

# Mystery of the Vanished Parents

Fiction for 10 – 15 year olds  
David Drake

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# **Mystery of the Vanished Parents**

**A short novel**

**For 10 – 15 year olds**

**by**

**David Drake**

**Family of Man Press**

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**CHAPTER ONE:**  
**Stormy Nights Are Great for Making Plans**

Tommy sat in the padded window seat in his second-floor room looking out into the darkness. It was not Tommy's favorite sort of evening. In fact, of all the kinds of evenings there could ever be it was his least favorite. A ferocious wind was blowing out of the darkness. It caused the huge limbs on the hundred-year-old oak trees out back to thrash uncontrollably and tugged relentlessly at those things it could not immediately coax into motion. Unrelenting lightning flashed, bringing the only sustained source of illumination to the world outside. From time to time the thick dark boiling clouds parted just long enough to reveal faint streams of light from the moon only to immediately close and return the world to darkness.

Tommy looked down on the back yard and saw the tire swing being tossed and twirled in a fully unfriendly manner. Rain was coming down in sheets so thick it made it impossible to see the woods at the far end of the meadow behind the house – well, Wentworth Mansion to be completely accurate,

but the story will get to that. The angry wind slammed the rain against the window panes, clouding the view and making it impossible to see anything clearly. It whistled through the cracks in the attic of the old structure and lent an eerie and unnerving backdrop to the whole distasteful event. The distant lightning defined the moving branches and projected a downright scary invasion of distorted shadows that forced their ways inside and danced across the furniture climbing the inside walls of his room. It was enough to send chills up the back of the bravest eleven-year-old boy.

Tommy was, therefore, reasonably startled when the door to the hall opened behind him. He turned to look.

“You okay in here, Tommy?”

It was his older brother, Gary, fifteen and less brave about such storms than he’d dare let on.

“I’m okay. You know how I hate storms. I don’t know why, except to me they are the scariest things Mother Nature ever sends our way. I guess I feel helpless against all that power – the wind, the rain, the lightning.”

He shivered intentionally as if to emphasize his feelings.

Gary closed the door and walked across the room to where Tommy sat. He took a seat beside him.

“It’s probably something more than that.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“I guess you’re old enough and you should know. It was storming like this on the night we were removed from Mom and Dad’s home. You were just two. I was six and barely remember anything but the terrible feelings, myself. Having cops and other strangers come and take us away was bad enough, but having it all happen during a raging storm like this one I imagine hooked it all together – the storm with the terror we were feeling.”

“I don’t remember anything about that night – except, like you say, maybe the terror. Thanks for telling me. You

doing okay, then?”

“Good enough, but there is that second bed in my room if you’d feel better being in there with me tonight.”

What Tommy heard was his brother asking him to come and stay with him, as if together they might be able to handle it better than either of them could do alone. There was no need to state the truth behind the offer. Gary really hadn’t tried to conceal it. As brothers went they were quite honest and open with each other about most things.

“Sounds good to me. You’re a good big brother. I’d like to know more about what happened that night, but it’s always seemed like it was off limits to me? I asked Granddad once, but he just said I was better off not knowing. I figured that ended the conversation forever.”

“I’m sure I don’t know the whole story either, but I’ll tell you what I know and what I’ve pieced together.”

There was a knock at the door. Both boys smiled knowing who they’d find when they opened it. It was Jackson, the butler. He was a Class ‘A’ worry wart when it came to the two of them. Tommy opened the door.

“Hey, Jackson. The storm scarin’ you, is it? You’re welcome to come and join us.”

The boys broke into laughter. Jackson – slender, erect, with gray hair and wearing a black suit like he had always worn ever since the boys had come to know him – offered a warm smile. He carried a covered tray. He spoke in his distinguished, English accent.

“I thought perhaps sandwiches, chips and pop might be in order on a night such as this.”

“No Butterfingers?” Tommy said, kidding.

Jackson set the tray on the desk, reached into his inner jacket pocket and extracted two butterfingers, offering them with a playfully smug expression. When very young, Tommy was convinced that was where all Butterfingers came from – Jackson’s jacket pocket.

Tommy turned to Gary.

“We should have known he’d know what we wanted – that mind reading thing we’ve always believed the man possesses.”

“You’re right. We should have known.”

“There is one more thing,” Tommy said placing his fingers against his head as if to read Jackson’s mind. “I do believe there is still one bar in that pocket. Could that be, do you suppose?”

Jackson reached into his jacket and removed the goodie, which Tommy had predicted would be found there. As many times as that sequence had played out among them, it was always worth a good chuckle all around. As one, the three of them peeled back the famous blue and orange wrappers and toasted to who knew what – it was something they had just always done.

Jackson never chuckled in the presence of Mr. Wentworth. Jackson never smiled in the presence of Mr. Wentworth. But, with the boys, smiles blossomed easily and often. He was not married and whether he ever had been, was not known to the boys. He lived in a room at the end of the second-floor hall – handy when either of the boys needed something. When they were younger, many a stormy night found them knocking on his door – pillows under their arms prepared to ride out the event in the safety of his room. They all usually knocked at each other’s doors – it was an unstated rule among them.

“We’re on our way down to Gary’s room,” Tommy said. “I’m going to bunk in with him tonight. Come and join us. We’ll share the treats and promise to keep you safe.”

“Thank you for the generous offer, but I still need to see to Mr. Wentworth’s needs for the night.”

“Okay. Thanks for thinking of us. You spoil us, you know and that wasn’t intended to suggest that you stop. We love it.”

Jackson offered just the hint of a smile, set his feet



together, bowed slightly, turned, and left. He always set his feet together and bowed slightly before he left. It had apparently been part of his 'butlering' training.

In many ways, he had been more of a father figure to them than their grandfather since they arrived at the mansion in the middle of the night, nine years earlier. Claybourne Wentworth the third – the grandfather – was very wealthy and continued to work at being very wealthy most every waking minute of every day. The boys knew he loved them and they were certainly well cared for, but he hadn't the foggiest idea about how to be a father. They often wondered about the sort of relationship he and their father had when he was a boy.

A few minutes later, next door in Gary's room, they sat the tray on the nightstand between the two beds and each made himself comfortable, settling in for food, pop and conversation. As was their style, they had finished dessert first!

"So?" Tommy said urging the conversation to get under way.

"To begin with I don't claim to know everything," Gary began, "but I'll share what I can. You were two and I had just turned six. We were upstairs in the bedroom we shared. We'd both been asleep for quite a while. I woke up first – there were sirens and flashing lights. I went to the window and saw several police cars parked out front. A storm had come up – probably after we'd gone to sleep. I opened our door and looked out into the hall. Usually, all the lights were off at that time of night, but they were on and there were strange voices coming from down stairs.

"Cautiously, I walked to the top of the stairway to investigate. I remember feeling quite brave about doing that. A woman I'd never seen before was coming up. She said there was a problem and we would have to go with her for the night. I was really confused. I asked what the problem was and she said mom and dad were sick and we needed to leave for a while so they could receive treatment. I told her I wanted to see them and she said I couldn't.

“About that time, I saw granddad come in the front door at the bottom of the stairs. He was soaking wet from the storm. I called to him and he called back saying he’d be right up. He talked for a few minutes with a policeman and then came up the stairs.

“He spoke in low tones to the woman. She nodded and he came over to me and picked me up. He told the same story the woman had. He carried me back to our room and the woman packed some cloths in a bag she’d brought along. I remember hanging onto granddad’s neck so he couldn’t put me down. A policewoman arrived at the door to our room and took the bag. The first woman wrapped you in a blanket and picked you up. I’m not sure you even fully woke up. Granddad wrapped me up and we went downstairs and immediately out to the limo. Jackson was driving. He was at the door with a huge umbrella. The woman rode with us back here to this place.

“She stayed with us all night. I cried a lot and kept asking to see mom and dad and she kept saying that wasn’t possible. I guess I eventually fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning she was gone and Jackson was sitting there on the bed beside me. I knew Jackson from my visits here. I liked him and felt safer once I saw him.

“I know I asked him questions, but got no good answers other than the ‘they are sick’ speech. Now I understand that he was fully loyal to granddad and would say whatever he was told to say. We got dressed and Jackson took us down for breakfast. Madge had lots of things on the table since she didn’t really know anything about what we liked to eat. She made me feel relaxed and comfortable – the way she always does. As help goes, we really lucked into two great people, Jackson and Madge.

“After breakfast, Jackson took us into granddad’s study. He was sitting behind his big desk and we stood in front of it – it was all quite formal and uncomfortable. You couldn’t even see over it. He said that dad and mom needed to go on a vacation and while they were gone we were going to stay with him. I would have a tutor instead of going back to school for a

while. He handed me a note from mom – I could tell it was in her handwriting. It said what he had said and ended with, ‘I’ll always love you both’. It seemed an odd way of saying she loved us, but since it was from mom I just accepted it.

“You couldn’t understand about any of it, of course, and cried for mom for a week. I figured it was my job to take her place for you so I tried my best. Strangely, I think that’s what helped me the most those first months – knowing you needed me like that. So, thanks, Squirt.”

“You’re welcome.”

They exchanged a smile.

“When did we find out they had died in the plane crash?”

“It was several months later I’d say. I really had no good idea about time when I was six. It was another of those uncomfortable meetings in the den. You weren’t even there since you were too young to understand. Granddad told me that coming back from their vacation their plane had crashed in the ocean so we would be living with him. I remember he said he loved us both very much. As you know, he’s not an affectionate person, but he motioned me to him around the big desk, put his big hands on my shoulders and drew me close, giving me a kiss on my forehead. It’s the only kiss I’ve ever received from him.”

“That’s one more than I ever got. I figure all the smooching from Madge sort of makes up for it.”

“She is a kissing machine, I’ll agree. Mom used to kiss us last thing at night and first thing in the morning.”

“I don’t really remember mom, or dad, you know,” Tommy said.

“I know. I’m sorry. They loved us a lot. They took time to play with us. Sometimes we’d go on picnics and they’d let us wade in the stream at the park. They laughed a lot – I think that was really good for us, to hear lots of laughter when we were little.”

“We laugh a lot,” Tommy said. “I think that’s good.”

Tommy grew quiet. He often did that when there was something big on his mind. Presently he turned his head toward Gary and spoke.

“What do you think really happened to them?”

“What do you mean? They got sick, went on a vacation and died in a plane crash.”

“They don’t sound like the kind who’d go on a vacation without us kids.”

“Well, no, they weren’t. I always figured it had to do with their illness, whatever that was.”

“What kind of an illness could they have both gotten so suddenly after putting us to bed that was suddenly so bad we couldn’t see them?”

“You’ve been thinking about this for a while, haven’t you?” Gary said turning on his side to look directly at his little brother.

“All the time. I’ll bet Jackson knows exactly what happened.”

“But he’s loyal to granddad. It wouldn’t be fair to put him on the spot – to make him choose between us and granddad do you think?”

“I guess you’re right. I hadn’t thought about it like that. I’ve just been thinking it was a matter of getting up the courage to ask him and then we’d know once and for all.”

“Like I said, I don’t think that would be fair to Jackson. I must admit I’ve wondered about the story sometimes but mom confirmed it in the note she wrote for us that night. I still have it if you want to see it.”

“Of course, I want to see it.”

Tommy sat up and dangled his legs over the side of his bed. Gary got up and lifted the bedspread. He reached underneath and pulled out a small metal box with a padlock.

“It’s in here.”

“I didn’t know you had that box, Gary.”

“It’s for my private stuff.”

“I didn’t know you had private stuff.”

Gary pulled out the top drawer to his dresser, reached under it and produced a key.

“I guess it isn’t private anymore, is it?” he said.

“Oh, I’ll never open it if you want it to stay secret. Cross my heart on that.”

“I know you won’t, but it’s mostly our private stuff, not just mine.”

He patted the bed beside him and Tommy moved to it. The box was soon unlocked and opened.”

“Here are some pictures you should see. I always figured they’d just make you sad but I’m beginning to think I was wrong about that. This is mom and dad sitting on the couch in our living room. This is me opening a present beside the Christmas tree when I was four – mom was pregnant with you. This is you when they brought you home from the hospital.”

“Wow! How did that ugly thing grow up to be this handsome guy you see before you tonight?”

It was worth a good laugh between them. Tommy looked at it for a long time. Gary just waited, fascinated by his expression and the way he so gently touched the picture.

“This is at your second birthday party – just the four of us at our kitchen table. You got a big rubber ball that you really loved. You slept with it for months afterwards.”

They looked through a few more pictures.

“Is that all we have – pictures of us back then, I mean.

“I’m afraid so. Not much I guess.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that. I think it’s fantastic. Now I feel closer to mom and dad – having real faces to put on them. I had pictures in my head but they weren’t anything like the real

faces. Thanks for keeping them and showing them to me.”

“Here’s that note. And here’s the birthday card from when I turned six. Mom wrote on both of them and I’ve compared the handwriting so I’m pretty sure the note was really from her.”

Tommy studied them back and forth and agreed they were the same.

“Did you ever think that whole story about the sickness and the vacation and even the accident might have all been made up to protect us from something terrible that actually happened to them?”

“Sort of, I guess, but I never wanted to believe anything like that. It was bad enough to have lost them. I didn’t want it to be any worse than just that. I still don’t, really.”

“I won’t talk about it anymore then,” Tommy said handing back the pictures and notes.

Gary took them.

“We’ll keep them locked up in the box, but you can get them out whenever you want to look at them. You know where the key is now. I don’t know how the other people in the house would react if they knew we had them.”

“How did you get them?”

“Soon after we got here I found them in the trash – like granddad had just thrown them out. I figured they made him sad and he didn’t want to have to look at them anymore.”

“I’ve wondered why there aren’t any pictures of mom and dad anywhere here in the house but I never asked. It seemed like one more thing I wasn’t supposed to ask about. I even figured I wasn’t supposed to ask you.”

“Sorry about that. I probably waited way too long to show them to you.”

“It’s okay. Now, you’ve showed me and now all that is a part of my life. It makes me feel closer to Mom and Dad and especially to you. I have to tell you, though, I find it really hard

to buy the story they've fed us all these years, and either with you or without you I plan to get to the bottom of it. I had thought I'd wait 'til I was thirteen to begin— not sure why I thought that — but if you'll help it all averages out to thirteen.”

“I have no idea what you mean, Squirt.”

“I'm eleven. You're fifteen. Average our ages and it's thirteen.”

“For a long time, I've thought you had a really strange brain sloshing around inside that skull of yours and I think you just proved it.”

They shared a grin. Gary locked the box, replaced the key in its hiding place, and shoved the box under his bed. He sat down beside Tommy.

“Well, I can't let a little squirt like you go off halfcocked all alone trying to solve a mystery this big, so I guess I'm in.”

It seemed a pact had been formed between them that stormy night — a pact to solve the mystery of the vanished parents.

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## **CHAPTER TWO: An Unhappy Revelation**

The boys turned out the lights and settled in for the night. Gary, being a fifteen-year-old boy, was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. Tommy, on the other hand, suddenly had things to think about – things he had never before really allowed himself to think about. He found he had way more questions than answers, but figured that was good. He had heard someplace that until you asked the right question you would never be able to solve a problem.

He suddenly felt a grand sense of freedom – as if there had always been a trunk load of things hidden away in his mind and he suddenly had permission to open that trunk and begin sorting through what it held. He had faces to put with the words – dad and mom. Gary had helped him begin understanding what life had been like with their parents – a pretty good life from what he had been able to tell. He had always believed they had loved him, but hearing the things Gary had to say about them seemed to confirm that. Now he wondered if he had any way of loving them – they were

strangers he could only ever come to know in a second had way, through things others offered to him about them.

And then there were other questions, which were more centrally related to the mystery of how and why they had vanished from the boys' lives. If they loved their children, then their disappearance probably was out of their control. Why? How? What could have happened that would have made them believe they needed to just evaporate out of their sons' lives? Tommy had heard that the parents in crime families loved their children. Could it have been they were a part of a crime family and had to run for their lives and left him and Gary behind so they would be safe? Maybe one or both of them were dying of some terrible disease and they hadn't wanted the boys to have to watch them suffer. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. How was he to know when he had asked the right question?

He wondered if maybe they were still alive and would come back for them when whatever had happened was over. If they were still alive, who would know? Granddad? Jackson? Madge? The police or the FBI? Maybe the newspapers would have something in them – the papers from around the time of their disappearance. That seemed like a good place to begin. He'd talk to Gary about it the next day.

In some way, he felt closer to them than ever before. Even if it turned out they were not alive, the fact that he was going to search for them and solve the mystery surrounding their disappearance really made him feel closer. He expected he would discover lots of things about them as his search got underway. What if he found out things he didn't want to know, like his dad really had been a gangster? How would that make him feel? Would it ruin his picture of them forever? Was finding the truth really going to be worth it if something like that came up?

As it was, he had nothing. He needed to know something and if something tarnished their images in some way, so be it. He figured that had to be better than never knowing. He also figured that the very best source of information was Jackson, but Gary had made a good point

about not putting him in an uncomfortable position between them and granddad. Still, he thought Jackson should know what he – they – were up to, in case he was thinking differently about where his loyalties would lay.

He decided he would need to start some lists – things he knew, things he suspected, way out possibilities, real facts they learned along the way, things like that. He'd use a three-hole binder so he could easily add pages as the need arose. Suddenly, he felt organized – or at least well on the way to being organized. He felt like a real investigator – a detective.

He had always been the careful, think ahead, be organized, brother. Gary was a fly by the seat of his pants sort – he just waded into things and dealt with whatever happened. Tommy admired him for what seemed like a brave, self-confident approach to life, but he could never be that way. He needed a plan. He needed to know what was coming up. He needed to have several options in mind in case things didn't go according to 'Plan A'.

Tommy figured he must have finally fallen asleep because the next morning he woke up. He went to the window, stretching and scratching. It looked to be a beautiful June day. With school behind them for the summer Tommy was ready to get to work. Gary was clearly only ready to sleep in, so he went back to his room and got dressed.

A few minutes later he was in the kitchen downstairs. Madge had bacon sizzling and the pancake batter ready and waiting to meet the griddle. As he sat down she poured his orange juice.

"Thanks. I probably don't say that often enough, but Gary and I really do appreciate all the things you do for us."

Before he could go on, Jackson entered the room.

"Morning, Jackson. You know, I've never wondered about it before, but is Jackson your first or last name? Most folks do have at least two and most of us three."

"And good morning to you, Master Thomas. I'm fine thank you. Looks like it will be a beautiful day."

He winked at Madge and then looked back at Tommy.

“Jackson is my last name.”

The question had been answered and no more information had been offered. Jackson waited for what he knew was about to come.

“I think you missed my point,” Tommy said. “I intended that monologue as a request for your entire name.”

“I am well aware of that, but it is just so much fun to see that patented ‘what the heck is going on’ look you get on your face when things like this come up.”

Madge smiled and giggled. Tommy shrugged and offered the hint of a smile. His brow furrowed.

“I have a patented look for such occasions?”

“Oh, yes. Since your fourth birthday when nothing came out of the piñata at your party after you had landed one killer of a blow to it.”

Madge nodded and smiled, clearly remembering the incident.

“I’ll have to pay more attention at times like that. But, your name? Or is that your private stuff?”

“Not private at all – Milton Edgar Jackson the third. Is that a more satisfactory answer?”

“Yes. Milton after the ancient writer and Edgar after the horror writer, Edgar Allen Poe?”

“Actually, yes. Not many people tune into that. My father, like his father and grandfather, was an insatiable reader.”

“Insatiable?”

“Unable to be satisfied or to get enough.”

“Thanks. A good word. I’ve learned most of my big words from you, you know.”

Madge put her hands on her hips – her very round and wide hips – and pretended to be insulted.

“Oh, you’ve taught me plenty, too, Madge – how to use a needle to remove a splinter, how to use wet tea bags to take the burn out of a sunburn, and when I was little nobody could kiss the hurt out of a boo-boo as good as you could.”

“Thank you. Just checkin’ to see if you appreciated my higher-class skills.”

“Always. But, back to names. You’re Madge Miller, right? I like the two M’s – that’s called an alliteration according to my walking encyclopedia here, Milton Edgar.”

“It gets even better. My parents saddled me with, Mable, as my middle name. Always hated it, but learned to live with it. Try to say that with a mouth full of oatmeal! Madge Mable Miller.”

The others chuckled.

“Those M’s followed by vowels do tend to open up the mouth, don’t they?”

“Maybe you know something about the middle name Gary and I both have – Owens. I’ve heard of Owen – singular – as a boy’s name, but I’ve always wondered about why the final ‘s’ and why both Gary and I have the same middle name.”

The two grown-ups looked at each other. Madge nervously retied her apron strings behind her back. Jackson topped off his cup of coffee that didn’t need topping off. Tommy thought it had been an easy question, but immediately got the idea it was not going to be comfortable for them to answer.

“Hey, guys, I’m eleven. I got the right to know things about myself.”

“Yes. You do have that right,” Jackson said. He glanced again at Madge. She indicated that Jackson was on deck.

“Owens was your mother’s maiden name. She kept it after she and your father married. She apparently thought it would be a wonderful gift to pass it on to her sons.”

“Now, was that really so hard? And thanks. I didn’t

know she kept her name after she was married. I really don't know much about either of my parents, I guess. Granddad made me feel like I wasn't supposed to ask so I didn't. That's all changed now."

"Changed?" "Now?"

They had been Jackson's questions.

"Gary and I have decided to look into the how's and why's of our parents' disappearance. We really aren't sure we can trust granddad's version. We don't expect either of you to tell things you know he doesn't want you sharing with us. That's okay. We understand about loyalty. We just have to make sure we have the real story. We believe that as their children we deserve to know that."

Jackson responded.

"I think we can understand that and thank you for not putting us in an awkward position. Are you going to tell your grandfather what you are doing?"

"No. Not yet. He's been so great about taking us in and all that we don't want to upset him. If his story is not the whole truth, then it would be like accusing him of lying to us before we had the facts. And, if he did lie to us, I'm sure he believes he did it for all the right reasons. I have no question about that."

Madge served the pancakes and bacon. Jackson did his bowing thing and left the room. Gary staggered in still only half awake.

"Smelled breakfast. Seemed like it would be worth getting up for. Good morning, by the way."

He slid into a chair next to Tommy.

"I sort of filled them in on what we talked about last night."

"Them?" Gary asked looking around.

"Jackson was here until he smelled you coming."

Tommy immediately put up his hands to defend

himself. It deserved and received a friendly fist to his shoulder – well, sort of friendly!

“And which of the stuff are we talking about – why you’re afraid of storms?”

“No. The mystery we’ve decided to investigate.”

Gary became suddenly serious. He turned to Madge.

“You okay with it?”

“It is your life. I understand your curiosity. I won’t do anything to stop you.”

“Not a glowing endorsement of what we’re doing, but I guess we’ll take it. How about Jackson?”

“He’s okay about it – to about the same extent as Madge,” Tommy said thinking they shouldn’t force Madge to interpret Jackson’s feelings.

The matter was dropped and they enjoyed breakfast. Their grandfather never ate breakfast or lunch with them, but was always in the dining room with them for dinner at seven. It seemed quite late to eat as far as the boys were concerned, but Madge always had a four o’clock snack ready to tide them over.

Gary had several things he needed to take care of that morning so while he was gone Tommy began getting organized. Up in his room he set up the binder the way he had figured out the night before. Then he began using his considerable computer skills to search the web. Since the disappearance had taken place only nine years before, the web had been a well installed part of life at the time. His first idea was to find newspaper stories on and after that terribly frightening night they had been removed from their home. It had been April seventh of the year he was two years old. He didn’t realize there were so many papers in Rockdale – a city of about a quarter million people. On that date, there were no fewer than nine of papers – many apparently small and some of those were like neighborhood papers, just covering certain sections of the city. One caught his eye immediately – Police Beat. He saved the name, the editor, email and phone

number before he looked for it on-line. Unlike the larger papers, it did not have an on-line edition back then. Still, he thought it just might be one of their best sources. Its office was across town some twenty, city blocks away. That meant either bus or Jackson. He tabled that for later.

The Rockdale Sun was the major paper there in the city and it had an on-line version back then. Tommy began clicking his way through the editions that had been published after that night. One story on page three of the paper that came out the day after that night interested him. A man by the name Gary T. Wrightworth had been killed and his wife was being held for his murder. The Gary and the T. fit his father – Garrison Thomas – but the last name was close although not right (Wentworth). He skipped on. He found no stories about a Wentworth or Owens.

He only had a vague timeline for when the airplane crash was said to have occurred. According to Gary it was about two months later. He decided to do Google and Bing searches on plane crashes around that time. He didn't know if it was supposed to have been a private plane or a commercial one. Several small plane crashes were reported within a two-month period of the time Gary had figured, but the names of passengers didn't come close to matching their parents.

He sat back to think. It could have been that the plane could have crashed thousands of miles from Rockdale – if they had gone to Europe, or Japan, or South America for example. He widened his search parameters to included commercial planes, worldwide. There were so few accidents among the large passenger planes that he found only two – one in the mountains of Argentina and one in the Sea of Japan. He searched for the lists of passengers and found the Japanese manifest almost immediately. It was ninety percent Chinese passengers and the only two from the United States were listed as students.

He continued searching for the one in Argentina. It took him to mainly Spanish websites and his Spanish was quite limited. Gary had two year of Spanish in High School. He decided to find the likely sites and then have Gary help



after he got back. He really wanted to look at back copies of the Police Beat paper. He put a few supplies – yellow pad, pens, portable scanner, water, butterfingers – in a small back pack and went in search of Jackson who he found washing the limo on the driveway to the east of the huge, gray stone, home.

“You up for a little ride?” he asked. “I can go as high as three butterfingers if a bribe is necessary.”

“And to where would we be going?”

“A newspaper office – The Police Beat – over on Lexington avenue – 1257, North.”

“If you’re up to taking a chamois and helping me get this vehicle dry and spot free, I will be happy to provide the transportation you request. I suggest we take the smaller BMW rather than the cumbersome limo. Will that be satisfactory?”

“Probably. I’ll just have to substitute conversation with you for the TV or Game Boy in the Limo. I can manage that. Really, I’d prefer it. I always enjoy our talks.”

Ten minutes later the limo was dry and back in the four-car garage. The two of them were adjusting their seatbelts for the cross-town trip in the smaller car.

“How long will you be and shall I wait?” Jackson asked.

“I don’t know and I don’t know. Let me call ahead and see if they have what I’m looking for before we get there.”

“That sounds like a good plan, if a bit late.”

Tommy felt rather dumb that he had not already done that. He made the call. As it turned out, they had the back copies he wanted and the woman at the office said he was most welcome to look for as long as he liked.

“How about dropping me off and then coming back about eleven thirty so I’ll be home in time for lunch. Gary said he’d be back by then.”

“Fine. I will give you a ring a few minutes before I

arrive.”

The arrangements were completed just as they stopped in front of the building. As it turned out the paper was on the top floor of an old, five story building. Not being one given to wasting time, Tommy ran up the stairs and entered the front office.

“I’m Tommy Wentworth. I just called about looking through some back copies of The Police Beat.”

“Yes. I’m the one who spoke with you. Betty Ann Culver.”

She stood from behind her desk and reached her hand for a shake. Tommy wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of handshakes, but he thought he managed it quite well.

“B. A. Culver – that’s the editor’s name according to your website.”

“Guilty. My father started the paper forty years ago. He was Barnard Alexander Culver. It was handy not to have to change the initials when I took over ten years ago. Follow me and I’ll get you set up back in the stacks.”

“Stacks,” Tommy asked.

“What we call the shelves where we keep the old copies. They are arranged in order by year. When you remove one please place the yellow sheet you’ll find on top of the stack at the spot from which you removed it. Makes it easier to replace it.”

“Gotcha. A good system I imagine.”

“Pretty low tech, but fully effective,” she said offering a wonderful smile.

She led him to the area that held the dates in which he had expressed an interest and pointed out a table at the end of the row of shelves by a window he could use.

“If you need my help give a holler. It’s just you and me here this morning.”

“Thanks. By the way is there any rule against me using

my pocket scanner to copy sections I'm interested in?"

"None whatsoever. If you use the information in a paper for school I'd appreciate a footnote. That's all."

"And what about eating a candy bar back here?"

"Not a problem if you share. I have pop in that fridge at the end of that row over there. Help yourself."

Tommy took out a Butterfinger and handed it over. She thanked him and returned to her desk.

Tommy passed up the drink and got right to work. He soon found the dozen editions he was interested in searching first. He took them to the table and broke out a candy bar. He unfolded the first of the papers. He couldn't believe what he saw staring back at him. Page one, right column – always the most newsworthy story was in the right column of page one.

He recognized the picture immediately although he had only recently seen photographs of the person for the first time. The caption under it summarized the story: "Ida Lou Owens, accused of murdering her husband, Garrison Thomas Wentworth." It was a mug shot front and side views with a police ID number held across her chest.

Tommy slumped back into the chair and allowed tears to dampen his cheeks. He sat there for several minutes before returning his gaze to the page. He read the first paragraph.

At two o'clock a.m. this morning police received a call from Ida Owens at 1217 West Maple, saying her husband had been murdered by an intruder. Police sources are quoted as saying that subsequent investigation revealed Owens' bloody fingerprint on the weapon – a heavy iron skillet. She is being held without bail until her preliminary hearing on Tuesday.

He wasn't up to reading more at that time. He scanned the article and saved it to a flash drive. He then went through the next several editions and scanned and saved the related articles that followed. He called Jackson, put the papers back where they belonged, packed his things, offered a simple thanks in passing and left without really speaking to Betty

although she invited him back any time and offered her help if it were needed. His tears wouldn't stop. How would he explain them to Jackson?

## **CHAPTER THREE: Finding the Right Questions**

He entered the backseat of the car. It was his habit to sit up front with Jackson so that caused the man to turn and look. He saw the tears, but didn't mention them directly. The car moved on. Jackson spoke.

"I assume you found some disquieting (disturbing) information."

"I assume you knew I would," Tommy replied quietly.

"Does it change your plan to look into things?"

"No. I assume there was a trial."

"There was – about three months after that night. I happen to have a transcript of it if you would be interested."

"The transcript? Really? Why? How?"

"I think it's best to just leave it at the fact that it's available. Yes or no?"

"Yes. I'll need to talk with Gary first. Thanks. She have a good lawyer?"

“No, I wouldn’t say so.”

“Why not? I mean granddad could certainly afford the best.”

“He chose not to participate.”

“You mean he didn’t help her?”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Can you tell me why?”

“I can. Perhaps that would be best presented to the two of you at the same time.”

“Okay. After lunch?”

“I already have you penciled in on my calendar.”

Tommy wasn’t sure what the deal was, but for some reason Jackson had taken a major interest in the case. And better still, he seemed willing to share things with him and Gary. His tears stopped and his mood brightened some. He had known going into it that there could be bad stuff. He thought he was up to it, but clearly, he hadn’t been. For some reason, he suddenly figured he would be, now. Like he had told himself the night before, knowing the truth had to be better than not knowing. It had all just been such a shock.

They pulled into the driveway just as Gary was riding up on his bike.

“So, Squirt, where you been?”

“Went to look through some old newspapers – regarding our plan.”

“Did you find anything helpful?”

“Yes. I’ll go over it with you after lunch.”

“Cool. I’m free now the rest of the day and I’m eager to start helping. I just had stuff this morning.”

“Yeah. I can tell from the lipstick on your T-shirt what sort of stuff you had this morning.”

“Lipstick? Really. Where?”

“You’re so gullible. Any lawyer would have a field day if he got you on the stand.”

Gary grinned and felt he needed to explain a bit more.

“Carla is leaving for a week at cheerleading camp down at the university so I wanted to say good-bye and stuff. Someday soon you’ll understand.”

“I already understand, brother dear. My hormones are rapidly catching up to yours.”

Madge had lunch ready – ham salad sandwiches, French fries, potato salad, a pitcher of milk and apple pie – warm for Gary and refrigerator cold for Tommy. As brothers went the two of them were very different in a whole lot of ways besides hormone levels.

Jackson entered. Gary spoke to him.

“Pull up a chair and join us for pie – you too, Madge. I’ve always thought dessert should be a family affair and since you’re our family there can be no excuses.”

Tommy looked up at Jackson and nodded, pushing out the chair next to him.

Jackson spoke directly to Madge.

“It’s a matter of family. What can I say?”

He took a chair and she produced pie on two plates – oven warm the way they preferred it. It was a game they had played forever when it came to the noon time meal. Jackson always arrived just in time and Madge always had things ready. They chatted about this and that the way they always did. When the grandfather was not present, things were very informal among the four of them. Not so, once the old gentleman entered the picture.

When they were finished, Tommy leaned close to Jackson and said, “Give me ten minutes with Gary before you come up, Okay?”

Jackson nodded. Madge refilled his coffee cup. The boys thanked her and left.

“So, what’s the deal with inviting Jackson?” Gary asked as they pushed and shoved their way up the wide spiral staircase to the second floor.

“He knows some stuff he’s willing to share. First, I have some things I found that I need to share with you. They aren’t happy so get prepared.”

Gary frowned and followed Tommy into his room. They sat in the big chairs that allowed them to look out the big window at the big tree tops in the big back yard. Tommy laid out everything he had learned. It was a very sober ten-minutes between them before Jackson knocked. Tommy went to let him in. It wasn’t that the door was ever locked or that the man wasn’t capable of opening a door, it was just the way Jackson preferred it – a butler thing the boy supposed.

Jackson took a seat in a third chair. He had a cardboard box that he sat on the floor beside him. He began by addressing Gary.

“Tommy asked about your mother’s legal defense team and I told him I thought it best if the three of us discussed it together. It involves some sticky wickets (unpleasant things) I’m afraid. I need to provide some background about your grandfather – William – and his business. He owns and manages a great deal of real estate – apartment buildings, business buildings, farms. When he was a young man he had a partner, Frank Owens. When your father was about Gary’s age things went sour between William and Frank and they went their separate ways, dividing the property between them. I have no solid information about what prompted the split, but from your grandfather’s standpoint it was clearly something unforgivable on Frank’s part. They never spoke again.

“Your father and Ida had grown up knowing each other and, unknown to either father, became romantically involved – they fell in love. Both fathers forbade the relationship, but fathers seldom control the romantic goings on of their offspring. And so it was in that case. On your father’s nineteenth birthday, he and Ida eloped and got married. The young people were sophomores at the university. Their fathers continued to support each of them, but neither ever



condoned the marriage. After graduating, your father went to work in the family business, but his relationship with his father, your grandfather, was never the same – always strained.

“Owens was not a good business man making very risky investments, and by the time the children graduated he had lost everything. He turned to drink and died a few years after that.

“Your grandfather and your grandmother had never liked Ida and most certainly did not approve of the marriage. I think they believed she was only out to get the Wentworth fortune and really didn’t love your father. When your grandmother died a few years later your grandfather pulled back from everything except the business. He began working at it eighteen hours a day – well, you know how that’s been.

“When your father was killed and the evidence pointed so directly at your mother, Ida, William wrote her off completely and refused to assist in her defense. Having no financial resources of her own since her father’s death, she had to rely on a public defender at the trial. He was young and inexperienced and the prosecutor tore him apart. I believe his name was Cullen, yes, David Cullen.

“Even so, the jury deliberated almost two weeks – a very long time in such a case – before bringing back the guilty verdict. I have always wondered what must have gone on in that deliberation room. Surely some had originally thought she was innocent.

“Anyway, I secured a transcript of the trial, thinking it was only right that at some point you boys have it to do with as you wished. I thought that time would be much later on in your lives, but things will be what things will be. It is all in the box. At the time, I made some notes about the trial. You’ll find them on top. I’m not sure how much further I should get involved, seeing as I do work for your grandfather.”

The boys nodded. Gary responded.

“We can understand that. Can you at least tell us what the outcome was, other than that she was found guilty?”

“She was sentenced to life in prison. I gave her my word I would never reveal to you boys where she was. It was her final request of me.”

“I’m sure that Google will help us locate her,” Tommy said. “Our real problem will be deciding whether we should contact her since she clearly didn’t want us to.”

Jackson reacted to that.

“Perhaps a better way to think of it is that she wanted to make sure you were protected from any additional sadness.”

The boys nodded. It didn’t mean they wouldn’t go about trying to find her. It just meant they understood what Jackson had said. Jackson understood that.

The boys thanked him. They stood up. Gary shook his hand. Tommy administered a belly busting hug around his waist. Jackson left and closed the door behind him.

“Wow! Life can change in a nanosecond, can’t it,” Gary said falling back-first onto Tommy’s bed.

“Tell me about it. I felt like my life was draining away when I first looked at that picture of mom in the newspaper.”

“So, what’s first on your list? I just assume you have a list. You always have a list.”

“The first thing was for you to look at some Spanish websites to see if we could find out about the plane crash that killed mom and dad. I guess we don’t need to follow up on that anymore. I suppose this transcript is next, then.”

Gary sat up.

“Jackson said he made some notes,” Gary said. “Maybe that’s a good place to start. I imagine they may highlight the most important things that came to mind for him.”

Tommy opened the box. There on top was a yellow pad. There were more than a dozen pages in Jackson’s handwriting.

“Split them up or go through them together?” Gary asked, as if for some reason, Tommy were in charge.

“Two heads are better than one. Let’s go through them together. I’ll read the notes out loud and we can discuss anything that seems important. I’m keeping a list of questions we need to answer.”

“Sounds good to me.”

They got comfortable side by side on Tommy’s bed leaning back against pillows propped against the headboard. He would read a sentence or so and then one or the other would have a comment or a question. When they finished, they tried to summarize what they had learned. Tommy began.

Tommy: “So, mom said she saw a man leaving the kitchen when she arrived to see what the noise was all about. He had the skillet in his hand and tossed it at her then left through the back door.”

Gary: “She said he was wearing gloves, which could explain why there were nobody’s fingerprints in the kitchen other than the family members.

Tommy: “She said she then knelt down beside dad and determined he was not breathing. In the process of examining him she got blood on her hands. She said that was how her bloody print got on the handle of the skillet. “

Gary: “If she’d have used the skillet to hit dad, that would have all happened before there was any blood so that print had to have been made after dad had been hit. What was it the coroner said about the blow or blows?”

Tommy: “That there had been only a single blow to the back of his head. That it probably had been made by someone who was strong.”

Gary: “That sounds like one strike in support of mom’s claim about a guy being there and one plus for mom. Mom is tiny – can’t be more than five/feet and weigh what, like maybe 110 pounds?”

Tommy: “How did she describe that guy – 200 pounds, well-tanned, black messy, curly hair and a scar on his face. He was carrying a burlap bag she said looked about half full.

Something about he limped or dragged his left foot. We'll need to see if there's a better description of that scar in the actual transcript."

Tommy made a note in the binder.

Tommy: "I sure wish the transcript was in digital form so we could do word searches. It would really speed up things. Okay, what else?"

Gary: "Well, Jackson mentioned it took the cops almost ten minutes to respond to mom's 911 call. That would have given the guy plenty of time to get away. There were things missing from the house. What were they again?"

Tommy: "Dad's watch and rings for one thing. We'll need to find a better description of those. Then there was a silver tray and coffee set – not sure what all that would be. "

Gary: "And the silverware, remember. I think silverware comes in special designs that have names. That could become important."

Tommy continued making notes.

Gary: "And dad's wallet – one mom had made for him, tooled it in leather for his birthday. It had his initials on it."

Tommy: "I wonder how the prosecutor explained all those things being gone? Sure sounds like a robbery gone bad."

Gary: "Probably made mom out to be a liar saying she had time to hide the stuff before the police got there."

Tommy: "That's another thing. Why would she have called the cops if she'd killed him and if she had all that time why didn't she remove her bloody finger print?"

Gary: "She might have thought the print belonged to the man. I sure don't know what my finger prints look like. I doubt if she knew hers. I'm with you on that. If she knew it was hers she'd have removed it."

Tommy: "Doesn't seem like much evidence – not enough to send her to prison for life. There must be other

things that Jackson didn't list."

Gary: "There were a couple of witnesses he listed. What was that about? Nobody was there in the kitchen with them when things happened?"

Tommy: "Another question. Let me catch up, here. Where were we at the time, do you think?"

Gary: "At two in the morning we'd have been upstairs in our beds. There would have been at least three closed doors between us and the kitchen. We probably wouldn't have heard anything."

Tommy: "I guess that leaves the most incriminating piece of evidence – the letters dad scrawled on the floor in his blood: I L O \. I L O backward slash. Those are mom's initials – Ida Lou Owens. It was like he was trying to add something after the slash. I wonder how that was handled in court."

Gary: "Is there any computer short hand – ILO like LOL? You know more about that stuff than I do."

Tommy: "None that I know of and even so it still leaves the problem of the back slash."

Gary: "Maybe it's time to start through the transcript – it must be a ream and a half of paper – lots of words."

Tommy went to the box.

"Hey, here on top is something titled Case Summary. Looks to be only a couple of dozen sheets stapled together. Maybe that's really the best next step," Tommy said.

"I agree," Gary said. "Let's get at it. I've been thinking we might need to speak with the lawyers who were involved. Are they named?"

"Let's move to my study table. This is too awkward on the bed."

They were soon situated at the table. Tommy had the binder to his right and they placed the document in between them. The attorneys' names were near the top of the page.

"You read faster than I do, Gary. You scan through it

'til something important pops out at you. Then we can deal with it together.”

“Okay. Here at the beginning it lists the prosecutors’ main points: A neighbor testified that she and her husband had heard several loud arguments between mom and dad during the week preceding the murder. I never heard them argue in my life. Then it goes on, Mom opened a personal bank account two weeks before – like she might have been thinking of leaving dad. The First Central Bank – better make a note of that. I think it’s a small local bank not far from where we lived. None of the supposedly stolen items ever turned up in local pawn shops. Then there was the bloody fingerprint and the scrawled letters on the floor. There was some kind of expert witness who said since the skillet was so heavy all the killer had to do was raise it above the victim’s head and gravity would pretty much do the rest. There was one witness for Mom – a neighbor who told about what a nice and loving family we were and that she had never heard arguments between any of us.

“Let’s see, it goes on to say mom said she was in her sewing room across the hall from the kitchen when she heard a thud, which she latter assumed was dad falling to the floor. She had no witness to place her over there at the time, of course.”

“The evidence did seem to be stacked against her, didn’t it,” Tommy said.

“I’ll say. That one witness was all she had, really. Oh, here’s something – looks like a police artist’s sketch of the man mom described. An ugly so and so.”

“And that answers the question about the scar – across the nose and two or three inches down his left cheek,” Tommy added.

“That’s some nasty scar,” Gary said, running his finger along it on the picture. “I’d think a scar from a knife blade would be a lot narrower and cleaner than that. See how wide and jagged it is. We need to think about what would leave behind that kind of a scar.”

“Looks like the leavings of Captain Hook in Peter Pan. Ouch!” Tommy said.

“And look at the teeth. That wasn’t mentioned anywhere,” Gary said. “He was missing the two front teeth on top.”

“Like a hockey player or a boxer, maybe?” Tommy asked.

“Maybe. You getting all this good stuff down over there?”

“Sure am. You didn’t really need to ask, now, did you?”

“No. I’m sure you have it all down. It’s a good thing that one of us is organized.”

It was the first time his big brother had ever complimented him for that trait. Always before it had been the target of put downs. It was a good feeling to think he was really appreciated for something.

“Hey, here’s something new,” Gary said. “The police report said the screen on the back door had been cut. They speculated it could have been done to allow somebody to reach in and unlock that door. They found it unlocked. Mom swore they always locked the screens at night. I remember that. It was like part of our going to bed routine. They often let me push the lever to do the locking. I remember that.”

“Did the prosecutor have some other way of explaining it?” Tommy asked.

“Let’s see. Just that screen doors often have bad screens in them especially in houses with active children who tend to push on the screen instead of the door itself when opening them. And there was no way of telling when it had been cut – that night or months before.”

“You were six, Gary. The screen would have been above where you’d have pushed from, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would and good thinking. Anyway, here’s a picture of it and it was slit in a straight up and down line. That’s not how it would have been torn from somebody pushing on it.”

“It’s looking more and more like Mom’s version of things is correct, Tommy said. “Now, we just need to find the bad guy with the scar and limp, find where he got rid of the things he stole, and place him in the neighborhood the night of the murder.”

“Well, if that’s all we need to do, we should have mom home in time for dinner.”

“I know. It’s a big job, but if we can do it, we’ll get our mom back.”

“Let’s get at it, then. Where do we start?”



## **CHAPTER FOUR: Behind the Secret Door**

Tommy tried to answer his brother's question with one of his own.

"Well, if mom didn't commit the crime and if we are going to move on believing our own mother who says she didn't, then who is the most likely suspect?"

"Scarface with the limp."

"Right. Now, how do we look for him all these years later? For all we know he may have moved out of the city."

"Or be dead. That scar suggests he wasn't living a safe and comfortable sort of life."

"Could we take the man's picture to pawn shops?"

"Even if they recognized him there's no way of tying him to dad's murder."

"What if we had pictures of the things mom said had been stolen?"

“That might help, but how can we take picture of things we don’t have to take pictures of?”

“I saw a TV show once that said insurance companies often require pictures of things they insure.”

“But where would they be? We don’t know who the insurance company was?”

“Maybe we need to ask an even more basic question than that: Where are the things from our house? What happened to all the stuff?”

“Let’s ask Jackson and Madge – Madge won’t admit it but she’s a Class A snoop. If it happened in this family you can bet she’ll know.”

The boys were soon down stairs using their state of being famished as an excuse to enter the kitchen.

“Any more of that pie left?” Gary asked.

“Seems like you ran out of gas pretty early today, boys,” Madge said.

She knew them well enough to know when they were up to something, but she played along. Pie was served along with milk. Tommy began the inquisition (questioning).

“We’ve been wondering what happened to all our stuff from the old house when we moved in here with you and granddad.”

“And what would that kind of information be worth to you,” she came back really joking, but milking it for the attention she could get.

“Our eternal love and affection,” Gary said.

“I thought I already had that.”

“She’s got you there, Gary. How about a mention in our wills?”

“Now you’re talking! Everything from the house was brought here and stored in a room in the basement.”

“The secret one that’s locked with the no trespassing

sign on it?" Gary asked.

"That's the one."

"And the key might be where – if you were just taking a wild guess about it?" Gary asked.

"Who is the keeper of the keys around here?" she asked in return.

"Jackson/Jackson," they said together.

Somewhat humorously, Jackson entered the kitchen at just that moment.

"Jackson/Jackson is it now?" he said smiling at the boys and tossing a puzzled look at Madge.

"We need the key to the room in the basement where our possessions are stored – they are ours now that mom and dad are out of the picture, right?" Gary asked.

"And, since they are rightfully ours, you certainly would not keep us from them, right," Tommy added.

"You know where I keep the keys."

He turned and left. It seemed odd – cold even for Jackson. Madge explained.

"He just pointed you in the right direction without giving you his permission to use any of his keys. He may have been given some directive about that room and you two from Mr. Wentworth. You know he's on your side in all this, but you must realize he finds himself in an uncomfortable place between you and your grandfather. Mr. Wentworth has always been quite clear that none of us was to ever have anything to do with those old days. I guess I'm uncomfortable about sneaking around behind his back as well. He has been a wonderful employer all these years. I love him like a father."

"May I suggest a piece of pie for you, Madge?" Gary said. "Your pie always has been able to make our worries vanish, right Tommy?"

"Absolutely. I highly recommend it."

He took a bite and produced a puzzled look, turning to

Gary.

“Any uncomfortable feelings I’ve been experiencing are completely gone. How about yours?”

“Gone like they were never there. I can’t even remember what had caused them so I guess this conversation just might as well be over for ever.”

“You are both rascals, you know. I understand what you’re saying – that you’ll protect me from being known as a part of all this. I don’t expect or even want that. I have always taken responsibility for my own actions and I don’t intend to vary from that now.”

Tommy and Gary looked at each other.

“You have any idea what she’s prattling on about big brother?”

“None whatsoever, little brother. All I know is that this is the best apple pie in the universe.”

The pie was quickly finished and the boys put their plates and glasses in the sink. That only occurred on rare occasions when some special thank you was intended and that was certainly one of those times.

The unspoken rule that nobody entered anybody else’s room when the door was closed might pose a problem for the boys. They went upstairs to Jackson’s room. Interestingly, the door was open.

“That’s odd,” Gary said.

“That’s just right odd,” Tommy said. “It’s permission without permission to enter and look for the key.”

“Gotcha. Suppose he’s in there?”

“One way to find out,” Tommy said.

They entered, but stopped immediately inside the door. Tommy called out.

“Jackson. You hear?”

“I’m shaving in the bathroom. Make yourselves at

home. I'll be with you in five minutes.”

Tommy pointed to the closet door. It was on the back of that door that all the keys hung – each one in its own, clearly identified place. Gary opened it. They looked up and down the rows of keys. Tommy pointed again. Gary removed the key and slipped it into his pocket. Tommy shut the door and called out again.

“I think we'll be on our way. Don't want to be pests while you are shaving. Later.”

“Okay, later,” he answered.

The boys knew Jackson wasn't shaving. Jackson knew exactly why the boys were there. None of them would ever admit to what they knew.

The boys were soon into the basement. As basements went it was quite nice – dry, no musty smell, well lit, painted plastered walls. They went directly to the secret door and hesitated for just a moment while they reread the sign – No Trespassing. Gary inserted the key and pushed the door open. He found the light switch and the room was soon lit. Tommy closed the door behind them.

“So, what are we looking for?” Gary asked as he walked from item to item as if having just rediscovered some old friends – the sofa, the dining room table, his old study desk. Tommy, of course really didn't remember any of it.

“I guess we just need to get an idea about what's really here and hope in the process we find something that will be useful.”

Gary walked to a metal file cabinet and explained.

“This was where mom and dad kept things about the family. He had a fancy wooden one in his den where he kept the business stuff.”

“Maybe the insurance papers are in it, then,” Tommy said moving to Gary's side.

He reached out and pulled the handle on the top drawer fully expecting it to be locked. It rolled out toward him.

They both looked surprised.

“Let’s see what the file tabs have to say,” Gary suggested beginning to run his fingers along the tops of the folders. This looks promising – Insurance.”

“I’ll say. Take it out,” Tommy said.

Together they flipped through the contents. The insurance gods seemed to be smiling on them that day. There was a large brown envelope that contained pictures of the more expensive items that had been insured.

“Look at this!” Gary said. “Just what you said we needed. Pictures of lots of the stuff mom said had been stolen – the tray, the coffee set, dad’s Rolex watch – everything. Maybe these pictures beside that sketch of Scarface will jog some pawn shop owners’ memories.”

“Let’s see if we can find two more things,” Tommy said. “Bank accounts and wills – maybe something just labeled Legal.”

They went through the folders carefully, moving from drawer to drawer. Bank Accounts was in the top drawer, Legal was in the middle drawer and Wills in the bottom.

“I think that’s enough for now,” Tommy said. “Let’s get it up to my room and see what we have.”

He hesitated.

“Do we lock the door, Gary?”

“I have the idea it’s only locked to keep us out so who would ever check? I say we leave it open.”

“We need to get the key back to Jackson,” Tommy said. “You go up the back stairs with the folders and I’ll find a way to return the key.”

Tommy went in search of Jackson who he found dusting in the living room downstairs. He engaged him in conversation and managed to slip the key into his coat pocket while he was bending over. They made meaningless conversation for a few moments and Tommy left. Jackson

smiled, although Tommy hadn't seen that.

Back in his room, he saw that Gary had already removed the pictures from the insurance file and had them ready for Tommy to scan and print. Tommy took the folder with the Will and Gary the one labeled Bank Accounts. They pursued each folder in silence for several minutes. Gary spoke first.

"Looks like they had several bank accounts at First Federal – a joint checking, joint savings and a trust account for each of us. Look here. This is odd if mom was really trying to keep the one in her name secret from dad. All the info on it's right here in with the others."

"Doesn't look very secret then, does it?" Tommy said confirming what Gary was suggesting. "Is there a pass book with deposits and withdrawals?"

"Yeah, well sort of. It was a checking account so there are deposits and checks. There was a deposit made near the first of every month and a check written on the 25th of every month. The check was always less than the deposit so the balance grew."

"Who are the checks to?"

"Doesn't really say. Just three letters – BLO. Always the same so if it's code for somebody they are all to the same person. I guess we'll have to think some on that. What did you find?"

"A copy of their will. I don't understand legalese real well, but it looks like they each left everything to the other one if anything happened to them and to us if something happened to both of them. Then, something about ten percent going to – get this – going to BLO if anything happened to both of them. Who or what is this BLO?"

Gary thought for a moment then responded.

"No idea, of course, but I'll bet their attorney knows. Somebody would have to know what it means and that means the lawyer that drew up the will, don't you suppose?"

“I imagine you’re right. It says it was prepared by Wilton Osborn, JD. What’s a JD?”

Gary shrugged. Tommy went to the computer and soon had the answer:

“It’s a lawyer’s degree. Let me see if I can find this Wilton Osborn listed somewhere.”

In minutes, he had the law firm, the phone number, email, website, and address.

“We may just need to pay the man a visit,” Tommy said, handing the printout to his brother.

“You keep it Tommy. You know if I have it, it’ll end up in a sandwich or something.”

It was worth a grin and chuckle between them. Often the truth is also quite funny.

“I wonder what happened to the money in the bank accounts.” Tommy said. “It doesn’t look like very much, but it had to go somewhere, don’t you suppose?”

“Yeah. Another question for the Osborn guy, maybe.”

Tommy nodded.

“What about the Legal folder?” he asked.

They went through it together at the desk. It contained the deeds to the two cars and the house. There were some registration papers for the cars and a mortgage for the house marked paid.”

“It raises some more ‘what happened to’ questions,” Gary said. “What happened to the cars and what happened to the house?”

“Good questions, but not really related to helping clear mom,” Tommy said. “With all of this there seem to be just two places to go with our investigation: find Scarface and see if we can turn up anything by showing the pictures to pawn shops.”

“I agree,” Gary said. “You can find a list of the pawn shops on the web, right?”



“Right. Let me take a preliminary look to see what we’re talking about in terms of numbers.”

A few minutes later he had printed out a list of forty shops with addresses and phone numbers.

“Looks overwhelming,” Gary said.

“We can probably whittle that number down by calling and finding out which ones were in operation nine years ago,” Tommy suggested.

“Good thinking. That’s why I keep you around, you know,” Gary said with a grin.

“And here it thought it was to proofread your papers for school.”

“And that!”

They shared a grin and chuckled. Gary could read anything at super-fast speeds, but his spelling was terrible, his knowledge of punctuation was far less than helpful and his keyboarding skills produced sentences that looked to have been written in some secret code. Tommy had saved his bacon in that area hundreds of times and Gary appreciated it. In return he would protect his little brother with his life if it ever came to that. They had a very good relationship – pushing, shoving, and blows to each other’s shoulders notwithstanding.

“Let’s get started making the calls,” Tommy said. “You take two pages and I’ll take two pages.”

“What do we ask them?”

“I suppose that’s a good question. What do you think? How about something simple like, ‘I’m conducting a survey and just need to know one thing; in what year did your pawn shop open for business here in Rockdale?’”

“Let’s try a few calls using that,” Gary said. “If it doesn’t work we’ll have to come up with something else.”

Half an hour later they had their information. It had cut the number down to 21. Tommy printed out a map of the city and they put a sticker with the shop name at each address.

Gary would have skipped that step and just begun visiting shops. Tommy explained his reasoning.

“I doubt if high class shops, like those right down town, would handle what must have looked like stolen merchandise. So, let’s look at the ones in the poorer, rougher parts of the city – like down around the warehouse district.”

“What does that give us?” Gary asked.

Tommy pointed and counted.

“About a dozen. I’d say we start there.”

“Okay, but we’ll need a story and it’ll have to be good. We’re asking about something that happened nine years ago – that’s quite a while back for two kids to be interested in. You were still in diapers.”

“You’re right. It has to be fully believable and we have to make them want to help us. I have the idea in that area of the city nobody’s going to just offer up what they know. Maybe we can play on their sympathy some way. Like our poor health or our sick mom or something.”

They thought for some time. Tommy had the first idea, which surprised neither of them.

“How about something like this – it’s just a starting place, remember: Being the oldest one, you’ll do the talking. I’ll walk with a big noticeable limp. You’ll say nine years ago, I got hurt in a hit and run accident and had to have three operations to save my leg. Mom needed money for the bills so she sold all her valuable possessions to some man. We just got an insurance settlement and we want to try and buy back the family heirlooms for her that she sold to take care of me.”

“You are really good, little brother. Throw in those sad puppy dog eyes you always put on when you want something from me and I think we have something. I’ll need to practice ‘til we think it’s just right. What about our clothes? Shouldn’t we dress down a bit for that part of the city?”

“That would be a good touch. We may have to stop by

a second-hand clothing store. Granddad and Jackson take too good a care of us and our wardrobes.”

Gary practiced until he had the story down pat. He'd say what he had to say, Tommy would offer the picture of the merchandise, and then as an afterthought he'd turn back to the person and pull out the sketch of 'the man mom sold the stuff to'.

Eventually they found some well-worn clothes – too small and too dirty – that seemed to provide the look they thought they needed.

“Now, how do we get there?” Tommy asked. “You think we'll be safe down there by ourselves?”

“What if we run the plan by Jackson and make him believe we're going to do it no matter what he says,” Gary said. “I'll bet money he'll insist on coming with us.”

“An Englishman in a black suit isn't going to cut it down in the warehouse district,” Tommy said.

“I'm thinking some of his day off clothes could be made to work.”

“I've never seen his day off clothing,” Tommy said. “Have you?”

“Yeah. He leaves early Sunday mornings before any of us are usually up. Once when I was sick I saw him leave. You'd never recognize him in his jeans and hoodie.”

“You're putting me on. Jeans and hoodie – Milton Edgar Jackson?”

“I swear.”

“It's worth a try. I'd hate for him to get hurt or anything.”

“I'd hate for us to get hurt or anything. It will be his decision.”

Tommy fixed copies of the pictures they would need and Gary found a large brown envelope in which to carry them. From the insurance papers, he had copied the pattern names and any serial numbers the items had and added them

at the bottom of each picture.

They located Jackson reading in his room. The door was open. (Could it have been he was expecting them?)

Tommy presented the plan. Jackson nodded, but made no comment. The boys wondered if they had misjudged the man's interest. Presently, Gary asked, "What do you think?"

"I didn't realize I was expected to think anything about it."

The boys looked at each other and frowned. Tommy tried one last thing.

"We're determined to go through with it even though we figure it may be a bit dangerous for two kids alone down around the warehouses."

"Indeed, it may," Jackson said showing no real interest in any part of it.

The boys turned to leave and made it to the door before Jackson called them back.

"You two lunk-heads don't really think I'd let you go through with such a lame brained plan without some back up, now do you? I was just putting you on. Why didn't you just ask for my help?"

"That loyalty to granddad thing, I suppose," Tommy said. "We thought it should be your suggestion."

"Yes. Well, that loyalty thing also extends to the two most important young men in my life. I'm in. If you are dressing down, I imagine I should as well – my brown suit, perhaps?"

For just a moment the boys thought he was being serious. He broke into a grin and had a suggestion.

"I imagine I'll be hanging around outside, out of sight. Do you think I would blend in well enough in jeans and a hoodie?"

The boys looked at each other and grinned. Gary

provided the answer.

“Jeans and a hoodie should be fine. Have to find some grubby shoes. I’ll bet you can fit into a pair of my old tennies.”

“So, when do we begin Operation Undercover?” Jackson asked, clearly onboard with the plan.

“Most of the shops open at ten in the morning and stay open ‘til mid-night,” Tommy said. “I’m thinking night is probably their busiest time so how about we go in the morning – tomorrow morning?”

“We’ll need to arrange a pretext (reason) for Madge,” Jackson said. “How about a fishing trip? It will account for why we are wearing our grubbies. She will expect us to be terrible fishermen so when we return empty handed she’ll be none the wiser.”

“That sounds good, but we can’t take any of Granddad’s cars – they’re all too expensive looking,” Gary said.

“A good point,” Jackson agreed. I’ll arrange with Zeke, the grounds keeper, to borrow his old pickup.”

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## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

### **Fishing, but not for fish**

The fishing trip had been announced to Madge the night before so she had a lunch and snacks packed and ready when the grungy looking trio made ready to leave. It wouldn't go to waste. Zeke had left the pickup for them out back. The boys were impressed by how well Jackson handled the old vehicle.

It was a half hour drive to the warehouse district. There were lots of trucks, railroad tracks and trains creeping along, backing and blocking crossings. Just to the east of the area of huge buildings was a sizeable, if run down, retail strip with all the usual businesses. The first six pawn shops on the list were within three blocks of each other so Jackson parked in a spot from which they would all be easily accessible.

Their well-rehearsed patter brought them nothing of value at the first place. He did take the time to look at the pictures and comment the items were of some value. He glanced at the picture of Scareface, but just shook his head

indicating he didn't recognize him.

The second was run by a woman who seemed to buy into their story and show some sympathy for their situation. She gave them a bit more time. She did suggest that things that valuable might have been taken to one of the more upscale places down town. She studied the man's picture for some time, but in the end had nothing to offer.

They fared no better in any of the next three. Tommy had hand written his phone number on strips of paper, which he left behind in case anything came to mind.

By the time they entered the sixth store, Gary was a bit downhearted. Tommy tried to cheer him up by saying they shouldn't expect immediate success. There were still plenty of places left to visit, especially since the woman had suggested they not skip the places down town.

That store was run by a man and wife team. They listened attentively and gave what seemed to be serious consideration to the pictures. After all that, they had not handled the merchandise nor had they seen the man whose picture was still lying on the counter when a man entered with a box of things. He placed the box on the counter beside the boys and glanced at the picture.

"What ya doin' with ol' Mickey's picture – a pretty good one, too, I'd say."

Tommy elbowed Gary indicating he should follow up on the information.

"Mom says he was the guy she sold some of our family stuff to a few years back. Had this drawing made to help us locate him. We can afford to buy back the stuff now and are trying to track it down."

"Well, you won't find Mick here in Rockdale. He lives over in Richland. Sticks pretty much to the waterfront."

"Does he have a last name," Tommy asked.

"Let's see. I knew it once. S... something. Hmm. Small, maybe. Yeah, I think it's Mickey Small. He's a bad



dude if you didn't know. Soon as put a knife in your gut as shake your hand. Be careful if you's dealin' with him."

"He work alone?" Tommy asked.

"Always. Nobody'd put up with him."

The man giggled and shook his head.

Gary thanked him. Tommy retrieved the picture. He handed the new man one of his phone number slips and they left. It was their first real lead and they felt quite good.

Outside, Tommy filled Jackson in on what they had learned. They walked back to the truck.

"How far is Richland?" Tommy asked.

"Less than an hour – maybe forty-five minutes," Jackson said. "Is that to be our next destination?"

The boys looked at each other and nodded. The best lead seemed to be Richland. If nothing panned out over there they could always continue the search in Rockdale.

It was eleven thirty and the boys were hungry.

"I know of a lovely little tourist area along the highway some ten minutes out of the city," Jackson said. "How about we stop there and have lunch?"

It really hadn't been a question. Jackson often made suggestions in that way.

As they ate they talked about various things related to the mystery – especially how to deal with a man who had a reputation like Mickey. And, what would they do if they ran into him? They certainly could not go up to him and ask if he was the bad guy who killed their father, stole their valuables and framed their mother. The fact that he came from a different city did answer several questions the boys had wondered about: Why the local police wouldn't have known the man from the drawing if he were such an undesirable. Cops knew those kinds. And, why the stolen things had not turned up in any of the local pawn shops.

They wondered what he had been doing in Rockdale

on the night of the murder and why he had selected their house to enter. Jackson offered a possible answer.

Several weeks before, the boy's parents had allowed their house to be part of what was called The Parade of Homes. It was a charity affair benefiting a local hospital. There's had been a very nice house and as part of the affair they opened it up and people paid some sort of fee to go around town and see nice houses all decorated up. Seemed like a big waste of time and effort to the boys, but Jackson said it had been very successful and raised lots of money for the new children's wing. Pictures of the inside of the house and therefore many of the things later stolen had been in the Sunday society pages of the local paper. Evidently, it had looked just too good to old Mickey to pass up so he made his way to the city.

They packed away sandwiches, potato salad, peach pie and cans of pop. There was enough left for a sizable snack later. Madge knew about growing boys.

Back in the truck they discussed what approach to use with the pawn shops in Richland. Tommy used his phone to find addresses and such in the dock area. Gary managed to pull up a map, though they had no means for making a copy. Tommy drew out the essentials on his pad. There were four that looked promising. Richland was a much smaller place than the city, and most of the retail activity took place close to the docks along the river.

They decided to continue using the approach they had been using. It had been a success in getting the folk's attention and cooperation even it had produced no specific leads from the owners.

Once off the Main Street, the town got rough looking in a hurry. There were lots of empty buildings. The streets were dirty and in need of repair. The big boats at the docks were mostly old and showed rust streaks through their spotty paint jobs.

"Brings back memories of Liverpool, England, where I grew up – dirty and dangerous back then," Jackson said.

“Nobody who didn’t live or work near the docks ever ventured into that section, out of fear for their safety and wellbeing,”

Even with the addresses, the map Tommy had drawn was sketchy and they had to look up and down streets in order to locate the shops. The first three gave them the same two messages: they had not received the items and don’t mess with Mickey Small.

The last shop was deep into the dock area, well away from most of the retail stores and businesses. They could hear the water lapping up against the wharfs. The air was heavy and humid. The boys entered the shop. Jackson waited close by the door just outside. They did their thing. The woman’s face brightened when she saw the pictures.

“Those are wonderful pieces. Yes, I’m quite sure I handled them. Give me a minute and I can make sure. Nine years ago, you say. I keep records when there are serial numbers or patterns worth noting.”

She spent a few minutes going through one of several large register books in which she kept all the details of her transactions. At last she nodded.

“I knew I recognized them. In fact, I bought every item you have pictured plus a man’s, gold Rolex. All from the same party. Not a nice man, but he often brings me high class merchandise.”

“Mickey Small?” Tommy asked.

“Why yes. I’m surprised boys your ages would know about him. He’s been gone from around here for three or four years.”

The boys were disappointed at that news. Even so, Tommy produced the picture just to verify they were talking about the same person. She nodded and frowned and put on a shiver emphasizing her point that he was not a nice man.

“Any information about who bought the things from you?” Gary asked.

“Let’s see. Six pieces and they were each sold to

different buyers. All local addresses, but truthfully, you can't count on addresses being correct. I will copy off what I have for you and hope that helps. Sometimes folks buy from me just to try and resell things for a profit you must understand. The buyers may not have kept them."

"We understand and really can't thank you enough for your patience and all your help," Tommy managed.

He handed her a phone number and spoke.

"If you hear anything about where Mickey is I'd really appreciate it if you'd let me know."

"I take it there's more to this story than you've told me. That's okay. I really don't want to know. But, I'll keep my ear out and try to find something for you. Word was, he went clear down river to New Orleans – quite a piece from up here. But I'll see if anybody knows anything."

It had been a good news/bad news meeting and once outside they immediately shared what they had learned with Jackson.

"I think it sounds like it's time to regroup and set Plan B," Jackson said.

The boys agreed. They headed home. It was three thirty when they pulled into the driveway. Jackson spoke.

"Oh, there is one thing I may have failed to tell you – something Zeke required for the use of his truck."

"Huh!" the boys said as one.

"He wants us – meaning you two – to wash it for him. I promised it would be ready by five. I guess you know where the buckets and rags are in the garage. I have a short errand to run."

The boys took it good naturedly and got to work. It gave them time to talk about Plan B.

When finished with the truck, they sat on the back porch and finished the food Madge had prepared for them. They were thirsty so went into the kitchen to drain a milk

carton. Madge was there beginning to prepare dinner.

“Nice fish you men caught. I must say I didn’t expect one let along seven. It’ll make a nice batch for dinner. Mr. Wentworth so loves breaded fish with tartar sauce. You boys get cleaned up and changed. Fish don’t hold so don’t be late.”

The boys looked at each other in astonishment. Fish? Who was pulling whose leg?

Jackson entered the kitchen, dressed more like the Jackson with whom they were familiar.

“Madge is going to fix our fish for dinner,” Tommy said as the boys looked at the man, suddenly putting two and two together. His errand had been a run to the fish market. The secret would be safe with the boys who headed off for the shower.

After supper, they were still at a loss for Plan B. Tommy had gone ahead and looked up the addresses they had been given at the pawn shop, but it had never been their intention to really try and get the things back. The more they thought about it the better it seemed, however. It would be a grand welcome home present for their mother – if it ever really came to that. With Mickey ‘Scarface’ Small, out of the picture, that was looking more and more like a lost cause.

They returned to the secret room in the basement partly just to be among their things and partly to see if some inspiration might come to them down there.

“Hey, Tommy. Here’s a stack of letters – envelopes – tied together with string. They are addressed to mom at the house and you’ll never guess who they are from.”

“If I won’t ever guess will you please just tell me?”

“Betty Lynn Owens.”

“So. I don’t get it. That name supposed to mean something to me?”

“Just the initials – BLO.”

“Oh, BLO. The bank account. You suppose it would

be okay to read them. It might explain some things.”

“I think we’ve already claimed everything in here as our rightful personal property,” Gary said.

“I guess that’s right. Let me cut the string with my pocket knife.”

That done they soon found they were stacked in order from earliest postmark date on the bottom up the latest on top. There were fifteen letters. Gary took the oldest and after a moment of hesitation, as he looked at Tommy, he proceeded to remove the letter from the envelope.

“Just scan through it and see if there seems to be anything worth our knowing about,” Tommy suggested.

Gary began reading to himself. Gary began nodding. At last, Gary began speaking.

“Here’s the deal. Betty Lou was or is mom’s half-sister – apparently, mom’s dad was married before he married mom’s mom. You follow that?”

“Yeah. I got it.”

“Okay. It seems she – Betty Lou – got very sick and had to be put in a rest home of some sort. The checks mom sent her every month were to pay for her treatment.”

“That didn’t come out at the trial,” Tommy said.

“No. Mom must have wanted to protect Betty Lou from all the bad publicity – having a sister that was an accused murderer – so she didn’t explain her private bank account.”

“Still not sure why it had to be private,” Tommy said, “unless she didn’t want dad to know, but it was all in the file folder together so, of course, he knew. Can’t figure that but maybe that’s not important. Skip to the last letter and see if it tells what happened to her.”

“According to the date it was just shortly before dad’s death so that will be nine years ago.”

He read the letter and summarized for Tommy.

“She was still in the home when the letter was written

and was doing a whole lot better. She was looking forward to going home soon – where ever home was.”

“Maybe we need to try and find her,” Tommy said. “Not sure why, but guess that makes her our aunt, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, I think so. The name of the nursing home is mentioned. You’ll have to look it up and see if we can find it. Then we can make plans about it.”

Tommy agreed. They looked around for a few more minutes and left for upstairs. Tommy got on the web and soon had the nursing home located – it was actually in another state but was still in operation.

“Shall we email them and ask if we can get Betty Lou’s address?” Gary asked.

“I can’t see how it could hurt even though that really has nothing to do with our current operation. I’ll go ahead and do it and we’ll see what comes of it. In the meantime, where do we turn next?”

“We have a name to go with the drawing. That’s more than they had at the trial. Can you find the Mickey guy on the web?” Gary asked.

“We can give it a try. Mickey – you suppose that’s short for Michael?” Tommy asked.

“Maybe. Try them both I suppose.”

Tommy tried Mickey in several ways – property owner, driver’s license, arrest record. He got hits on both license in their state and arrest in Winston County where Richland was. No up to date addresses were available.

“Let me see if he has anything come up in Louisiana,” Tommy said.

Interestingly, the same two pieces of information were available in that state. They had no idea how it really helped them, but they had it just in case.

They still had an hour before dinner so they took seats in the big chairs. Tommy had something on his mind.

"I've been really bothered by the letters dad scrawled on the floor – ILO and then that backward slash. I have a way out idea. Want to hear it?"

"Of course. I usually love your way out ideas."

Tommy got his pad and printed the I L O \.

"What if it wasn't initials but the start of a message?"

"You lost me," Gary said.

"Look here what happens if I add just two things – I L O V E . . . YOU."

"You mean that slash was really just half of the letter V. That makes more sense, especially since the backward slash didn't make any sense. The next word could have been YOU, like penciled in their or it could have been IDA or something else even maybe. Good thinking. Mom's lawyer was really dumb – like Jackson said. That could have shed reasonable doubt or something, couldn't it?"

"I'd have thought so," Tommy said. "It's a sad thing when a couple of kids can out lawyer a lawyer."

"So, we have a couple of things in mom's favor that weren't brought up at her trial," Gary said, beginning to count them off on his fingers as he continued: The fact that the things mom said had been stolen really had been stolen. The fact that the face she had drawn really does fit a man, Mickey Small, who we can connect to the stolen items through the pawn shop woman. And, we have a possible alternate explanation or interpretation of what dad scrawled on the floor. Think that's enough to reopen the case for mom?"

"I guess we'd have to ask a lawyer. How do we find one?"

"Let's ask Jackson," Gary suggested. "Neither of the two lawyers at the trial seem right. How about the one who signed all the legal stuff – the will and such?"

"I don't know, Gary. I've been wondering if that David Cullen guy – the young one who tried to defend mom – might be our first choice. He's been lawyering for nine years since



then so he's bound to have gotten lots better, wouldn't you think?"

"I suppose. And, since he has to know he botched up her defense the first time he just might appreciate a second chance."

"Let me find him on the web. We can call him in the morning and see what he has to say."

"Shall we run it by Jackson to see what he thinks about it?" Gary said.

"Sound like a good idea. Let's go do that before dinner."

"We should make sure he's still in the city, I guess," Gary said.

"Just take a minute," and that's just what it took. There he was – David Cullen, JD – part of a good-sized law firm down town.

They caught up with Jackson on the back steps on his way to the kitchen getting ready to serve dinner. Gary ran the idea by him and he approved.

"I think it's very clever, even, giving the one who so badly handled the case a second chance. My bet is he'll jump at the chance to help."

The fish were delicious. The dinner conversation was strained since the boys couldn't really talk with their grandfather about what they had been up to. It did bring up other problems for them; if they were to get their mother a new trial and she was freed, would they live with her, and if so, where would that be? Probably not at granddad's considering how much their grandfather seemed to dislike her. They didn't want anything to come between them and him and yet, she was their mother and they thought they should they be with her.

That night, Tommy laid awake thinking about all that. In the next room, Gary understood the problem, but he would not let it interfere with a good night's sleep!

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## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **Taking the lawyer by the horns**

Nine o'clock the following morning found the boys pausing in front of the large, ornate, wooden door beyond which they were hoping to talk with David Cullen, the former Public Defender. They decided to let Tommy do the talking because he was more tactful. Gary would have just waded in and said something like, "Since you messed up so badly defending our mom we decided to give you a chance to make things right." Tommy thought a more positive approach would get things off to a better start.

They entered a large, expensively decorated waiting area. The woman behind the desk greeted them.

"How may I help you gentlemen?"

"We need a few minutes of Mr. Cullen's time – has to do with a case he handled for our mom several years ago."

She looked through the appointment book.

"Luck is with you. His first meeting is not until eleven,

today. I'm sure he'll be happy to speak with you. Take a seat."

Tommy sunk nearly out of sight as he sat in one of the huge, upholstered chairs. For clearly expensive furniture, it was most uncomfortable. Presently a man in his mid-thirties entered the room and walked to the desk. The receptionist pointed at the boys and he put on a big smile and moved to them.

"I'm David Cullen. I understand you need to speak with me."

"Yes, sir," Tommy said standing and taking the lead. I'm Tommy. This is my brother, Gary. We won't take up much of your time. We brought a hundred dollars in case there's a charge."

He figured adding that would seal the deal as a professional relationship and not a charity case.

"Never a charge for the first session. Follow me."

They entered his office – far larger than seemed reasonable to the boys. Lawyers must have lots of money they don't know what to do with. They all took seats.

"So, something about a case I handled for your mother, is that correct?"

Tommy knew once he mentioned her name it would all be out in the open. He expected the man to become defensive and ready with a long list of excuses. That was not to be the case.

"Her name was Ida Lou Owens."

Mr. Cullen's smile readily faded and his forehead furrowed. He nodded.

"Go on," he said, his tone also became serious.

"We have come upon some new evidence in her case that we think may clear her of the murder charge and we believe you are the one who should hear about it first. If we are wrong about that just say so and please tell us who we

need to see instead.”

“No. You are correct. I’m the one you need to speak to. Go on.”

As Tommy began the explanation, Mr. Cullen opened his bottom left desk drawer and removed a thick folder without comment. Tommy continued.

“We have identified a man that is a dead ringer for the sketch the police artist made from mom’s description of the man she said was in the kitchen that night. We have located the pawn shop where he sold the items he stole from our house. We learned where he lived at the time – had a reputation as a really bad sort over there. We learned he moved to New Orleans a few years back and have verified that’s where he is – driver’s license and stuff. Is that enough to get her case reopened?”

“It may be. I have fretted over that case ever since I handled it so badly. This is the case file. I keep it right here and review it every so often. The fact that I was young and inexperienced is no excuse and I won’t offer it to you in case you were expecting that.”

“I was expecting that,” Gary said. “Tommy and Jackson weren’t.”

“Jackson?”

“Our butler – well, Granddad’s butler and our best friend. We live with our Granddad.”

Mr. Cullen stood and moved around to the front of the desk where he sat back and folded his hands in his lap.

“What you have sounds compelling and will be a good springboard for further investigation.”

“Further investigation?” Tommy said/asked.

“The fact he had the stolen material in his possession doesn’t prove he is the one who stole them – that he was the one at the house that night. He could have been handling the items for somebody else who was the actual perpetrator. You know ‘perpetrator?’”

“Yes. Committer, culprit, offender,” Tommy said.

“But Mom’s description fit him to a T,” Gary added.

“And who’s to say she hadn’t seen him somewhere else and just figured she’d try and implicate him and save herself.”

“Whose side are you on, anyway?” Gary said, in an unfriendly manner.

“Believe me, I am on your side and your mother’s. It’s because of that that I’m telling you how a judge would see your evidence. It does convince me and although it’s not yet enough to reopen the case in a courtroom, it is enough for me to reopen the case and work with you to fill in the missing pieces.”

“Really?” Tommy said getting to his feet again and offering his hand for a shake.

“Sorry for my outburst,” Gary said. “I tend to run my mouth before engaging my brain.”

“Not a problem.”

“So, what new evidence do we need?” Tommy asked.

“A confession from Scarface would be the clincher, of course.”

“His name is Mickey Small,” Tommy offered. “I have the information we have about him here on this print out for you. There is a driver’s license he renewed the month before the robbery with his address at the time over in Richland and a new one from Louisiana, dated three years ago. We have a statement from the man and wife pawn store owners saying they bought the items from him – they have serial numbers that match the insurance forms mom and dad had in their insurance file. We have photographs of all the items from that same file. I guess we figured that would cinch things but now we understand it won’t. Not sure where to go from here.”

“It will help if somebody can place him in the neighborhood on the night of the . . . robbery, as you have referred to it. There were two other robberies in the area that evening, but I couldn’t tie them to the one at your place.

There were no foreign fingerprints in your kitchen. Apparently, the man, assuming there was a man – and I certainly now believe there was – wore gloves suggesting he was an experienced thief.”

“I guess we have some knocking on doors ahead of us, then,” Gary said, also standing. “Eight years is a long time ago.”

Tommy had one last question: “Was that sketch published in the paper at the time?”

“Yes. Several carried it.”

He opened the folder on his desk and removed three clippings handing them to Tommy.

“The Globe, The Sun and Police Beat.”

Tommy passed them on to Gary as he finished looking at each of them.

“They were all published on Thursday, the 10th, I see.”

“Yes. It was more than a week after the crime had been committed. After that long, public interest has always lessened so it was probably skipped over by most readers.”

“If it was in Police Beat, I missed it, too,” Tommy said. “I thought I had read all the articles they ran about the case. Do you have a better copy of the sketch? We need to make some nice clear copies to circulate in the old neighborhood.”

“I have a photocopy of the original. How many copies do you want? I’ll have Wanda run some for you before you leave today.”

“I’m not sure. You have a suggestion?”

“Well, the other robberies were within ten blocks of your house. I’d guess you’ll need at least one hundred for starters. Lots of houses and apartments in that area.”

“We really appreciate your willingness to help, Mr. Cullen,” Gary said offering his hand for a shake. I have one more question and I know that lawyer/client privacy thing may mean you can’t answer it but where is mom, now?”

Mr. Cullen hesitated and looked back and forth from one boy to the other.

“She specifically requested that you boys not be told. Hmm. How many women’s prisons are there in this state? I suppose that’s all I can say – that lawyer/client privacy thing, you understand.”

He winked at Gary. Gary nodded and passed the wink along to Tommy.

“Keep me posted on your activities,” Mr. Cullen said. “And, don’t mess with this Mickey character if he returns. I’ll see if there is anything more I can learn about him.”

They picked up the copies of the sketch on their way out.

“Well, that sure went better than it could have,” Tommy said.

“I’ll say. Turns out he’s a pretty nice guy. Here I’ve been thinking terrible things about him.”

“Me, too. Looks like we have a starting place at least.”

Gary called Jackson who was soon there with the car. On the way home, they filled him in about the meeting and the copies of the sketch.

“I have an idea,” Tommy said, suddenly sounding quite enthusiastic. “We can put the sketch up on some social media sites on the web. We’ll need to figure out a cover story to go with it. Something about trying to locate him for some good sounding reason.”

Jackson had a comment: “You mean trying to find a man who once played an important part in your lives?”

“You’re a genius, Jackson, Gary said. “Not a lie and yet not giving the actual circumstance away.”

“We also need to put together a story for when we hand out the sketches,” Gary said. “It needs to make total strangers want to help us.”

“Well, what we really need to accomplish by this is to



place him in the neighborhood on the night of the robbery. I don't how to sugar coat that."

As one they turned to Jackson for a suggestion.

"Perhaps a straight forward statement will be best. Something like, 'There were a string of robberies in the neighborhood on the night of – give the date and year – and a special family heirloom was stolen from your family. You have reason to think the man in the picture may have information about the robbery. You are trying to recover it as a special gift for your mother'."

Tommy looked at Gary. "I think he's done it again."

"I'm certainly glad we didn't fire him that time he . . ."

They broke into giggles.

"That time he did what?" Jackson asked.

"Just kidding," Tommy said. "You know you can't fire family."

"We just need to decide on which of the things to tell folks about," Gary said.

"How about the little gold picture frame," Tommy suggested. "It's a simple thing. We could stretch the truth a little bit and say mom's grandmother gave it to her and it was the only thing she had from her."

"Sounds good," Gary said. "We could make a copy of the picture of it, too – to like lend legitimacy to our claim."

"Good touch. I can scan it right to the printer and we can print it on the back of these sketches."

"Sounds like a plan."

"So, our immediate destination is home?" Jackson said/asked.

"It is," Gary said confirming Jackson's assumption.

They were soon there and the boys got to work fixing the flyers. They decided to use Tommy's email as the contact information. Since the old neighborhood was across the city

they would either have to take the bus or kidnap Jackson again. They had been using him so much they figured their grandfather might get suspicious so they opted for the bus.

By the time lunch was ready the sketch and story had been posted on-line and they had the sheets printed with half of them stowed in each of their backpacks. They decided not to share their outing with Madge because they knew she'd worry about them. Before leaving they informed Jackson of their plan. It was another unspoken rule that when they left the yard they told either Madge or Jackson. Their grandfather was not one to be disturbed from his routine.

By one thirty they had arrived in the old neighborhood. From the addresses of the other robberies they established the blocks they would approach. They took separate sides of the same street so they could cover twice as many houses, but still keep each other in sight. It was a safe neighborhood, but in the city it always paid to be careful.

Most of the people were friendly and said they would ask other family members what they may remember from that night. No one answered the doors at about half the houses – everybody was probably at work. At those places, they left the flyers taped to the door with a printed note telling their story – Jackson's suggestion thinking many houses would be unresponsive at that time of day.

At 4:15 they finished the last block in the search area. There were only a half dozen flyers left – Mr. Cullen seemed to know the area pretty well. They stopped at an ice cream shop to rest and treat themselves before heading home. Gary had a comment.

“That women's prison, Mr. Cullen mentioned. I guess he meant the one at Bridgeton.”

“Only one in the state,” Tommy added.

“Bridgeton is clear across the state.”

“I know, but then it's not like we'll be going there,” Tommy said.

“I guess that's right. Just seems like a long way away

from home for her.”

Tommy nodded. He wished he could have the same deep feelings of sorrow his brother had about her situation, but he didn't know her – he had no memories of her. He was sure he loved her, but he just didn't feel the close connection Gary did. He hoped all of that would soon be changing – her situation and their relationship. The banana splits were delicious and should hold them until dinner time.

They went directly upstairs to Tommy's room with the intention of kicking back on the beds and planning their next move. Tommy had email – three responses from the flyer. Two were from other people who had been robbed that night. One said the thief had taken several coins from a collection and he had a police report he offered to them in case it might be helpful. The other reported that the glass in the kitchen door had been broken in a fashion similar to what happened at their house. There had been a trace of blood on one piece, which the police had taken for evidence and never returned. Nothing had come of it.

The third email was from a woman who said she was in her late eighties. She had been walking her dog that night and a man had come up behind her on the sidewalk and shoved her aside as he passed. She described him as clumsy and dragging one leg as he hurried on. He wore a large backpack and carried a good-sized cloth bag that was clearly filled with objects. He had dropped a silver dollar – or rather, it had fallen from his coat pocket – a shabby, long, black, wool coat. She still had it in case he returned searching for it.

“This is really good stuff,” Tommy said.

“Like how?” Gary asked laying back on the bed. Gary was a typical teen age boy: if there was a choice between standing, sitting or reclining, he always reclined. Jackson had explained it was how teens were able could keep on the go without appearing to tire. When they didn't need to be expending energy they didn't.

Tommy responded to the question.

“Well, think about it. If the silver dollar is one that was

taken from the man that night, we can place a guy with a limp on our street. If the blood on the piece of glass turns out to be Mickey's, we can place him as the man with the limp who perpetrated the other robbery. In all three robberies, the MO is the same – broken window in the kitchen door used for access. Mr. Cullen will certainly find all that good stuff for a judge, don't you think?"

"I'd think so. Better email Cullen with all that and see what he thinks."

"I'm one step ahead of you, bro. There. The email is on its way."

Gary chuckled.

"What?" Tommy said not understanding why it was humorous.

"Ever since you started walking you've been one step ahead of me, little brother."

They shared a smile.

There was a knock on the door. It was Jackson. Tommy let him in.

"Just checking to see if your venture was fruitful."

"Sure was," Gary said. "Got enough to put Mickey away forever."

"Well, maybe or maybe not," Tommy corrected. He recounted what they had found.

"It does sound promising. Have you alerted the attorney?"

"Just now. Haven't had time for a reply yet. Check that. Just got one. Let's see. Mr. Cullen wants the names and addresses of the three people. He says he will contact the police about the old bloody glass evidence and have his own forensics guy examine the coin. Sounds like he's really into this."

"I should say," Jackson said. "I'm wondering if the police looked for fingerprints on the coin collection. I doubt if

Mickey could have sorted through the coins with gloves on.”

“Good point, Jackson. Let me send Cullen that observation.”

“So, let’s list what we have,” Tommy said getting out his ever-handy yellow pad. “We have a man with a limp on the walk in the neighborhood the night of the robbery. We have a silver dollar, which, if we can establish it came from the stolen coin collection, suggests the limping man stole the coins.”

Gary rolled over onto his side with a comment.

“Cullen would say the fact he had the coin could have meant he received it from somebody else.”

“I suppose you’re right but I’d think several things like that would begin to build strong suspicion, anyway.”

“Circumstantial evidence, I believe it’s called,” Jackson said. “It’s the same kind of evidence that got your mother convicted. Only seems fair to turn those tables on the real perpetrator.”

“I guess we wait now,” Tommy said.

Another email arrived.

“This one is from a Mr. Mix,” Tommy said.

“Mr. Mix lived right next door to us,” Gary said. “He used to play catch with me sometimes when he’d get home from work in the afternoon. What does he have to say?”

“Let’s see. He says the night of the robbery he noticed the security lights go on in our back yard about the time when mom said the break-in took place.”

Tommy turned to Gary as if for an explanation.

“We had lights that were motion sensitive. If anything moved above eighteen inches of the ground, they lit.”

“Why eighteen inches?”

“So, the neighborhood cats and dogs and wouldn’t set them off.”

“So, if the lights turned on, it would have almost

certainly been a person back there.”

“That’s right. I remember crawling along the ground once to see if I could get from the back door to the alley without being detected. I made it.”

Tommy turned to Jackson.

“Would you please assume a crawling position on the floor?”

“I’ve done far odder things for you since you’ve come into my life. Why not?”

Tommy got a yardstick from the closet and measured the distance from the floor to Jackson’s back.

“Twenty-five inches. So, even if old Mickey was crawling along, he’d have been too tall in the butt and set off the lights.”

“Doubt if he’d have known about the lights,” Gary said. “Anyway, could a man with a stiff leg even crawl?”

“Good point.”

“I make good points sometimes. Don’t look so surprised, you two.”

It was worth smiles and a chuckle.

“But what does that tell us that a judge would consider helpful?” Tommy asked.

“For one thing,” Jackson said, “that there almost certainly was somebody in your back yard the night of the robbery.”

He turned to Gary.

“Were there often people crossing your back yard at night?”

“Never. Remember, the back yard has a wall on each side and thick shrubbery across the back by the alley. You went through an opening in the shrubs right into the garage door and the outer doors of the garage were always locked.”

“That’s a good news/bad news situation, then,” Jackson

said.

“How so?” Tommy asked.

“That arrangement did keep people out of the yard for your privacy sake but it also meant it was unlikely that Mickey could have entered the area from the alley.”

“We had side yards. He could have gone around the house from the street,” Gary added.

“A burglar just walking down a well-lit street to the house he was going to rob?” Tommy asked.

“It does seem unlikely, I guess,” Gary said.

“I remember something from the Police Beat articles,” Tommy said.

He removed a folder from his desk drawer.

“Let’s see,” he spoke as he searched through the papers. “Here. The police report says the main garage door into the alley was open and the door to the back yard was unlocked.”

“That’s not right,” Gary said, sitting up on the edge of the bed. “Dad was a security freak. He’d never have left those doors unlocked. He just wouldn’t have. Anything about broken locks or like that?”

“Nothing.”

“Let me email Mr. Mix. He was a great guy but his wife was a busy body. They can verify that dad would have never left the doors open.”

“You do that. Then I’ll also send that information to Mr. Cullen. I’m suddenly feeling better and better about things,” Tommy said.

“That feeling better remark reminds me” Jackson said. “I actually came to tell you Madge has blue berry cobbler about to emerge from the oven. “Perhaps a celebration is in order.”

It was. Once the emailing was completed they pushed and shoved their way down the back stairs to the kitchen.

(Well, not Jackson. He had probably never pushed or shoved in his entire life!)



## **CHAPTER SEVEN: A real lead at last!**

By the next morning there had been several responses to the posts of Mickey's picture on the social media sites. One was particularly interesting. It was from a sheriff's deputy in Louisiana. Apparently, Mickey had been in prison there and had only recently been released for humanitarian – medical – reasons. He was dying of lung cancer with only months to live.

"Bummer," Gary said. "If he kicks the bucket before we can get to him we may not be able to prove our case against him. Cullen said a confession was what we really needed."

"You're terrible, Gary. The man's dying and all you can think about is our case."

"Seems that's all that's left to be important in his life. May seem cold, but that's how it seems to me. If we can find him, maybe he'll do one last good deed and confess."

"Maybe you're right. But how can we find him?"

“I have no idea. Things like that have always been your department little Bro.”

“One idea, here. We can email the pawn broker in that store where the man came in while we were there – the one who pointed us toward Mickey in Richland. Maybe they can tell us how to contact that man and we can see if he knows anything more up to date – like if he has come back up this way.”

“See,” Gary said. “What did I tell you? I put it out there and you take it and run with it. It’s what makes us such a terrific team.”

It always made Tommy feel good when Gary said something like that – reaffirming they were a team. They were all each other had left from their family so it seemed doubly important. Well, there was their granddad, but although he saw to their needs he really played a very small part in their day to day lives. Truthfully, Jackson and Madge were more like family than he was. Tommy hadn’t yet allowed himself to really think about how it would be if they were reunited with their mom – something that suddenly seemed more and more like a real possibility.

Tommy sent the email and received an immediate reply. The owner had been wondering about them and seemed happy to have heard from them. There was also some good information. The man they were looking for went by the nickname, Slugger. He lived in what the owner called a flop house on 64th street and had not been in the store since that day they met him there. Tommy googled the area and found it was in a dangerous part of the city, about six blocks from the pawn shop. He shared his information with Gary.

“So, what do you think? Do we go and try to make the contact or turn it over to Mr. Cullen?” Tommy asked.

“I’m thinking he would be more likely to talk to us – since he knows us – than to talk with a lawyer in a black suit and tie,” Gary said.

Tommy nodded his agreement.

“I suppose it’s Jackson and his hoody time again, then, huh?”

There was a knock on the bedroom door. Tommy opened it.

“We’ve always thought you have super hearing or something,” Tommy said. “We were just mentioning your name.”

“I was just checking in – well, really, wanting to make sure you two didn’t go off halfcocked and put yourselves in danger trying to contact Mickey.”

Tommy turned to Gary.

“Maybe it’s not super hearing, but mind reading – you suppose?”

“Mind reading would explain lots of stuff that’s happened, that’s for sure.”

“Neither of those super powers, I’m afraid,” Jackson said. “Just remembering how it was to be a lad of your ages and wondering how I ever managed to live past adolescence.”

“You did dumb stuff, too?” Gary asked, amazed.

“I can match you dumb stuff or dumb stuff and then some.”

“Although it may be fun to see if you two can ‘out dumb’ each other, we need to get back to the real world, guys,” Tommy said. “We need to go find the man who pointed us toward Mickey in the first place. We’ve found out his name is Slugger and he lives down on 64th street.”

“A perilous section of the city. Hoody and sneaker time again, I assume.”

“You’re not going to try and talk us out of it?” Gary asked, clearly surprised.

“Would such an attempt yield fruitful results?” Jackson replied.

“Well, no, I guess not.”

“So, let us not waste words on the matter. Now?”

“Can you be free now?”

“Would I have offered if I couldn’t?”

“The truck?”

“It is here. I’m sure we can receive its loan if we ask. There may be another scrub job involved, however.”

“Many more scrub jobs and we’ll rub right through the rusted fenders. But sure,” Gary said.

“Meet you at the garage,” Jackson said. “I’ll change there so as to not worry Madge.”

The boys had soon changed into their grubbies and were down the back stairs and across the back lawn to the truck that was parked next to the garage.

Jackson was soon ready. The old truck roared to life amid a cloud of blue exhaust fumes and they were on their way.

“So, just where on 64th are we headed?” Jackson asked.

“Well, we don’t have what you might call an exact address,” Tommy said.

“I see. Well, what might we have?”

“A flop house six blocks from the pawn shop.”

“It will require a search, I see,” Jackson said, sounding in no way upset. “Probably a hotel that’s seen better days. I imagine there may be several in the vicinity. How do you propose to find this, Slugger?”

Jackson had directed the question to Tommy, since he knew he was the one who typically handled such details in the boys’ plans.

“What do you think if I go in and ask if they’ve seen my Uncle Slugger? I figured a family touch like that coming from a pouty, adorable, waif like me, might break through the usual ‘Don’t know nobody’ approach, those folks tend to use.”

“A stroke of genius, I’d say,” Jackson said.

“I suppose we could discuss the ‘adorable’ part,” Gary said, prepared to defend himself from the punch he knew would soon be launched toward his shoulder. It was.

Gary would never admit it, but recently those punches were getting to the point they really hurt. He’d have to begin being more careful about engaging his mouth before thinking.

The first hotel didn’t yield any results. At the second they fared much better. One man knew Slugger and pointed out where they would most likely find him. It was, as Jackson had predicted, an old hotel in the middle of the block on the opposite side of the street. They crossed and the boys approached the front door as Jackson hung back. The area was worse than he had anticipated so he had decided not to let his young charges out of his sight. He pulled his hoodie tight around his face and followed them as they entered the old building.

The first contact was a scruffy old man with a scraggly beard and long uncut hair. He had the information they needed.

“Third door on the right. Big Billy will probably answer the door. Didn’t know ol’ Slugger had family.”

Tommy knocked. A huge man opened it – certainly large enough to be someone known as Big Billy.

“Hey, Billy. Remember me, Tommy. Lookin’ for my Uncle Slugger. He still livin’ here?”

Billy was clearly both large in size and small in smarts. He smiled and nodded and stepped out of the way pointing to the bed under the outside window. He left the room – whether to provide some privacy for the family reunion or some other reason was not apparent. It was the man they were searching for – no doubt about that. He was asleep.

Tommy looked back at the door where Gary was waiting. Gary shrugged. The unspoken question had been about whether to awaken the man or not. Tommy reached out and touched his shoulder. The man roused and squinted up

into Tommy's face.

"The kid from the pawn shop, right?"

The man had a very good memory, at least for kids. He hoped that was also true about 'Mickey's'.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Slugger. My brother and I are hoping you can answer a question or two about Mickey."

Slugger sat up on the edge of the cot.

"How did you find me?"

"I'm known to be a pretty good detective for my age. I promise not to take up much of your time."

"Okay. What?"

"We have information that leads us to believe Mickey may be back in the area. We wonder if you have any information about that."

"What's it worth?"

"Worth. Well, our everlasting gratitude, for one thing," Tommy offered not sure where to go from that.

Gary approached them, holding out two butterfingers. The man peeked around Tommy at the colorfully wrapped candy.

"Candy over gratitude any day," he said.

He reached out and Gary delivered the bars, which Slugger tucked under his blanket.

"Whereabouts, huh? Well, your info is right. Come back a couple a weeks ago. Stayin' with his sister here in this city."

"You know the sister's name or address or anything that could lead us to him?"

"Ol' Slugger knows all."

He offered a toothless grin.

"Katy Weathersby. Somewhere out in Bethany."

“Bethany – the suburb?” Tommy asked.

“Only Bethany I know of.”

“Anything that could pinpoint it better than that?”

“She runs a neighborhood grocery store – Gillespie’s Groceries I believe it’s called.”

“Thanks. You’ve been very helpful. By the way if anybody asks about us, we’re your nephews – that’s the story we used if you want to keep things consistent.”

The boys turned and made their way to the door.

“Good luck. Be careful. Mickey’s a real mean one.”

They entered the hall grateful for the warning, but without replying, and were soon outside.

The drive to Bethany took only twenty minutes. It was a poor community but didn’t appear to be dangerous. Tommy’s search for information suggested that most of the residents were either retired or worked at a factory on the edge of town. One inquiry got them directions to the Grocery store. It was small and sat on a corner. The sidewalks were old with large chunks missing here and there. The building had not been painted in years and one window was boarded up, presumably broken and never repaired. An old woman was leaving as they entered. As before, Jackson remained outside.

“Hello, boys,” came a cheerful greeting from a gray-haired lady standing behind the old fashioned, thick topped, wooden counter. “Can I help you find something?”

It wasn’t the question Tommy had anticipated so he had to think fast.

“Butterfingers. Do you carry butterfingers?”

She pointed to the box on the counter – about twelve inches under Tommy’s nose. It was clear that had raised questions of her own.

“So, I haven’t seen you two before. What’s your story?”

The woman kept making it more and more difficult to

get around to the story they had concocted. Gary gave it a try – usually not a really good thing.

“We’re looking for somebody our dad knew a few years back. He’s dead now – our dad not the somebody. Our only lead was the name of this store. We’re told he may have something for us.”

Despite the clumsy presentation, Tommy was impressed. Maybe there was hope for his big brother after all.

“Got a name?” she asked pushing the box of candy bars closer to Tommy.

“Mr. Small – Michael or Mickey, I believe,” Tommy said, coming to Gary’s rescue.

“You say this Mickey fella has something for you?”

“That’s right. Information I suppose you’d say.”

That had been from Tommy again.

“Your friend outside there a cop,” she said pointing with a flick of her head.

Clearly Jackson hadn’t stayed out of sight.

“No. He drives us places – a friend of the family. I can get him to come in if you’d feel better meeting him face to face.”

“Not necessary. I know the man you’re looking for. He’s sick. Don’t see folks anymore.”

The boys’ hearts sank. So close and yet so far. Tommy hadn’t given up.

“I’m sorry to hear he’s sick. Anything we can do to help?”

“I don’t know what your game is, boys, but I must say you’re pretty good at it.”

“No game, ma’am. We just really, really, need to see Mickey before . . . well, before he gets any sicker.”

“Sounds like you know about his illness – that he’s dying.”



“We heard that rumor from one of the guys he used to hang out with – Slugger I believe he’s called.”

She pulled the box of candy back toward her and removed two bars.

“Tell you what, I’ll run it by Mickey when I see him. How can he contact you?”

“Does he use email?”

“I can do that for him.”

Johnny pulled out a slip of paper with his address on it and handed it to her. In turn she handed over the two bars. Gary reached for his wallet. She waved him off.

“On the house, this time.”

She was clearly a nice person. They hoped that work in their favor.

The boys thanked her and turned to leave. She called to them.

“One more thing. If you don’t hear by tonight there is one way you might contact him. He goes to Freddie’s Bar on Baxter Avenue at nine most evenings. Baxter is two blocks east of here. The bar’s in the 200 block. They won’t let you boys in, but your good-looking friend out there would fit right in.”

She tossed a third bar at them. Gary made the catch. It had obviously been intended for Jackson. They thanked her again and left.

“Get anything?” Jackson asked.

Gary handed him the candy bar.

“I think the lady in there has a thing for you – you stud, you.”

“Useful information was what I was going for.”

They filled him in as they entered the truck.

“In case you don’t hear from him, may I suggest we locate this Freddie’s Bar during daylight hours?” Jackson said.

“Good idea. Baxter Avenue, two blocks east.”

As it turned out Baxter Avenue, as grand as its name implied, was in fact a narrow street – ‘Baxter Lane’ or ‘Baxter Path’ would have more appropriately fit it. It was lined with bars, pawn shops, and neighborhood stores most having lottery signs in the window. The sidewalks were littered with trash cans and the alleys were narrow and five stories tall – dark at street level even during daylight – resembling nothing more than deep, dusty cracks in pieces of coal. Ancient, rusty, iron fire escapes clung to the fronts and sides of the mostly grime caked brick buildings. It was not an area of the city they would have wanted to enter under any but the most extreme circumstances. Their current mission qualified as such a mission.

“There’s Freddie’s,” Gary pointed out.

The ‘Fr’ in the neon sign was unlit so it actually read ‘eddie’s’. Like most of the buildings it was narrow and very deep. From what they could see from inside the truck, it seemed to have a long, massive, bar with stools following along the right wall and a row of two occupant tables down the left. It was dimly lit and virtually empty.

“I assume we are not going to stop at this time of day?” Jackson said.

“She said he was here at night, drinking – after nine,” Tommy said. “We’ll need to come back. Can you spring the truck for us to use this evening?”

“I’m sure I can. Eight-thirty-ish?”

“That should get us back here soon after nine,” Gary added, nodding.

The plan was set.

The rest of the day dragged on. Tommy kept close to the computer to receive the email. Gary checked his phone frequently. By dinner – the seven o’clock meal with their grandfather – they had still not heard, so assumed a dark of the night operation was soon to get underway.

They made excuses to Madge suggesting the three 'guy's were having a night on the town together.

"We may take in a movie," Tommy said trying to make it believable and phrase it so it wasn't really a lie.

"Or," Gary added as a tease, "We may visit a few strip clubs."

"Or 'Dip Clubs', more like it," she came back. ['Dip' was a term used when she was their age to refer to boys who were so disgusting no girl would ever date them.]

The boys looked puzzled.

"I will explain later," Jackson said, privately flashing a thumbs up at Madge to acknowledge her little joke.

They all three opted to wear regular street clothes for that outing – it was a poor section not a slum filled with vagrants (homeless beggars). Right at 8:30 they pulled out of the driveway heading east. On Baxter, they parked across the street from the bar so Jackson could keep an eye on both the truck and the boys.

They had studied the drawing of Mickey's face that afternoon to keep the image fresh in their minds. Tommy had even made several copies on which he had drawn beards and moustaches in a half dozen different styles. They believed they needed any edge they could get.

Jackson stood against an abandoned building just behind the truck across a wide sidewalk from the street. The boys crossed and sat on the curb. Tommy had brought a deck of cards and they made it appear they were playing.

At nine fifteen they spotted a man that could have been Mickey. He was still at some distance, approaching the bar from the west along the sidewalk. He paid no attention to the boys and turned into the bar. Gary stretched – the signal they had established so Jackson would know they had spotted the man.

"So, now what?" Gary asked.

"Not sure. I suppose one of us should try and go inside

and talk to him.”

“That sounds unbelievably dangerous,” Gary said.  
“You can go.”

Tommy stood.

“I was just kidding little bro. I’ll go. Give me some help with what I should say.”

“I’m thinking just an honest, straight forward approach. It all comes down to Mickey being willing to come clean about his role in Dad’s death – now that he’s dying himself.

“Okay. Honesty is not usually my first approach to things but I’ll give it a try.”

It had only been partly a joke. Gary was basically a good kid but he had a long history of mostly harmless fibs, falsehoods and out and out lies following in his wake. That was the one area in which he had a truly creative gift.

He moved to the side of the door and waited for a small group of people to arrive. He followed them inside and immediately moved into the shadows along the left wall. He looked up and down the row of stools – no Mickey to be seen. He scanned the tables. There he was, clear at the back. It would be difficult to move the full length of the room without being seen and probably get thrown out.

Again, he waited for a small group that would shield him from the bar keeper. He moved with them toward the rear of the room, staying on the side opposite the bar and managed his way past Mickey clear to the back wall. Tommy watched through the big window out front. Gary was tall enough to not immediately stick out as a kid. He kept his head down and had pulled the bill of his cap low to cover much of his face. They caught each other’s eyes – Gary and Tommy. Gary pointed to the door in the back wall. Tommy noticed, but didn’t completely understand. An emergency escape route, perhaps.

Mickey occupied the chair that faced toward the front of the room. He was nursing a drink of some kind. Gary moved toward him and, without a word, slipped into the chair on the

front side of the table. From that angle, Tommy couldn't really see much of him other than the back of his head. In fact, his body blocked Mickey and he couldn't see him either.

Tommy figured it was a good sign that Mickey didn't immediately make a scene of some kind. Maybe they were sitting in silence. Maybe they were talking. Tommy had no way of knowing.

Presently they stood. Mickey put one arm around Gary's waist. His other hand was inside his own jacket. Tommy panicked. Could the man have a gun? Was his brother in real danger?

They slowly walked toward the back wall. Gary opened the door and the two of them disappeared outside.

Tommy motioned for Jackson who came on the run. He followed Tommy into the alley and had soon been brought up to speed on what had taken place. It was difficult to believe that what had happened could have been a good thing. Tommy brushed back a tear. Jackson took the lead.

///

## **CHAPTER EIGHT:**

The alley was pitch black. The one that led in from the street met a second at a right angle. It ran behind the buildings that fronted on Baxter Avenue. There were only a few dim lights on the backs of the buildings. Tommy and Jackson could make out two figures no longer close together. It appeared Gary had gotten away from Mickey and had begun climbing a fire escape. He was fast and agile like a young monkey. Mickey was slow and overweight and, according to the report, sick with a lung disease. As he passed one of the lights it became clear that he did have a hand gun. As he climbed he stopped on several occasions and tried to get a bead on Gary. Through the maze of iron steps and supports he couldn't get a clear shot.

Tommy and Jackson watched helplessly from the alley floor. Presently, it became clear that Gary had run into difficulties. Apparently, the final section of steps that led from the roof had come loose from the building and when he put his weight on it, it leaned far away from the building. It would not provide escape for Gary to the roof.

Mickey continued to climb. He was still two stories below the point at which Gary had become stranded. Tommy broke loose from Jackson and ran toward the fire escape, screaming nonsense just to draw Mickey's attention. The big man turned and then looked back and forth between Gary above him and Tommy below. He gave up the climb and began moving back down toward the alley.

Jackson dialed 911 and then set out after Tommy. As he understood it, the GPS in his phone would lead the 911 responders to his position. He put it back in his pocket and moved cautiously in the direction of the fire escape. Tommy was running a zig zag route continuing to scream at the man. Gary understood it was a diversion aimed at saving him. He broke a window on the fourth floor and entered. He was at least out of the line of fire – safe for the time being.

Tommy had an idea. He called out in a very clear, deep, voice: "Officer Jackson, take a shot if you have it."

Mickey stopped in his tracks, turned, and began climbing the steps again. Tommy managed to make a very convincing siren sound. Jackson, taking a clue from the boy, held his flashlight high and to the right away from his body and clicked it on and off, hoping that in the darkness, Mickey, in his panic and alcohol induced state, would take it for a police light.

As Mickey reached the landing at the third floor, he clutched his chest and slumped to the iron grating that formed the floor.

Gary, who had been watching the proceedings from the shadows of the room he had entered, emerged back onto the fire escape and hurried down toward where Mickey lay. He wrested the gun from the man's nearly helpless hand and tossed it down into the alley. He rolled the man onto his back and straightened his body out on the landing, beginning CPR.

"Need some help up here, guys," he called.

Tommy was already half way up the steps. They were soon working on the big man together – pumping his chest and breathing into his mouth. Jackson entered the bar and asked if there was a doctor or other medical personnel in



there. No one came forward. He returned to the alley and took out his phone prepared to try 911 a second time.

A police car entered the alley and Jackson motioned it toward him. He explained the situation and the officers had soon taken over. EMT's arrived and Mickey was transported to the nearest hospital.

"You boys undoubtedly saved the man's life," one of the policemen said. "He a friend?"

"More like an important person in our lives," Tommy said.

He then went on to lay out the entire set of circumstances. One officer called dispatch: "Secure the victim from Baxter Street and treat him as a suspect in a murder."

Jackson asked that they be kept informed of the man's condition and gave the officers the name of the boy's attorney.

\* \* \*

Mid-morning the following day, Jackson received a call from the officer.

"Mickey Small is stable at Memorial Hospital. He is asking to see the boys – Gary and Tommy Wentworth. Can you meet me there at eleven?"

"Certainly. Should the boy's attorney be present?"

"That's your call. Not really necessary. They aren't being accused of anything. Use your own judgment. Somebody from the State's Attorney's office will be present."

At 11:05 they entered the hospital room. Mickey was hooked up to several machines the boys had only ever seen on TV programs. Mickey turned his head to look at Gary – the only one he recognized, of course.

"Sorry. Thanks," he said.

It had been short and to the point and offered with no real emotion or sincerity, but then he was clearly a very sick man.

Gary chose not to respond. What was there to say? He

sure wasn't going to say something dumb like, "It's okay. We all have times when we chase kids up fire escapes with guns blazing."

Mickey looked at a man in a suit and tie who had been standing in a corner. He turned out to be from the State's Attorney's office. Mickey pointed with one finger to a paper on the stand beside his bed. The man picked it up and began speaking.

"Mr. Small has dictated a full confession to the murder of your father and the robbery of your home some years ago. Our office has already begun proceedings to have the conviction of your mother set aside. The process should take no more than a week.

Tommy let his tears flow freely. Gary sniffed and went to the window, looking outside just to be looking outside.

The officer motioned for them to leave. At the door Tommy turned back toward Mickey.

"Thank you for doing the right thing, Sir – in the end, I mean."

Jackson had waited in the hall, but had heard what had transpired in the room (he DID have super hearing, remember!).

Tommy had questions.

"How do we tell granddad? When do we tell granddad? Who should tell granddad? Do you think mom already knows? Has our attorney been told yet? Exactly what does it mean to have a verdict set aside? Will there have to be a new trial?"

"I think I can answer the last two questions," Jackson said. "There will not need to be a new trial. Your mother is already essentially a free person. It's just a matter of winding the way through the red tape and paper work."

Then as an afterthought he added: "Perhaps the three of us need to be present when your grandfather is given the news provided his attorney has not already notified him."

When they arrived home they immediately sensed that something was very wrong – there stood their grandfather on the front porch waiting for them. Unless he wore a full face smile the boys could never tell what was going on inside his head. At that moment, there was no smile.

As they approached, fully uncertain of what was about to take place, he opened his arms and drew them close.

“I am sorry for the terrible error I committed. I hope you and your mother will be able to forgive me but I fully understand if you cannot. My home will continue to be your home if you want it that way. You need to know that the two of you are the joy of my life. It is hard to think about not having our time together every evening around the dinner table.”

The boys understood they were not required to respond and they didn't, except for extending his embrace for as long as seemed reasonable.

\* \* \*

The day finally came. The boys were nervous and made no effort to hide it. Madge was excited and she'd been baking for three days. Jackson was pleased that things were working out so well, but was disheartened by the possibility that the boys might leave his care to go live with their mother. Through it all Mr. Wentworth remained stoic (unemotional – at least on the outside).

The boys had helped Jackson wash and wax the largest of the limos. It shined – glistened – in the sun. Jackson drove. Mr. Wentworth sat in the center of the wide, rear seat with Gary on his right and Tommy on his left. It was seven a.m. when they pulled out of the driveway on their way to Bridgeton. Their mother was to leave the prison at one p.m. They would be there to meet her.

In fact, they arrived a half hour early. Jackson parked close to the door through which she would reenter her family's life. Gary tried hard to remember how she looked, wondering how she would have changed during those years away. Tommy had no real memory of her face, but he had studied

pictures until it seemed like a memory.'

Prisons were run according to precise schedules. At exactly one o'clock the door opened. There she stood. The boys ran to her. It was a long and wonderful embrace that followed. Their new life as a family had begun: mother and sons, Madge and Jackson, and the elder Mr. Wentworth, all determined to form the finest, most loving family that had ever graced the grand old mansion known as Wentworth Manor.

THE END

\* \* \*

HEY!

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