disappointing?"

"Yeah. I already had all of that figured out – well maybe not some of the subtler aspects of the mutual pleasuring activities."

"Oh, yes, those all-important MPAs."

"I get it, Mutual Pleasuring Activities. You're making fun of me."

"No, I'm just saying that once again no human being has ever used that set of words before to describe those behaviors – or anything else."

“I accept your apology and say, good for me, then. Let’s finish supper.”

Nathan handed him his sack. Alexander returned up to his bunk. Each one did his best to go on about the evening as if the discussion had not raised more than interesting points about boy girl things.

* * *

Frazier called into the hold at five thirty to make sure they were awake. Nathan had already seen to that. He wondered if ever again he would be able to just sleep in.

They ate up on deck. Frazier had found a great source for bacon, scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, and grits. He had three plates and motioned for Alexander to serve them from the four containers.

“Great food,” Nathan said.

“I’ll say,” Alexander agreed. “Restaurant?”

“No Harvey’s sister – he’s the local constable. I met him last night. If you ever find yourself in a small, strange, town look up the lawman. Ask him your questions. He’ll always be there for you if you need him.”

The boys nodded, tucking it away in their mental, ‘for future reference’, files.

“Any leakage down stairs during the night?” Frazier asked.

“No, sir,” Nathan said. “I even looked. All ship shape – an expression I suddenly understand more fully than ever before.”

When they finished eating Frazier placed the pans and dishes on the dock, apparently according to the arrangement, and they were on their way.

The area where they had waited out the storm turned out to be a shallow bay so the current had a tendency to keep them headed into the gentle curve of the bank. It was necessary to engage the two gigantic oars to manage the boat back out into the current of the main channel. It was flowing significantly faster than the day before. Once in the grasp of the current, they stowed the oars and took up their usual stations. Whether the three-legged race had anything to do with it or not, they had coordinated the two oars like old pros.

“Be on your toes up there, Nathan. A slight move can

cause a big reaction in heavy current like this.”

“Thanks for the heads up.”

It was the last conversation until Frazier asked Alexander to get the lunches, and that completed the cycle until they pulled in on the north shore at seven.

It had been a very warm, humid day and by mid-morning the boys had shed their coats and by three their shirts.

“Watch the sun, Nathan,” Alexander had managed at that point. “Your skin is still lily white. We don’t need for you to get a burn.”

Having been inside for most of four years, nothing about Nathan’s skin even faintly resembled a tan. Alexander, on the other hand was tan from head to toe.

Supper was special. The constable’s sister had included pieces of peach pie, double-crust, and sweet as sugar itself.

As they ate, Alexander had a question.

“Do you typically dock at the same places every time you make a run?”

“It’s hit and miss, depending on weather, traffic, and such. There are a few I like to visit when I can. Like here in Abbott – a good hotel, good food and pretty ladies.”

It somehow seemed out of character for him to mention the fairer gender and Alexander snorted. Perhaps it should have been reassuring that men continued to be interested in such things at his age, but mostly it was just disgusting.

Frazier continued.

“If a town isn’t filled with travelers, always wait until after eight to approach a hotel. They can usually be talked down in price. Same for restaurants. They’ll give you a good discount on food rather than have to throw it out.”

The whole conversation seemed odd – as if he were trying to be a father to them or maybe an uncle or perhaps just a man who wanted to be their friend and really didn’t know how to go about it. At any rate, it was in no way unpleasant.

By nine, Frazier had left for town – *Abbott*, the boys had learned. They lit the lanterns and went inside for the night. It had been a longer day than usual.

“I wonder why we stayed on the river so late?”

Alexander asked.

“Maybe to make up for the time we lost yesterday.”

“Or, maybe Frazier has a special lady in Abbott. He indicated something about it was special. It’s odd and surprisingly unpleasant to think of him with a woman. I don’t feel that way when I think about you with a girl.”

“You think about me with girls? That’s just sick, brother.”

“Not at all. I’m thinking I can learn from your mistakes.”

“There are no mistakes when it’s all a figment of your warped imagination.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to draw that conclusion until you know what has gone on in that imagination. You’re actually a pretty good kisser and the girls like the way you stare into their eyes.”

Alexander ducked to avoid a fist to his shoulder and climbed into his bunk ready for sleep. He giggled on for some time figuring he had lit a fire that would not soon be put out. Little brothers were often such imps!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was like it had Rained Silverware.

The days on down to Cairo droned on in pretty much identical fashion from one to another – up at five thirty, breakfast at six, lunch at noon with supper between six and seven. Alexander studied at night while Whimp and Nathan discussed the mysteries of the universe atop the kegs. The boys talked with each other for half an hour or so after Alexander had finished, and then to sleep – sleep being defined as that point after which Nathan no longer offered responses. Whimp slept when Nathan slept, which tickled Alexander to no end.

Other than their single-minded tasks during the day they really had no responsibilities. From that standpoint, it had been a nice break from the vicissitudes of life. They liked Frazier, but would not miss him like they had the other people they had left in their wake.

“Cairo’s about an hour downstream,” Frazier announced at noon. You’ve been good help. You’re nice people.”

They figured that was pretty much the last he would have to say to them. They were almost right.

Once docked, he counted out the second half of the money they had agreed on. He added an extra three dollars and told them to use it for a room and meal at the Atwater Hotel on Main Street. For a quarter, they could get a hot bath – It seemed like a suggestion. They agreed it was a good suggestion.

The Atwater had the look of an older building although

since the town had only really begun to thrive some thirty-five years before it couldn't have been all that old. It was brick and stone on the outside, ugly dark wood paneling on the inside. The unpainted, ornate tin ceilings and carved door and window frames hinted at an attempt at elegance from times gone by. They procured a small room, third floor, one window, one gas light, four doors west of the facilities down the hall. They cracked open the window and explained to Whimp why he needed to remain and guard their possessions. He lay down and made no fuss. He seemed confident he finally had them trained to always return.

With a change of clothes in their carpet bag, they set out in search of a barber shop – it was where male travelers bathed in the back room. None but the most expensive hotel rooms had access to a bathtub and hot water. During the three block walk the boys saw more black people than they had in their entire lives – combined – times ten! Alexander explained.

“Population is about nine thousand. Of that nearly three thousand are black people. Settled just before, during and since the Civil War. They make barrels here for one thing and wages are pretty good. It's the most southern town in Illinois and is its lowest point. If I recall the locals pronounce Cairo, like Care-o. Most other people call it Kay-ro. It's a big mistake to pronounce it like the city in Egypt even though this lower section of the state is sometimes referred to as Little Egypt – don't ask, don't know why.”

It felt good to be clean of body and clothes. They washed their dirty clothes in the water before they left and hung them to dry – a typical part of a bath in those circumstances. The bath boy offered his open palm saying for a nickel he would guard their clothes if they wanted to leave. Alexander figured the translation was, 'give me a nickel and I won't steal your clothes'. They obliged. Alexander's hair had been matted from his excursion into the filthy, that is, Mighty, Ohio River. He found his comb once again pulled through it with ease. He had learned girls liked it better that way and on more than one occasion several had run their hands through it commenting about how soft it was.

They had a dollar seventy left from the three, so treated

themselves to apple pie after a pot roast dinner. It was three o'clock when they left the restaurant. They had given themselves that much of a window before getting on with the serious business of their lives – getting to Kansas.

“I imagine we can afford train fair,” Alexander said. “Shouldn't be more than five dollars each from this close.”

They asked a policeman for directions to the train station, not so much because of Frazier's suggestion, but because he was just standing there when they exited the restaurant.

“Two blocks South.

He saluted. How nice they thought.

Alexander had been right – four dollars and seventy-five cents each and fifty cents for Whimp, provided he rode in a box car with the horses. There would be two changes. North to Centralia then switch to one going west to St. Louis and then the third all the way northwest across Missouri to Kansas City. The four-hundred-and-fifty-mile trip, with layovers, would take twenty hours – thirteen on the rails. Neither boy had ridden on a train, and it was clearly an exciting decision for them.

They talked as they walked back toward the hotel.

“I'm actually surprised the human body can survive speeds of forty and fifty miles an hour,” Nathan said. “I'd think it would push the blood right out our backs.”

“I suppose the experiences of others suggest it can and that it doesn't happen – the blood thing. I read where on straightaways and secure track many trains can gain speeds of eighty-five miles an hour. The two main problems seem to be hardly any track is that dependable and it becomes extremely difficult to stop a train that's rumbling along at that high a speed with all that weight behind it. The new airbrakes Mr. Westinghouse just invented should change that, I think.”

“How do you know such things?”

“At school, we had to read the front page of a newspaper every day. One tends to keep up with world affairs pretty well that way.”

Nathan nodded. He figured it had been over four years since he had even seen a newspaper.

They walked the streets for some time. It was one of

the largest towns they had ever been in. All the people seemed pleasant but it wasn't a pleasant town – the streets were littered and everything seemed to be dirty. Some streets were graveled, but most were still dirt with well-worn ruts that had to be kept filled at intersections so wagons could turn right or left. The whole town was surrounded by high dirt banks called levees. The area was so low that it flooded easily and regularly every time either the Ohio or Mississippi River outgrew its banks – which occurred every spring.

They returned to their room at four thirty after having retrieved their clothes from nickel-in-the-palm boy and picking up some scraps for Whimp from the restaurant's kitchen. Alexander had charmed the waitress into saving some for them. Alexander had a way about him that charmed everybody. Nathan was sure he could have any girl he wanted, but didn't share that observation having made the decision for him that he still needed to wait a few years. He needed to be tending to his studies not holding hands with girls.

Whimp had waited patiently and was appreciative of the food. Initially he waited for the boys to begin eating, but that not happening, he went ahead and enjoyed his fill of steak, fat trimmings, and vegetable scraps laden with gravy. Nathan observed it was a better meal than he had often had at Sherwood's. He didn't mention it.

Alexander took out the atlas and they perused it together, tracing the path the train would take, and searching out points of interest along the way. They would have a five-hour layover in St. Louis, which was a huge city by the boy's standards – over 300,000 – almost as many as in the entire state of Kansas. They looked forward to exploring it. Nathan's co-worker had told him there were painted ladies in St. Louis. He didn't have a complete notion of what that meant, but was pretty sure his brother was too young to find out. He would remain vigilant.

The train left at six in the morning and they were waiting for it well ahead of time. Nathan settled Whimp into the designated box car and waited until the door was rolled shut. They were on their way right on schedule.

Third class was designed for transferring people from

one place to another with no considerations about comfort. It was a long, narrow appearing car, with continuous rows of windows along both sides. It was filled with chairs which the occupants arranged and rearranged according to their whims. They had arrived in time to procure two of the five remaining unoccupied seats. They managed room at a window.

Their conversation turned to the most pressing element of their journey – how to go about finding their uncle, Hermann Hoffman, somewhere in Kansas.

“I read . . .”

“Of course, you did.”

They exchanged smiles.

“I read that many immigrants, especially Irish and German, changed their names when they arrived in America – a way of breaking ties with the past and fitting in here immediately. The most popular as I recall were Thompson, Williams and Smith. Uncle Hermann might have done that especially in light of his problem with papa. Did you ever hear what that was all about?”

“Once, at night – they didn’t know I could hear – I heard papa ask mama if she ever had any regrets about which brother she chose. I’ve always wondered if the brothers he was talking about were him and Hermann. I really didn’t hear it in the . . . what’s the word that means flow of the whole conversation?”

“Context.”

“Yeah, context of whatever they had been talking about so it could mean something entirely different.”

“That’s one of your finest attributes.”

“What?” Nathan asked caught off guard by the comment. “Listening in on other people’s private conversations?”

“No. You never jump to conclusions without good evidence. I learned that about you when I was really small and I’ve always tried to be like that, too.”

Nathan had long believed that his younger brother looked up to him – although with all of Alexander’s talents he wasn’t sure why. It had been one of the few times anything about that had been said, outright. It gave him a very special feeling. He couldn’t contain a grin and immediately wondered why he thought he needed to.

“Got any ideas how to start looking for him?”

“The government does a census every ten years. As I understand it he was in Kansas ten years ago, right?”

“That’s been the story ever since I can remember.”

“So, if that’s true he should be listed in that census.”

“Where do we find that?”

“There are federal buildings in all the states. I suppose we have to begin there. I know some libraries also have copies of the census. The ones I’ve seen haven’t been that detailed, though – summaries, not details down to names and such.”

“If he’s a somebody we might find his name in newspapers,” Nathan added.

“That would be great, if he were a somebody. I suppose we really need to define the term better.”

“No, *you* may need to define the term better, but I don’t, so that’s not *we*.”

Alexander managed a nod and smile.

The 120-mile ride to Centralia took nearly three hours. It was one of the best maintained sets of rails in the state and they often exceeded sixty miles an hour for short sprints. It amazed the boys how rapidly the sights seemed to pass by. Alexander enjoyed the rhythm of the wheels on the tracks, a dull sound he couldn’t characterize beyond that, with dependable clicks where individual rails met – or didn’t meet, more precisely. It was the tiny gap that set the tempo. He could imagine it singing: ‘Here we go to Kansas, Here we go to Kansas.’

In Centralia, they just had time to transfer to the westbound. They moved Whimp and were again fortunate to find chairs. Like the train that had carried them north, the new one was also part of the Illinois Central Railroad. They learned from the conductor that Centralia was named after the railroad, being the oldest and most important rail hub in the south of the state.

It took less than an hour to reach the outskirts of St. Louis, but then the train slowed as it wound its way through the acres and acres of houses and eventually the down town, which presented the tallest buildings they had ever seen. It was ten thirty that morning when they stepped off the train.

Apparently, the box car door had been opened before they arrived because Whimp was close by, pacing up and down waiting for them. How he could have possibly known the arrangement, the boys could not fathom.

One of the tallest buildings in the city had an observation platform on its roof, and for a nickel people could go up and take in the 360-degree view of the city and beyond – up to sixty miles on a clear day. They purchased tickets and walked to the wide, carpeted stairway in the huge lobby. A man stopped them there saying the dog was not allowed to use the stairs.

It was a disappointment – an expensive disappointment. They walked away, downhearted. They were ready to sit and think. As they approached an arrangement of six, leather covered chairs around a low, round table, Nathan pointed. There was a small sign on the wall that read, ‘Rear Stairs’, with an arrow.

“The man only said that Whimp couldn’t use the *front* stairs, right,” Nathan asked.

“That is certainly the way I heard it, brother with sharp ears and keen eyes.”

They moved quickly around the corner into a narrow hallway, and soon came upon the door labeled, Stairs.

“Hope they go clear to the roof,” Alexander said.

“Only one way to know that,” Nathan said thinking his brother’s ‘hope’ statement had been a waste of lung power. “Stay with us, Whimp.”

They climbed. As Nathan had suspected, they came to a door that opened out onto the roof – it wasn’t the observation platform, which stood some six feet above the roof and way to the front, but it was good enough. They enjoyed the view walking close to each edge to take it all in.

Somewhat comically to Alexander, Nathan took time to point out to the dog where Cairo and Centralia were and then moved so he could do the same for Kansas. Whimp hung on his every word.

After twenty minutes, they had seen their fill and turned back toward the stairs. It was some twenty-five feet south of the main entrance onto the platform.

Nathan pointed.

“Is that smoke coming from the door there?”

The door he was referencing was the one that allowed entrance onto the platform.

They ran toward it. It was at roof level with steps leading up to the platform. It was indeed smoke – and it was growing by the minute.

Nathan cupped his hands and called to the two-dozen people

on the platform.

“A fire in the main stairway. Follow us and we’ll guide you down the rear stairs.”

Women screamed. Children cried. One man opened the main door and smoke and flames rushed out at him. Through dumb luck he avoided getting badly burned.

The people ignored Nathan’s suggestion. Alexander propped open the door to the rear stairs and began motioning the others toward it with enthusiastic, full loops of his arms. Nathan pulled himself up onto the platform and repeated his suggestion, pointing to Alexander. He took hold of a man and explained right into his face.

“You move everybody to the rear of the platform. I’ll go down onto the roof and help folks off and to the back stairs.”

He understood and began approaching individuals, steering them in the right direction. Whimp had followed Nathan onto the platform and began nudging people toward the rear like a sheep dog in the Alps. Several children took hold of Whimp and accompanied him to Nathan.

Up to that point, no smoke was evident from their alternate stairway. It took at least ten minutes to lift everyone down onto the roof and escort them to the alternative door. Alexander was calmly maintaining an orderly procession of people through the door. Even during the state of emergency, Nathan was amused at his brother.

“Stay three steps apart. Be very sure to stay *three* steps apart,” he kept repeating.

He had read that giving people one specific task to do during an emergency helped keep them calm and focused. It seemed to be working. At last it was just the boys and Whimp who remained on the roof. Nathan motioned Alexander through the door ahead of him. Whimp would have it no other

way than to be last.

Nathan reached back and closed the door behind them thinking that would prevent any upward draft that might spread the fire. On one particularly windy day at the 'works' he had seen flames leap up the chimney at the black smith's fire pit and the smith had immediately closed the damper and it stopped the problem.

Presently, everybody had reached the ground floor where they milled around the large lobby going on about the ordeal – many still sobbing. The bellboys did what they could to help.

Nathan and Alexander slid their backs down a wall in the hall and sat on the floor; Whimp stayed nearby with the children. Big brother was exhausted; the other one had things to say.

"That was a superior mental achievement up there, Nathan."

Nathan gave him a look.

"You done good," Alexander offered by way of translation. "You probably saved dozens of lives with your quick thinking."

Nathan shrugged. From his perspective, there was only one course of action and he happened to be the one in the position to see to it.

A tall, stout, middle aged man in a suit and tie and shiny black shoes approached them. Whimp approached him as if unsure of his intentions.

"My name is Samuel Atherton and I own this building. I understand you two – er, three – are the heroes of the day."

The boys looked at each other sincerely puzzled. Alexander ignored what he had said and spoke, looking up at the man. They were too tied to stand.

"Is the fire under control?"

"Yes. I'm told the observation platform was completely destroyed and there is a good deal of roof damage, but nobody was hurt. As I was saying, I have been told it was due to your quick action that all these lives were saved. How can I repay you?"

"No repayment," Nathan said.

"We just did what seemed like the thing that needed

doing,” Alexander went on, expanding on his brother’s comment. “It was actually Nathan’s quick thinking that got it all started.”

He hitched his head in Nathan’s direction.

A nervous looking, pencil of a man walked toward them and addressed Atherton. He was the one the boys had encountered earlier at the main stairs.

“Mr. Atherton, I assure you I forbade them from using the stairs since they had a dog. I did my job.”

“Johnson, go clean the basement.”

Not expecting such a response, the boys grinned and chuckled into their hands. Johnson left.

“He has the common sense of a slug, but he’s my wife’s brother. What can I do?”

He threw his hand up. As one, the boys shrugged and allowed their grins to diminish some. They got the idea the matter was closed.

“Tell you what. Accompany me to lunch. That’s the least I can do.”

The boys – on their feet by that time – agreed. It had been a long time since meat and potatoes the afternoon before.

Lunch, as it turned out, was a three-course dinner, in what they figured must have been the world’s fanciest restaurant. There was red textured wallpaper, crystal chandeliers, thick red carpet and floor to ceiling drapes cozied up to floor to ceiling windows. Each table was covered in two layers of linen table clothes – white over red – and each place was set with more silverware than their parents had ever owned. There were plates sitting on plates and stiff starched linen napkins folded to resemble ducks or geese or some such bird sitting beside them. The waiters seated them, moving the chairs for them and unfolding napkins, draping them across their laps. That immediately seemed chuckle out loud silly to both of them.

Atherton whispered to a waiter and soon the extra dishes and all the silverware – save one spoon, knife and fork – along with the extra everythings were removed. First, came the salads, unfamiliar green and purple leafy . . . leaves . . . intermixed with crumbled and chunked things they could also

not identify. The thick dressing made it all palatable. That was followed by spaghetti with meat sauce, hard roles and a variety of jams and jellies. The waiters grated cheese on their food as if they had an endless supply. The meal concluded with the largest bowls of ice cream either boy had ever dreamed might exist. There were small, hard, chocolate cookies to accompany it.

“Would you young men be looking for work?” Atherton asked at one point.

Nathan explained their situation. In fact, he felt so comfortable with their new friend that he went into a good deal more than Alexander felt comfortable about. Although the discomforts at the wagon company were mentioned, he had downplayed the worst of it offering generalizations rather than details.

“Well, if things don’t work out with your uncle you come back and see me. I’m always looking for bright young men in my businesses.”

Alexander noted the plural ending on business, but kept it to himself.

As they sat back filled fuller than they had ever been filled full before, a bevy of a dozen men, some with cameras, swarmed toward their table from across the room. One spoke.

“Mr. Atherton. I understand these are the young heroes who saved hundreds of lives at your downtown store this morning.”

Atherton smiled and leaned in to whisper behind his hand to the boys.

“The press. They love to make things worse than they are – seldom better, but often worse. I will handle them if you like.”

“Yes, sir. Please,” Nathan said scrunching down a bit in his chair.

Personally, Alexander would have liked a shot at them, but didn’t raise his objection.

The reporters soon had the gist of the real story, snapped several, ‘please sit completely still,’ photographs, and left, pushing and shoving as if it were to become the story of the century.

“Well-meaning idiots. I can guarantee you the story in

the papers tomorrow morning won't even resemble the one I just recounted. You two will be portrayed as a cross between David and St. Jude entering the city on white steeds along a trail strewn with rose petals. Better prepare yourselves."

"No, sir. I mean we have a train to catch," Nathan said. "We're not bad kids, but sainthood is clearly out of our reach."

Atherton laughed a full out wonderful laugh, which teased the boy's faces into full out grins.

"When does your train leave?"

"In exactly one hour and a half," Alexander answered.

"I will have a carriage get you there in plenty of time. You have all your things with you, there?"

He pointed to the carpet bag and two knapsacks.

"Yes, sir." Nathan said. "We travel light."

Atherton translated that accurately as meaning, 'we are paupers and have very few possessions'.

"Tell you what. Since we have some time to kill, let's go next door to the clothing store. We'll fit you out in whatever you want."

"We can't accept that, sir," Nathan said. "You already paid for a lunch unlike anything we've ever experienced before."

"Nonsense. I won't take no for an answer."

The boys believed he never took no for an answer.

He raised his hand and a waiter was immediately there with the bill. He signed it – he didn't pay it, he just signed it. Unbelievable!

Long story short (as has been written far too often), a half hour later the boys were each standing there in a new set of traveling clothes – generally browns for Nathan and greens for Alexander – right down to stockings, a brightly colored vest, and underpants (white, for the color inquisitive!).

"We can never thank you for all this, Sir," Alexander said.

"You are *not* the ones doing the thanking. Remember that."

He turned to the clerk who was waiting on them.

"Now, new boots and knapsacks – what do you call the new larger ones – backpacks, I think I've heard the young people say."

Upon observing they were unable to stow all their extra things in the old carpet bag Maggie had provided, Atherton motioned toward a shelf and immediately two, soft leather, suitcases were produced. The clerk spoke.

“With two, you will be able to spread out the load. You’ll find these much lighter and easier to handle. They have a shoulder strap, you see, in addition to the handle.”

“It arrived in the tone of a fully unnecessary sales pitch.”

Atherton removed a red bandana from a rack, bent down and tied it around Whimp’s neck. He received Whimp’s juicy thank you like a good sport. He signed the bill while the boy’s stood speechless.

Back out on the street, Atherton held up a hand and a carriage – a cab – pulled up alongside them.

“Illinois Central train station. Take very good care of them – they are precious cargo.”

He handed the driver a five-dollar bill. The man must have been a millionaire! He also handed Nathan a business card.

“My mailing address and private telegraph address. Show this card at any telegraph office and there will be no charge to you.”

He shook their hands, solid and long.

“Thank you again, and let me know how things work out. If you get stymied, maybe I can help in your search. On second thought, telegraph me when you reach Kansas City so I’ll know you’re safe at least that far.”

He nodded to the driver and the carriage moved out.

They exchanged waves.

“Can you believe our morning?” Nathan said sitting back.

“Yeah. Men waitresses and about five pounds of silverware at every place.”

“That’s not where my head was going, Alley Cat. Think how it would be to have Atherton’s money and power. He raises his hand and somebody is right there to do his bidding. He signs his name instead of using money. Now, that, would be some life, I’ll tell you.”

“You know they send him monthly bills – he does pay

for everything.”

“Even so!”

“I’d be afraid it would just present the temptation to acquire lots of stuff a person didn’t need,” Alexander said.

He shivered, all quite sincerely, and continued.

“If a man was so busy making money, how would he ever find time to actually be helpful to people in need?”

Nathan just looked him in the eyes and waited silently for his mental wheels to complete the loop.

“Oh. I see. Mr. Atherton just *did* take time to be helpful. I’m still not acknowledging we really needed any of that, because we were doing just fine on our own.”

His voice had become just a bit emotional. Whimp barked as if to offer his agreement or endorsement or at least insist on his participation.

Nathan shook his head in disbelief.

When they arrived at the station they asked for directions to their train from the first uniformed, important looking person they came to – one standing well outside the main iron gate in front of the railroad yard.

“Would you be the young friends of Mr. Atherton?” he asked.

The boys looked at each other, puzzled. There had been a lot of that that day.

“Perhaps. We have met a Mr. Atherton.”

“Follow me, please.”

Nathan was content to wait and find out what was going on. Alexander began spinning worst case scenarios in his head – Atherton was a mob boss, he had set them up to take the fall in some horrible crime, he was kidnapping them to work as slaves in his diamond mines in South Africa, there were others. They stepped off after the man.

They stopped at the last in a line of seven passenger cars. It was only half as long as the others and painted bright blue to the other’s dull green. A man – sixty-five-ish, Alexander calculated – wearing a dark suit and gray chaps over his shiny black shoes, stepped down from it and introduced himself.

“I’m Winston. Mr. Atherton asked me to welcome you to his private car. He would like you to accept his hospitality on

your journey to Kansas City and offers his regrets that he is unable to accompany you. Please, let me help you aboard.”

“We really don’t understand what’s going on,” Nathan said shrugging. Anyway, we need to get our dog onto his proper boxcar.”

“That would be, Whimp, I assume,” Winston said trying not to cringe at his first look. He will be riding with you, here. Please. Step on up inside.”

Between Winston’s comforting manner and the fact the other man turned and left, Alexander began letting go of his litany of fully unpleasant possibilities and Nathan just gave in.

From the rear, Alexander placed his hands on Nathan’s hips and urged him forward. He followed Alexander’s suggestion and they climbed three steps into a world they had never dreamed of. The walls were hung in thick, burgundy drapes. There were two, floor to ceiling windows on each side. Two gas lights hung from the ceiling. There were chairs and a sofa upholstered to match the drapes. A table with chairs sat between the windows on one side. The area was bathed with light entering from windows in the roof. The carpet was so thick Alexander believed his toes would get lost in it.

Nathan just stood there taking everything in. Alexander moved about the car touching whatever could be touched, a characteristic his mother, try as she had, was never able to eliminate from his natural bent.

“Please make yourselves at home.”

Winston pointed to a door, rear right.

“The facilities.”

Then to the door on the left.

“My quarters. Pull the gold chord beside that door whenever you need anything – food, drink, questions answered, whatever it might be; well not quite *whatever*, we have no young ladies on board.”

He put his hand to his mouth and giggled at his little joke.

“When the whistle sounds, you may want to get seated. These large engines tend to produce quite a jolt when they suddenly decide to be on their way. As passenger cars go, I think you will find this one is comfortably quiet and offers a

nicely cushioned ride. Is there anything I can get for you here at the outset?"

"Water for Whimp?" Nathan said/asked finally dropping his things to the floor.

"Certainly. I should have anticipated that need. I apologize. Would he also enjoy a steak?"

"That would be very thoughtful. Yes. Thank you."

Whimp was watered and steaked. The boys sank down into the deeply padded furnishings and removed their new boots. Whimp was the last of the three to close his eyes – none of them was still awake by the time the engine jerked the train on its way out of the station.

* * *

Alexander was the first to awaken.

"Nathan! Winston! What's going on?" he said. "It's dark. Where are we?"

It seemed that one of his dire predictions just might be coming true.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

They Felt Absolutely Wealthy

“We’re about fifteen minutes out of Kansas City.”

It was Winston’s quiet voice out of the darkness. He continued.

“You were all sleeping so I pulled the window shades. Let me open them.”

Whimp stood and nuzzled Nathan back into consciousness as the car was flooded with light, requiring the momentary shading of eyes. Neither boy had ever considered there might be shades for skylights.

“You mean we just used this wonderful, most expensive train car in the whole universe as a dark as night bedroom?” Alexander said clearly upset with himself.

“I’m afraid that has been the case. You must have been exhausted. I do have a snack prepared – for here or it can be taken with you.”

Nathan sat up, having heard the conversation.

“I may never eat again.”

“I have soda if your stomach is upset.”

“Thanks, but no. Just full. I’m not used to having a full stomach so I guess my system didn’t know what to do so it put me to sleep.”

Alexander allowed the hint of a smile and sat back. His brother’s comment had brought him to the point of a life changing decision. That was partly because he had been contemplating it for some time. It was partly because of the emotionally detached, matter of fact way Nathan had just delivered the sad reflection on his past. Alexander figured he

could either continue feeling sorry about the terrible years Nathan had spent at the hands of Sherwood and Cantrell, or he could begin looking forward with him toward the grand life he knew they were both destined to have from there on out. With no reservations, he was finally ready to opt for the latter. It was as if a huge obligation had been lifted from his shoulders – the dual responsibilities of accepting as his own their parent’s guilt over what they had done to Nathan, and assuming the responsibility for healing his big brother.

“I love you Nathan.”

“Where did that come from?”

“If I believed in souls, I’d say from deep within my soul. Since I’m still pretty skeptical about such things, I’ll say from a recent realization of how my affection for you trumps all the sorrow I have been harboring about your past.”

Nathan paused, considering the statement with some care. Then, he nodded.

“I love you, too, of course. I guess I just always thought we both understood that so it didn’t need to be stated.”

“I understand your position, but since it makes me feel so wonderful to express it, I hope you will indulge me.”

“You bet I will and if I don’t receive at least one, ‘I love you’, a week, you can bet I’ll be on your tail about it.”

“Thank you, beloved brother.”

“You are welcome, beloved brother.”

Even that attempt to lighten the impact of the moment in no way lessened the newly affirmed bond that would follow them for the rest of their lives.

Winston allowed a few tears, although he averted his face. Whimp looked expectantly back and forth between his boys.

“Yes, we love you, too, big fellow,” Nathan said reaching down and patting his head.

Whimp seemed satisfied and returned his head to the floor.

Nathan smiled, wondering when the animal’s disgusting slobber had begun feeling like love.

Nathan turned to Winston.

“So, just a few more minutes, you say.”

“That’s right. Mr. Atherton has made arrangements for

your indefinite stay at the Savoy Hotel, downtown.”

“I’m not sure what that means, indefinite,” Nathan asked.

“As far as I can determine it means from now until you’re my age or beyond, should that be your decision.”

“Can you tell us anything about him that will help us understand him – his generosity toward us in particular,” Alexander asked.

Winston gave the question a moment of serious consideration.

“If I were to reference one incident it would be that when he was eleven, his younger brother drowned while they were swimming together in a creek – a place their parents had apparently forbidden them to go. I assume it had been Mr. A. who had coerced his little brother to participate. He still carries a lot of guilt, I believe. He recently built a wing on the local hospital that is to specialize in treating children, whether their parents can afford to pay or not. It bears the name of his brother, William Estes Atherton.”

“So, he thinks we are a couple of sick kids?” Nathan said.

“Quite the contrary. He believes you both have the essential combination of traits necessary to build a better world: intelligence, compassion and determination. From the little I have heard between you, I must say I agree with his evaluation.”

The boys grew quiet and studied each other’s faces for a long time. It became a serious moment – one of the most serious of their lives. Would they accept the huge burden such an observation required of them? If they did, they would remember it as the moment they both grew up. It would require and receive hours of discussion later.

It was more difficult for Winston to say good-bye than for the boys. He saw them into a cab with directions to the driver. Another five exchanged hands.

At the front desk of the hotel, Nathan requested that a telegram be sent to Mr. Atherton – the one they had promised upon their arrival. Alexander quickly composed it. “Arrived safely. Thanks for the special car, for Winston and the room. Nathan and Alexander.”

They were shown upstairs by a bellboy who was Nathan's age.

They opened the door to their room – rooms – five of them in a luxury suite. They looked at each other and shook their heads.

Nathan turned to the bell boy.

"We only require a single room. Please change our accommodations."

"But the suite is on Mr. Atherton's account."

"Please. Now."

He raised his hand as if to snap it the way Mr. Atherton had. The snap would not materialize.

After ten minutes of commotion and hushed discussions back and forth among men in ever increasingly expensive suits, they were shown to a room more to their liking.

A few minutes later there was a knock on the door.

"A telegram for The Hoffman's."

It was from Mr. Atherton. "Regarding your accommodations: Good for you! Keep me posted. Mr. A"

"What do you suppose he meant?" Nathan asked

"The hotel contacted him about our recent room rebellion and I think we just passed one of his convoluted tests."

"That was my first thought, too – without the convoluted. Congratulations to us, I guess."

The room was still absurdly lavish and the mere thought of its expense embarrassed the boys.

"I suppose this is the best we can do," Nathan said looking around.

"I'd say more accurately it's the *worst* we can do."

It was worth smiles and full out laughter.

Alexander explored.

"Hot and cold water. A bath tub big enough for my whole class at school – the boys, I mean. And there is a shower – water sprays from holes in the ceiling – and it's hot. And tiny bars of soap that smell a lot like Miss Prendergast, our fourth-grade teacher."

He went on for fifteen minutes from item to item to item.

"When you're ready to light, we need to get down to

business, Alexander.”

“Oh, sure, sorry, it’s just that, wow!”

“Ready now?”

“I think so, yes, but don’t you agree, wow!”

“Yes. I agree, wow. Whimp agrees, wow. The blackbird on the window ledge agrees, wow.”

They removed their boots and vests. Alexander removed his stockings so he could sink his toes into the carpet. He spoke.

“When you were young did you ever hear papa speak about Uncle Hermann?”

“Only a few times that I can recall. I remember that he liked animals. I think he had a small farm with cattle in Maryland before he moved west. I don’t remember ever hearing about a aunt – like his wife.”

“Papa and mama got married just before they came to the United States, right.”

“Yes. I do know that. They were planning to get married, but there was something about being married that either made it easier for them to leave Germany or enter America. They got married one day and were on the ship the next day.”

“And Uncle Hermann was on that same ship?”

“I don’t think so. No. I’m pretty sure he was here first, maybe by as much as a year. I seem to remember potential immigrants had a better chance of being accepted if they already had a relative living here – somebody to see to their needs if that was required. Yes, that’s why mama couldn’t have come so they got married and got to come because of papa’s brother here – the married couple thing.”

“And you were born two years later.”

“That’s right. And then when I was four you invaded my life and refused to leave.”

Alexander was not within easy reach of a pillow so the conversation continued.

“No idea why Uncle Hermann decided to move way out here to Kansas?”

“Nothing I remember, but he was gone by the time I was born.”

“So, we can figure an approximate date for his move –

1851 or 1852. Any way to figure out how old he is?"

"Yes. He was a year plus the time to Christmas older than papa – he was born on Christmas Day – and papa's birthday was November 15th. Papa is – was – 38."

"So, Hermann would be about forty, now."

"I believe that's correct," Nathan said. "Not sure how that helps us."

"I was just figuring how old Hermann would have been so we could think about what sort of jobs might have been available to him."

"That's a good idea. I'm seventeen. Papa would have been twenty-one when I was born so Hermann would have been . . ."

"Twenty-two or twenty-three. That would have been in 1851 or '52."

"Was Kansas a state back then?" Nathan asked.

"It became the 34th state on January 29th 1861, so no it wasn't"

"You actually knew that?"

"I can do it for all the states. Want to hear?"

"Let's save that for some night when I can't get to sleep. You can bore me into sleeping."

"Yeah, as if *that* will ever happen. But, back to the topic. Assuming he also finished secondary school back in Germany, like papa and mama, what could he do here? I assume his English was pretty good."

"Remember, mama and papa's education didn't do them a bit of good here in America. Maybe he could have tutored American kids in German, for one," Nathan said trying to get things going.

"Do you think there would have been call for that out in the wild west?"

Nathan shrugged. He had no way of knowing, but it had raised another possibility.

"Apparently one thing he could do was farm – probably with animals."

"So, you're saying ranching."

"Of course, that is exactly what I'm saying."

It had been a bluff he tried to ride from Alexander's inference. It hadn't worked, but Alexander went on as if it had.

"I wonder if ranchers have clubs or societies or associations."

"I read in a nickel novel that mentioned ranchers have to register their brand designs with some group like that," Nathan said.

Alexander was less impressed by the information his brother had than the fact he had actually read a nickel novel.

"It could be he's just a ranch hand. I doubt if they have associations."

"That would leave us with nothing," Nathan said a bit deflated.

"We need to go with what we have first. If that doesn't get us to where we need to be, we'll just figure a second plan."

"That's a reasonable approach."

"Let's see if the concierges here at the hotel can help us find it."

"What the hell is a con-see-air?"

"I've never heard you swear before."

"You've never said *con-see-air* before. Sorry about that. Slipped in out my recent past I'm afraid. Not proud to admit it. Anyway . . . ?"

"It's a French word and refers to a hotel employee who sees to the guests' special needs. He can probably head us in some direction at least."

They redressed in boots and vests and went out into the hall. Alexander pointed to an ornate door.

"Shall we try the elevator? Only the best hotels have them."

"Do you trust them?"

"I suppose so if they are here and are used by hundreds of guests every day."

"Do you know how?"

"I think they come with a man inside who operates them."

Alexander approached the door and pressed a button labeled 'down'. Presently, amid a good deal of whirring, clacking and clicking, the outside door opened, then a gate slid up into the ceiling and finally the inside door was opened – all by the man Alexander predicted would be there. He sat on a high stool off to the left of the door. The boys entered.

Alexander elbowed Nathan so he would turn around and face the front.

“Lobby, please,” Alexander said.

The man reversed the process with the gate and doors and pressed a button on a panel.

“Lobby,” he announced once the jerking and whirring and clicking and clacking ceased.

They exited and Alexander thanked the man who held out his hand. Nathan shook it.

A few steps out into the lobby Alexander whispered.

“I think when he put out his hand he expected a tip for his service.”

“Probably the last ride he’ll give us then.”

They chuckled into their hands and it required a brief round of shoving.

“Seems to me it would have been just as fast walking down.”

“I agree, but now at least we can say we’ve ridden in one.”

They found who they needed sitting at a table on the far wall in the lobby. Alexander approached. Nathan followed wondering how – why – anybody could get *con-see-air* out of *consigners*, the word on the plaque on the front of his table. Alexander continued to be their spokesman.

“Pardon me. We’re the Hoffman brothers in room 326 and are in need of some information. Could you give us any idea how to locate the Rancher’s Association of Kansas?”

He smiled a very nice smile. He looked to be some past middle-age with graying hair and gold rimmed glasses. He wore a gray and black pinstriped suit with a white vest. Unbelievable to them, he even appeared to be comfortable in it.

“I believe it is called the Cattlemen’s Association. Let me look here and I will get you its address.”

There was a two-drawer wooden file cabinet sitting beside him. He removed a folder and placed it on the table in front of him.

“Lots of folders there, sir.”

“Lots of question needing answers, young man. Here. Let me write down the important information for you.”

“It took him only a moment and he handed the slip of paper to Alexander.”

“I must say that is the prettiest handwriting I have ever seen, sir.”

“Miss Ellis, my third-grade teacher would be so proud you think so.”

It had been offered sincerely, but with a wink.

Nathan had a question.

“Will the Cattlemen’s Association expect a tip or anything for answering a question? We’re from Maryland and all of this city stuff is pretty new and a little confusing to us.”

Alexander would have tried to paint a more sophisticated picture, but he bowed to his brother’s brutal honesty.

“No. I’m sure they will be happy to assist you.”

He hesitated and opened a drawer, removing a folded newspaper.

“Hoffman, you say. Then you would be the young heroes from St. Louis. The article says you prevented the most modern building in that city from burning to the ground, saving hundreds of lives. Look at the picture. Not bad likenesses.”

They quickly read through the article.

“You may keep the paper. I have other copies.”

“Can we ask you to keep that quiet – that we are here, I mean?” Nathan said. “Having our pictures in a newspaper is bad enough.”

“You two running from something?”

“Oh, that’s not the point, sir,” Alexander said hoping to cover up his brother’s blunder. “We’re planning a surprise visit to our uncle and it would just be a shame if he heard we were coming, you understand?”

“I understand.”

He winked again, that time clearly suggesting that he privately believed something very different from Alexander’s story.

Nathan had one more question.

“Are we supposed to tip you, sir?”

“Boys under eighteen are never expected to tip.”

“But the man in the elevator . . .”

“Old Ben would try and pry a tip out of the hand of his dying grandmother. Forget it.”

They thanked him and moved close to the front window to discuss their next move.

“Shall we go now?”

“Might as well. There’s a map of the city on the wall, there.”

They found the address was only three blocks away. A ten-minute walk later found them climbing the stairs to the Association’s second floor office. The name was on the fancy, frosted window on the door. They entered and were met by the smiling face of a woman in her thirties – silver rimmed glasses, dark hair rolled into a bun on the back of her head. She sat at the front desk – there were a dozen more in rows behind her. The sheer number of desks made them think it must be an important organization.

Nathan took the lead and approached her.

“We have what is probably the strangest request you have ever had.”

“You certainly have my attention.”

She removed her glasses and looked back and forth between them, making no attempt to hide the fact she liked what she was seeing.

“What is it, gentlemen?”

“We think we have an uncle living in Kansas and we think he might be a rancher and we know what his name was but have reason to think he may have changed it. We are trying to locate him.”

“I will have to admit that ranks near the very top of the list of strangest requests I’ve ever had, but let’s see if I can work my magic for you. How about beginning with the name you know?”

“Hermann Hoffman.”

“Hoff-*man*?” she asked splitting the name in an odd fashion.

“Yes,” Alexander said. “Would be in his early forties. Probably blond hair if it hasn’t turned gray. May speak with a slight accent – German. To our knowledge, he’s not married.”

“Is that Hermann with one or two ‘n’s’?”

“Two, ma’am. The Old-World spelling.”

“Well, I will look further, but your description fits Hermann Hoff to a T. He’s one of the biggest ranchers in the state. The Flying H ranch down near Pilson along the Fall River. About ten thousand acres of top grazing land. I’d even say you resemble him – blond hair, blues eyes, tall and lanky. Got the same ears. I’d bet on him.”

Clearly, she could have gone on, but thought better of it.

Alexander got the idea she had spent more than a little time studying the man’s features – probably a woman thing.

“How would you suggest we contact him?”

“Let’s see what his file has to say about that?”

She walked to a bank of wooden file cabinets along one wall and soon returned with a folder.

“No picture. Didn’t expect one. Here’s what his brand looks like – an H with a wing on each side at the crossbar. Let’s see, I have a contact box in Pilson.”

“A contact box?”

“Most ranches have them – a place for folks to leave messages in a nearby town. It would be where mail went. It is where we send notices and such.”

“Are those boxes checked every day?”

“Goodness no. Lucky if it’s every two or three weeks. Life out there moves at a very slow pace compared with the city. Probably half a day’s ride from the ranch.”

“Is there any kind of transportation between here and there?”

“Let’s see. Need another folder.”

She removed it from her bottom desk drawer.

“There’s a train running as far as far as Emporia. That would leave a stage ride of about fifty miles straight south. Looks like one other possibility. A train from here down to Alliance – about a hundred miles more or less south from KC. Then there’s probably a stage that goes west toward the ranch – forty or fifty miles I’d say.”

“Probably? You can’t be sure?”

“Stage coach lines are pulling runs like cowboys pull ticks. Let me ask Vernon. He’s got kin down there.”

She left and visited with a young man at a desk in a rear corner. Alexander wondered if that position meant he was

really important – being shielded by so many other workers – or rather unimportant, there in the rather unattractive corner as he was. Due to his young appearance, he figured the latter. Apparently, it had no bearing on their question.

She returned.

“Good news. I wasn’t thinking. There is a regular stage back and forth between the rail station at Alliance and Wichita. The Hoff ranch is about a third of the way in between – forty or fifty miles west of Alliance, like I said.”

Nathan turned to Alexander.

“Anything else you can think of?”

“Is he married, do you know.”

“Most eligible bachelor in the state.”

She removed her glasses again.

Alexander shrugged and shook his head, having no response. Nathan thanked her and they left.

“So, what do you think?” Nathan asked once on the sidewalk.

There was that inexact question again. Alexander would ignore it, resigned to the fact his brother would never be given to using precise language.

“For one thing, I think she’d be our new Aunt if she had her way about it. Besides that, there are several things, some of them even relevant to your question. First, let’s take a good look at our atlas. Then, once we determine our choice of route, we will need to find the cost of rail fare and stage fare.”

“Sounds good, race you”!

And off Nathan took with Alexander at his heels. They jumped over trash barrels and small boys and dogs. They dodged horses and buggies in the street. People stopped and looked at them. The young people cheered them on. The men watched and smiled – a few clapped. The older ladies shook their heads in disapproval. Alexander had often thought all old ladies should have lived for at least one day as a teen age boy. It would have made life easier for all concerned. (He had failed to consider that the reverse would also be instructive for the boys.)

They touched the front door of the hotel at the same moment.

“I pulled up at the end, you know,” Nathan said smiling

and puffing.

“You pulled up. I pulled up.”

They followed their smiles and heavy breathing into the lobby. The Concierges waved them to him.

“A telegram. Knowing you were out I kept it here for you.”

“Thank you,” Nathan said accepting it.

They walked toward the stairs reading it together.

SHERWOOD OUT OF BUSINESS STOP HE AND
CANTRELL IN JAIL. STOP OTHER BOYS RELEASED
STOP GOOD HUNTING.

[Telegrams had no period so added ‘stop’ in its place
STOP, er .]

“It’s not signed,” Alexander said.

They returned to their man behind the desk.

“It’s not signed,” Alexander repeated. “Any way of finding out who sent it?”

“Let me look into it. We should at least have the station number or the telegrapher’s code. I’ll send what I get up to you by bell boy – they do expect tips and can get really nasty about service if ignored.”

“How much?”

“A nickel should keep them off your backs – not endear you to them but that should be enough.”

Upstairs in their room they again slipped out of their new boots; the run had been no help regarding the growing blisters. They removed their new vests.

“I could get used to wearing a vest – feels good and makes me feel fancy,” Alexander said.

Nathan took his off and tossed it onto the bed.

“Something fell out of your vest,” Alexander said, pointing to the floor.

Nathan bent down and picked it up.

“Would you believe it?”

“Can’t answer that, of course, without the relevant information.”

Nathan unfolded a twenty-dollar bill, which, upon examination turned out to be two twenty dollar bills.

“I’m betting the telegram about the wagon works is from Atherton,” Nathan said.

Alexander had suspected that from the beginning.

“How much money do we have now,” Nathan asked.

“Get out the books. I hid the bills in the pages. Doubted if any highwayman would have need of reading material.”

“A McGuffey Reader, maybe,” Nathan said.

It was good for laughs. (That reader was the first book a child was given when he entered school in the 1800s.)

After a few minutes, Alexander had the count.

“With the new forty, we have eighty-six dollars. Can you believe that – eighty-six dollars, plus our coins.”

“That should handle any train and stage fares, right,” Nathan asked.

“Back in Riestertown it would have bought us a used horse and wagon. Probably get one of us to California by train or procure a painted lady for the night.”

He giggled uncontrollably and slipped onto the floor holding his stomach.

“What do you know about painted ladies?”

“Only that you really smile when you mention them in your sleep.”

Nathan chose to ignore it because it was the only sensible explanation he could think of, and, they *would* have been worth a smile. He tried to put the conversation back on his brother.

“What did you mean a *used* horse?”

“Think about it. Aren’t all horses, used horses?”

“Your head goes to the strangest places, brother. I just hope it never gets stuck there so it can’t come back.”

“You’d miss me?”

“I’m just not sure how I’d explain your disappearance to Whimp.”

That was worth a pillow flung somewhat awkwardly from Alexander’s position on the floor.

Duck!

Miss!

Contest over!

“I suppose we need to let Mr. A. know what we have discovered,” Nathan said. “Let’s compose a telegram.”

Wiping his eyes, Alexander slid himself back up onto

the sofa and soon had that completed. They decided not to mention either the Sherwood telegram or the forty dollars. The latter was fortunate since later that evening Alexander checked the pocket on his vest – on a hunch – and found forty more.

The knock on the door was from the bellboy – the same one from earlier. He had an envelope from the Concierges. Alexander handed him the new telegram and Nathan placed twenty cents in his palm.

“Sorry about earlier. We’re new to this tipping business. Hope that satisfactorily brings us up to date.”

The young man smiled and nodded, bowing slightly.

“You two are the heroes from the St. Louis fire ain’t you? I hear the two of you and your dog saved hundreds of lives. Here, I can’t take no tip from you.”

He replaced the dimes in Nathan’s hand and left.

They closed the door. Alexander brought up something that had been on his mind.

“I’ve been worried ever since those reporters swarmed us at the restaurant that Sherwood would see the article, put two and two together and suddenly know where we were.”

“Apparently, Mr. A. did, too, and used some of his pull to take care of things. It’s amazing how, with the telegraph, so much communication can take place in so few hours.”

“It is amazing, I’ll say that,” Alexander agreed.

He laid out the atlas on the table and they pulled up chairs. They traced both routes the woman at the Association office had suggested. Alexander recalculated the distances. She had been very accurate in her estimates.

“Here to Alliance by rail and Alliance to the ranch by stage?” Nathan asked at last – it had really been his suggestion.

“Seems like the best arrangement to me. I imagine the stage driver will know where to drop us off – near the ranch. How about we make the rounds and buy tickets first thing in the morning?”

Nathan nodded.

It was going on seven o’clock. The world had grown dark outside the windows and Nathan lowered the shades.

There was another knock on the door.

“It’s getting to be like the revolving door down stairs,” Alexander said.

Nathan answered it.

Again, it was the bellboy accompanied by another young man pushing a small cart on wheels.

“Your dinner, compliments of Mr. A. May we bring it in?”

“Sure, I guess,” Nathan said stepping back from the door.

They rolled it in, removed the linen cloth and the new boy proceeded to point out what each covered dish contained.

“Porter House Steak, fried potatoes, corn, peas, and cherry pudding for dessert. Milk in the pitcher. This dish is for the dog – wish I ate as well as fido.”

The bellboys indicated they should leave the cart in the hall when they finished. They turned and left.

“So, ‘stomach-filled-forever-boy’, want to give some of this a try?”

“I suppose it would be like a sin to let it go to waste.”

“I wonder if mama and papa ever in their whole lives had a meal like this – let alone two in one day?” Alexander said.

“I don’t know that, but I do know they would be very happy for us.”

They arranged the food on the table – setting aside the table cloth that had been provided – and lingered over it for a long time.

That evening they had lots of things to remember and share about growing up together back home in Parkville. There was laughter and there were smiles and even an unexpected tear or two. They talked about wins and losses, putting honey in the teacher’s ink well, and, of course all the things they had done that they would never have wanted their parents to know about. In most ways, they had been very normal boys.

They slept well, despite the fancy surroundings and sudden found wealth. Even the lightning and the lengthy, raging, rain storm didn’t intrude on them.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Entire Human Guttery!

The train to Alliance left at ten. It would take two and a half hours and cost seven dollars for the three of them. Again, Whimp would ride in a box car with horses and other pets. The stage from Alliance to the ranch left town at six the following morning and would approach the ranch between four and five that afternoon. There seemed to be some uncertainty about which days the stage ran. Tickets would have to be purchased at the Stage office in Alliance.

Back at the hotel, Alexander got the Concierges to tell them what he knew about Alliance and that area of the state. Alliance was a small town, bumped up against several others – all apparently relatively new settlements and all vying for consideration as the new county seat. Vying was less than accurate; there were mob sized fist fights and shootings in the street over it. Men became afraid to run for office. It sounded like a good place to move through as rapidly as possible. The train terminal was claimed by Alliance, but that was not a certainty either.

By ten o'clock the three of them were installed in their proper places on the train. They chose the slightly more expensive second class – real train seats, relatively clean floor, and a luggage rack near the ceiling. The walls were wooden – two inch vertical boards varnished in oak. Each seat had a window that opened and closed – up and down. First class windows also had a shade that could be pulled. The sun should not be a problem at that time of day. They selected seats on the right side so they would be looking west

into the state as they traveled south. That had been Alexander's idea.

The boys had heard stories about train robbers who still worked that area of the country. They had talked about it. People were often killed. It would be a wonderful adventure to be part of a robbery, but for the sake of the future Hoffman generations they decided it might be best if they were spared the thrill.

Alexander had previously determined there were three kinds of train riders: those who chatted on way too long, those who would talk but had the decency not to commandeer the conversation, and those who would just not respond. He characterized himself as tending to be the first and Nathan the second.

Their car was sparsely populated that day so conversation would be whatever the two of them decided to pursue between them. They were the only ones in the car who were carrying a fire arm.

"I wonder if there are armed guards to fend off the hordes of bad guys," Alexander asked, not expecting an answer.

That was well, because he got none.

There were very few towns along the route, which made for very few stops. Alexander estimated they were not traveling very fast so assumed the tracks were not reliably maintained. He hoped the slower speed would maintain an appropriate measure of safety. Later he learned the track was, in fact, brand new and the company was still examining it for places that might need attention.

Without incident, they arrived in Alliance within a few minutes of what the schedule had predicted. They stepped down from the train with their belongings and Whimp lumbered up offering his enthusiastic greeting. Nathan removed the destination tag that had been tied around his neck.

They approached the ticket window on the outside of the station and Nathan asked directions to the Stage Station.

"Got no stage station here," the older man said.

"But we were told . . ."

"Bein' told and bein' so ain't the same thing."

The boys looked at each other not sure what their next step would be. They had walked way further than forty miles before so weren't afraid of trying that. They did need to find somebody to head them in the right direction.

When they turned back to him, the man shut his window. That seemed to be that! They turned and walked, mostly aimlessly on south along the street. They needed a plan.

A boy – perhaps ten – who had been shadowing them from a distance trotted to catch up and was soon trying to match Alexander stride for stride, the other side of the twosome being occupied by Whimp.

“I heard ya at Billy's window.”

They boys found nothing in that to respond to. The boy continued.

“I can solve your problem for a brand-new U. S. of A. nickel.”

[The old five cent piece, called the halfdime – pronounced halfdime – was being replaced by the nickel.]

“What problem would that be?” Alexander asked.

“Gettin' yourselves on west from here.”

“How could you do that?”

“Cost ya a brand-new U. S. of A. nickel, like I said.”

Alexander looked at Nathan.

“I think we can catch him if he takes off without coming through for us, don't you?”

“Catch him and hang him up by his heels to bake in the sun like we did that other kid.”

The boy smiled as if to acknowledge their playfulness.

Nathan reached into his front pocket and pulled out some change. He picked a nickel and handed it over. As if planned, the brothers placed their hands on their hips – less threatening than commanding.

“You follow me. You're gonna git your money's worth. You'll see. Old Billy's a diehard.”

“What's a diehard?” Alexander asked as they picked up their pace.

“He thinks the world will come to a end if Alliance ain't made the county seat. So, he don't send no business toward any a the other towns. I'm takin' you to the stage line. It's just

down here in Tioga.”

By the time the short conversation was finished they found themselves within a block of the stage office – the city limit sign was nailed to the side of the building. They would have come upon it by themselves.

They stopped at the front door. Alexander placed a second nickel in the boy’s hand.

“Thank you, sir!”

Aside from the fact it was the first-time Alexander had been called, sir, it gave him an idea – more accurately it gave the imp within him an idea.

“There’s work involved in earning this second nickel, kid. You have to go back and tell old Billy that you overheard those boys talking about having their Uncle, Hermann Hoff, send some of his men to town to teach him a lesson for lying to them. You do that?”

“I’d do that for free. Everybody hates old Billy.”

He took off on the run. Regardless of his offer, he made no move to return the nickel. The boys laughed themselves into the office.

The only person there was a middle-aged woman who they came to find out was Mary Beth. They learned that the information they had been given in Kansas City had been generally accurate – leave west at six in the morning at a cost of two dollars provided the dog was satisfied to ride up on top. They would get to the ranch, where the stage seemed to stop often, between four and five. They purchased the tickets and asked directions to a place they could stay the night.

“Only two places: rooms over the saloon and Miss Patty’s Rooming House. Things go on at the saloon boys your age don’t have no business knowing about. Try Miss Patty’s first. Tell her Mary Beth sent you. Room comes with supper and breakfast. At the far end of Main Street. Left.”

They thanked her and went outside, sitting down with their legs off the porch onto the dirt street.

“So, which place?” Alexander asked.

“You heard her; the saloon’s no place for boys our age.”

“Well, yeah! That’s why I thought it would be a good choice – probably learn stuff.”

“Probably get shot is probably what we’d get.”

“So, that’s a no.”

“You’re barely thirteen. You have most of your life to learn about that kind of hanky-panky.”

Alexander stored ‘hanky-panky’ within his growing, *Learn More About List*, which also contained ‘Painted Ladies’ and MPA’s.

“If that’s your decision,” he said to Nathan, “but understand that I will be very interested and insistent to hear your detailed description of hanky-panky and I certainly hope it involves a good deal more than that kid at Sherwood’s seemed to know.

They looked at what the town had to offer as they walked south: Saloon, barber shop, mortician, grocery, hardware, clothing store, saddle shop and a few more. They pointed and chuckled at the baffling sign in the mortician’s window – SALE – and one in the clothing store that lit their teen boy imaginations – Dresses Half Off. That got full out laughter and fantasies neither chose to share with the other.

“Guess we don’t need baths – had two in one week,” Alexander said as they passed the barber shop. “Close to a record for me, I imagine.”

“You keep track of the oddest things, brother.”

“And you don’t know the half of it.”

He giggled, which for some reason required twenty yards of back and forth hip shoving. They had managed to spend close to an hour walking the streets.

“Calm down, now, Alexander, there’s Miss Patty’s house.”

It would have been interesting to an outside observer that as their journey progressed, Alexander came to feel free to act more like a thirteen-year-old willing to defer to his brother, while Nathan appeared more like a more mature seventeen-year-old who gradually came to have the final say in things.

It was a large, white house with green shutters and a front porch that ran its width. A white picket fence enclosed the front and both sides of the lawn. There was a cobble stone walk that led from the street to the front door.

Nathan told Whimp to wait, then knocked.

Provided Miss Patty was three hundred years old, it was she who answered the door.

“Ma’am. I am Nathan and we are wondering if you have accommodations for two vagabond brothers for the night.”

“My! Handsome, classy, and artistic of language. I don’t see many that fit that picture anymore. I’m Miss Patty – outlived three husbands, but they still insist on calling me Miss Patty around here. Yes, of course I have a room. The riff-raff that usually makes its way into Tioga prefers rooms at the saloon. I can’t provide the sort of entertainment they have over there, understand, although there was a time I could dance with the best of them high stepping girlies.”

“I think we prefer what you have to offer.”

“Of course, you *don’t*. You’re young men with hot blood and a thirst for knowledge of such things, but I think you have made a wise decision to knock on my door first.”

The boys looked at the floor and blushed. What sort of old lady was this, anyway?

“Come in. I imagine you’d like to see the room.”

“Yes, ma’am. That would be good.”

“Well, don’t leave the dog out there. All God’s creatures are welcome in here. Remember that if the mosquitoes get to you tonight.”

She giggled, turned, and led the way. She took the shortest steps the boys imagined were possible.

The four of them were soon in the bedroom on the south-east corner of the first floor, just off the end of the hallway straight back from the entry hall. It seemed perfect in every way: windows on two sides, a large bed, a table and two chairs, and other features designed to catch the fancy of the feminine gender.

“Outhouse – they are usually called ‘facilities’ these days – is just out the door at the back of the hall. Water is available from a tank in the kitchen – you can take a pitcher to your room – use it to drink and wash up. You can have dinner this evening and breakfast in the morning. Whole package is seventy-five dollars – a hundred if you want me to dance.”

“The boys frowned and looked at each other, but only for a moment.”

"I'm thinking she is something of a comedian, brother Nathan. Her demeanor exudes the comic's bearing."

She leaned in close to Nathan.

"Does he come with instructions or at least a glossary?"

"I've searched for both, ma'am, but I've never found either that does him justice."

"Three dollars, includes scraps for your wonderful animal. Just look at him. Not another like him anywhere, I'm thinking."

Whimp stood and walked to her as if accepting here accolade.

"I believe we have a deal, then," Nathan said.

"You know I was putting you on with the words just before," Alexander said.

"A comedian can always tell another comedian by the turn of his lips."

Alexander really didn't understand, but let it go.

"How about dinner in an hour? A bit early, I know, but I'm thinking it's been a while since you've eaten."

"I has, in fact. That will be fine. We'll wash up and put our things away. The kitchen is where?"

She pointed to a double door off the entry hall.

"Through the sitting room and to the other side of the house."

"May I ask how many others are here?" Alexander asked.

"No others."

Alexander followed her with the large pitcher from their room (she called it a ewer) and was soon back with water. He poured some in a bowl for Whimp. They washed faces and hands and figured they still had fifty-five minutes to wait for dinner.

"She's an interesting old lady," Nathan said.

"Yes, and she's also an interesting lady who is old."

"Sorry, I don't get it."

"I'm thinking she has been an interesting lady far longer than she has been old."

"A point well taken. I love it when you do things like that. I agree."

Alexander roamed the room.

“I imagine these pictures on the dresser and walls are of her in her younger years, don’t you?”

“If that’s her as a teenager, I’d have walked her down the path for sure. That is one beautiful girl.”

“Does ‘down the path’ in that context have some hidden meaning?” Alexander asked.

“Not as far as I know. Sometimes I think your main interests are vulgar and carnal.”

“Hey, you’ve had four more years to get used those *interests*, as you put it, than I have. I’m still trying to sort through them and figure them out – see where they fit with everything else in my life.”

“Sorry. I tend to forget how it all was at first. I’m glad you pointed it out. Let me add that those feelings don’t lessen; they just become more familiar so they don’t jump up and take you by surprise when you’re not expecting them.”

“I appreciate knowing that. It seems a big brother may be good for something after all.”

Alexander took a seat and read. Nathan lay back on the bed and considered those ‘*interests*’.

Dinner was delicious. The accompanying conversation was both fun and enlightening. They learned a good deal about the history and people of the area and heard of Miss Patty’s plans for the future – a book she was writing, a series of paintings she was finishing, a set of dishes she was making and would then paint, as well as other things. They both suspected she wouldn’t turn down another proposal of marriage if it struck her fancy at the moment it was offered. They both watched their language so she couldn’t misinterpret *their* intentions.

They offered to help with the dishes, but she scooted them on their way. They arranged for a five o’clock breakfast so they could make the stage on time.

“I must say,” Alexander said before they headed for their room that night, “you really don’t seem old, ma’am.”

“Oh, Alexander, I’m *not* old. I plan to never be old. A person only becomes old when he stops dreaming of new possibilities and allows himself to become comfortable merely regurgitating his past.”

They would never forget that.

It rained hard during the night – something drought-stricken Kansas needed in the worst way. They were just coming off ten years of very little rain – although better right there in the south-eastern part of the state than elsewhere. The history books would refer to it as the years of the dust bowl. Unfortunately, the sun-dried clay was more like tile and absorbed very little of it. There were puddles in the street and the ruts carried it off to who knew where. Maybe to the river that ran through their uncle's ranch.

They were waiting at the stage office at five thirty feeling a good deal more excitement than they had figured they would. It was the last leg of their long journey – they hoped. They realized it was all based on the assumptions of the woman with aspirations to become their aunt, and both understood they would be terribly disappointed if it didn't prove to be correct. They did their best not to dwell on the possible down side.

It would be the first time they had ridden in a stage coach. They were ready for a grand adventure.

At five forty-five, the stage pulled up to the front from the stable in the rear. It was painted red with black trim. The large wheels in back were nearly four feet high. The ones on the pivoting axil up front were nearer two. They were wooden with an iron rim. A well-greased, iron collar at their center fit into the wooden axils. The top of the coach was enclosed by a foot-high railing to hold in place whatever got stashed up there. On the rear was the luggage compartment, sloping from top to some three feet behind at the base. It was covered in leather. It was difficult to see inside from the ground because the coach itself rode several feet off the ground, suspended on wide leather straps designed to cushion the ride from the predictably rough roads. In front, at the top, was a wooden seat with a backrest where the driver and the man riding shotgun sat. The boys thought it was an impressive spectacle.

The run originated right there in Tioga. The only other passengers were a mother and her nine-year-old son. The others entered first and chose to sit on the seat facing the front, leaving the one facing rear for Nathan and Alexander. The inside was upholstered in brown velvet, a near match in

color to the brown leather seats. The wooden floor between the seats was painted brown. All in all they considered it comfortable. That assessment would quickly change once they moved out along the rocky trail ahead.

The stage left right on time. Alexander tried to make conversation with the woman and her son.

“At least with the rain the ride shouldn’t be too dusty.”

The boy responded from out in left field (he must have been nine!).

“I’ve never seen boys with yellow hair, before.”

“Our parents were from Germany and most Germans have hair this color – we call it blond.”

“Mine is black.”

He looked at his mother.

“Where are my parents from?”

“Parent means mother and father and we are from south Texas where most hair is black.”

“My parents are from south Texas where most hair is black,” the lad repeated.

“Yours is very pretty, I must say – as is your mothers.”

She took a book from her bag and opened it for her son, apparently more comfortable with him reading than talking with strange, yellow-haired boys of German ancestry.

Alexander understood and took out a book of his own. The boy was clearly more interested in Alexander’s than his own.

“Your book’s full of pictures of people’s guts, huh?”

“I suppose that’s one way of stating it.”

“Can I see?”

“You will need your mother’s permission. I have no way of knowing what kinds of things she allows you to see.”

The mother looked Alexander in the face and nodded as if to thank him.

“He may look so long as it’s just of the insides.”

“I understand. Can he come and sit here between us – it will make it easier?”

Again, she nodded. Her hair and complexion suggested Mexican or Indian ancestry. Alexander thought she was quite beautiful. The boy continued to look and listen as Alexander took him on a first-class romp through the human

guttery. He began nodding, leaned against Alexander and was soon asleep. Nathan lifted him and laid him onto the seat next to his mother, head in her lap. She thanked him.

Nathan spoke to Alexander in a quiet voice.

“We seem to be moving along at a fairly fast clip, don’t you think. The horses seem to be running full out.”

“The first relief station is only about two miles away. Seems way too close, but maybe they can run the horses faster for such a short way and lay in a little extra distance up front. Then the next one is back to the usual, fifteen miles.”

“And you know this how?”

“The map on the wall back at the station. Back there I thought it was just poor planning. It could be something entirely different, of course, like how it was before the towns sprung up.”

Nathan nodded. It was never a big deal to discover that his brother had been more observant than he had been.

At the first station, they changed the team. It gave Alexander time to try out his theory on the driver.

“From here on we’ll slow to more like five miles an hour. That’s a good run – to average five. Wet clay may slow us down just a little bit. Several creeks to ford. They’ll be running high after the rain. Actually, the first two miles of a new run are to check out the equipment so if there are any problems they can be taken care of at the first stop.”

That explanation made more sense than the others he had concocted.

“Any stage robberies out here recently,” Alexander asked, pressing what appeared to be a good relationship.”

“About a year ago. Not on this run. Not a real concern. We seldom carry anything of value.”

Alexander wanted to point out that a mother, her child and two teen age boys really didn’t comprise an un-valuable cargo, but he didn’t. He got the man’s message, but still could not understand how some folks believed stuff could ever be more valuable than people.

They continued changing horses about every two and a half hours to three hours. The scenery didn’t change from mile to mile. The boys napped from time to time. It was not a comfortable ride. Any glory about stage coach travel that had

been conveyed to them in nickel novels was soon a clear fiction from the past.

They stopped to eat at a larger station at noon, which was run by a man and his wife. The passengers were given twice the usual layover time – thirty minutes.

They were back on the road on schedule. It put them just four hours from their uncle's ranch. They weren't clear how they were to proceed once they left the stage, but were certain the driver would be able to instruct them. Alexander would ask at the next stop.

"Creek to ford ahead," the driver called out after some time.

The boys twisted themselves so they could see forward out their windows. It was a wider creek than the others they had come upon. It looked deeper and was running a rapid current, which even produced hints of white water.

The driver didn't hesitate, but pulled right down the bank into the water hoping the momentum would help ease them up the opposite side. It had been an unfortunate move. A sizeable log was moving at considerable speed down the flooding creek toward them. It hit the front right wheel and the stage came to an abrupt stop. The boys were tossed back against the seat hitting the back of their heads with some force.

The little boy and his mother were thrown out of their seats across the way onto Nathan and Alexander. The boy began to scream.

"Mama, my arm."

Alexander recovered first and helped the woman back onto the seat. Nathan picked up the boy.

"His right arm is broken, I'm sure. I've seen one before. Bone is nearly sticking through the skin."

The boy kept screaming. Alexander took charge.

"Nathan go see how you can help outside."

He left and began supervising the removal of the tree trunk so he could estimate the damage.

Inside, Alexander rolled up the boy's sleeve – it was the ulna in the lower left arm. Alexander called out the window.

"Nathan. I need three sturdy sticks about an inch thick and a foot long."

Alexander began talking to the mother.

“Can you begin singing a lullaby – soft, slow, make it as monotonous sounding as you can.”

She furrowed her brow.

“Please just try it. What is his name?”

“Carlos.”

She began a song in Spanish. It was perfect.

“Now, Carlos, I need you to be a very brave boy – braver than you’ve ever had to be before. I know it hurts and it is going to hurt for just a little while longer then it will all be better. Remember the arm bones in the pictures. One of yours got broken in the crash. I am going to fix it. Is it alright if I fix it?”

He received a tearful, “Yes.”

Alexander took his pencil from his pocket and began moving it back and forth a foot above the boy’s eyes.

“I need you to keep a sharp look out on this pencil. Sometimes it changes colors. If you see that happening, you need to tell me right away. Okay? Will you do that?”

The boy nodded. Alexander transferred the pencil to his mother and although clearly puzzled, she continued the slow, even motion. He began a closer examination of the arm. He also pulled out his shirt tail and began tearing it into strips. By the time Nathan opened the door and handed in the sticks, he had torn six good sized pieces.

“Nathan. I’m going to pull on the wrist so the broken sections of the bone can slip back into place. Then, I will place the three sticks along the arm and you will tie them in place with the strips from my shirt.”

The mother kept singing. She kept moving the pencil. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Carlos kept his eyes following the pencil. His crying diminished to sobs and then his sobs to shallow breathing.

Amazingly to all of them, Alexander included, the boy did not so much as wince when he slowly pulled the arm and felt the bone realign itself. He felt it to make sure it was a clean fit.

Within ten minutes the arm was in a splint. Alexander motioned for the woman’s shawl which he fashioned into a sling.

“Now, Carlos,” Alexander said, continuing in a calm, low voice, you have done so well I just need you to do one more thing. Close your eyes. You need to go to sleep for me now so your arm can get better. Go to sleep for me. You are going to be fine. First, you need to go to sleep.”

He took the pencil from the boy’s mother and encouraged the woman to keep singing. The boy was asleep. The driver and the man riding shotgun had come up and watched through the door. Nathan, who had been on his knees helping, just inside the door, backed out moving the men back with him. Alexander also stepped out into the water and moved up onto the bank where he and Nathan both sat back against a tree.

“So,” Nathan began, “you okay?”

“Probably not. I think I’ll puke now.”

He stood and moved several yards away into a stand of tall grass and took care of his business.

“I never seen nothin’ like it in all my years,” the driver said.

Shotgun just shook his head in disbelief.

“How could a kid that young be a full-fledged doc?” he asked.

“Because he’s a full-fledged genius who, in his entire life, has never seen any problem as being impossible,” Nathan explained.

“Genius, *I’d* say,” the driver said.

Alexander returned with a question.

“What’s your take on the wheel, Nathan?”

“I can fix it. First, we need to prop up the front right corner of the coach, then remove the wheel up to dry ground. Three spokes and a small section of the wooden part of the rim need rebuilding.”

He turned to the driver.

“What tools do you carry?”

“A full emergency box full.”

“Let’s get them up on the bank. Show me what wood we can take off this coach without weakening it.”

The process took two hours. The men carried the repaired wheel into the stream and slipped it back in place. With some urging the team gradually coaxed the coach back

onto dry land. It was worth a cheer and a yahoo, but nobody really felt like managing one.

“The Flying H will have a spare wheel,” the driver said. “It’s the next stop. They’ll be wondering what happened. We’re usually on time up to this point.”

With everybody back in their places and Carlos still asleep, the driver got them on their way – slowly and carefully – but on their way. The mother offered her words of thanks and offered a short prayer for the boys.

Almost immediately Shotgun called out.

“A group of riders coming at us out of the sun straight ahead. Hard to make out but we have to assume trouble. This is the perfect time of day for a hold up. Can’t out run them.”

“I suggest we stop and do whatever they ask,” Nathan said. “We have a badly damaged boy in here.”

The driver mumbled under his breath:

“What we got is a woman in there. This could be really bad.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Continuation

Inside, Nathan quickly arranged a blanket over the woman and Carlos and situated the back packs and rifle in places to make it look like a seat full of cargo rather than people. He explained to her as he went. The boys stepped out and stood close to the stage thinking it was safer there than out in the open. The driver and shotgun tossed down their rifles so they lay in plain view. They put their hands up and waited.

The riders slowed and inched forward, stopping some ten yards away. With the sun at their backs it was impossible to make them out. One urged his horse on ahead slowly. He saw the boys and spoke.

“Put your hands down, men. This is no hold up.”

At that, Nathan and Alexander moved out into the open. The man dismounted and walked toward them.

“Nathan? Alexander?” he said with less hesitation than seemed reasonable.

“Uncle Hermann?”

The hug of all hugs went on for some time and then, needed to be repeated.

* * *

Hermann used the telegraph terminal back at his ranch to alert a doctor in Wichita while his men changed the wheel. The housekeeper provided a vial of dark liquid she guaranteed would handle Carlos' pain until they got him to the hospital. The stagecoach left, but not until Hermann had been regaled with four versions of Young Doc Hoffman's miracle and Nathan's ingenious fix to the wheel.

Hermann called to his housekeeper.

“Got two hungry lads here. Fix ‘em your best vittles.”

It was only then that the three of them were finally alone together –in the living room. Alexander offered his hand to his uncle.

“I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced. I’m Alexander, younger brother to the finest older brother that ever had a younger brother, Nathan.”

“You have your father’s sense of humor and your mother’s eyes.”

“A question,” Nathan said. “How could you have possibly known the two boys on some random stagecoach were us?”

“It seems you have a friend by the name of Samuel Atherton who just happens to own half of Missouri and sizeable slices of Illinois and Kansas. When you telegraphed him that you thought you had found me – and you will have to explain how in thunder you managed that – he did some checking, verified who I was, and telegraphed me your story so I would be ready. I know that wasn’t according to your plan, but Atherton knows how to make money, not how to be a father. You’ll have to give him some slack, okay.”

They boys nodded, both wondering if the news about their parents had also been shipped on ahead. They immediately had their answer.

“I am heartbroken about your parents, boys. How are you holding up? What can I do for you? I mean I will do anything for you. Consider my home your home for as long as you need or want it.”

“Did you know about us?” Alexander asked. “That we had been born.”

“Yes. About three years ago, I contacted your father by mail telling him I was doing well and wanted to help out. He wrote me a long, very cordial letter, catching me up on things, but asked me not to make such offers. He said he was capable of taking care of his family. I didn’t contact him again. I knew he was a proud man, and it hadn’t been my intention to offend him.”

“We didn’t know about that exchange,” Alexander said.

They sat together in the huge room appointed with

heavy rustic furnishings, and talked until dinner was ready. They talked through dinner and dessert and were still at the table talking when the grandfather clock struck ten.

“Let’s get you up to your rooms and settled in for the night. I’ve cleared my week so we can get acquainted and so you can get to know the lay of things here at the Flying H.”

In the upstairs hall, Hermann pointed at two doors.

“One apiece. Take your pick.”

“We’d rather stay together, at least for a while, all right?” Nathan said.

“Certainly. However, you want things. I have to tell you, this is just about the greatest day of my life. I am so glad you chose to come to me.”

An awkward moment was followed by short hugs, then, the boys entered their room. Sleep came with difficulty throughout that big house that night.

“He’s a really nice man,” Alexander said.

“Of course, he is. He’s papa’s brother and our uncle. How else could he possibly be?”

They lay in bed trying to unwind. Nathan had held it as long as he could. He turned, propped up on his elbow.

“Okay! How in blue blazes did you know what to do for Carlos? More to the point, what *did* you do for Carlos? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Well, although I’ve never set an arm before I’ve read about it and couldn’t see how it could be all that difficult – still one bone in place to guide the broken one back to where it belonged. I guess I was right about that.”

“I figured all that, but the pencil and stopping the boy’s pain?”

“I’ve done some reading on a procedure known as hypnosis. It’s better known in Europe than America. One of its uses is to free the body of pain or at least to make what pain there is seem insignificant. I learned the basic processes and I guess I sort of just played it by ear from there.”

“The lullaby?”

“Ear.”

“The pencil?”

“Ear.”

“The putting him to sleep?”

“Book – sort of – ear partly.”

“It was the most fantastic thing I’ve ever witnessed.”

“That’s what the stage men said about how you took that shattered wheel and literally grew a new one out of scraps you tore off the coach.”

It had been nice to hear, but Nathan had always known Alexander was the true genius.

* * *

They remained there at the Flying H until the following August. Hermann employed a former college professor as a live-in tutor for Alexander. That June he passed the entrance exams and was accepted into one of the most prestigious Medical Schools in the Mid-West. [At that time such training came right after high school.]

A few weeks after they arrived, Nathan went to work as an assistant to the finest cabinet maker in Wichita. He was home, at the ranch with Alexander, every weekend. He gained many new skills and liked the work, but his heart was somewhere else.

Five years later they had both moved on. Alexander – Dr. Alexander Hoffman, MD – was the assistant director of the new William Estes Atherton children’s hospital in St. Louis Missouri.

Nathan returned to work with Parker and eventually became a full partner in the Parker-Hoffman Boat and Railroad Car Company of Brownsville, Pennsylvania.

One weekend every other month, Nathan and Alexander each traveled by train to Grove, Indiana, where they swapped lies about the old days with Jack and Frasier, and spent time together keeping up to date on the important aspects in each other’s lives.

Those important *aspects* would eventually include three children each. For Nathan: Parker, Jack and Estelle. For Alexander: Maggie, Mitchel and Patty. (And they had accomplished all that without ever encountering a single painted lady!)

* * *

[If you enjoyed this book, you may enjoy **Rabbles**, another historical novel by Tom Gnagey / David Drake.]

Three young men form an odd alliance as they work their way north from southern Arkansas during the Civil War. Zachary, a wounded 17-year-old Confederate soldier, is the rich son of a powerful plantation owner. Benny, also wounded, a Soldier from the United States Army, comes from a poor farm family in northern Illinois. Amos, is a runaway slave boy. The white boys are trying to avoid firing squads for desertion. Amos would suffer a terrible fate at the hands of his owner if caught. They slowly form a bond and become a team working themselves north through Arkansas and up the Mississippi River to Illinois. Along the way, they listen to each other, they listen to themselves; they are very different boys in many ways by the time they reach their destination.

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