

SHADOWS

BEYOND THE SHADOWS OF SUMMER

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Jonathan Zensky



Beyond the Shadows of Summer

By Jonathan Zemsky

*This book is dedicated to my wife and
best friend, Stephanie.*

Acknowledgments

This story was made possible because of many incredible people, and I would like to thank them for everything they've done.

To Peter Charbonneau, my friend, editor, and cover artist. Thank you for all of your hard work and dedication to this project. I will be forever grateful for everything you've done.

To Stephanie Zemsky, my wife, and proof editor. Thank you for your inspiration, support, and understanding. You are everything to me.

To all of my friends and family who have supported me through this endeavor. This book is a celebration of our time together. Thank you for being a part of my life.

Beyond the Shadows of Summer

Chapter One

A Final Picture

I loved to draw.

Cartoons, comics, scenery. You name it, I'd draw it. And I was damn good too!

Mrs. Stephenson, my art teacher, was so impressed with my talent that she wanted me to enter some of my sketches into a local drawing contest. I was truly considering the idea until August 5th, 1954 at 1:35 pm. That's when my kid brother died.

I can remember the events of that day all too well. I was shaking, but not by choice. Brand had a solid grip on my pajamas as he jarred my body back and forth, up and down. He was attempting to wake me up and get me out of bed. I opened my eyes and squinted through my hand at the sun's rays that had worked their way through our half-opened window.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"It's time for ball," he said. He disappeared to the closet for a moment and returned with my glove in his hands. He flung it towards my stomach but I crunched up in time to prevent the blow.

"You're gonna get it," I said to him.

"You've been saying that for...forever," he replied, wearing a smile.

"Yeah, but this time I might mean it," I said, unable to keep my own smile in.

After getting dressed, I dashed down the stairs skipping four or five at a time. It was amazing that the bat, ball, glove, sketch pad, and pencil I was cradling didn't fall from my arms. Brand was already at the front door waiting for me. His sketchpad and pencil were tightly tucked under his right arm and his glove was, as it always was, on his hand. I swear that some nights he slept with a glove on one hand and a pencil clutched in the other.

“We’re goin’ to the ball field mom,” I yelled back up the stairs.

She quickly replied, “James, look after your brother and take some soda pop change with you.” I grabbed twenty-five cents from the cookie jar on the kitchen counter and Brand and I headed out the door.

“Look after your brother” echoed in my mind. A phrase I must have heard a thousand times and something I didn’t need to be told. I always watched over him like a hawk. I had to; his safety, security, and happiness were my life.

Brand was small for his age and somewhat frail due to the rare blood disease he had since birth. What he didn’t have in physical size, however, he made up for in heart and courage. He knew, as we all did, that he wouldn’t live to see his 20th birthday. The amazing thing was Brand never complained, or cried about his disease. He never brought it up and I was just fine with that.

We made our way across the lawn and past the two houses that separated ours from Patterson Avenue. Our road, Summer Street, was always quiet, but today it seemed as if *everyone* was sleeping in. We were the only ones around. It was a pleasant feeling. With just a quick right turn onto Patterson we were in business. The field was almost a straight shot from there, just ten blocks up the road; Five to town and another five to the field.

The corner of Patterson and Main was the home of Joe’s Soda Shop. Joe’s overlooked the town square, a square that was always buzzing with the locals and provided a place for kids to buy candy, sodas, even toys. Adults gathered there to get their hair cut, purchase beer and smokes, and trade town gossip. Chap’s Hardware, The Corner Store - which was a country store, and Ralph’s Hobby Shop were a few of the mainstays.

Joe’s, however, was, by far, our favorite. It was our second home. Joe knew our favorite flavor of soda, ice cream and probably even our shoe sizes. He was always sliding us free stuff like an extra piece of candy or a refill on a soda. He’d probably give you half his store if you would sit

and chat with him for a few minutes. Joe seemed awful lonely. Mom said that he did something wrong in his marriage and now wasn't allowed to see his wife and kid. I felt sorry for him; I couldn't figure what he could have done that was so bad.

As we walked by Joe's we saw old Hank Dawson sitting at the counter top. He was using his hands to tell one of his many wild stories. His hat almost came off during one outburst. He and Joe made a great pair, a storyteller and his audience.

Joe waved to us as we walked by and we returned the gesture. It was amazing to me that he always knew when we were near. I swear once he was picking up scraps off the floor in the back room and still managed to poke his hand through the door at the precise time to deliver the wave. We planned, as always, to stop at Joe's on the way home, after working up a sweat at the ball field.

As Brand and I walked the remaining few blocks to the field, images began flickering through my mind like a slide show gone haywire. Brand's first ride on the Ferris Wheel at the Illinois State Fair, the last piggy-back ride I gave him before he was too damn heavy to carry, and the incredibly detailed drawing he sketched of our family, which was still on display at Simmons Elementary School. I can still remember watching him draw that picture. It took him every waking hour of three straight weeks to complete it. It was his most prized sketch. He beamed any time one of us mentioned it.

At 11 years of age, Brand's artistic ability was extremely advanced. Heck, it was advanced for any age as far as I was concerned.

He drew well-proportioned people and animals, three-dimensional scenic views and even used shadows to bring depth to his creations. Yet his strongest skill might have been his ability to capture people's emotions on paper. This is what haunted me the most about the picture hanging at Simmons. It was almost a photographic image of Brand, me, my mom, and dad, left to right. We were standing outside the

fairgrounds with the rides barely visible in the background. Everyone had a great big smile, except me. I had this worried look about my face.

Is this what my brother thought of me? Did he feel that I didn't have as much fun as everyone else? Well, I *did*. I just needed to know that he was ok. It helped me sleep at night. He needed me and I liked being needed. I think Brand appreciated my caring, but lately he seemed frustrated when I'd offer my help. I wondered if he thought of me as all worry and no fun. The picture at Simmons sure made it look that way.

But now was not a time for worrying, it was a time for baseball. Baseball at Chapman Field.

Chapman Field was unlike any ball field in the area. It was set back, through a long path of Oak trees, far enough so you could barely hear the cars pass and the children laughing on the swings. The grass was Crayola green and would cushion your feet with each step. The field looked, smelled and even tasted like baseball. The dirt was raked daily and fresh chalk lines were meticulously laid by Bert, the grounds keeper.

Brand and I often sat and watched in amazement as we waited for Bert to finish. We always got a kick out of him when he yelled, "Play Ball!" after he laid down the last chalk specks at home plate. We swore he did that even when he was the only one there.

Bert was a loner. A tall, muscular man with hands the size of Frisbees. He was missing a pinky finger on his left hand which attracted much attention. Everyone seemed to have their own story as to how he lost it. Many accounts involved Bert losing his finger in a fight. Funny thing was I never saw him even get mad, let alone fight with anyone.

Bert didn't have many friends, as far as I could tell. My friends and I, including Joe, were the only people I knew that gave him the time of day. White people didn't often talk to coloreds.

Bert was a man of few words but the ones he spoke always seemed to be of great weight and importance. The

only problem was they didn't make any sense, at least not to me. I would just nod back to him in agreement as if to say, "I'll think about that one and get back to you."

As my feet hit the infield grass I felt a wave of calm come over me. I stood at the pitcher's mound and pretended to throw a pitch before I walked over to the bench to put down my drawing stuff. Brand was already in position at first base, waiting for me to take my place at shortstop. Today, Bert was nowhere to be found. He was probably working at his other job at the garage in town.

"Brand the Man," as I loved to call him, was a small target at first. He was barely four feet tall and sixty pounds soaking wet. His jet black hair poked out from underneath his Cardinals hat which he wore slightly tilted to the left. His mouth was filled with so much gum that he couldn't force his lips to touch if he tried. His blue eyes glistened with excitement.

I cleared some pebbles away from my feet and got in the ready stance at short. Immediately, Brand fired a grounder in the hole. I backhanded it and rifled it to first, a little low but Brand had no problem picking it out of the dirt. His hands were lightning fast.

The next ball was to my left. I snared it and zipped it back to Brand's glove, causing a puff of dirt to fly from the pocket. I loved to throw hard.

The third ball took a funny hop off the grass and went between my legs.

"Get your ass down, James," Brand yelled.

I ran into the outfield to get the ball, embarrassed at being reprimanded by my younger brother. I turned and threw it to first without even looking. The ball hit well short of Brand and bounced up into his body. He immediately fell to the ground clutching his chest, an agonizing grimace on his small face.

I ran towards him in a blind panic. With each step I felt my stomach tighten. The grass and dirt beneath my feet seemed to slow my pace but I quickly overcame them and sprinted across the diamond to where Brand lay, head resting

against the first base bag. I stood over him as he winced in pain. He motioned for me to come closer and a bead of sweat, powered by terror, ran down my forehead.

“Brand!! Are you alright?” I was almost afraid to get too close to where I would have to see the damage. He again motioned for me to come closer. I felt each beat of my heart in my throat and head.

Finally he whispered, “You throw like a sissy too,” and began chuckling. I fell to my knees in relief and then felt a wave of anger form in my gut.

“How could you do that to me?” I yelled at him. “I thought you were dead!”

“Not yet, punk,” he replied in his favorite movie gangster voice.

I was fuming at this point. I had so many emotions battling that I didn’t know how to react.

“Calm down.” Brand realized I was not taking the joke well at all. “You gotta relax,” he continued as he got to his feet.

I reluctantly went back to shortstop and we continued our ritual for about a half-hour. My heart wasn’t fully into it following Brand’s stunt. I think he realized this and said, after awhile, that he needed a drink and a break. He was excellent at knowing how you were feeling and what you were thinking at almost every point in time.

“I think we should do some drawing now,” Brand said.

“Already?”

“Yeah already! I’m tired of chasing down your crappy throws.”

I laughed and pulled the brim of his hat down past his eyes. I couldn’t stay mad at him, ever.

We walked over to the backstop and sat down, poised to begin the final phase of our Saturday morning ritual. Brand coughed some of the dust from the field out of his lungs and continued on a sketch from the previous week. He wouldn’t let me see this one until it was done. I picked up where I had left off on a drawing of Chapman Field. I had never tried to

sketch it before. I planned to get a frame for it and give it to Brand for his next birthday.

A symphony of gentle sounds surrounded us; the wind across the grass, the scraping of the sharpened pencils against the paper, and the occasional chirp of birds off in the distance. We were in our sanctuary where there was no stress, arguments, and certainly no rare, fatal blood diseases.

“Hey James,” Brand turned to me with a serious look on his face.

“Yeah?” I answered back.

He continued, “I had a strange dream last night. I guess it was more of a nightmare.”

Something in his voice caused me to swallow hard before I inquired about his dream. “What was it about?”

“It was about you. You had...um...died.”

I was beginning to get annoyed again. “Now why would you have a dream like that Brand?”

“I don’t know, I think I just worry about you a lot.”

“You worry about me?” I asked with a huge tint of irony in my voice.

“Yeah because I don’t know if I’m going to make it, James.”

There was complete silence that seemed to last for hours before Brand repeated, “I don’t know if I’m going to make it.”

“Yeah, I heard you,” I replied, softly this time. The anger was building again. “Why would you say that, Brand? You’re doin’ just fine. You were even able to trap some of my worst throws today.”

“Look, this isn’t about baseball,” Brand quickly responded. “I just feel different lately.”

“Well let’s tell mom, she can get you to Doc Williams and we can see if...”

“No!” Brand interrupted. “You’ve heard what all of the doctors said. There is nothing they can do.” Brand’s voice lowered as he said in defeat, “There is nothing anyone can do.”

“I want you to do just one favor for me if I go soon.” Brand tilted his head down in an effort to have the brim of his cap hide the tears that were beginning to streak down his face. He raised his eyes to lock on mine. “I want you...” He began but stopped short as emotion overcame him.

“Yeah bro, what is it?” I felt my own tears form.

“Come visit me. I don’t want to be alone. Bring your sketch book and come draw with me.”

“That is ridiculous. I don’t want to talk about it, I can’t...”

“Just promise me!” he pleaded, placing his hand on my shoulder, his blue eyes piercing through mine.

“Sure, pal, whatever you say,” I answered. I didn’t know how to react to such a morbid request. I suddenly felt the need to be home and to lock Brand in the house, away from anything that could harm him. “You wanna just head home?” I asked him.

“Nah, that soda would do my dry throat some good,” he replied.

Sadness weighed heavily on my heart as we walked silently to Joe’s. Our post-baseball, post-sketching walks usually consisted of my brother and I chatting it up about who had made the best play or whose current drawing was more interesting. At this moment, I was too busy trying to forget what Brand had just said to me to take the risk of more conversation. We exited the tree path and made our way through the square, its buzz now registered to me as a low-grade hum. We left the square, and turned the corner, just a block from Joe’s.

When I looked up from my feet, Brand was no more than a few paces in front. He stopped suddenly and appeared frozen in time, his head and trunk motionless. I looked up ahead of him to see what had caught his attention but saw nothing other than a few cars passing by.

Then I heard the sound which has stayed with me to this day; a gulp for air that seemed as if it came from someone drowning. I threw down everything and ran to my brother’s

aid. I arrived just in time to catch him as his legs gave way and he spun to the ground in my arms.

All of my stuff was strewn about the street in a complete mess. Sketchbook pages were flying through the air like paper doves. Brand's things were neatly lying at his feet. His sketchbook lay open, revealing the drawing he had been working on. It was the best work he'd ever done. A flawless depiction of two brothers sitting and sketching.

And smiling.

I carried my dead brother the remaining five blocks to our house where I handed him to my mom, sixty pounds soaking wet with my tears.

Chapter Two One Year Later

Wednesday, August 17, 1955.

I arrived early to my friend Fizz's house, that Wednesday, because I couldn't sit still at home. My dad's office was closed and he was home, reading the paper. My mom was keeping busy in the kitchen, putting away a set of vomit-green dishes she recently received through mail order. Not a word was spoken between them until noon. Don't get me wrong, they weren't mad at each other. This is just how things were at my house now. A lot of extreme quiet interrupted by occasional sighs.

The quiet was sometimes comforting. If you didn't have to converse, then you wouldn't have to hear or say painful beginnings of sentences like, "I wish Brand was able to..." or, "Hey, remember when Brand..."

Unfortunately, with the quiet came some painful disadvantages. Void of involvement in conversation and other distractions, my brain would fill the space and time with its own unnerving thoughts. Thoughts about the past. Thoughts of Brand. These were the most painful times for me and since the anniversary it had gotten worse. This is why I needed to escape early from my house, and there was no better retreat than Fizz's basement.

I delivered the secret knock to the heavy, metal doors of the basement. A series of knuckle raps, slaps, drum rolls and taps. It was a little extreme but a necessary guard from unwanted intruders.

I heard nothing. This meant Fizz was upstairs because he always answered the secret knock within a few seconds. I noticed, however, that the left door was propped open with a thick piece of wood. I hesitated for a moment and wondered if I had told Fizz I would be coming early. Either way, he would be expecting me by 1pm, so I didn't feel bad about entering. I wedged my fingers under the brown-painted metal

and lifted with all of my might until it ‘squanked’ open. As I expected, Fizz wasn’t there.

Fizz’s dad finished and decorated the basement to escape his marriage before the divorce papers had even been served. “The Cellar,” as we reverently called it, was a virtual museum. It couldn’t have been decorated any better by a fourteen-year old. Comic books and baseball cards painted the walls, interrupted only by posters of movie stars and Rock ‘n’ Roll singers. If you wanted to see Batman, Stan Musial, Buddy Holly, and Marilyn Monroe in the same room, this was your chance. The contrast of lighting in The Cellar created the illusion that the images were about to jump off the wall and spring into action. It was the coolest place in town.

Every year, on the day before the start of the fair, my brother and I, along with my friends Costello, G-Man, and Fizz gathered in The Cellar. We would play cards, talk up our favorite baseball players, and chat about which girls we wanted to kiss. We were one less this year but nobody mentioned it, at least not in my presence.

I sat on the couch and looked down at a huge mountain of baseball cards that almost entirely covered the deep-blue coffee table that sat at my feet. Within seconds I was organizing them by team, and in alphabetical order. Although I was no longer a big fan of baseball cards, I needed something to do until Fizz joined me.

“Rap-a-tap, dttlit-dttlit, rap-a-tap, dttlit-pop.” Someone had delivered the secret knock, and by the precise way it was performed, I immediately knew who was at the door. I dropped the remaining cards I was holding to answer it.

“Bump-bump slap, bump-bump dtillit-slap.” I unlatched the door and pushed it up, which allowed the visitor’s long-black fingers to slide underneath.

“W-w-what’s up, partner?” G-Man said as he lifted the door open and slipped into The Cellar.

Garrison Henry Day, “G-Man”, was the oldest in the bunch and my closest friend. He was a colored boy.

Not too many people bothered about him because he had quite the intimidating look. He was tall, lean, and could throw a ball from here 'til next week. His hands were bigger than my head and his voice was deeper than a hole to China. All of his features were as dark as night; his skin, hair, and eyes. He dressed neat and clean and often caught the attention of the ladies.

He said the least out of the crew. This was partly because he stuttered, but mostly because he didn't like to tell stories.

"T-t-truth and facts is where it's at," he would always say. G-Man was the opposite of our friend Fizz, who he mocked all of the time for his ridiculous tales and antics.

We walked towards the couch but before we were able to sit, we heard a slam, a squeak, another slam, and what sounded like a stampede of buffalo heading down the stairs. The figure hit the floor, rolled into a somersault, leapt in the air, flew over the back of the couch, and landed just between where G-Man and I were going to sit.

"Afternoon gerts. Hey, where's our friend, the round one?" Fizz questioned.

Christopher Frederick Izzo, "Fizz", was the life and energy of our group of friends. Our batteries, if you will. He was tall, awkwardly thin, and wound up like a teenage tornado. His short blonde hair and blue eyes were overshadowed by his red candy-stained lips. He always wore bib overalls and fashioned a slingshot in his back pocket. His mouth and body were in constant motion, which lent itself to Fizz's gift for impersonations. He could imitate almost anyone, make you laugh in an instant, and get you into trouble quicker than a hog could crap.

The Round One was, in fact, his best friend Costello. They had lived next to one another since birth. Costello always took the fall when one of Fizz's wacky plans blew up and never once ratted him out. In addition, Costello provided a safe haven for Fizz to escape his arguing parents, by leaving his bedroom window open. Even in the winter.

The three of us sat drinking Pabst Root Beer, pretending it was the real thing, awaiting Costello's arrival.

Fizz chimed in, "Have I got a story for you guys?"

"O-o-oh, here we go again!" G-Man exclaimed.

"Is this another story of alien dogs digging up pirate treasure in your backyard?" I asked.

"No, this is sports story. But that alien dog thing is legit." Fizz rebutted.

Fizz jumped off the couch and took center stage in the room where he began to talk about a boxing match he had seen last month on television with his dad. Floyd Patterson vs. Archie McBride. His voice changed into that of a fast-talking, dog-yelping ring announcer as the lights in The Cellar dimmed even further. A spotlight gently shone on Fizz displaying his sweaty forehead which he dabbed with a white handkerchief.

He began:

"A swirl of cigar smoke dances through the room. Flashbulbs crack as reporters try to capture the intensity and emotion on the faces of the fighters. The sound of the crowd fills the room and cheers and jeers are thrown at the boxers, 'Kill da bum!' and 'Get 'em champ!'"

The bell rings a copper tone and the ring announcer continues, 'It's da seventh round and da champ, Floyd Patterson looks stunned. He's just taken one on the chin and he seems to be hurt. He's hobbling around and his legs are beginning to give way. I can't believe this! He's looking out into the crowd in a daze instead of at the challenger! McBride seems astounded that he has, somehow, against all odds been able to hurt the champ. What's this? He's pausing for a second, maybe waiting for his moment to strike, and there he goes in for the kill. Listen to this crowd buzzing with anticipation. Two lefts to the body and anudder chop to the head, and he's down! That's it. Bout over. What a finish!'"

"Holy crap, Patterson...the champ went down?" I exclaimed, shattering Fizz's storybook world.

Fizz responded wearing a confident smirk on his face.

“Nah, those were *The Champ’s* punches and they were quicker than lightning.” Fizz furiously imitated the punches until he hurt his shoulder trying to throw a wild haymaker. He rubbed his shoulder, wincing in pain.

My mouth was agape. “What happened to McBride?” I already knew the answer.

Fizz hesitated and then yelled, “Whammo!” just as a large object struck the outside of the cellar door. The combination of Fizz’s loud mouth and the crash on the door practically shook the room. We all jumped.

“W-w-what the hell was that?” G-Man stuttered as everyone looked towards the source of the thud. Something had landed on The Cellar door. G-Man stood up and tried to push it open but it wouldn’t budge. We all joined him and waited for his direction.

“On three g-g-guys,” he ordered.

“One, Two, Three, arrrggghh!” We all grunted as the door slowly gave way. Costello’s body stood up, supported by the door, and then crumpled to the ground like a puppet whose strings were cut. He barely let out a cry as he fell towards the earth.

“Is he d-d-dead?” G-Man asked as we hesitantly moved closer. It was then that Costello let out the loudest fart to ever hit the Midwest. We jumped back four feet.

“The challenger is down!” I cried out and we all began to howl.

Chapter Three Chatter

“Wally Walnuts, Splatz, Wide Walter, Chocolate Bottoms, Corn-Guzzling McGirk, Hanky Spanky, Johnny Elbows, The Caped Disaster, Seven Thumbs Sally, and Gravy Crockett, were just a few of the nicknames that Walter Henry Platz wore proudly across his chest. None stuck, however, like the one he received from our manly gym teacher, Ms. Cranch. She told him that he looked like the chunky comedian, Lou Costello. And thus, a legend was born.

Short and pudgy wasn't just Costello's look, it was his way of life.

Don't get me wrong, he wasn't ugly, not ugly at all. In fact, he had strong, dark features that just seemed a little lost on a boyish face; a face that seemed to beg for forgiveness as the rest of his body knocked stuff over. He was well-groomed, well-mannered, and of course, well-fed.

Right now he was well-plastered to the ground.

After we peeled Costello off of the soil we made our way back into The Cellar to finish our annual ritual. The Four Aces' song, “Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing” played softly in the background as we sat back down to our root beers. Well, everyone sat except Costello, who, on his still wobbly legs, began taunting us like a little brat.

“Guess who's coming to the fair? Guess who's coming to the fair?” he said in a high pitched squeal. Costello looked around at the wide eyes he created with his question. The pause was killing me.

“Who?” Fizz yelled out.

“It begins with an ‘M’,” Costello said, relishing a rare opportunity to tease us.

“M-M-Musial?” G-Man called out, hopefully.

Costello paused again and my mind buzzed with the idea that I might meet Stan-The-Man, in person.

“Nope, try again,” Costello responded as his huge smile made its way from ear to ear. “M...a,” he continued, trying to hold on to his moment of power.

Fizz couldn’t take it anymore. “I will shove this bottle so far up your ass that you will be burping the Pabst Root Bear Jingle if you don’t tell us!”

Costello paused again. It was now a matter of life and death. He had crossed the line from excitement to danger and he knew it. He did the only remaining sensible thing, he caved.

“Mamie Van Doren, that’s who,” he said, pointing past us to the far wall of The Cellar. At once our heads slowly turned, following the line of his outstretched finger to the poster of Mamie Van Doren and her gigantoid bizangas on The Cellar wall. It may sound strange, but at the moment we looked, her hooters seemed to heave forward off the wall, if only for a split second.

The poster of the movie “All American” had been on Fizz’s wall since the summer of ’53, when he and his dad had seen it together at the Fairmount Theater. We all knew the general story since we saw the movie four days in a row the following summer during its re-release. A man, played by Tony Curtis, solidifies his status as an All-American football player through his performance in the championship game. His parents never make it to the game. They die on the way in a car crash. The man leaves the game of football to study to become an architect. Enter Susie Ward, a love interest, with a shape that fourteen year-old dreams are made of.

If you want the rest of the plot you’ll have to ask someone else because we were focused on only two things for the rest of the movie. Don’t get me wrong, we heard the actors speak and we’re pretty sure it was English but we still couldn’t make sense of it after Mamie’s entrance. Not a single man or boy blinked for forty-five straight minutes.

“Wooooooooh!” Fizz yelped shooting out of his seat like a hormone rocket. “You have got to be kidding me,” he

said with bulging eyes. “*This* Mamie Van Doren?” he pointed to the poster.

“Yup,” Costello replied. He folded his arms, triumphantly.

Fizz jumped across the room, threw Costello down on the couch and sat on top of him with his root beer tilted and ready to pour.

“Tell me you’re not kidding or you get a root beer shampoo.”

Costello didn’t even say a word. He just looked back at him with the most serious expression he could muster up. Fizz slowly got up and slid next to Costello on the couch. He then took a deep breath, smiled, and in a cool, calm voice said, “Let’s discuss our work assignments for the fair, shall we?”

Our first year of working at the fair had been set for months now. With a little help from my parents, G-Man and I landed a job at the ice cream stand. The man who hired us was a kind, elder chap by the name of Mr. Curren. My parents always sat next to him at church. He owned and operated two stands that were shaped and decorated like cows. He also ran the main stand in the dairy building. He sold tantalizing soft ice cream that you could get in a cone or cup with your choice of toppings. It was so good that it made my eyes roll to the back of my head during the first few licks.

“You’re going to turn into cows one of these days,” my mom would say to Brand and me because we would eat so much of it during the fair.

Alex Pample would also be working with us. He was an extreme weirdo. He talked little, smiled little, and couldn’t seem to separate his finger from his nose. The thought of him handling someone’s ice cream made me sick.

I could just see it now: “What kind of topping would you like, ma’am?” Alex would say as he pulls a ripe green goblin from his nose. G-Man and I already decided that Alex

would be in charge of cleaning the machines; we'd make sure he didn't touch any of the ice cream.

Our cow stand was near the main gate entrance. Some fair workers had a great view of the dive show or the main stages where the musicians played. Our view consisted, nearest to farthest, of a narrow strip of street, a corndog stand, and the exposition building. One couldn't be too picky about their first job at the fair. In fact, it was my first job ever.

"Y-y-you take what you can get," G-Man said to me when he heard about the opportunity. He put it so simply at the time; it immediately calmed my fears of entering the realm of the gainfully employed.

Fizz and Costello were hired to work at one of the many corndog stands at the fair. They would be slinging their dogs at the end of the main entrance strip, within listening distance of the main stands. They'd also be much closer to the action than us.

I was sure this would drive Fizz crazy, knowing that he had to be working while Mamie Van Doren could be appearing at any time just up the road. I could see the smoke coming out of his head already as he was beginning to think of different ways to leave his post in search of his one true love: Woman with big boobs.

So, how can a man leave his best friend alone to handle an angry crowd demanding hot-doggedy goodness, you ask? Simple.

Fizz had no morals and he and Costello were set to work for the oldest man in the town of Springfield, Mr. Swift. Yeah, I know the name is hard to believe but even a young Mr. Swift has to get old at some point.

Mr. Swift was 75, bald, hard of hearing, and almost completely blind. He was so slow; he couldn't outrun an overweight chipmunk on crutches. His cane was the only thing preventing him from toppling to the ground. He was no match for the wily, blonde-haired, sugar-powered scheme master that would soon turn his corndog stand upside down.

Chapter Four The Longest Walk

Thursday August 18th, 1955.

The first day of the fair. It had been just a little over a year since my brother's death and two major things had gone unchanged.

The first thing was that I had not visited my brother, as he had requested. My parents hinted about this one often, but had not yet pushed me to go. I wasn't sure they ever would. I think a part of me believed it was all a dream and one day Brand would come sprinting through the front door, glove in hand, to end the nightmare. If I wouldn't visit him then maybe it didn't happen, or that's what I kept telling myself. And anyway, I didn't see what visiting my brother was going to do for either one of us. It wouldn't help ease my pain, it would only make it more real. And nothing I could do for him or say to him would bring him back.

The other thing that went unchanged was our bedroom. Many of Brand's things were still visible throughout the room. A stack of forty of his favorite Bowman baseball cards was piled on the dresser just beneath the mirror. Each morning when I brushed my hair, I would catch a glimpse of the top card, Stan-The-Man. Three short piles of Brand's comics sat in the corner of the room. One was purposefully covered with a Mad Magazine. It was a Frankenstein comic that had a drawing that freaked me out beyond belief, but I refused to move it or any of Brand's stuff.

I don't think that my parents were ready to let go of him either. They hadn't removed a single item off the top of our red bunk beds; not his blanket, sheets or even his Cardinals pillow. Brand's mattress still sagged giving the illusion that it held a dark haired, baseball slinging, artist in its grasp. I swear I could still hear his breathing from the top bunk as I lie in bed slowly drifting off to sleep. Most nights, before his death, I would lie awake listening to Brand's deep and chunky breaths. I'd look up at his bunk and wait for the final

wheeze he would let out before drifting off to sleep. This was the signal that everything was all right; my permission-slip for dreamland.

After his death, I'd sometimes climb up to check his bed with hopeless anticipation. Each time I would try something different. Sometimes I pulled myself up, slowly, so as not to wake him and other times I shot my head up lightning fast to surprise him before he could leave. The outcome was always the same. No Brand. A few times I actually wept myself to sleep up there after leafing through his sketchbook. My mother never bothered me about it when she found me there. She'd just dutifully remake Brand's bunk in the morning. I'm not sure if she told my dad as he never mentioned it. He never mentioned much about Brand after his passing.

I kept Brand's sketch book on me at all times. It was with me at school, in my bike rack, and under my pillow at night. I guess I just felt closer to him with his sketches near. I used to think the pictures were trying to tell me something. I would study the pictures of me, my parents, the ball field, all of Brand's creations, for hours on end until they became a blur.

When my mom popped into my room at 6:00 am, on that first day of the fair, I was in no need of a wakeup call. I had had that nervous, excited sleep where one eye rests and the other watches the clock. I was ready to spring into action at a second's notice but thoughts of guilt were weighing on my chest like an elephant on a bicycle. How could I enjoy myself at a place where I pocketed so many great memories of my brother?

Another hot flash of guilt swept through me and turned butterflies to wasps in my stomach. I felt anxious and feverish.

My mom opened my door and gently made her way to the shades.

"Rise and shine," she said. She released the shades to reveal a bright, Midwestern, morning sun. She made sure not

to make direct eye contact with me as she crossed the room. Did she know what I was thinking?

Her matter-of-fact way of dealing with me in the morning always gave me the strength I needed to get through the day, or at least begin it.

I ate a quick breakfast and engaged in some small talk with my parents about the importance of my first day of work. Each person spoke quieter than the next.

“Mr. Curren will be counting on you boys,” lectured my dad as I stared out the window.

My mind wandered. I thought of the cap gun I had won for Brand at last year’s fair. I shot three balloons out with a BB gun and walked away a hero to my younger brother.

“A true cowboy. Just like Shane,” he had said as he took the prize from my arms.

My dad continued speaking as I continued daydreaming.

“Aren’t you forgetting something you need to wear?” he said.

He was referring to the pin-on button that all food-serving fair workers had to wear this year that read, “I have had a chest x-ray for your protection.” This policy was created in response to the outbreak of tuberculosis that was spreading ‘cross the country.’ My dad’s voice rose as he attempted to bring me back down to earth. “Son what kind of a worker do you want to be?”

The words, “a cow” came out of my mouth. My parents looked at each other as if to say, “This is *your* child,” and then they burst out laughing.

The reality of what I just said hit me and I began to giggle and then laugh uncontrollably along with my parents.

A chunky piece of sausage flew out of my dad’s mouth and hit me square in the forehead and stuck where it struck. My eyes crossed to focus on it, making my mom laugh even harder. We all did, to the point of tears. The three of us had not laughed that hard and with that freedom for over a year. I felt slightly better as I grabbed my button from the counter, hugged my parents, and made my way out the door.

“Thanks for the sausage Mom. And you too, Dad!” I called back to them.

“Good luck son!” my dad yelled as the door swung shut behind me.

I walked to the fair instead of riding my bike because there wasn't any room to put it near the big makeshift cow that would be my new home for the next eight days. As I began my two-mile walk to the fairgrounds, I checked to make sure I had Brand's sketch book with me.

The comic relief of my cow statement quickly began to fade as I made my way up Patterson Avenue towards Joe's. I hadn't stepped foot in his shop since Brand died. I often thought of walking around the shop altogether but it was smack dab in the most direct route through town. I usually sped up as I walked by to try to avoid making eye-contact with Joe.

The worst part was that I couldn't explain to him why. I don't know if I really had a reason.

Sometimes I accidentally caught his eye and he shot me a look that said, “Hey kid, it's alright.” I would quickly put my head down and speed on by.

As I began to do my usual dash, something, actually someone, in Joe's shop caught my eye and caused me to stop. A girl in a bright orange ball cap. I only got a quick glimpse of her face as she spun around just after I spotted her. There was something about this girl that I just couldn't figure out. I needed to see more but I didn't want Joe to catch a glimpse of me so I ducked around the corner, out of sight of the front window of the store. I slowly poked my head back and peered through the window with one eye.

Joe was hunched over, wiping down the countertops, too busy to notice me. The girl was sitting at a slight angle so I could see the side of her face. She sipped her ice cream soda, an interesting choice of beverage at 8:00am, I thought.

The overflow of ice cream dripped off the edge like lava flowing from a volcano, but colder, of course. The girl quickly attacked it with her tongue and I felt my head press up against the glass window.

This girl, now powered with chocolate and sugar, began pumping her legs as she sat on her stool. She performed a 360 degree spin, and as she whirled to face the front window, I jumped back around the corner once again. I waited a few seconds before moving back into position to see if she had returned to her straw and spoon.

There was something about her that prevented me from pulling my face away from that glass. Something about the way she moved, the way she looked, and the way she licked...the ice cream. Her energy at 8am was both disturbing and refreshing. It filled me up with a sense of exhilaration. My face was so firmly pushed up against the glass window that it probably looked like a giant white bug had flown into the glass and splattered its head.

Joe said something to her, she nodded, and he walked into the back room. She turned from him and towards something near the register. She looked around, as if to make sure the coast was clear, before leaning in to get a closer look. Her right hand was on the register, providing her some support as she used her left hand to reach for the item. As her hand came back, I saw an envelope in its grasp.

My eyes narrowed as my feelings of intrigue quickly turned to anger. She was stealing from Joe and right in front of me, if she knew I was there.

The culprit held the envelope up to the light, reached for the flap, and I had seen enough. The door flung open and I found myself on the other side of it, inside Joe's Soda Shop for the first time in over a year.

I tried to yell, "What the hell do you think you're doin'?" which, in my irate condition, came out something like, "Whaaat tink-a-doo?"

The girl turned to me and started giggling at my ridiculous comment. I couldn't believe it. I was being mocked by a teenage thief, wearing a ball cap.

"What did you say?" she inquired.

"Give me that!" I yelled, proving that I could actually speak English. I pulled the envelope out of her hand as I tried to save face in this embarrassing situation.

Joe must have heard the commotion as he rushed out of the back room and froze in his tracks. Our eyes locked and I barely heard him say, “Wait, James,” as I bolted out the door, the envelope firmly in my grasp.

I ran as fast as I could, to get away from the girl and the awkward situation with Joe. When I got past Main Street, I slowed to a walk to catch my breath. I turned around a few times, struggling with my desire to go back and talk to Joe and say I was sorry for acting like an ass for a whole year. I couldn’t face him. I also couldn’t deal with being in that girl’s presence for one more second. I decided to mail the envelope back to Joe later.

Chapter Five

Entrance Fee

Now on the verge of being late for my first day on the job, I quickly shoved Joe's envelope into my back pocket. I looked up at the bright blue sky and spotted a flock of geese flying in a v-pattern, taking turns honking at the sun. Their flight was smooth but sharp like an arrow heading for an apple. I watched as they disappeared behind the vision of the largest structure at the fair, a huge painted statue of Abraham Lincoln. This statue depicted a young Abe. No black suit and no stovepipe black hat. Just suspenders, a simple shirt, brown pants and a stern look on his face. He held an axe across his waist in both hands, as he watched over the fair twenty four, seven. The sight of him calmed me.

I stopped by the booth at the main gate to sign in. It appeared empty so I took the opportunity to blow off some steam and act up a little.

"James Sayer, booth 106 reporting for duty!" I exclaimed, saluting nobody.

The voice that followed almost knocked me off my feet. "At ease soldier", it said. The soft voice seemed to come from the very ground I was standing on. I looked straight into the booth again, and saw nothing. I rubbed my eyes and paused as I stood there contemplating my sanity.

"Do you need a pass?" the voice repeated and I looked down, way down, to find its host. A very elderly woman was sitting on a stool at the counter. Her head barely reached the top of the window. My face turned red and my voice cracked with embarrassment as I replied, "Yes, ma'am."

She handed me the pass and I hurried through the gate.

I had never experienced the fairgrounds like this before. No children screaming on rides. No smell of cotton candy or the melt-in-your-mouth mini doughnuts. No hullabaloo of frantic families speeding by to watch the tractor pull. The grounds were empty and silent but I sensed they were a powder-keg just waiting to be lit.

My life as a working man had begun. I had arrived early, even after the soda shop fiasco, to clean out the machines, and stock the cow with supplies. G-Man would be joining me at 9:30 or so, if he planned to be on time. We were scheduled to work 'til 6:30 when we would trade off with three older kids; two girls and a boy. The switch would come just in time for us to catch the twilight parade that kicked off the fair each year.

The cow was only a few hundred feet from the main gate entrance. On the way, I stopped to look up at Abe as if he was going to give me some important advice. I imagined if he could have, he probably would have said, "Hey kid, don't stand there or the birds will crap on you...just like they do on me."

I moved on, following the slight bend in the road until I saw the Expo building. I studied it for a moment and decided that I would go for a walkthrough later.

I was eager to see the drawings, paintings, and photographs that were entered into this year's art contest. Every year, prizes were given to people of all ages for their artistic creations. I, of course, loved the sketches. I respected painters and photographers but I just got a special feeling when seeing someone capture an object or scene using just a pencil. It felt to me like a direct extension of the mind and body. It also symbolized creation from nothing. With just a simple stick one could create a masterpiece. I also loved shadows. A pencil could create imagery that was both comforting and creepy. It could soften the ground beside a tree like a warm breeze or provide enough cover to hide a scary creature in a back alley or forest.

Brand and I used to spend hours walking the maze of art while most fairgoers went through in just a few minutes. We pretended we were a couple of critics, giving scores to each piece until we decided upon a winner. Then we each placed a rock on the ground, in front of our choice, as if our ribbon-of-the-earth would have some bearing on the real results. Actually, we hardly ever picked the real winner-to-be but as

far as we were concerned, receiving our ceremonial rocks was the highest honor at the fair.

The corndog stand that was situated across from my cow came into view. Walking by, I noticed that the service window of the stand was slightly open; enough to see someone's legs pacing back and forth. My fourteen year-old-mind stared at the legs for a moment, and then I snapped out of it and made my way towards the cow.

I walked to the side of the cow and found the door padlocked. The key that Mr. Curren had provided took some jiggling to release the rusty old lock. I pulled the chains away, opened the door and entered the cow. The air inside was heavy and stale and I swiftly unlatched and propped open the front window using two wooden boards. This began the de-stinking process and framed my view for the next week and a half.

The bright-yellow corndog stand was directly across from me with the Expo building just behind it and off to the right. I wondered who would be working at the stand. They'd be my neighbor for the summer.

As I turned around to survey the machines, I heard a scream. A loud shriek had come from a distance behind me, the kind of scream you would hear when Dracula was about to sink his teeth into the sweet neck of a young blonde. A spidery shiver went up my spine and I felt every hair on my body stand at attention. The sound of terror, fear, or worse, torture had emanated from the direction of that corndog stand.

I slipped through the side door and slowly made my way across the street. As the distance between me and the stand got shorter, my walk got slower, the excruciating shriek still echoing in my mind. As I stopped about five feet from the stand, I suddenly felt like I might be in danger.

"Is anyone in there?" I could see the shadow of someone through the service window. They were motionless. A bead of sweat traveled down my face. I took a small step closer to the stand and paused a few seconds.

"Hello?" No answer again.

I took two steps closer and turned my face to lean my ear up against the window. I began to say hello again but only got out the “H” when the window flew open.

“I’M OK!” a girl screamed in my face sending me hurdling through the air. As I reeled backwards, I recognized the source of the scream. The face of Millie Gargus, the most annoying girl in school, poked through the window. That was more terrifying than the scream itself.

I now realized who would be in my sights for the duration of the fair.

Luckily, my fall was partially broken by something behind me and my current state of fear caused me to bounce off it like a rubber ball off a wall. My sudden change in direction caused Joe’s envelope to fall out of my back pocket without my knowledge.

As I scrambled to my feet, I turned to view the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. She had silky, flowing, red hair and bright green eyes. She greeted me with a breathy, “Hello,” but spoken words failed me as I stared back at her.

“Are you ok?” she asked.

I shook my head like a cartoon character trying to snap myself out of the trance. She laughed and I immediately woke up.

Like a splash of water in the face of an unconscious man, I was revived by the cold sound of the rapid giggles of the girl from the soda shop.

Chapter Six Twilight Parade

G-Man knew something about me was off. When he strolled in around noon I was cleaning the ice cream machines like my life depended on it.

“W-w-what’s gotten into you, you bucking for a promotion?” he asked.

“Nah, it’s just my first *real* job and I want to make a good impression,” I answered. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye to see if he was buying it.

“Y-y-yeah, right,” he said, as he saw right through me. He changed the subject.

“H-h-hey, have you checked out the beauty who’s working with Millie across the way?”

“Nope,” I said and started cleaning even faster.

“S-s-she is beyond fine, a stroke of perfection,” he elaborated.

I started to grit my teeth as he continued on.

“A r-r-red-headed bombshell, a gift from the...”

“Enough!” I yelled at him and watched as his eyes widened with what looked like confusion. “SHE’S WHATEVER...JUST WHATEVER!”

“I-I-I thought you said you didn’t see her?” he said, rubbing his chin.

“Yeah, I saw her, and up close she’s just average. If you ask me, she and Millie make the perfect team...The Annoying Duo.” G-Man looked at with me wide eyes and I went back to work.

“M-m-man if she’s average, I’d like to see your choice of beauty queen.”

“Are you gonna help me or just stand there?” I said, disinterested in the current topic.

“Y-y-you are beyond my help Dr. Frozenstein. W-w-way beyond.”

The name Dr. Frozenstein played in my mind a few times until it sounded so ridiculous I had to laugh. G-Man’s

small dig at me lightened my mood a little, but my laugh was quickly stymied by a sudden uncomfortable feeling in my gut. I twitched and shot my head towards the window where nine fingers were now visible on the counter.

“Hey Bert,” I called out before he was able to pop his head through the window.

“Afternoon boys. Promises to be a wonderful showing this year.”

We nodded at him. “Hey Bert, you workin’ the stables again this year?” I asked.

“Yessir. You betcha. My 25th year at the fair. Man how the time flies. Before you know it you gentlemen will be on your 25th year,” he said with a strong grin.

“I’m not sure I ...”

Bert interrupted. “Keep a watch on those shadows. For they are often more revealing than the sun.”

G-Man and I looked at each other and just shrugged our shoulders. Bert was always saying strange stuff but, I swear, his comments were getting even more bizarre lately. By the time we looked back up to ask him what he had meant, he was gone.

Bert was an interesting mix of kind... and creepy. He was always cordial, but his deep raspy voice made him sound intimidating. His movements were graceful, like when he was laying chalk down on the field, but his oversized frame could scare off a pride of lions. And his handshake was more friendly than fierce, but there was that finger, or lack thereof.

Bert was the hardest working man I knew. He worked “double duty,” as did many people in Springfield. Betty Roberts, who worked the morning shift at “The Greasy Spoon,” spent her afternoons going door-to-door selling Avon products to middle-aged women. Gil Masters, a town fireman, pumped gas on weekends, and Bert, the Chapman Field groundskeeper worked in the stables at the fair.

Bert had no family in Springfield that we knew of, and needed the extra money to keep his small, two-bedroom apartment on Mason St. His mother died a long time ago and

he never met his father. Bert never married. He told me a few years ago he was still lookin' for the right lady.

Bert put a ton of pride into what others might have thought of as menial tasks. Chalking the ball field, shoveling horse manure, and bailing hay weren't the most celebrated jobs, but he talked about them like they were as vital as the president's.

"The mirror sees us all the same," he once said to me.

Bert was stellar at his jobs, too. The impeccable chalk lines he laid on Chapman Field were as immaculate as the coats on the horses he cleaned. Brand and I had visited the stables, which we referred to as Bert's stables, since I could remember. My friends also enjoyed the horses. They were the only things that seemed to have a calming effect on Fizz.

G-Man had a special interest in the stables, as well, but not because of the horses. He was in love with one of the riders, Marie Rae Wilder. Although she was two years older than him, she seemed to like him as well. Their relationship, however, had not made it past casual flirting. Sometimes it's hard to explain why people don't get together. In this case it was pretty easy; wealthy white girl from the west side of town and poor colored boy from the east side just don't mix. Some folks expend an awful lot of energy to make sure of it, too. G-Man and Marie both knew the rules, but decided to allow their hearts to pay the price.

When Alex Pample arrived at work, G-Man and I had already cleaned, primed and stocked the machines. We were armed with gallons of ice cream, two kinds of cones, and a slew of toppings. I greeted Alex and found myself staring at the dirty, tattered clothing barely hanging from his wiry frame.

I held back, but G-Man just couldn't. "H-h-hey Pample, you could have showered before your first day of work. I mean we're serving food here."

Alex blinked twice at G-Man, wiped the snot from his nose onto his sleeve, and just stood there staring off into the distance. The long silence that followed must have made G-

Man feel uncomfortable so he let it go. “Ah, d-d-don’t sweat it kid, just get your apron on and watch the master at work.”

G-Man loved to feel like he was the expert of everything. In fact, he usually was. He was the strongest, fastest, and smartest of the bunch and he didn’t mind telling you so. It didn’t bother me much because I knew he wasn’t all-confident.

He felt bad about his stuttering. Real bad.

One time he told me that he would trade half his brains and strength just to be able to speak like a normal person.

“I-I-I sound like a bumbling moron,” he told me. I didn’t answer him because I didn’t know what to say. In fact, that is why I never brought up the topic.

At around one o’clock that afternoon, we had our first customer, Fizz. We didn’t have a bell to ring for service so instead he decided to plant a pebble in my right shoulder with his slingshot. He could knock a pimple off your nose with that thing.

“Hey ladies and gernts!!!” he said.

“Hey Fizz”, I replied as I stepped to the counter to greet him.

“I’ll have a triple double scoop, with chocolate sprinkles, please,” he beamed.

“Fizz, that’s not even on the menu,” I said.

“Aw heck, just give me the biggest cone you can whip up.”

“Alright, keep your overalls on,” I replied.

I spun around and made the cone while G-Man and Fizz whispered to each other, barely out of my earshot.

I struggled to balance the top-heavy cone, which Fizz almost dropped, because he was looking at the corndog stand as I was handing it to him.

“Hey guys, you see the new honey?” Fizz asked.

“Y-y-yup. But James here must be going b-b-blind,” G-Man said.

“Been towin’ the line too much?” Fizz said as he shot me a sinister smile.

“Oh shut it,” I snapped.

“H-h-he told me just a minute ago that she was average,” G-Man said wearing a big smile across his face.

Fizz kept his eyes fixed on the girl and said, “Man, if she’s average you are the Creature from the Black Lagoon.” I thanked him for his compliment and was quickly distracted by something on his shirt.

He had taped something over his button. Instead of it reading, “I Have Had A Chest X-ray For Your Protection,” it now said, “I X-ray Chests.” G-Man burst out laughing when he read it but I wasn’t as amused.

“You’re not going to make it through one day! You’ll be fired for sure,” I told him.

“Nah, if ‘Ol Swifty can’t see the full moon on a clear night, he’s never gonna be able to read my button.”

I laughed off his cockiness and asked him where Costello was.

“I reckon’ he’s holdin’ down the fort.”

“You’re not takin’ advantage already are ya?” I said.

“Nope, this is my lunch break,” he said as he turned around again to glance at the redhead. “What a fox!”

“Whatever,” I said under my breath.

Before he left, Fizz gave us permission to talk to the girl at the corndog stand but said that Mamie Van Doren was off limits.

“She is *all* mine, for now and forever,” he said through a goofy smile. “Anyway, I gotta get back to work.”

“What a novel idea,” I said. “Costello’s probably panicking already.”

“Not *that* work, *this* work,” he said holding up the melting cone. He walked away chuckling as he licked ice cream and fudge from his finger to his elbow.

We had a few customers off and on for the next couple of hours which gave us the chance to get used to pouring the ice cream. It was an art form. You had to twist the cone or cup at the perfect speed to get the ideal swirling effect. I was great at it. Alex was also pretty good but G-Man...well, G-

Man stunk. His shirt had tasted more ice cream than our customers.

I rejoiced in this rare opportunity to tease him and he promptly punched me in the arm. The pain kept me quiet for awhile. G-Man was especially upset when Alex poured a perfect cone way before he did.

When quitting time, 6:30, finally came around, I was starving. The mini-doughnuts I had shared with G-Man earlier in the day were very tasty but just didn't hold me over. Thank goodness our replacements arrived on time.

Two girls and a guy: Sally, Jill, and Sid took over. They were high school seniors and were called in to be "The Responsible Crew" to clean up, lock up, and close out the register. I didn't mind, as long as I didn't have to work as the sun went down, I was happy. And besides, I had plenty of years of responsibility ahead of me. I didn't want to ruin my first job by smothering it with responsibility.

G-Man and I left quickly and without asking Alex to join us. The thought crossed my mind, but I figured seeing him hold a burger and a booger at the same time might send G-Man off the deep end.

As we walked past the front of our cow, I noticed that the corndog stand had had a shift change too. I quickly glanced around to see if the red-headed girl from the soda shop was anywhere in sight. I exhaled a long sigh of relief, when I saw no sign of her.

We met up with Fizz and Costello to grab some burgers and corndogs from the food tent. The sun had fallen beneath the horizon, and the darkening sky made everything appear crisp to the eyes.

This has always been my favorite time of day, even though it usually meant it was time to put the baseball gloves to rest. There was something magical about it. The bright colors faded and the shadows dissolved into the growing night. Everything turned a shade of green as it borrowed color from the grass and trees. It's too bad that this time of day went by so fast. In a quick blink, night was upon us.

As we finished our meal, we heard the sound of the parade approaching. Fizz jumped up on the table to get a better view. He probably wanted to see if Mamie Van Doren was riding on any of the floats.

Everyone followed his lead, except me. The sound of the approaching bagpipes made me think of Brand. We had always gone to the opening twilight parade together. When he was younger, he would hold my hand and duck behind me when any of the sounds got too noisy.

* * *

I looked down at my brother and marveled at his intensity. His eyes were wide and locked in on the empty street. His head, motionless. The wind whistled through the crowd, who were silenced by their anticipation, until finally... the tinny sound of the bagpipes could be heard. The mass roared and Brand's excitement flowed from his body to mine as he almost crushed my hand. The bagpipers were upon us. The parade had begun.

Brand glanced at me for a fraction of a second and then shot his head back towards the parade. The next troupe was a host of pom-pom girls and baton twirlers. They tossed their batons and spun their bodies, stopping on a dime, to catch the batons just before they hit the ground.

The high school marching bands were next. Jacksonville, Auburn, and even Lincoln, whose players traveled from twenty to thirty miles away, marched down the main street. They were meticulously dressed in colorful uniforms and walked in perfect formations. The pounding of their drum cores echoed through my chest until my heart seemed to share their rhythm. Brand briefly covered his ears as the drummers passed right in front of us. Jacksonville's trumpets caught the streetlight's rays during "Anchors Aweigh" which sent a chill down my spine.

Circus music could be heard and slowly drowned out the echoes of the departing bands. The Shriners clown cars were upon us.

The clowns were the exact opposite of the marching bands. They scuttled in random motion, engaged in raucous

behaviors, and all to a plethora of zany noises. They drove in wacky patterns, weaving in and out of each other as they honked their horns. Other clowns followed on foot. Four were juggling and three were chasing each other. Brand laughed and pointed at their every move. The last clown kept threatening to throw a pie in the face of different audience members. When he approached me, I could feel something tapping me on the head. I looked up to find Brand's finger. He was standing on his tippy toes and trying to get the clown to smack that pie into my face.

"Oh no you don't," I said as I quickly pushed my brother forward, offering him as a new pie target. The clown reared back to throw his pie and the crowd gasped. As the pie came forward, the clown quickly stopped it and the crowd cheered. Brand looked at me and we started to laugh. Our cackling didn't stop when the next clown emptied almost a whole can of whipped topping into our faces.

We licked our mouths and cleared whipped cream from our faces as the milk trucks approached. They played music while the fire engines immediately behind them rang their sirens.

Brand stepped behind me and placed his hands to his ears for temporary relief from the blaring scream of the fire engine siren.

The political floats were next. One float featured the head of Abraham Lincoln made of papier mache. Another was a dedication to Harry S. Truman and a third to Dwight D. Eisenhower which were both covered with hundreds of colorful flowers.

The governor, mayor, and town representatives flooded the streets giving thumbs up to the prospective voters. Their presence brought boredom to the faces of most of the children in attendance. The only solace was that the departure of these floats meant the horses were soon to follow.

Every boy dreamt of being the cowboy who came to the aid of a poor farm girl and her family. So when the horse-drawn carriage led the small herd of horses through the

streets, every boy's hand took the shape of a six-shooter, pointer finger poised and ready for action. Brand's was no different. I could even hear him make the sound of the shots firing.

"Pshew, Pshew." He looked up at me and said, "You're my hero, Jesse James."

* * *

"James...you ok...James?" Costello finally snapped me out of my trance. "Yeah... I'm fine", I said. But I wasn't.

Chapter 7

A Flash of Light

I tried to gain my composure but my thoughts of Brand made me resent all the happy people in the crowd, including my friends. Even watching the pretty girls atop the huge, powerful stallions couldn't snap me out of it.

The last horse was ridden by Marie Rae Wilder, G-Man's dream girl. She wore a full cowgirl outfit complete with studded boots, a six-gallon hat (ten-gallon was customary, but she was pretty petite), and silver six-gun toy shooters at her sides. The riders waved and blew kisses to the crowd. Marie Rae's eyes locked on G-Man's and they held the intimate glance for a few of the horse's paces. At that moment, a jealous rage ran through my body.

Why did they get to be happy? I thought as Marie Rae tapped her horse and trotted off. I became angry with myself for using work and cotton candy to cover up my memories and true emotions. How could I do this to my brother, return here without him, to the thing and place he enjoyed most? My eyes welled up with tears and suddenly I was weeping. I ducked away from my friends and headed towards the bathroom without anyone noticing, or so I thought.

The men's room looked and smelled as if it had been bombarded by a thousand fairgoers. Toilet tissue and towels were strewn about the floor and sinks. Puddles dominated the ground. Dirty streaks of water were pasted to the mirror making it difficult for me to see how puffy my face had become.

While I splashed water into my eyes, I assumed the others continued to watch the parade. I hoped that nobody would come looking for me and see me in my current state. There was nothing more embarrassing than having your friends see you cry, unless you had just been run over by a car or something. No blood, no tears. That was the unwritten rule.

I could tell by the sound of the crowd that the finale of the parade was near. I looked at my sad excuse for a face in the mirror as I heard the kids begin screaming and cheering with anticipation. Everyone knew that the last floats featured people hucking candy into the crowd. Children brought bags to fill up like it was Halloween.

The cheering of the candy-hungry children gave me a little energy. I gathered my thoughts, took a deep breath, and prepared to return to my friends. I put my hand against the bathroom door to push it open but hesitated when I heard the grumbling of a familiar voice.

“I think he went in here,” the kid barked. I recognized who it was immediately. Any kid in the Springfield area would have. It was Billy “Black-Eye” Grazer, the most feared bully in Springfield history.

Black-Eye was larger than any human 14 year-old had a right to be, and meaner than a bull with its manhood tied in knots. He terrorized kids of all ages and races, and always left his signature black eye on the faces of those who were unlucky enough to cross his path. He was kind of a Zorro from hell.

Black-Eye was a unique kind of bully. What set him apart from the others was that he wasn't in it for the lunch money or items he could lift from his prey. He did it for the pure satisfaction. He liked to see a happy child's face turn to a vision of fear and terror. He liked how their eyes sharpened and sunk back into their heads. He especially loved to see them quiver and shake. They almost always got into the fetal position, to beg for mercy, before they were pummeled.

Where does a kid learn to inflict such punishment and terror, you ask? In Black-Eye's case, it was from his father. There was a rumor goin' around that Black-Eye had been beaten with every belt that his old man owned and many major tools and appliances as well. This didn't even count the amount of times his dad may have hit him with his bare fists. Some say drinking was the cause, some say he was crazy, but *nobody* said anything about this to Black-Eye, if they valued their life.

Hearing Black-Eye's voice sent me into a panic. I quickly jumped into one of the stalls, engaged the lock, and stood up on the toilet so my feet couldn't be seen. Then I prayed. I was in the stall furthest from the entrance. There were two others that were closer.

I thought about opening the stall and trying to climb out the bathroom window, but it was too late. I had no weapons either. The only thing I had with me was Brand's sketch pad. I curled up into a ball on top of the toilet, hoping to make myself as small as possible.

The bathroom door creaked open and in came a smattering of evil laughter. Lucky me, he was with his three thug friends known as "The Posse". The Posse rarely spoke, they just gave moral support to Black-Eye by laughing whenever he humiliated or physically abused someone. They were also in charge of softening up the victims before he put the final touches on their eye socket. The only distinguishing features of The Posse members were that the biggest one wore a black cowboy hat and the smallest one had red hair. The middle one had neither.

The crowd quieted down outside. I assumed that Ms. Illinois was approaching. The beauty pageant float was the last one and featured Ms. Illinois and many of the surrounding county contestants. This was more of an "ooh and ahh" float than a cheering one. The women marveled at the beauty of the girls and their gowns and the men...well...also marveled at the beauty of the girls and their gowns. My friends were probably among the admirers.

Earlier I had hoped my friends didn't catch me running off all upset. Now I was praying they had and would come to my rescue, although I knew it would take about 20 men to handle Black-Eye and his Posse.

They were all in the bathroom at this point. I could hear them whispering a little and then...silence.

"Boy, the parade was so great this year it almost made me cry!" exclaimed Black-Eye, starting a mock conversation. Any of you boys cry or were you all able to

contain yourselves?” A few grumbling laughs followed and then again, silence.

“I can’t stand to see someone *cry*,” he continued. “It makes me want to punch the tears right back into their EYES!” I put my hand to my eye, without even knowing. He began again, “I saw some babies out there who didn’t even cry. Boy, you gotta be a real sissy to cry at a parade. Did any of the loud noises scare the witty-bitty baby?” They were just toying with me now, waiting for the right time to jump into the stall and beat me to a pulp. I was doomed.

“*Bang!*”

They had kicked in the door to the first stall. My foot slipped off the toilet, from the shock of the noise, but I was able to quickly regain my balance.

“Come here baby - baby’s daddy needs to change your diaper.”

Silence.

“*Wham!*” He kicked the second door in. My body froze and every muscle began to hurt. “Time to take your bottle.” We both knew the game was coming to an end.

Silence.

“*Crash!*” “*Crack!*” “*Smack!*”

Silence again.

Was I dead? Was this heaven? I put my hand to my eye again – no pain. I wasn’t hit?

I waited a few seconds and peaked under the stall. Nobody was in the bathroom which was now illuminated by green, red, and blue flickering lights. He had hit me so I had I was seeing rainbows! No, that wasn’t right. It was the fireworks display. It must have temporarily distracted Black-Eye and his Posse from their fun.

I exhaled for the first time it seemed since I entered the bathroom. The only thing that could bring a bully away from a violent act was violent explosions.

I left the stall, jumped up onto the sink and hopped through the bathroom window. There was no way I was going to chance the door. I was drenched with sweat but I was alive.

The huge crowds made me feel safe for the moment. I caught a glimpse of the fireworks for myself. The sun had dropped completely and I had to rely on the intermittent bursts to light my way. I used them to find the table where I had left my friends. Unfortunately, they were gone. I decided to keep moving, not at all eager to hang around until Black-Eye and his Posse remembered to dismember me.

I walked over to a stand that sold cowboy hats and propped my body against it, in awe of the light show. A huge whistler flew up into the sky, snapped, and dropped streams of white light to the ground. I followed their path until...until they ducked behind a figure blending into the shadows.

And then she stepped out from among them. Carrying with her a slender, but muscular body. Commanding my attention. Calling to me. Her hair was like the sea, free flowing in all directions, seized by the wind and dancing through the night. Its auburn color lighting a fire in my eyes and warming my soul. Her face was that of an Angel, softening the bright light of the moon with her flawless skin. I looked away for a moment to clear my eyes and make sure she was for real. She was still there when I looked back.

My eyes traveled up and down the soft features of her face. Her perfect ears, her slight nose. Every curve leading me like a narrowing path to her lips. Beautiful lips, full and glistening with life.

I was now convinced that I was gazing at the most gorgeous girl I had ever seen, perhaps in the world.

Countless streams of fireworks screamed into the night. Her face grabbed every ray of their light. Blue, white, green, pink; each color looked more beautiful than the next. I watched them pop and split apart in her eyes and cascade over her face. My legs began to buckle and she started to slowly turn her head towards mine until...until we traded glances and, "*Wham!*"

Something or someone had hit me in the eye.

Chapter 8 The Big One

I stood on the lawn looking down at the door to Fizz's basement. We had all planned to meet here after the parade. After searching for my friends at the fairgrounds, I figured this was the next-best place to look.

My eye was hurting pretty bad and I knew it was probably more than just a little swollen. I didn't get a chance to catch a look at it because I had been on the run for the past hour from Black-Eye and his Posse.

I took a deep breath and thought about my options. My friends would want to hear the story of how I got my shiner, which I wasn't too eager to tell. Sure, if Black-Eye had popped me, then I would just be one of many victims, just another bruised face in the crowd. That would be acceptable, but what really happened wasn't. This was what kept me from descending the stairs.

I could tell the truth or a lie. Those were my only two options. I usually favored the truth, but this case was an exception. My respect and dignity rested on my ability to come up with a feasible story. I couldn't say that Black-Eye had hit me because my friends would find out I was lying when he came looking for me again. No, I needed a good story, one that couldn't be disproved.

It could go something like...I fought off a gang that was trying to rob an old lady. They had knives and chains and I was armed only with my bare fists, my cunning intellect, and my...my...poorly crafted, stupid lie! It was hopeless. The truth would have to be told.

I performed the secret knock and Costello popped the door open.

"Where have you been? You just disappeared!"

"I was around." I wondered why he didn't react to my eye. Maybe it didn't shine up after all.

I shuffled down the stairs to a shocked crowd of onlookers. My friends stared at me, some gasped, some

remained silent, but all were wide-eyed. It turned out there just wasn't enough light by the stairs for Costello to see the shadow around my eye.

"Nice eye makeup. You runnin' away to join the circus?" Fizz kidded as I collapsed on the couch.

G-Man grabbed my chin and pushed my face to the side to get a better look. "W-w-what happened to you?"

"Holy Crabapple," Costello followed. His parents didn't like him cussin' so he had to get creative. He made up his own approximate curses and said them with a hint of severity. This, of course, made them more ludicrous than they already were.

I wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear as my friends became more assertive with their questioning. They started squawking at me from all directions. I didn't even know who was saying what.

"C'mon, out with it!"

"Don't hold back on us!"

"Who did it?"

They closed in on me.

"We'll get 'em," someone said as they all placed their fists into their hands.

"ALRIGHT!" I blasted back at them.

My friends settled down and sank back into their seats. Here comes the truth. My mind went blank. The first thing out of my mouth was, "An old lady...see?"

"An old lady?" Fizz questioned and surveyed the faces of the rest. Within seconds my three friends' bellies were jiggling with laughter at the thought of me being taken to task by an elderly woman.

"Will you guys pipe down and let me tell my story?" I raised my voice and finally gained their attention.

Again I was at a crossroads. I could end it here and tell the truth, or take the seedling of my white lie and water it until it turned into Jack's Beanstalk. What did I do? Take a guess and just add water.

"An old lady was waiting...yeah, she was waiting in line." I said with growing confidence.

“F-f-for what?” G-Man asked and everyone was locked in on my story. I suddenly felt like an old war hero sharing slightly exaggerated accounts of his battles.

“She was waiting in line to ride The Cyclone.”

“No way.” Costello whispered with amazement. “An old lady riding The Cyclone?”

“Yes way, and she was *real* old. She had a cane in one hand and her handbag in the other. She was waiting towards the back of the line. I was looking all over for you guys but couldn’t find you anywhere. This old lady caught my attention because I couldn’t believe she was going to risk a heart dropper to ride the Cyclone.”

“Was she with anyone?” Fizz interrupted.

“Huh?” He had thrown me off my lie for a moment. The gang was forcing me to improvise further. I quickly recovered. “Yeah, an old man. He must have been about 100. He had a walker and he was waitin’ to ride too. As I was checking them out, a shadowy figure swept across the grounds. It was a thug...in a mask...holding a crowbar...and he was with his two, I mean, *four* friends.

“Holy Schlitz!” Costello said and gulped hard.

“Go on,” Fizz encouraged me.

“Anyway, the man with the crowbar grabbed for the old lady’s bag and she began to wrestle with him.”

“Go Grandma!” Fizz cheered.

“W-w-what did the old man do?” G-Man asked.

“He turned to help but caught a boot in the midsection from one of the other thugs,” I answered.

“Ooh!” Fizz shouted out as he and the others were now standing so they could act out my story. I didn’t know where I was leading them, but they were following.

“The old lady, though, she put up a good struggle, long enough for me to get involved.”

“What are you, nuts?” Costello exclaimed, throwing his arms into the air. “You went after five guys?” he continued with a mouth full of doubt and pretzels.

I hesitated, realizing how ridiculous that last one sounded. Deep breath. Regain composure.

“It would seem so,” I answered. “Anyway, I seized the crowbar out of the one guy’s hand while he was distracted by the old lady, and I tossed it aside. If I had no weapons, then I wanted them to have no weapons. Now the thugs turned to me and I was standing...no, I was in a *circle* surrounded by all five of ‘em. The old lady had tumbled to the ground from exhaustion.”

“No fartin’ way!”

“Yes fartin’ way! You think I just make stories up to pass the time?” I quickly retorted. “So the thugs didn’t come right in on me, they wanted to have some fun first. They began to slowly circle me like a bunch of hungry wolves about to go in for the kill. And they started growling, too, each one striking more fear into me than the next. My heart was pounding as I whipped my head around to try to keep all of them in sight. The circle slowly started to close and the growling got louder and fiercer. Then the leader shouted, ‘Get him!’ Just as a fireworks blast exploded in the sky and something flew through the night.”

“Security?” Fizz shouted.

“No!” I rejected. “The old man. He had reached down deep for something from his youth and had taken two of ‘em out with one flying tackle.”

“Go Grandpa!” They all cheered.

“The only problem was, he knocked himself out in the process. This left the leader and two others for me, but I was up to the challenge. The leader gave the hand signal for the other two henchmen to come in first, and come they did. I ducked under the punch of the first guy which thankfully caught the second guy square on the chin, knocking him out cold. The first guy was stunned from what he had done, which allowed the old lady to cold cock him with her purse. He went down like a fighter jet without a pilot. This left only the leader and me. I had no plans to wait and see what he was going to do to me so I tried a surprise attack. I rushed him. I closed my eyes and bolted as fast as I could, with my arms out in front, hoping to catch him with a lucky shot.”

“Holy poopyballs!” Costello yelled.

Everything suddenly stopped. We all turned to him.

“What? I’ve been working on some new material,” Costello said shrugging his shoulders.

I continued. “So I was speeding at him like a runaway locomotive. It was gonna be him or me. I lowered my head, and ran through him like he wasn’t even there.”

“You destroyed him?” Fizz yelled, half commenting and half questioning.

“Nah, it turned out he had the same idea as me. As he went to take his first step, the old man came to and grabbed him around the ankle causing him to fall and hit his head. The thugs were no more! Purse rescued. No rewards necessary ma’am.” I motioned to Fizz pretending he was the old lady.

My story sent my friends into frenzy. They flew around the room, acting out each part of my tale over and over. Until...

“Hey wait a minute,” Fizz came over and pointed to my swollen eye. “When did you get that?”

“Oh yeah...umm...when the leader went down I flew right past him, face first, into the old man’s walker.”

Fizz hesitated at my response and I saw him pondering this omission from my story.

“You are a one of a kind, foul-mouthed, dirty rotten stinking liar!” Fizz was now right up in my face to issue his challenge. “You expect us to believe you and two people, totaling 200 years in age, fought off five guys and you got a shiner from the old man’s walker?” His confidence was building, “You had to have been hit at least once!”

I smirked. How dare he challenge the best-crafted lie ever, I thought.

“What if I tell you that I might have also caught an elbow from one of the two thugs that attacked me?”

Fizz stared directly into my eyes and tried to read my brain. He smiled, “You are a one-of-a-kind, reckless, ruthless, and crazy superhero! Nice work.”

“Thanks,” I replied. I let out a huge breath and with it all of my nervousness around the lie. Fizz and Costello once

again popped up to act out the scene and began arguing over who should be the old man and who should be the old woman.

G-Man pulled me aside. “N-n-nice story,” he said. “Y-y-you should make that one into a comic or something. Who really tagged you? T-t-that doesn’t look like Black-Eye’s work, not dark enough.”

G-Man had me. There was no use lying to him, he was too smart. “Millie Gargus accidentally elbowed me while I was staring at her co-worker,” I said. My body slumped from the embarrassment.

“T-t-the cute one from the corndog stand?”

“Yeah, the cute one from the corndog stand. Millie was excited because they had a cowboy hat she wanted in her size so when she pulled her hands to her face her elbow met my eye.”

G-Man smiled, then laughed, and finally said, “Stick to your other story. It’s much more heroic.”

“I will. Thanks,” I said. “Another thing G, Millie handed me this envelope. It was the one that girl tried to steal from Joe’s soda shop. I guess Millie had picked it up. It fell from my pocket after I took my spill the other day.”

G-Man looked at me like I was a lost cause.

“It has a letter in it from Joe to his son ‘cross town. It says, ‘Congratulations on graduating from high school and on being accepted to college...’”

“I-i-it isn’t right to be reading someone else’s letter,” G-Man stopped me.

“I know.” He was right.

“W-w-well, go on,” he said. I had given him too much information. Right or wrong, he had to know the rest.

After I filled G-Man in, he reminded me that Joe was forbidden to see his son or even give him a letter. This was the punishment the judge laid down after Joe’s wife accused him of cheating with Betty, the waitress at Moe’s Firin’ Hole. Everyone in town knew about Joe and Betty. They all had their own opinions of what had really gone down between the two of them.

There must have been more to the story because the judge's penalty seemed way too harsh for just cheating. I couldn't believe Joe would do anything to hurt his family, let alone, so severe to warrant banishment.

The letter was dated a month earlier and still hadn't been sealed or delivered. It also contained a check for \$500 which was for Joe's son to buy a car. The letter must have mentioned how proud Joe was of his son at least ten times.

"What do we do?" I asked, knowing G-Man would tell me to give it back. He did. He was usually pretty predictable. I looked at the letter and back at G-Man without saying a word.

He rolled his eyes as if to say, "Don't bring me on any more of your crazy adventures."

Chapter 9

A Name

The second day of the fair started out very similar to the previous one. I was the first to arrive, prepare, and load the machines. G-Man was next, followed by Alex and his snot-dripping nose. It was beyond me how Mr. Curren had looked at this kid and thought, "Food services." G-Man and I did our best to keep him in the back, out of sight from the customers.

"B-b-boogers are bad for business," G-Man said, later, after Alex went on break.

This day was hotter than the first, definitely over 90 degrees and not a whisper of a breeze. The air in the cow stand was stifling, making it difficult for one, let alone three to breathe comfortably. The machines were running hot which was making the ice cream soupy and difficult to pour. We engaged in the ancient ritual of people watching to help us keep our minds off the heat.

All kinds of people came to the fair, from all over the region. Each had a different look, attitude, and style of clothing. We got cowboys, councilmen, and cops one hour and teachers, preachers, and creatures the next.

Now, I am pretty open-minded about people's rights to look and dress as they please but I don't like seeing things I don't need to see. For example, this one man came up to order two cones. He paid, we handed him the cones and he smiled. The heat was already getting to me, but this man's smile put me over the edge. His lips spread to reveal the most grotesque mouth I had ever seen. G-Man and I actually jumped back a few inches at its presentation. One tooth...and one tooth only...was hanging from the top of his mouth, like a child lost in a cave, lonely and surrounded by darkness. But that wasn't the worst of it. It wasn't motionless, like a tooth should be. It swung forward and back freely, each time revealing a frayed nerve that twitched in the breeze.

Somehow I was able to cough out a, “Have a nice day” which signaled to the man with the toothless cavern to move along. I had to take a few deep breaths and stare into the sun to reset my eyes before serving the next customer, a pretty councilman’s wife. Life is quite random.

“H-h-hey James,” G-Man said. “W-w-why don’t you take a couple of bucks over to the corndog stand and get us some change?”

I looked at him warily. “Why should I have to go to that corndog stand?”

G-Man rolled his eye. “B-b-because it’s the closest one.”

It was tough to argue his point.

I glanced across the road at the girl that had hypnotized me with her beauty the night before, and then quickly at the long line of customers that was outside our booth. I didn’t know which scared me more. The people in line would surely be angry if they had to wait for change in this heat so I did the courageous thing.

“Hey Alex, why don’t you go over to the corndog stand and get us some change?” I asked.

“Do it yourself, you’re not my boss,” he nasally replied.

Again, tough to argue.

As I stood by the side of the cow I thought how someone’s looks could change so quickly. She went from the ugly duckling to the swan within minutes. A face that once reminded me of hate now brought me hope and gave me a feeling I could not easily explain.

I carefully contemplated the strut I wanted to display to get across the street. She might be watching, so I needed to nail it. If I ran over, I’d look too desperate. If I swayed too much, she might think of me as too confident. I couldn’t relax too much either. That was the big no-no. If I did, *she’d* surely think that *I* didn’t think highly enough of *her*, to put enough thought into planning *my* walk. I narrowed it down to a cowboy or gangster walk and wound up using kind of a mix. I looked like Al Capone’s wounded donkey.

When I was a few feet away I noticed the girl and Millie looking my way. They had a lull in business so no line blocked their view. Each turned and whispered to the other, then quickly twisted back to greet me. I figured they were trying to determine if a broken leg was causing my bizarre gait.

I reached the counter and was met by girl from the soda shop who now stood in front of Millie.

“Hey,” I mustered. I swallowed hard trying to moisten my desert-dry throat.

“Hi,” she replied with a killer smile. I heard that two-letter word with every part of my body except my brain. I said nothing in return. I just stared at her, wondering how I could have been so mad at her. What had she really done wrong?

“What happened to your eye?”

Awkward silence. I couldn’t talk.

“My name’s Paige,” she said, a bit louder, to try to wake me from my trance.

It didn’t work.

The line to the cow was getting longer and G-Man was surely out of change by this point. I didn’t care, though. Nothing seemed to matter. Cows, fairs, gravity. I was in another world. If only I could just communicate. And I would. I had too. I would not be deterred by a little bit of nerves, nausea, and an inability to animate my tongue. I had something to ask her, G-Man and Alex were depending on me.

I turned and walked back to the cow.

I made my way back across the pathway, all traces of my gangster and cowboy walk gone, replaced by a depressing slouch - shuffle. I walked inside the cow, closed the door, and sat down on a milk crate.

“D-d-did you get the change, James?” G-Man asked.

“Yeah,” I said not even paying the slightest bit of attention to his question. He was frantically trying to serve the customers by himself.

“Well let’s have it, we’re almost out.” He stuck out his hand, and into it, I placed a corndog, layered with mustard. He looked down, back at me, and smiled as he wiped the mustard from his hand.

“N-n-never send a boy to do a man’s job,” he said as he pulled the two bucks from my shirt pocket and headed out to get the change himself.

I watched G-Man talking to the girls across the street. Even with a stutter he had more confidence than I. Panic began to set in. What if she was making fun of me? What if she thinks I’m a complete moron? I squinted to try and catch an expression or gesture on Paige’s face but G-Man’s head blocked my view. Her name was Paige but how did I know that?

After a few minutes, G-Man walked back to the cow, way too slowly for my liking. I wanted to ask him what she said and if she liked or hated me. Oh my God, I realized, they had probably been making fun of my walk. I met him at the door and pounded him with questions.

“Well, out with it, what did she say? What did you tell her? Tell me! Tell me!” I demanded as I shook him by his shoulders.

“Y-y-your name, you moron. I told her your name.”

I cringed at the thought of how stupid I acted. I couldn’t even say my name. It couldn’t get any worse than this.

“A-a-and another thing, they wanted to know if you were sick because you were limping funny and couldn’t speak.”

“I feel it,” I said back.

“M-m-must be, if you blew your chance to talk to a pretty girl,” he replied.

My lunch break came soon after which protected me against any further embarrassing G-Man questions about the strange change incident. I figured I would split my break between saying hi to Fizz and Costello and doing a quick walkthrough of the art contest exhibit.

I arrived at their stand to see Fizz sitting in a chair with his feet propped up and his hands behind his head. Today his

button read, 'I Have An XL Chest.' Costello was frantically running side to side to keep up with the hungry mob. Their manager, Mr. Swift, wasn't around so I slipped in the side door to the stand.

"How can you let him get away with this?" I said to Costello.

"He's planning what he'll say to Mamie when he gets his chance."

My eyebrows furled. "He'll say he can't take her on a date because he has no money, because he lost his job, because he was sitting on his ass while his friend did all the work!"

Costello's eyes widened as he saw the smoke coming from my ears.

"Alright, alright," Fizz said as he got up and joined Costello at the counter.

I often made Fizz feel guilty for the way he treated Costello. I'm not sure why it made me so mad. I think it was because Costello never stuck up for himself. I might have been madder at him for that than I was at Fizz.

After reprimanding my friend, I headed towards the Expo Building. En route, I changed my mind two or three times about walking through the Expo doors. I had put to rest many of the activities that reminded me of Brand: sketching, playing ball, comic reading. I didn't know if I was ready to walk the exhibit, but my legs kept leading me there.

The Expo Building was an enormous, two-story, structure that provided an ample space for local vendors to sell a variety of goods. Vacuum cleaners, homemade pies, and handmade jewelry were just a few of the items for sale in the building.

"Step right up, step right up and try the newest and strongest vacuum on the market. It's guaranteed to clean up your act or your money back!" One vendor claimed as I walked past his booth.

"Polish your floor, polish your car, and polish your shoes, all, with this amazing new product!" Another man announced.

“You’ve coughed your last cough. You’ve nothing to fear of Tuberculosis anymore, as long as you buy our product, C.U. Tubercu-later,” a woman called out.

I ducked my way in and out of the vendors and kept my eyes to the ground. I didn’t want to make eye-contact with any of them and give them a chance to sell me anything. I was successful and only bumped into a few people and one partition along the way. I made it safely to the doorway of the art exhibit and walked on through.

The exhibit walls were lined with sketches, paintings and photographs. Most pieces were on the outer walls and some were displayed on partitions that weaved a maze through the exhibit. The light-tan wall paint provided a clean background for the local artwork. Each piece had a small card to its side containing the artist’s name, age, and a brief description of the piece.

The exhibit had a lot of paintings this year. Many were good but I skipped over them to find the sketches and photos. They were few and far between but most were very well done. There was a photo of the main street taken by a 45 year-old woman, a sketch of a very old man dancing with a young lady drawn by a 27 year-old woman, and a photo of the Expo Building shot by a 20 year-old girl that were amongst my favorites.

Some of the entries by the younger contestants were also good. A photo of the buttercow, taken through the window of its refrigerated room, was cool looking. A sketch of a clown by an eight year-old showed the clown’s feet, nose, and hair as significantly larger than normal. I wondered if this is how all young children saw the world. I tried to recall if I ever did.

I looked down at my feet to compare them to the clown’s and spotted a smooth looking rock. I bent down, picked it up and began running my thumb over its surface.

* * *

We each held a rock in our hands, pacing back and forth, debating our final decision. Brand insisted that his favorite, a sketch of an old baseball glove with a slight tear

in the seam, should be the winner. I was torn between that one and an overhead photo of the fair taken from the sky ride. It was a crisp shot that captured the entire Midway. I gave it a few seconds thought but then agreed with Brand.

I usually favored sketches over photos, anyway. It was hard to argue the time and effort put into a sketch vs. the fraction of a second required to push a button on a camera. I respected the length of time it took to paint a picture, as well, but I was more intrigued by what someone could create with a single shade of lead than a full palette of paint.

Brand and I shook hands on our decision and placed our rocks on the ground at the foot of the winning piece.

Brand asked, "Do you think I will ever be able to draw that well?"

"You almost do already." I mussed his hair as we walked out of the exhibit.

Chapter 10

The Ball Drops

I was riding such a high all day long that I forgot my life was still in danger. Then, Black-Eye and his Posse stopped by for a cone. They decided not to pay and between me, G-Man, and Alex, we sure weren't going to ask them to.

"Oh, lookee there," Black-Eye said, pointing to my swollen eye. "Hey, I didn't do that, unless just thinking about doing it made it appear. Now that would be a first."

I said nothing, hoping he would forget the whole idea after seeing I had already been hurt.

"Listen punk," he said leaning in so far that I could see his straggly nose hairs. "Don't think that you have escaped your punishment. I'd never leave a mark as light as that one on your eye."

The Posse chuckled behind him.

"That'd be an embarrassment," Black-Eye continued. "No, you are gonna feel my punch for years. Your day is coming," he said with an intense stare strong enough to make most people wet their pants. I barely heard him. I was staring right past him into another world. The world of Paige.

"Come on, man. Are you going to order or what?" asked a large man who was standing behind Black-Eye and his Posse. The line had lengthened substantially during our exchange.

"We're outta here," Black-Eye said to his Posse. "And you're a dead man," he said to me before leaving.

Or at least that's what G-Man told me Black-Eye had said while I was hypnotized. I shuddered, and realized I would be a dead man by the end of the fair, if not sooner.

Our shift ended and we were off to the ball field for the annual softball game organized by our boss, Mr. Curren. Each year he recruited his employees and challenged Mr. Swift, the owner of "Simply Beef" and many of the corndog stands at the fair, to a softball game. It was a tremendous deal to both elderly men and for many of the townspeople.

Each man had a ton of friends and family who went to the games to show support. Many of them were old high school buddies. The winner earned bragging rights for the year and either a dozen corndogs or a dozen cones.

The funniest thing about the game was that both Mr. Curren and Mr. Swift insisted on playing. Each was 75 years old.

To understand the birth of this softball tradition you have to go back 60 years, when Mr. Curren and Mr. Swift used to battle against each other in high school baseball. Mr. Curren played for Jefferson High and Mr. Swift played for Lincoln High. Each was the star shortstop for his team, two of the best players in the area at the time. They split their high school games, each team winning four games over a four year period. Neither man would admit to the other being a better player. They argued about it constantly, often grabbing former teammates, classmates, and even some innocent by-standers to help plead their case.

Years went by until these two proud men had the chance to, once again, battle it out. It was for King of the Snack Stands. Whichever man earned the most sales at the fair wore the crown. Again, they were even, alternating nearly every year. During the really hot summers, Mr. Curren would win, ice cream over corndogs. Other years, the results were reversed.

Their most heated battles always came back to baseball, however. They played softball now because of their age but the fire was still burning in them like it was 60 years ago. To them, they were still 15 years old.

Although it was always billed as a friendly competition, some felt that Mr. Swift and Mr. Curren hired workers based only on their ball playing abilities. It didn't surprise me, when Mr. Curren asked my parents at church if G-Man and I would work for him.

Many people knew we were two of the best ball players in the county. Mr. Curren occasionally stopped by Chapman Field to watch us play. It was like he was scouting us for a

big-league team. Only he hadn't seen me play in a year. My glove had been locked in my trunk since Brand died.

The 30-year-long series between 'The Corndoggers' and 'The Dairy Moo'ers' was, of course, tied at 15-15. The previous year, Mr. Curren had tied up the series with a win on a controversial call. Mr. Swift referred to the call as "a clear misrepresentation of the truth," while Mr. Curren called it, "an act of God."

The play went like this: A Corndogger had hit a ball that landed either on the foul line or very close to it. Mr. Swift's keen eyesight told him that it was clearly fair. He argued with the ump for ten minutes before returning to the bench. Each manager liked to argue at least one call so they had an excuse to fall back on if they lost the game.

That's right, there was even an umpire. The series became so big and so important that they had to hire one. That honor was bestowed upon Sheriff Scott, a well-respected man who had served in the town's law enforcement for over 15 years. His 6-2, 200-plus pound frame was enough to keep most people, especially us kids, in line.

He would threaten both team captains, good naturedly, with his billy club when they got out of line.

Another interesting aspect of the games was that they were co-ed. The two captains didn't have enough boys working for them to a field a complete team so they asked the girls to play as well. Some of them were pretty good, too. Almost all of them were better than Costello, or as he was known on the ball field, Seven Thumbs Sally.

Since this was our first year working at the fair, it was also our first chance to play in the big game. Fizz and Costello were on Mr. Swift's team and G-Man and I were on Mr. Curren's. I thought we had a definite edge, except for one problem: I wasn't going to play. I felt like I was letting my team down, but it wasn't enough to get me into the lineup.

Mr. Curren had offered me everything from a pay raise to a five cone-a-day bonus to entice me to play. I kindly refused. He eventually seemed to lose interest.

The impending game brought a series of thoughts into my mind. If Brand and I hadn't played ball that day and he hadn't got hit in the chest and he just stayed home and rested, maybe he would still be with me. I now hated baseball! Despised the game! The thought of playing it made me sick.

G-Man and I greeted Fizz and Costello when we arrived at Chapman Field. The grounds looked perfect, as usual. Bert must have laid out fresh chalk before heading over to the fair to work in the stables. I felt strange about returning to Chapman Field after a whole year. I walked way around the infield. I didn't want any painful memories kicked up from the dirt to my brain.

"C-c-can I change your mind?" G-Man asked me.

"My mind doesn't need changing," I gruffly replied.

I saw G-Man's eyes drop and softened my tone. "You guys don't need me anyway. Go get 'em, man."

I headed over to take my spot on the bleachers. Brand's sketch pad at my feet, I put my elbows on my knees and my hands under my chin and thought about how I got to this place in my life. My head slipped off my hands when I saw Paige walking through the trees with Millie.

I had totally forgotten Paige and Mille worked for Mr. Swift and would, therefore be playing against our team today. Paige looked amazing, wearing shorts and an orange ball cap that had the word, "Fly" stitched into the front. Her legs were lean and strong. I couldn't tear my eyes from her as she approached. Millie looked as awkward as Paige looked stunning. She was too tall for her body and had a plastic blue baseball glove that looked like it was meant for a five year-old.

Alex Pample was the next to arrive. Mr. Curren had no chance of winning with this guy playing. G-Man had tried to confuse Alex by giving him the wrong time for the game, but obviously that hadn't worked. If you wanted to win

something, you didn't want Pample on your side. Of course, none of us had ever seen him play but we could tell just by looking at him he was bad news on a baseball field.

Alex was wearing a Brooklyn Dodgers cap and shirt that had the name Robinson written on the back. Jackie Robinson was one of my favorite players. My dad had told me many times Jackie Robinson's story: That he was the first black man ever to play in the major leagues. And how he had to put up with tons of racist teammates, opponents, and, even fans.

He was an awesome player. A great hitter, fast runner and possessed lightning quick hands in the field. I wasn't happy that Alex was about to disgrace Jackie's name by stinking up the joint with his jersey on.

"Play ball!" Sheriff Scott shouted, snapping me from my thought. Game time. The Dairy Moo'ers took the field first.

I watched Alex have a brief discussion with Mr. Curren who was trying to send him out to play left field. Alex argued his way over to 2nd base, Robinson's position. Mr. Curren took left field instead.

The first kid up grounded to short and the second one popped out to the first baseman...for two quick outs. This kid Doug, who was as big as a tree, stepped up to bat next and slugged a solo home run over the fence in left. The following kid popped out to the catcher. Inning over. No balls were hit to Alex in the 1st inning. Our team had escaped disaster.

I couldn't tell you what happened in the bottom of the first inning because I didn't catch a single swing. I was too busy staring at Paige out in right field. I think I only blinked once and that was when she ran into the gap to catch a fly ball.

She moved like a cheetah. She caught the ball in stride and threw to second base on a fly. Everyone was staring at her, and many were cheering. The people of Springfield had never witnessed a girl who could play ball this well.

Top of the second, and everyone on the Moo'ers' held their breath as Alex saw his first grounder of the day. It was hit straight at him. He calmly scooped it up and fired it to first.

Mr. Curren, who had been hiding behind his glove with fear, wore a surprised look on his face.

"Way to go, Alex!" he clapped. I heard someone else yell it too and realized that it was me. I sat back down.

The next inning, Alex continued to surprise everyone when he delivered a base hit to the gap in left field. His hit drove in G-Man from third, who had singled earlier in the inning. Alex kept running like a bullet and stretched it into a double, diving head first into second base, just under the tag. The crowd erupted as Alex stood up, nose running but smiling, and dusted himself off.

...And so they played. A rocket of a hit by G-Man...another great play by Paige...and some steady fielding by Alex. For the next two hours the people of Springfield were treated to a modern classic.

The score was 6-4, our favor, in the final inning. The sun was now halfway visible above the horizon, making it difficult to follow the path of the ball. It was then that Jeffrey Thomas, who was playing shortstop, my position, had to reach for a hard-hit ball. Jeffrey, who was a pretty good fielder, planted his foot awkwardly when the ball suddenly took a funny bounce and changed direction. As his body twisted to compensate, his ankle gave out and he fell over onto the outfield grass in pain.

Several people rushed out to help him while the rest of us looked on. Jeffrey, fighting back tears, was carried off the field by his dad and his uncle. He was out of the game.

Mr. Curren immediately looked up to find me in the stands.

"Hey James, we need ya!" he called out.

I ignored him for a second, hoping he would get the hint and ask someone else.

"Come on, James!" he yelled louder and the whole crowd turned to face me. I felt their eyes on me but mine

were focused on Paige. She too was staring at me, or right through me, it seemed. She wore a reassuring smile and her gaze was full of hope. She was nodding her head.

I stood up, took Brand's sketch pad in my hand and headed down the steps of the bleachers. The crowd cheered and I took a quick left turn and ran into the trees.

The cheers turned to a confused murmur. I heard some people asking questions as I left the field.

"Where's he going?"

"Isn't that the Sayer boy?"

"What's he doing, we need him?"

G-Man stopped by my house later that evening and told me The Corndoggers scored two more runs to tie the score because we were short a fielder. He said the game was suspended due to darkness and slated to be completed at the end of the fair. Sheriff Scott tried to declare the game a tie but the two old managers wouldn't have it. They argued with the umpire before verbally going at each other. Each man pointed a finger at the other, blaming him for intentionally slowing the game, and therefore, causing the postponement. G-Man said he had never heard anything like it, one man placing blame on another for allowing the sun to fall. The sheriff had to break them up, as usual.

As for me...I had embarrassed myself in front of the whole town, my friends, and worst of all, Paige.

Chapter 11

Something Lost

The next day of the fair went by quickly and without major incident. Fizz continued to make Costello do all the work while he took frequent breaks to try to find Mamie Van Doren. So far, he had had little luck in tracking her down. Costello was still silent about his coworker's lack of effort, and Mr. Swift remained clueless about the whole situation.

Fizz timed his breaks perfectly. When Mr. Swift left to take care of some other business, Fizz knew he had at least 30 minutes before the speedy Swift would return.

G-Man spent his afternoon break with Marie, the horse rider. They grabbed lunch in the ethnic village, an area designated for selling food from all nations. Italian, Mexican, Greek, and Chinese were just a few of the types of food available. Personally, my tastes rarely strayed from corndogs, hamburgers, and fries. The village was secluded and provided some privacy for G-Man and Marie to enjoy their lunch, away from judging eyes.

I spent most of my day trying to avoid various people. There was Black-Eye and his posse, who wanted me dead, Mr. Curren, who continued to plead with me to play in the continuation of the softball game, and Paige. I wanted to throw up on myself every time I saw her. To date, I had only spoken to her once and was too much of an idiot to even ask her name.

G-Man was still after me to give the letter back to Joe. I quickly changed the subject whenever he brought it up. Bert stopped by around noon to deliver his bizarre and confusing words of the day. I felt that I could unlock the mysteries of the world if I could only understand one thing that Bert said to me.

Then there was Alex. While still strange, He seemed to have a little less snot on his shirt. Something in him changed after the softball game that had still yet to be decided.

That late afternoon, only three days into the festivities, our bodies, minds and bellies finally decided that they needed a break from the fair. Many of the fair employees were talking about going to see the new Abbott and Costello flick at the drive-in. If it was even half as good as when they met the Wolf Man, I would be happy.

We just needed a car to get to the drive-in. Since none of us were old enough to drive, we needed some luck.

Luck arrived in the form of Donny, Alex's older brother, who drove this really sweet red '52 Chevy convertible. He stopped by the stand to visit his brother and after 10 minutes of pestering from me, Alex, and G-Man, he agreed to take us to the drive-in that night after work.

Even though we would have to squish six of us, including Alex, into Donny's car, it would be a welcome change from piling into Costello's dad's station wagon, so we accepted. Half the fun about going to the drive-in was scoping out the other cars and trying to catch couples in the act of making out. This was nearly impossible in a van but it would be a very easy task in a convertible.

When Donny picked us up at the end of our shift, I was beginning to feel like I was turning into an ice cream cone. Staring at the chilled delight all day long made me want to choose a new favorite snack. I guess too much of anything can be, well, too much. G-Man, who absolutely hated popcorn, vowed to get a bucket instead of ice cream at the movie.

The five of us stood outside Donny's convertible, arguing over who should sit where. None of us wanted to be squished next to Costello or rub snotty elbows with Alex.

"The only way to settle this is a game of Cross The River," Costello explained. This was an elimination game we played to choose sides in sports, games, or other pressing situations, like these.

"We usually have only four so we'll have to modify it," Fizz replied. We all stuck out our fists to be counted, Alex followed.

“Just get in the car you dweebs!” Donny called out. Costello ignored him and began singing the Cross The River song while simultaneously tapping our fists with his.

“Cross the river, down the stream, no way home or so it seems. Hey man, strike up the band...”

“Hey you hit my fist twice,” Fizz complained.

“Ok, I’ll start again.”

“SHUT UP AND GET IN THE CAR BEFORE I KICK ALL YOUR ASSES!” Donny barked at us.

Our fists dropped and we quickly jumped into the car: Donny, Fizz, and Costello climbed into the front, while G-Man, Alex, and I took the back.

Donny looked back at his brother and then slammed on the gas. The tires squealed beneath us and we were off. The car was fast, very fast, and the wind blasting in my face made it tough to breathe. Donny cranked up the volume and I expected to hear some rockin’ song, which would have fit well with our speed. Instead, it was Perry Como and Frank Sinatra’s “Young At Heart”. The tenderness of the song did not seem to capture the danger of the moment.

We sped out of the fairgrounds onto Lincoln Avenue, and the streetlights became a sideways blur. I wondered if Joe was going to come looking for me and his letter soon. I wondered who would be at the movie. I wondered if I was going to get there alive.

Donny hit the turn out of town hard. We were now on the open road. Once again, the tires cried out, begging for mercy, and we were knocked back with the force of the car’s acceleration. Donny pushed the car to its limit. We sped past the cornfields like a crow wearing a jet pack. The green stalks blended together, creating the illusion of a green wall.

I yelled over to Alex. “Hey, your brother always drive like this?”

“Nah,” he replied.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“He’s just playing it safe because there are new people in the car.”

Just as he got the last word out of his mouth, the car roared and jolted us back hard into our seats again. Faster and faster we took the highway weaving in and out of cars. My heart was racing. A collective hum formed in our throats that grew in volume as the engine revved higher. 70mph...louder...80mph...screaming...90mph...

”AHHHHHH!”

Donny jammed on the brakes and we stopped short. We raised our hands to prevent our faces from smacking into the seats in front of us. We had made it to the drive-in.

We pulled up behind a few other cars, waiting to pay, and enter.

“Thank God,” I whispered to myself as I tried to catch my breath.

My friends were all wide-eyed and Costello looked like he wasn’t breathing. Fizz slapped him on the back.

“Thanks,” he coughed.

Donny turned to us with an outstretched hand. “Money?”

We all responded quickly with our quarters. He paid the attendant and we were in. The lot was especially crowded that night. Horns were honkin’, and people were throwing stuff from car to car. Donny pulled into a spot on the far end and approached the incline. The car rose gently until our eyes were even with the tall screen. Donny cut the engine. The sound of silence was a welcome one although I had to admit Donny’s driving provided ten minutes of the most intense excitement of my life.

Donny violently grabbed the speaker off the post. He was a mean looking dude and a greaser to boot. He was 18 years old, tall, stocky, and had a nose that looked like it had been crunched by a hammer. He wore a white t-shirt and blue jeans and had a pack of cigarettes rolled up in his left sleeve. More grease dripped from his curly black hair than from his hotrod. He could make someone pee their shorts just by looking at them.

The whole lot of us popped out of the car except Donny. “Get me a bucket and coke,” Donny said to Alex as he handed him a buck.

“You got it bro,” Alex replied.

“Try not to walk too close to me, Pample,” Fizz said to Alex after making sure we were far enough away from Donny’s earshot. “Mamie Van Doren might be here, and you’re bad for my image.”

I blasted him a look. “If I remember correctly, he made *you* look pretty bad on the ball field the other day.”

Fizz stepped in front of me. “I don’t remember *you* playin’ at all. As a matter of fact, I remember *you* runnin’ away, probably feeling sorry for yourself.”

“What did you say?” Fizz had touched a nerve.

“You heard me.”

Having no real defense, I tried to get someone else involved.

“I don’t have to take this from a guy who can’t even fulfill his corndog serving responsibilities. You make your friend do everything while you run around pretending you have some shot at landing a starlet like Mamie Van Doren. What a joke.”

Costello looked down at the ground.

“And you!” I said pointing my finger at Costello. “When are you gonna stand up for yourself and stop letting him walk all over you?”

“T-t-that’s enough!” G-Man yelled and stepped between us. “W-w-walk it off guys, we’ve all been working under the hot sun and it’s getting to us. O-o-obviously to some more than others,” he added as his eyes shifted, temporarily settling on me. He told Costello and me to go ahead and meet up with them back at the car.

After placing Brand’s sketchbook under my left arm for safety, I got in line, grabbed a box of popcorn and a Coke and headed outside to wait for Costello. I was fuming. I wanted to take that slingshot in Fizz’s back pocket and use it to plant a boulder right into his smug face.

I assumed G-Man and the others must have taken a walk to scope out the lot because they weren't in line behind us. I reached into my popcorn box and shoveled a handful of buttery kernels into my mouth. I used my icy Coke to wash it down. I was back in control of my emotions.

I couldn't believe how I lost my head with my friends like that, but Fizz was out of line. I just wasn't ready to play baseball yet, he knew that. It had been a year. Only a year. Costello walked out of the stand and stopped dead in his tracks. He looked like he had just seen a ghost.

"What gives, Costello?" I asked. I waved my hand in front of his face. He didn't even blink.

"It's him," he said with a frightened whisper as the intro music from the film began playing through the speaker of the car next to us.

"Who?" I asked.

Costello pointed over my shoulder and I turned to see the black-hatted member of Black-Eye's posse. He was scoping out some girl, leaning into her car window as if he was taking her burger order. She was trying to ward him off by pressing her hands in his face. He just laughed it off.

If he was around, then The Big Man was as well. We froze like a mouse on a snake's nose, hopelessly wishing that somehow our bright summer work clothes would blend into the dark surroundings. Unbelievably it worked, he hadn't spotted us. We ducked away and bolted for the car.

The intro movie, The Keystone Kops, had started and the music was picking up pace a little. The Kops were on the screen. They presented as calm and organized for the moment. Similar to the way we did.

Costello and I got close to Donny's car, but I saw something that caused me to pull back on his arm.

"It's only Mr. Curren, James. Anyway, your shift is way over. He won't mind that you're here," protested Costello.

"Yeah, but if he sees me, he's gonna bug me about softball," I replied. "We gotta avoid him. Run!"

We turned to run the other way but only made it a few steps before we again stopped dead in our tracks. The other two Posse members were walking just up ahead of us.

The music in the movie sped up to match our frantic pace. From the corner of my eye, I could see the Kops, on the big screen, running and bumbling about, knocking into one another. We took a quick left and ducked behind a car.

“We should be safe here for a minute,” I said to Costello. More like a few seconds, as the car started to shake and squeak and we heard moaning coming from inside. We slowly crept our heads up to the back window.

There we saw the ugliest couple in creation going at it. There were lips, tongues, and teeth everywhere.

“Ugh!” we said in unison.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Costello added.

“Yeah, two wrongs definitely don’t make a right.” I replied, and we both cracked up.

We slowly backed away from the car and turned, ready to run away from the horror show. All of the air in my lungs rapidly vacated as I spotted Paige and Millie walking towards us.

The music from the movie had now reached a hysterical pace. I felt my heart pound in my ears. We turned again to see Black-Eye walking towards us. “Ahhh!”

We spun and ran in the opposite direction, again. We faced left. “Ahhh!”

We turned right. “Ahhh!”

We turned around. “Oooooooh!” A beautiful blonde dressed in a short skirt walked by.

“Dinkity Dogs! That was Mamie Van Doren! We gotta go tell Fizz,” I exclaimed, nearly spitting on myself as I struggled to get the words out.

We finally spotted an opening and high-tailed it to the car. The others still weren’t back yet and Donny was gone too. Costello and I dove into the back seat, and hunched down to make ourselves less visible. The impact shook the car and jostled the speaker loose from the window, causing it

to fall to the dirt. Both it and Costello simultaneously let out a high-pitched squeal.

Seconds later, Costello was plucked from the car like a grape from a vine. I quickly turned and saw the Posse had a firm hold of him. Black-Eye was standing just in front of them.

“Get out!” he commanded and my body complied. I had nothing to defend myself, just Brand’s sketch book under my left arm.

“You escaped last time, but you’re not getting away this time,” he sneered. “Say goodbye to your eye, my friend.”

Costello didn’t even struggle. It was useless. One member of the Posse held him as the other two grabbed and pinned my arms back. I thrashed about to try and get free but they were too strong. Each one was a full head taller than me and twice as wide.

“Let me go,” I said, making one last ditch effort. Black-Eye walked up and looked directly into my left eye.

“You’ve had this comin’ all week,” he hissed. He circled the area on my face where he wanted to create his violent artwork. I struggled again, this time using more of my legs and flailing my arms. Brand’s sketchbook fell to the ground, the impact popping it open.

“Well, what do we have here?” Black-Eye chuckled as he quickly scooped it up off the dirt.

“Give it back!” I used every last ounce of strength I had left to pull the two Posse guys a few inches forward.

“Is this the witty bitty baby’s coloring book?” Black-Eye could barely contain his grin.

“I said give it BACK!” Fury and a year of sadness both hit me and shot all of the blood in my body straight to my face. I started to cry, which I immediately knew was a really bad idea.

“Here we go again,” Black-Eye mocked. “The witty bitty baby’s gonna have another tantrum. Cry it out baby, it’s time for your spanking.”

The Posse all laughed, expectantly. They knew this was gonna get good.

“Cool it!” said a voice from out of nowhere. “Cool it right down!” The voice grew louder and more familiar. It was Bert. I didn’t know what he was doing at the drive-in but at that moment I didn’t care.

“Cool it, or I’ll get the cops in here!”

Just past Bert I saw Paige looking on with Millie. Great, any chance I had with Paige was now gone. She’ll never like a coward who repeatedly cries in the face of danger.

The black-hatted Posse member released Costello after Black-Eye gave him the signal. Black-Eye took the sketchbook. “I think I’ll just keep this as a souvenir until we meet again.” He laughed heartily and the Posse dutifully joined in as they turned and shuffled away.

“NO!” I yelled as I ran towards them. Bert grabbed my arm, stopping me in my tracks.

“Boy, you wanna get yourself killed?”

Back in Donny’s car, Costello recounted the story as I sulked with my hands over my face.

“W-w-we’ll get it back,” G-Man said as he put his hand on my shoulder. “W-w-we’ll get it back.”

Chapter 12 Holding Back

G-Man took his break early on Sunday. Marie was riding in the noontime show which prevented her from meeting him for their usual lunch, so they settled on breakfast instead.

G-Man was a mess before he left. He spent most of the morning arguing with himself. “S-s-she’s too good for me. H-h-her parents would never approve. S-s-she sure is special...but people will make fun of her.” He was clearly distraught about how far he had fallen for Marie.

Before the fair began, he told me that he didn’t want to make Marie feel uncomfortable. He said that it isn’t right for a fine woman to have to put up with cruel glances and snide remarks. He vowed never to let that happen to her. He promised himself he’d keep his distance.

He broke his promise.

He couldn’t help it. Marie was too beautiful, too funny, and too smart. He didn’t want to lose her. So, to ensure Marie’s privacy, he decided to make sure that all their visits took place in secluded areas and he made us promise not to tell anyone about their relationship. We agreed.

When they ate lunch, he would often sit on the same side of the table as Marie, and at quite a distance, to give the illusion that they were strangers sharing a bench. Most people didn’t pay them much attention. Those that did showed their disapproval by sneering at them, or turning and giggling with their friends. No encounter, however, compared to the one we heard about when G-Man returned from breakfast.

He was shaking and a small trickle of blood was streaming down his lip as he spoke. Stuttering more than ever, he shared the enraging events with Alex and me. I had never seen him so upset and I could barely understand him.

This is my best recount of the breakfast disaster: Back at the Ethnic Village, G-Man held Marie’s hand as a Mexican

duo began to play a sweeping ballad. One musician gently strummed a guitar while the other played a violin. The soft, romantic music temporarily brought them to another world; one where they could hold hands in public, one where they could dance and sing and even kiss, if they so pleased, one without Black-Eye...

...who suddenly appeared at their table. He snickered. "Well, what do we have here? A coon and a cowgirl, how lovely."

Marie glanced at G-Man, who was looking straight ahead, hoping his indifference would bore Black-Eye.

"What's a fine young woman doin' hangin' around with such trash?" Black-Eye grunted.

G-Man's head continued straight as an arrow. He was determined not to give in. That only seemed to agitate Black-Eye, who decided to up the ante and sat down at the other side of the bench, directly across from G-Man. He leaned forward to make sure he was in G-Man's direct line of sight. Marie reached for G-Man's hand and squeezed it tightly under the table.

Black-Eye continued. "A pretty girl from a rich family and a poor, black, stutterin' fool. That's a damn shame if you ask me. World's goin' to pieces. My dad says blacks and whites gotta stay separate. Polluting the population, he says." He paused again, expecting to get some reaction from his remarks. Nothing.

"W-w-w-w-what'ya think of that?" Black-Eye stuttered, leaning across the table, inviting G-Man to throw the first punch.

G-Man wanted desperately to lash out. He wanted to grab Black-Eye's head and smash it into the table...but he couldn't. He knew that whatever he did would bring more attention to their relationship and, even worse, to Marie. He already felt guilty for the occasional looks that she received for sitting with him. If he tried to fight Black-Eye, everyone would surely hear about it. Even if only one person saw it, the rumors of their relationship would spread like butter on a

hot roll. She would be teased by friends and outcast from her family. He couldn't do that to her, he wouldn't.

He bit down hard on his lip and vowed to get back at Black-Eye one day. He remembered that Black-Eye had James' sketch book and bit down even harder. Black-Eye laughed and stood up, quickly losing interest.

"Tell your friend if he wants his coloring book back he has to come get it." And then he was gone.

G-Man's teeth clenched through his lip which caused a drop of blood to drip down onto his chin. He quickly stood up.

Marie stood to meet him and dabbed the blood off his lip with her handkerchief. She stuffed the handkerchief in his pocket and quickly embraced him, holding him close so he could feel her warmth. She then turned and walked back to the stables.

He wanted to say something but couldn't. Instead he just looked away...unable to fathom what he had just caused.

Alex and I stood speechless for a moment after hearing G-Man's story. Alex's head was down and he appeared to be staring at the ground.

"Ah, don't sweat it," I finally said to G-Man. I knew this was a foolish thing to say but I wanted to show some support for my friend.

"W-w-when someone insults you on the outside it's one thing but when they attack your soul it's another. There are no words that can quell the anger that follows," G-Man said, now looking away from us as he had done with Marie.

The remainder of the morning went by pretty quickly. The hot and hazy weather brought a slew of customers over for ice cream. I thought this was a blessing considering what had happened earlier. G-Man needed to stay busy or he was going to burst.

When my lunch break arrived, G-Man asked if I was going to go over to talk to Paige. He seemed extra pushy about it.

“No, she looks kinda busy right now, maybe later,” I flashed a quick excuse. If you want to know the fact of the matter, I was scared to death to talk to her. Her beauty flipped the switch that kept my mind working properly to ‘off’.

Instead of taking G-Man’s suggestion, I chose to go to Fizz and Costello’s corndog stand. I fully expected to see Costello running around, doing the work of two people while Fizz was lost in his 1,621st daydream about Mamie Van Doren. I was wrong. Costello was on his break and Fizz was working alone. Mr. Swift was walking around the area, at his usual snail’s pace. I told Fizz G-Man’s story.

“I can’t believe that even Black-Eye would sink that low,” Fizz sighed. He looked a little depressed. I could almost see smoke start to come out of his ears as his brain began constructing some idea.

“I gotta go,” he said suddenly taking off his apron.

“What do you mean, you gotta go? You’re the only one here!”

“It’s a sign...not to waste any opportunities...not to take anything for granted. I’ve got a date with destiny and her name is Mamie Van Doren. I heard she’s here today. I’ve gotta find her. I’m out. Break time.”

He ran out the side door and I grabbed his arm, “What about the stand?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, as his hand massaged his chin. He quickly devised a plan. He grabbed the life-size cardboard standup of Mr. Swift from outside and placed it behind the counter as if it was ready to serve up some corndogs. He then placed his hat atop the cardboard likeness of Mr. Swift and ran out the door yelling, “Thanks, James!”

The line at the stand was already pretty long before Fizz’s departure. It would be obnoxious in just a few minutes. I looked up the road and gasped as I spotted Mr. Swift turning the corner on his way back. I scrambled to think of something, but could only watch as he came closer and closer to the scene that was sure to put Fizz into early retirement. He walked past the angry customers and closed

in on the cardboard likeness of himself. He stared at it for a moment, tilting his head.

“Keep up the good work,” he said and turned around to leave.

I was relieved, but only temporarily because Mr. Swift turned back around. Maybe he wasn't fooled. He couldn't be that blind, I thought.

He gave the figure another look, this time leaning in closer. I held my breath. Mr. Swift studied the display closely, looking it up and down. He was sure to notice, he had to.

“By the way, your hat's crooked,” he said nodding his head as if he had just shown the paper employee who's the boss. He then turned once again, and continued on the two-hour tour of his stands.

Costello returned to a line of about 30 angry customers. His mouth flew open and his face turned fire-engine red with anger. Once again, he had to clean up Fizz's mess.

Chapter 13

When the Bubble Breaks

Sunday's work came to an end and we all headed out towards the back end of the fairgrounds. Fizz had entered himself into the bubble-gum blowing contest. He was a shoe-in for the crown title, which came with a month's supply of bubble gum and a \$10 bill. Not a bad payday for a ten-second bubble.

Fizz took it very seriously, though. He told us about the contest six months prior and had been practicing ever since. He blew his huge bubbles everywhere: at the movie theater during sappy love scenes, and in school when the teachers turned around to write on the chalk board.

Even Mrs. Farley, our 300-pound Math teacher, was unable to burst his bubble. I can remember that day like it was yesterday.

It was May and Fizz was chewing a huge wad of bubble gum in math class. I looked at him and shook my head, hoping to deter him, but knowing with full-certainty that I would not. Mrs. Farley was working math equations on the board when he began to blow. And blow. And blow.

She caught him mid-blow after slowly turning around. She stared directly at him as he continued to blow and blow. The class was silent. Fizz's bubble stretched and thinned out with each mouthful of air he infused.

"Please take yourself and your gum to the principal's office," Mrs. Farley said, pointing the way to the door.

He exited with the bubble fully blown to a chorus of laughs and cheers from the class. He later said that he was able to see her through the expanding pink bubble, but was too proud of his creation to stop.

"She is big, but it was bigger," he told us the next day.

Fizz claimed he had kept the bubble going all-the-way down to Principal Carver's office. We all believed him. Principal Carver was a short, timid man. He would have been completely bald if not for three yarns of hair that tried

to spread out to cover his head. He spoke with a whine and constantly wiped his nose with his handkerchief. It was no surprise that such a feeble man had not been able to put an end to Fizz's constant antics at school. King Kong probably couldn't deter Fizz from trouble. Trouble was his destiny.

Fizz said Principal Carver asked him why he kept blowing the bubble even though Mrs. Farley was looking right at him.

His response: "I saw her start to turn around, but I thought I had another ten minutes."

This was the quote of the century and the one that got him suspended for one day. Fizz's dad actually chuckled when he found out. My dad would have killed me.

Now all of Fizz's hard work would finally be put to the test. He talked about his skills as we walked through the lines of crowded food stands. He made it seem as if bubble blowing was as essential as breathing.

"Nobody really understands how I do it. It's just one of the great Wonders of the World."

Fizz's ridiculous comments caused G-Man to crack a smile. A rare thing since his altercation with Black-Eye.

"H-h-hey, get this over quick because I have to return this handkerchief to Marie," he said, pulling out and replacing the blood-stained hankie.

"Don't you worry, chief," Fizz said confidently. "When the competition sees my bubble, they'll get down on their hands and knees and pray to the Almighty God of Gum."

"Oh brother," I chimed in.

People of all ages, shapes, and sizes stood on the stage awaiting their turn to make bubble blowing history. We saw a tiny eight year-old redhead wearing bibs, a fat older man with a bald, round head and a huge mustache, and believe it or not, a pig. Someone convinced the judges that their pig could blow bubbles, and big ones. Who were they to argue?

The contestants were allowed to use as little or as much gum as they wanted. Fizz had been chewing his gum the whole walk over. That was the secret to blowing a humongous bubble.

“You have to get the sugar out, it weakens the bubble,” he lectured, like a professor from BGU, Bubble Gum University.

It amazed me how many people turned out to watch the competition. There were almost as many observers as the hog calling and husband calling contests and they were considered two of the more popular events at the fair.

The contestants took the stage one at a time. The little redheaded girl was first. She began the competition with a pretty big bubble as she synched her fingers behind her bibs to get some extra leverage. The bald man was next and his ruptured bubble became entangled in his bushy mustache and stuck to his bald head. The pig...well the pig took five huge pieces of gum in its mouth and swallowed them.

“That pig’ll probably fart the biggest bubble you’ve ever seen,” Costello remarked. We all howled at that one.

Soon came Fizz’s turn. He stepped on stage and in a complete act of confidence declared himself the winner before he even began.

“This one’s for you Mamie,” he announced as he tightened his cheeks. Some people jeered at the cockiness displayed by the tall, thin kid in the tan bib overalls. Others braced themselves for greatness.

Fizz kept his hands in his pockets as if to say, “I’m not even trying.”

His tongue extended, his lips pursed, and the bubble was formed. It gained size quicker than a balloon attached to a helium tank. Fizz moved his head slightly to the side to show all angles of his bubble to the audience, ignoring the judges. The crowd began to “ooh” and “aah” as the bubble expanded. It got bigger and the crowd got louder, anticipating the explosion, or at least, a pop. Fizz’s head was completely hidden behind his enormous pink bubble. He blew again and the bubble stretched to an impossible size.

The judges rushed in to declare Fizz the winner but he raised his arm, stopping them in their tracks. He was far from done. Oh no, there would be more bubble today, friends. Bigger and bigger and bigger until finally...wait, even bigger

still, and then...bang! The enormous bubble covered his entire head.

“I couldn’t have done it without you guys,” he said, pretending to cry as we ran up to congratulate him. His voice was muted from the layer of gum coating his face. G-Man lifted Fizz’s hand over his head like a prize-fighter awarded the victory by the referee after a title bout. The other contestants clapped, in awe of the champ. The little redheaded girl came to congratulate Fizz and G-Man headed for the exit.

“Where are you going G?” I asked.

“O-o-over to the stables to give Marie her handkerchief back,” he replied.

Fizz accepted his prize from the judges. He then took the opportunity to pose for some photos and sign some autographs. He was in his glory.

Over the noise of people filing out of the now mostly empty tent, I heard the faint whine of sirens getting louder.

I looked at Fizz and Costello. They heard them too.

“I wonder what’s up?” Costello asked as we began to make our way through the crowd.

“I don’t know, but I suddenly got a bad feeling,” I said to back to him. The three of us exited the tent, following the cry of the sirens. The sun had fallen while we were watching the competition. It was dark now, very dark.

“They’re goin’ towards the stables!” some guy yelled and people followed his direction. I gulped hard at the cool, dense air. Suddenly, it felt like the fairgrounds were the size of Illinois. Each step seemed to come slower and with more effort. A sense of dread hung heavy in the air along with a thick fog that seemed to have rolled in out of nowhere on this humid night.

We pushed and banged through the crowd like pinballs. People were gathered around a central area outside the main stable. They were all looking down at the ground, at two people. Costello, Fizz, and I squeezed through a few more fairgoers to try and see who the figures were.

I recognized G-Man's shirt before I saw his face. It was covered in blood. He was cradling someone in his arms.
It was Marie.

Chapter 14

The Postman

On Monday, the day after the attack, Mr. Curren stopped by the ice cream stand along with Sheriff Ralph Jasper. The sheriff told G-Man that he needed him to come down to the station as soon as he got off work.

“We have a couple of questions to ask you, son,” the Sheriff said.

“Y-y-yes sir,” G-Man answered as his shoulders dropped.

None of us had much of a chance to discuss what had happened the night before. We had all been told by the sheriff to go straight home to our families. All we knew was that Bert had been arrested shortly after the police had arrived on the scene.

“Too much evidence pointing to him,” Mr. Curren said to us that morning as we listened in disbelief.

I didn’t want to believe Bert could do such a thing but the picture being painted was disheartening. Bert had been found with a sizable amount of Marie’s blood on his bibs and some on his hands. He claimed he had found Marie, checked to see if she was ok, and then left to call the police. He was arrested before he was able to make the call. Someone else had phoned it in fifteen minutes earlier.

The deputy and sheriff didn’t seem to be buying Bert’s story and neither were most people at the fair. Many customers commented throughout the day about the beating and their reasons for believing Bert was guilty.

“There was always somethin’ strange about that man,” said Farmer Daniels.

“I heard that huge monster beat her within an inch of her life. He had blood dripping from his hands, even that creepy one missing a finger,” my mom’s friend Sally Wharton proclaimed.

The police were unable to find a weapon but it didn’t seem to matter. All signs pointed to Bert. A huge, strong

black man, with a marred hand, covered with the victim's blood had to be the killer. That was the general consensus. It didn't help that he always made a lot of strange, cryptic comments.

Regardless of who did it, the fair's horse rider and the love of G-Man's life lay unconscious in a Springfield hospital bed. She was beaten so brutally about the face and head that she wasn't given much chance for survival. None of us knew what to say and G-Man was too distraught to talk about Marie anyway.

Everyone told him to stay home. Away from stress and away from the backlash, now that his secret was out, but he insisted on going to work.

The image of Marie covered in blood swirled in my mind. I began thinking about the people in my life that meant the most to me, like my parents, friends, and Brand. Thoughts of Paige kept creeping into my head as well. What if it had been her instead of Marie? Or one of my friends or their families? Or...

"You thinkin' about losin' that sketch book at the drive-in again?" Alex pulled me back from my morbid daydream.

"Nah," I whispered back. "The drive-in, I almost forgot!"

Alex and I had been so traumatized by our experience at the drive-in that we forgot to tell Fizz that we had spotted his dream lady. She was actually here, in Springfield. When my break came I headed out to tell Fizz about our Mamie sighting.

When I turned the corner, I spotted Joe from the soda shop, and Mr. Curren standing in front of a lemonade stand. I stopped dead in my tracks and ducked from out in the open. I didn't want to be confronted about my year-long hiatus from the soda shop. And he might be looking for that letter Paige took and I retrieved. He might even be asking Mr. Curren about it right now. I was hidden behind a tree, but close enough to hear their conversation, so I listened in.

“Yeah, I know it doesn’t sound right, but I got no other choice.” Joe was doing most of the talking but both he and Mr. Curren wore the same disappointed looks on their faces.

“You’ve got to reconsider, Joe. The people in this town need you,” Mr. Curren reasoned.

“I used to think so Chappy, but things aren’t the way they used to be. I can’t see my kid and lots of people are talkin’.” Mr. Curren motioned to Joe to lower his voice and he complied. “‘He deserves it’, they say. ‘Serves him right,’ they say. At first I thought I could wait it out and things would calm down but they haven’t. Do you want to hear the worst part of it?” he said, swallowing hard. “The real reason I’m leaving is because of the way the kids look at me.” His voice cracked. “Their parents talk, they have heard all the stories. They used to come to me for advice first and ice cream second. Now they are in and out as quick as rabbits, with their ice cream, if at all. I can see my boy in each and every set of their disappointed eyes. That’s why I’m leaving.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself, Joe.” Mr. Curren said trying to calm his friend.

“Oh, really? I couldn’t even get him his graduation gift. His mom still has that court order on me. Says I was violent too. Violent, Stanley! Me...violent?” His shoulders dropped and he broke eye contact with Mr. Curren. He looked defeated. He sighed, “I’m such a wreck that I misplaced the letter.”

I stumbled backwards and onto a bench at Joe’s mention of the letter. Unfortunately, a large lady was occupying it at the time. She screamed and I ran, straight back to the cow. He didn’t know the letter was taken after all.

“I’ve finally decided what we should do with Joe’s letter,” I said to G-Man, catching my breath inside the ice cream stand.

“So what’s the verdict?” he said, folding his hands.

“I’m going to deliver it.”

Chapter 15
The Chief's Window

At around 6pm that evening, Alex asked if he could leave early to grab some groceries for his mom. G-Man and I both agreed.

Alex pulled the door open to leave.

“G-g-get home safe,” G-Man said to him.

Alex looked back at G-Man, studying him for a moment.

“You too,” he eventually said with an emerging smile.

After G-Man and I cleaned the machines we gathered our stuff and headed out the door. G-Man engaged the padlock.

“Good luck tonight, I wish you could come with us,” I said as I shook G-Man’s hand.

“I-I-I’ll be alright. I-I-I’m gonna check up on Marie after I have my chat with the police chief. G-g-good luck yourself.”

G-Man turned and set out for the police station. He got ten paces and turned with a quizzical look on his face, “H-h-hey, when are you going to talk to that girl, the fair won’t last forever, you know?”

“Soon...I mean I know...I will,” I said, feeling a little ashamed that I needed a romance coach.

Fizz and Costello arrived on their bikes at the drugstore at 9:30pm. Costello was wearing a hat with a light attached to the front.

“I told him it ain’t mining we’re doin’,” Fizz said with disgust.

Costello and I had each snuck out through our windows to meet up at the rendezvous point. My room was conveniently located on the second floor, where a large oak tree stood sentry outside the window. It was a great climbing tree with lots of thick, but closely positioned branches.

Costello lived in a ranch, but somehow managed to get scraped up more than I did during his escape. Fizz probably

just told his dad the truth, of course. He was the only one without a curfew.

We decided to bike over to The Chief's house, instead of hitching, to be more secretive about the mission. We couldn't risk being seen delivering the letter or Joe would have to answer to the judge.

The Chief lived cross-town on Truman Street, which was a 20 minute bike ride each way. The trip had a dangerous feel to it. We had to ride on some dirt paths through the woods to avoid being noticed. That added some time to our trip. In addition, none of us were excited about tackling the dark woods at night. We all knew, however, the consequences of deciding not to go. Joe would close the shop and move away. If we could only get the message to his son then maybe, just maybe, he'd reconsider.

We had all grown up at Joe's shop and weren't ready to see it closed down. He helped each one of us through the countless challenges of childhood and made us feel like equals - like men. He coached us through girl troubles, gave us insight into understanding our parents, and even helped us with our math homework. He showed up to our baseball games and gave us free ice cream and sodas around the holidays and our birthdays. He never said, 'I'm closed' and he never told us to leave before we were ready. Joe needed us this time and we weren't going to let him down.

Fizz grabbed the supply bag from Costello for a final check.

"Let's see...flashlights, rope, pack of gum, and...what's this? He pulled out a long, thin wrapped item that look an awful lot like..."

"A roll of bologna?"

Fizz and I immediately turned to Costello with an inquisitive look.

"It's a long ride. You guys will be sorry when you're too malnourished to make the trip back."

"Certainly not," Fizz agreed, shaking his head.

"Envelope?" Fizz asked, shifting his gaze towards me.

I flashed the envelope at Fizz and Costello. They both nodded and the three of us were off, cycling through the streets, weaving in and out of one another. Stolen goods, lying to parents, a mysterious bike ride. The mission was on. The night was ours.

We pulled up to the mouth of the woods and focused our attention on Costello. He clicked a switch on his hat and the light flickered. He tapped the old, rusty yellow light about ten times until it finally held, barely. It lit a path only about five feet in front which certainly wouldn't make us feel secure amongst the creatures of the night.

"Real hi-tech," I said to him.

I glanced at the darkness all around me and realized I was petrified. Awesome, I thought. It is very interesting that children, who have many more fears than adults, consume as much fear inducing entertainment as possible. Horror movies, werewolf and vampire comics. Why do we try to scare ourselves so much?

Every scary movie we had seen and horror comic we had read came to life in the woods. Each crack of a twig was an approaching zombie. Shadows cast from the light of the moon resembled ghoulish creatures about to pounce on us. Far worse, however, was the silence...extreme silence. That's when our brains really got creative.

Costello started to rant. "Uhh fellas, maybe we ain't alone...maybe the other animals know something we don't know...maybe there's somethin' or someone out there...maybe..."

"Shut up!" Fizz and I yelled in unison. Our voices echoed in the silence. He was freaking us out. Darkness, woods, and a 14 year-old's imagination are a dangerous combination.

We finally arrived at the house after our heart-pounding five minute ride through the woods which seemed like an eternity. A second floor light greeted us. The window was slightly cracked. I stood up on a large rock to improve my view. "I think that's The Chief's room. I can see his Cardinals banner," I said with confidence.

“Why do they call him The Chief?” Costello asked.

“Because he’s a born leader on the court. He’s the best basketball player in the county, and possibly the state,” I said.

“Oh, I thought it was because he wore a headdress and smoked a peace pipe,” Fizz said, and then pointed to the window. “The only thing I care about is how we are gonna get the letter up there?”

“I have no idea, but we will,” I replied.

“Look,” Fizz whispered, pointing to a gutter that led up the side of the house, passing about four feet from the window. “I’ll climb it and slip the letter through the window.”

Costello and I nodded in agreement.

Fizz’s long, lanky arms and legs allowed him to climb quickly, however he was as loud as usual. “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” turned into the “Lanky Clanky Spider”. He extended his right arm towards the window sill and almost lost his balance. Costello and I crouched down and covered our heads awaiting the imminent crash.

“I’m okay,” Fizz said prompting Costello and I to stand back up.

“Whew, that was a close one,” I whispered to Costello.

“Aaahhh!” Fizz screamed as he slipped and fell, landing on his back in a huge bush. “I’m okay,” he repeated, spitting out a mouthful of leaves.

A light at the window came on and my heart skipped a beat.

“Quick hide,” I commanded and the three of us slid behind the bush.

“Now look at what you’ve done,” Costello whispered to Fizz.

“Oh, you think you can do better?” Fizz replied.

“I couldn’t do any worse,” said Costello.

“Oh, will you two just quit it,” I said, looking back the window.

“Give me that,” I demanded with a stern whisper and grabbed the envelope out of Fizz’s outstretched hand. “Look,

the light's back off." My eyes traced a path through the limbs of a large oak tree up to the window. I got to my feet, hunched down and began to climb, trying not to look down. Steady now...not bad...just grab that big branch and we're home safe... "Snap!" The branch I was standing on broke, dropping me into the same bush Fizz had climbed out of just a second earlier.

"I might be okay," I said as I laid there for a moment to catch my breath.

Costello picked up the envelope that had fallen out of my pocket during my quick descent. "Amateurs," he said shaking his head.

Someone's hands appeared under the second story window and propped it up. A thin face poked through. "Get outta here before I call the police!" the voice warned.

"We're here for your...um...we have something for you," I said as I dusted the leaves off my shirt and pants.

The figure in the window surveyed us for a moment. I wouldn't trust us, is all that I could think. "Alright, I'll be right down."

The front door opened and Fizz and I gathered behind Costello on the porch.

One-by-one our heads shot up to meet the enormously tall 18 year-old's face in the doorway.

"Holy crap you're a tree," Fizz chuckled.

"Did you say something to me, boy?" The Chief said to Fizz.

"Um, no...I mean no Chief...I mean no Chief Sir," he answered putting his hand to his head to salute.

The Chief just shook his head. "What do you guys want?" He said impatiently. Costello handed him the letter.

"We think your dad lost this but it has your name on it." I explained.

"My dad?" He looked back into the house to see if his mom was stirring.

"If you guys know him, then why didn't you just give it back to him?" The Chief replied.

Good point, I thought.

“Well...Chief...Sir, we didn’t want to wake him. It’s kinda’ late.”

The Chief stood there for a moment, contemplating Fizz’s answer.

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” he said.

“You are The Chief, right?” Costello tried to change topics.

“Some people call me that,” he replied, this time in a calmer manner.

“Just don’t tell your mom...about the letter...or us. Okay?” I asked.

He looked at the envelope and a smile formed on his face, “A letter from my dad, huh? Alright, I won’t.”

Chapter 16

The Invite

After climbing the big oak tree outside my window and sneaking back into my room, I decided I had done enough climbing for one evening. My hands were still raw from climbing the tree outside the Chief's place. Thankfully, it appeared that nothing in my room had been moved. I took this as a sign that my parents didn't know I had ever left.

Doubts about the night's events crept into my mind as I lay in bed. Maybe we shouldn't have delivered the letter. Who were we to get involved in such a complicated family matter? The Chief's mom might find out that we had been there and pass the information on to the judge. Joe could be locked up, and all because of us.

Maybe Joe didn't even want our help. Maybe he would be happier if he did leave and got away from all of the negativity.

I thought about Joe's response when Mr. Curren tried to persuade him to stay. Joe didn't seem willing to give it a try. Was Joe deserting us, or had he simply had enough? Well, we certainly weren't going to desert him.

I pulled the covers up over my shoulders and took a deep breath to try and clear my mind. No luck. Thoughts about the other looming task bombarded my brain. I needed to rescue Brand's sketch book, if it still existed, from the clutches of danger. Black-Eye had probably torn it up and eaten it over a bowl of Corn Flakes. Or maybe he had pulled sheet by sheet off to wipe his stinky butt after eating 30 pieces of beef jerky. The hot and spicy kind. The kid loved beef jerky. He always reeked of it. The thought of him even sneezing on just one of Brand's sketches made me grit my teeth with anger.

My eyes grew heavier. I racked my brain for solutions to this seemingly impossible dilemma. I found none. I needed to be sure he still had it. I needed to...sleep.

Tuesday morning in the cow, G-Man told Alex and me about the conversation he had with Sheriff Jasper. The sheriff had asked him a lot of questions about his relationship with Marie.

“H-h-he was trying to find out if we were an item,” G-Man said. H-h-he also wanted to know if anyone knew we were dating or if we had any enemies.”

“Did you tell him about Black-Eye?” I inquired.

“Y-y-yeah, I told him that Black-Eye had interrupted our breakfast, and how he ridiculed us, and...”

“And what?” I asked.

G-Man paused. “A-a-a-a-a-and how I did nothing to stop him,” he ferociously stuttered.

“So what’s he gonna do about it?” Alex asked, as he hopped down off the back counter.

G-Man took a deep breath. It appeared he was trying harder than usual not to stutter. He seemed to be getting angrier at his stuttering lately.

“H-h-he said he was going to have a talk with Black-Eye.”

“I wonder what Black-Eye will tell him?” I asked.

“T-t-they already spoke,” G-Man said sadly, his voice low. “I ran into the sheriff this morning on my way to the fair. Black-Eye denied the whole thing. H-h-he said that he only told us it wasn’t right for colored folk to be dating white folks.”

“No way!” Alex yelled.

“Y-y-yeah, and he also told the sheriff that he thought Bert was the one who had beaten Marie. He said that Bert had it out for her. M-m-made up some story. Said his dad overheard Bert telling some guy that ‘her day of judgment was coming’.”

Now I was really pissed off. “That don’t mean nothin’. Bert says weird stuff like that all the time.”

“I-I-I know, but the sheriff seemed to be buying it. I-i-it appears as if they don’t have much to go on.”

“Lookin’ for this?” someone barked. The three of us each jumped a foot in the air. Brand’s sketchbook had

suddenly appeared in the window of our stand attached to a very large and ugly hand. Black-Eye's hand. I knew that if I went out after it I probably wouldn't come back alive. I was sure that was what he wanted. I was just glad he still had the book. I was even more surprised that it looked to be in one piece.

"Meet me at the dairy building. Friday, at 6:45. And come alone. I'll give your little coloring book back to you then...I pwomiss," he mocked with a smile that tore at my gut. He then grumbled off, probably to terrorize a pack of small children.

Alone? How was I supposed to get that book back by myself? There was no way. I would be mutilated before I ever touched the book. Still, I had to face him at some point. This wasn't about me; it was about my brother and the preservation of his dignity.

"Hey!" a girl shouted directly into my face.

I jerked backwards and contorted into a modified Karate stance. Black-Eye's visit still had me jittery. The girl was Paige. Heat rushed up to my face as I was cast under a spell of shyness. G-Man elbowed me to try to jumpstart my engines but I could only muster a little putter.

"Hi."

Paige began to twirl her hair. Man, why did girls do that? Didn't she know it was driving me crazy?

"I would like a vanilla cone, umm...some extra napkins, and someone to ride the Ferris Wheel with."

G-Man quickly left my side to go make the cone, leaving me alone with Paige.

"How about you?" Her head bounced, causing her glimmering auburn hair to sway from left to right. I almost barfed.

"Uhh. I'm not one for rides." Not one for rides? Why did I say that? It was like creatures from outer space were controlling my mouth.

She chuckled, "What, did you fall off a rollercoaster when you were younger or something?"

G-Man giggled behind me and I turned and shot him an evil look. He covered up his laughter with a cough and went back to pouring Paige's cone.

I spun back towards Paige, not realizing I still wore my angry face. It quickly melted into a happy one.

"Nah, I just don't ride 'em."

"Oh well, I guess I'll have to ask someone else," she said to me.

I, as usual, said nothing in return.

After an awkward moment's waiting, she turned to G-Man and thanked him for the cone as he handed it to her. She then turned to walk away but kept her head shifted back and her eyes on me for a moment longer.

G-Man shook his head and muttered something to Alex. I could feel my blood beginning to boil, but I kept quiet. I didn't want to give G-Man any reason to go at me. I knew how ridiculous I must have sounded. I'm not one for rides. I had ridden that Ferris Wheel more than anyone I knew. I wondered if Paige knew I was full of it as I watched her take a right turn and disappear into the crowd.

"Hola ladies and gernts," called a voice from off to the right of the window.

"Hey Fizz," I replied.

"You ladies want to take a crack at some of those carnival games after work tonight?"

"Yeah, sounds good," I said. I knew the games would provide a much needed distraction for G-Man.

"Let's meet at 6:30 for some eats first, at the food tent," Fizz decided.

"You got it," I said and I watched him blow away as quick as a feather in a tornado.

The food tent was ultra crowded that evening. When we finally got our food, and sat down, my stomach was growling.

'There Stands the Glass' by Eddie Pierce was playing over the tent speakers. As Eddie sang of drinking liquor to drown his sorrows, I ate gobs of food to drown mine.

Each of us chowed down on a different fair treat before heading over to give our hard-earned money to the midway. Fizz ate elephant ears, a heavenly snack of fried dough laced with cinnamon and sugar. Costello munched on a steak sandwich with extra onions and peppers. I feared for anyone that walked behind him that evening. I'd have to make sure it wouldn't be me.

G-Man was making quick work of a monster cheeseburger, while Alex ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich he had brought from home. Costello let Alex share some of his fries. I was having the Illinois State Fair staple, a corndog smothered in mustard.

Our dinner conversation changed rapidly.

"Who did that to Marie?"

"How are we going to get that sketch book back?"

"Where was Mamie Van Doren and what was she wearing?"

G-Man filled everyone else in on his meeting with the sheriff. They all shared his anger about the story Black-Eye was spreading about Bert.

"He'll be comin' for you next," Costello said to G-Man before slurping an onion.

"He's always comin' for us," Alex interjected. "He's always coming for all of us. That's what he does." Each of us brandished the same look of fear on our faces. It was at that moment I came to the realization that there was a distinct possibility we would all wear the mark of Black-Eye. And soon.

Nobody said a word for about ten minutes. Suddenly, Fizz slapped his hands on the table and blasted out of his chair. "I can't take this crap anymore. I'm goin' to tryin' find my sweetheart. Who's with me?"

"I'm in," Alex said. And before I could blink, they were off.

I sat there pondering Fizz's chances of meeting the girl of his dreams at the Illinois State Fair. "A million to one." I said to myself. Who meets the girl of their dreams at a silly agricultural fair? Who? Who...but me?

Chapter 17

The Breaking Point

After demolishing our dinners, we forked over our nickels and dimes in the hopes of winning a variety of unimportant prizes. A pack of cigarettes and a stick of beef jerky hardly seemed like a fair trade for our hard-earned money. So why did we do it? It wasn't about the prizes. It was about bragging rights. Guys felt more like men if they were walking around with some silly stuffed animal under their arms. Go figure.

The games were pretty fun, anyhow. I liked tryin' to knock over the milk bottles with baseballs. The shooting gallery was also a gas. We took shots at tin cans, hanging dolls, and metal signs with a BB rifle. Every time we'd hear a 'ping' we would claim that it came from *our* gun. The older and stronger guys at the fair took turns slamming a huge hammer onto a pad to try to make a ball shoot up and ring a bell. This was the ultimate manly maneuver one could perform at a carnival. If you hit it, you'd likely walk away with a girl on each arm.

My favorite attraction, however, was the dunking booth. The reward there was instant gratification by soaking the cruel, foul-mouthed, and usually drunk man sitting on the bench. His job was to insult you and get you so angry you missed the target completely. I think he took his job and his drinking a little too seriously.

"Step right up. Three balls for a nickel!" the fair attendant belted out. Costello, G-Man, and I each took a ball. Costello was the first to throw.

"Hey tubby, <hiccup> you eat enough at the fair today?"

Costello massaged the ball and attempted to block out the man's comments.

"I could guess your weight if I could count that high! <hiccup> Now, you know you have to throw it, not eat it, right?"

Costello wound up and threw his ball. “Bang!” It missed way off to the left, impacting the dirty, red padding behind the rusted blue target.

“What was that? A little girl could throw better than you,” the man jeered.

He was more right than he knew, I chuckled to myself. One time my six year old cousin, Sally, threw her arms up in disgust and walked away from a game of catch with Costello. He had tossed three balls over the fence, one into the bushes, and one at her dog, Oscar. For the safety of Oscar and any other living creature in the neighborhood, she had to call it quits.

But that was different. That was a six year-old, moving target. This was just a stationary circle. A child could hit it.

Costello grumbled and grabbed the remaining two balls away from G-Man and me. His face was ruby-red and sweaty. He squinted, as if this would improve his aim, and hurled the second ball. “Crash!” It too missed, this time sailing very high and nearly over the booth itself.

“Come on tubby, throw that thing! <hiccup> Put your weight behind it. Ha-Ha!”

Costello spat into each of his hands, and furled his lips. He grabbed the last ball and reared back with all of his weight. “Clink!” The third ball missed so far to the right it struck the metal pole that supported the tank. The drunk man’s rude banter seemed to really be getting to Costello.

“You gotta be kidding me, <burp> tubby. I can throw straighter than you after downing an eighth of gin.”

Costello mumbled something and stared right at the man sitting on the wooden plank whose feet dangled above the cool water.

“Calm it down a little, Charlie,” the attendant said looking back at the drunk.

“What? Mind your P’s and Q’s,” he said back to the attendant, spit flying from his mouth and impacting the glass walls of the tank with a sticky smear.

“It’s okay. It’s a hard target to hit,” I said trying to calm Costello down. “You’ve missed high, you’ve missed left,

and you've missed right. If my calculations are correct, this one will miss low."

"So you're saying I should aim high this time?" he asked.

"Nah, just aim for whatever you haven't aimed for yet," I suggested.

"I knew that load of lard wouldn't hit the target. Boy, <hiccup> you ain't fit enough to walk around the block. You couldn't hit this target with a basketball!" The man then let out a triumphant belch that fogged the tank slightly.

Costello let out a final grunt, turned, and marched off, looking defeated. The man in the booth pointed at him and laughed.

Then, shifting his attention to G-Man and myself he said, "One of you sissies gonna give it a try next?"

"Y-y-yeah, maybe we will," G-Man answered.

"Oh, boy, don't get me started on you," the man replied with wide eyes. It was this man's job to rile up the contestants but it seemed like he took personal pride in finding the thing that would completely denigrate each individual. With G-Man, he had an obvious one. G-Man was about to respond again when he was thrust out of the way by Costello, who was holding a basketball in his hands.

"Where did you get that thing?" I asked.

"Let's just say I commandeered it from the free-throw booth."

"Now wait just a minute! Boy," said the clearly agitated man in the booth." <hiccup> "What do you think you're doin'?" He shimmied on the plank, clearly in awe of Costello's courage. Interestingly, the booth attendant did not intervene.

Costello leaned back and released the ball. It went swooshing through the air and hit the very edge of the target with a loud "Plablong!" The plank gave way, and the drunk, loud, and obnoxious man dropped into the tank with a shocked look on his face.

"I took you up on your challenge," Costello said shaking his head at the man. He turned around to us. "I'm not takin'

anybody's dootlie dung anymore! My work is done here. Let's go."

I threw my arm around Costello and the three of us walked away from the booth.

The sky had faded from blue to black as we walked through the carnival rides. Their bright lights twisted and turned shifting the corndog in my stomach and making me feel queasy. The Zipper, which was shaped like its name, flipped and flopped its riders upside down causing them to scream at its every turn. Only silence came from The Roundabout, a spinning ride whose force literally pasted you to its walls. It hardly allowed you to breathe, let alone scream, as it attempted to crush your innards and squirt them out your ears.

And then there was the Ferris Wheel, the granddaddy of them all. It didn't spin fast or make you sick. It was just tall, bright, and full of magic. People of all ages could enjoy the Ferris Wheel. Kids rode with their parents, teenage guys with their girlfriends, and older couples rode to revisit their youth. A pipe organ played as loud as the ride was tall while you soared above the trees. The view from the top was breathtaking. It all made you feel one step closer to heaven.

I was mesmerized by the glimmer of the great wheel as we walked towards the line. I was hoping my friends would accept me sitting this one out since I refused to ride without Brand. Someone had to sit out, anyway, since there were five of us all together, and we were too old to fit three in a car anymore.

Alex came over to greet us and to let us know that Fizz was already in line. He also told Costello that Fizz wanted to ride with him.

"I'm not ridin' with him. He drives me nuts!" All of Fizz's antics, the extra work he had caused Costello, and a lot of pent up anger had been unlocked by the tossing of that basketball.

When we got over to the wheel, Costello remained standing next to Alex.

“Hey, you gonna ride with me?” Fizz asked Costello.

Costello just ignored him.

We got into the line. Fizz and G-Man formed one pair leaving Costello and Alex as the other. I stood just behind. Only four or five couples were waiting in front of us.

As my friends grabbed for their dimes I said, “I’m gonna skip.”

“No,” Fizz reasoned. “We’ll squeeze you in.”

“Nah, I’m fine,” I said, hoping that would be the end of it. I turned to exit the line.

“Hey!” Paige jumped into the line next to me, blocking my exit. “I’ll go with ya!” she said.

“No, it’s okay. I was just getting out of line.”

“Boy, you’re seriously out of line!” Fizz chuckled. Everyone laughed but me. Paige was trying to hide her giggle.

I started to panic. “Actually, I’m riding with G-Man. Here, you can ride with Fizz.” I nervously pushed her up in the line next to Fizz and pulled G-Man back by his shirt.

“But I want to ride with *you*,” Paige said as she pushed G-Man back up and stepped back next to me to replace him.

“But I promised him,” I said with a slight growl and stepped up and around her, once again taking my place next to G-Man.

“I-I-I think I can probably survive without...” G-Man started to say before he received a sharp look from me, stopping him in his tracks.

I looked back to see if Paige was convinced. She gave me a coy look.

“Alright, suit yourself,” she said as she stepped up next to Fizz, bumping G-Man back next to me.

Fizz looked back at me and shrugged his shoulders.

I shrugged back.

G-Man said nothing.

The line in front dwindled: four couples, then three. I began to sweat. Two...I was gonna make it! I wasn’t going to ride with her...one...

“Hey guys!” Millie shouted as she jumped in line next to me. She noticed Paige at the front of the line and darted to meet her, her pigtails dancing in the air. “There you are. Have I got news for you,” she said to Paige, who seemed startled by her entrance.

I looked up at the lights. Their glow had turned from bright to hazy. The pipe organ began to fade in and out, seemingly playing off key. I saw a five-year old Brand and a seven-year old James sitting in a car. Brand had blue cotton candy in his hand and a respectable amount on his face. We were laughing as he repeatedly flung his finger around pointing excitedly in all directions. I kept telling him to hold my hand but he kept releasing it to point at the sky ride, the trees, and the lights.

It was the first time we were allowed to ride The Wheel without our parents. They were watching from the ground...

“Hey kid...Hey kid!”

“Huh?” I had been in a trance and now Fizz and G-Man seemed to be nowhere in sight. I looked up and saw they were already sitting in a car that was about ten feet off the ground. And they were without Paige. They had screwed me. At least I had Costello or Alex. I started to step forward in a last ditch effort, but the ride attendant had just shut the door on Costello and Alex’s car. Screwed again! Millie finished up talking to Paige and ran off like a mid-summer twister, spinning out of control and threatening to take down everything in its path. It was just Paige and me.

“Hey kid, people are waiting!” The attendant shouted, this time with a much more impatient tone. I looked over to Paige and tried to speak, but before I could get a word out, she grabbed my hand and pulled me up to the car and into the seat. The door clanked shut and my feet no longer touched the earth.

Chapter 18

Ride Freely

It took me a few moments to realize Paige still had a hold of my hand before I pulled it away. I was two-timing my brother. I wasn't supposed to ride the Ferris Wheel with anyone but Brand. That's how it had always been. I felt sick.

"Thanks for riding with me," Paige whispered. Her voice was soothing, causing some of the guilt to lift off my chest.

"That's okay, it's my favorite ride," I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Mine too, but I thought you said..."

"I know, I just haven't been myself lately," I said and turned away, shamefully trying to hide my face.

Our car raised two positions higher. I looked down and saw the attendant stabilizing a car for an elderly couple.

"Why are you so sad?" She placed her hand on my shoulder and I shivered with both fear and excitement from her touch. "What could be so bad about working at the fair? Lots of action, excitement, and all the ice cream you can eat?"

I tried to hold back my chuckle which only caused me to spit on myself. "Oh, I'm sorry," I said, wiping my shirt clean. "It's just that..."

"Yes..?" she said.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I knew I shouldn't have even thought about telling her. She was practically a stranger. And besides, what would she think of me not being able to get on without my brother? I wanted to trust her. I wanted to.

"My brother died last year. He and I were real close. It's just been real tough for me to deal with." There, I said it. I had my head down, almost all the way into my lap. There was complete silence. I was scared to death of what she was thinking of me. I hesitated before looking up to find two emerald eyes rimmed with tears looking directly into mine.

“Tell me about him, James. I want to know.” Her mouth quivered. She looked as if she was a second away from completely losing control.

The information now began to freely drip from my tongue. It gave me an extreme sense of release. I couldn’t believe I was sharing my most private thoughts and feelings with someone I barely knew.

I told her about my first memories of playing ball with my brother. How, after having a nightmare, he used to climb down from the top bunk to sleep on the floor so he could be closer to me. How I had often caught him pretending he was me in the mirror, and how we used to sit and sketch for hours.

She didn’t interrupt or try to say anything to make things better. She just listened with one hand on my shoulder and the other on her heart. At first this worried me. The only thing that kept me from crying was the speed by which I flew through the stories. From Christmas, to Brand’s tenth birthday, to sitting in front of the radio listening to “The Adventures of Sam Spade.” I couldn’t stop. My brain tried as hard as it could to come up with the tiniest of details. I suddenly wanted to remember. Everything. Forever. And I found myself wanting Paige to know. I rambled on as our car moved another two positions higher.

I finally stopped speaking. Not because I realized I had poured a year’s worth of sadness into another person’s heart. Not because I had run out of breath. I was struck silent because the girl sitting next to me was quietly sobbing. I wasn’t even sure for how long, I was too wrapped up in my storytelling to have noticed.

“I’m sorry,” Paige said, as she wiped her eyes with her hands.

“Ah, don’t sweat it. I’m getting by,” I fibbed.

“You said you used to sketch with your brother? What do you draw?” she said changing the subject.

“I don’t anymore. I mean, I haven’t since then.”

“I wish I could draw. I’d draw this Ferris Wheel so I could relive this moment over and over again,” she said and

looked off into the distance. She turned back. “Hey, I got a better idea. You could draw it and I’ll color in the lines,” she bargained.

I repositioned myself in the car, feeling uncomfortable at the prospect of drawing.

“I have a pretty mean crayon stroke,” she said while twisting her fingers in a knot.

Once again I spat on myself from trying to contain my laughter. Paige had delivered another blow to my tension.

“That’s a real nasty habit,” she said pretending to wipe her sleeve, forehead, and shirt of my saliva.

“I have a brother, and we too are real close,” she said with a comforting smile.

I wondered why I hadn’t seen him at the fair, or any of her family for that matter. I didn’t ask, though because I felt like I had been meddling in other peoples’ affairs enough lately. I was still waiting for the hammer to fall from my little visit to The Chief’s place.

The Ferris Wheel kicked into full motion and we began cruising towards the treetops. I felt a cool breeze slide across my chest. Paige once again grabbed my hand and this time, I didn’t pull it away.

“This ride makes me feel...like I can go...and do...” she said but I could barely hear the rest through the overpowering grinding sound of the organ.

“What?” I said.

“I said this ride makes me feel...”

Nothing. Mouth moving, no sound. I shook my head, this time leaning in for a better listen.

She kissed my lips. My eyes closed. The organ went silent and I felt dizzy and warm. I could tell we were high up because the moonlight was touching my eyelids, causing them to glow.

“...Free,” she whispered into my ear.

The Ferris Wheel continued to cut through the night air and I finally opened my eyes. My heart soared above the treetops, and the fairgrounds below appeared tiny. The kiss,

the view, and the red-haired girl sitting next to me made it pound so hard I thought it would explode. Was this the same girl who stole Joe's envelope? The thought of it seemed impossible.

"Would you draw something for me?" she asked as our car sped towards the ground.

"You mean it? You'd want me to... Well, maybe I could. And then again, maybe I shouldn't. Like I said, I kinda' gave it up."

"Maybe you've given it up long enough," she said, showing a brazen confidence.

"Yeah, um, maybe," I said.

Our bodies jolted slightly and our legs began to rock. The ride had stopped. We were at the highest peak of the wheel. The cart squeaked with each swing. Paige reached for my hand and I did not resist. I couldn't. The kiss and the sharing of my most private thoughts made me feel so close to her. She almost made me want to draw, I couldn't believe it. She held on tight to my hand, gently massaging the back with her thumb.

When we got off the ride Paige turned to me, "Was that so hard?" She pecked me on the cheek.

"Well, it kind of..."

"Come on!" She grabbed my hand and yanked me away from the ride.

Up ahead of us, I heard Costello arguing with Fizz about some story Fizz was telling. Some things never change, I thought.

As I listened more closely to hear their banter, I was once again pulled by Paige. This time it was aside, off the road and behind a tree. Our lips met once again as Paige's hands danced through my hair. My hands were firm on her hips. I had seen movie stars kiss a zillion times and I thought I would know what to do when my time came but I was just holding on for dear life. I felt as though I might tumble to the ground if I let go of her. There was no way I was letting go.

Our lips parted for an instant and I opened my eyes. As she leaned in once again, I closed my eyes and pursed my lips, welcoming another kiss.

“I have to go.” Paige whispered in my ear. Every last inch of my body twitched at the gentle sound of her voice.

“Will I see you tomorrow or...maybe tomorrow?” I asked, obviously drunk on love.

“You couldn’t avoid me if you tried, Mr. James.”

“Can I walk you home?”

“No...I’m fine. My dad’s...umm...picking me up here back at the stand.”

“I can wait with you.” I didn’t want her standing out there alone, especially after what had happened in the stables.

“You’re so sweet, but I’ll be fine; Millie and I are meeting up in a bit.”

I studied her eyes, wondering if there was something else she wanted to tell me. I decided this night was perfect so I didn’t press her.

“Okay, see you tomorrow,” I said, finally conceding.

Later that night, after I had returned home, I shot through my front door and bolted past my parents and up the stairs. They called something out, but the speed with which I was running blurred the sounds. They were not used to seeing me with so much energy. Any energy for that matter.

“I’m fine,” I called back to them as I continued on up, taking two steps at a time.

I shut the door tightly and placed a chair under the knob for extra security. Feelings of shame burst into my head but my heart fought them off like a knight slaying a dragon. I was going to sketch that Ferris Wheel for Paige. I had made my decision the second she asked me; I just couldn’t say it out loud.

I grabbed some paper and lifted the lid of my trunk. It let out a low-pitched squeal. There was my pencil set, sitting atop stacks of Brand’s comics and baseball cards. I stared at the pencil set intensely before gathering the guts to pick it up. My grandfather gave me this set when I was seven. It had

small fabric rings, enough to hold twelve pencils. Finally I mustered the courage and pulled them out of the old, wooden trunk.

I can't remember sketching most of the wheel. The pencils scraped the paper, as if with a mind of their own. They danced and twirled and tapped the page, effortlessly carving their image. From beyond the shadows, I saw flashes of Brand and the silhouette of Paige. I saw the mirror reflection of myself. Drawing. Happy. I was alive and drawing for the first time in over a year. And for the first time, I wasn't drawing with my hands, I was using my heart.

Chapter 19

A Hop of Faith

The day's events, both good and bad, fought for dreamtime dominance in my brain that night. In one dream, Paige and I were on a never-ending sky ride, soaring high above Springfield. We held hands and I pointed out all the houses of the people I knew, including my own. I waited for Paige to show me hers but she never did. And for some reason, I never asked.

The second dream was far more bizarre. I was Abraham Lincoln. Not *the* Abraham Lincoln, but the huge statue of him, that stood just inside the front gate of the fairgrounds. Each person that I cared about walked by me, one by one. My parents, my friends, Paige, Joe, Bert, and Brand. The torturous part was that I couldn't move or speak to them. I was as paralyzed and silent as the statue itself.

As the people passed, I could tell they were all happy, laughing and smiling as they entered the park. Except Brand. He was crying, looking around furiously for something or someone. As he approached, I could hear him calling out my name. He was lost. I tried to speak, but could only look down on him from 50 feet above.

"James, James?" he kept calling, each time louder and with more desperation. I closed my eyes to gather energy in an attempt to scream but it was no use. When I opened them, Brand was gone and another figure was approaching. It was me. I was wandering around too. I appeared to be frantically looking for someone. "James? James?" I was yelling out my *own* name. "James!"

I woke up. It was morning. My brain felt numb from overuse and my face was sweating. I decided to bring the sketch of the Ferris Wheel with me to the fair but I had no clue what I intended to do with it. I didn't want my friends to see the drawing and I certainly couldn't give it to Paige. What if she didn't like it? What if she made fun of me? Still,

I left my house that morning with the sketch tucked under my arm.

We had the cow working on all udders that day. Alex, G-Man, and I kept the operation running so fast and smooth that the line rarely got longer than one or two deep. We even received our first tips. I figured out a technique to split a large cup into two smaller ones. This made families with two younger children quite happy, as they didn't have to deal with as much mess. A man, impressed by our work, handed the two evenly filled cups to his twin boys and then flipped us each a dime. He even tossed one to Alex who was in the back, restocking the machines. The tip inspired us to perfect the cup-splitting technique. More tips and some "oohs and aahhs" from the customers resulted.

Fizz passed by our stand during his break, as usual. His search for Mamie was intensifying. He was spending more time on the prowl than on the job.

"Come to me, my fair Mamie," he called as he walked off towards the food tent, his arms and lips extended.

G-Man and I shook our heads in disbelief.

There was much discussion again that day about the assault on Marie. Nobody, except us and the sheriff seemed surprised that Bert could have accomplished such a cruel act of violence.

"It just don't figure," the sheriff said as he accepted his vanilla cone with walnut topping. "I've known Bert for over 30 years. Never done anything even remotely like this. Sometimes you just don't know about some folks, I guess."

His words had said that Bert was guilty but it seemed like his heart didn't want to believe it.

"Goin' before the judge today," the sheriff continued. "It's not lookin' good. I just thought you should know. Well, good day, boys." The sheriff shook his head as he walked away, like he was trying to finish a puzzle, but one or two pieces stubbornly refused to fit.

Alex, G-Man, and I looked at each other. The reality finally hit me that Bert was going to jail. Forever. I was never going to see my friend again. Never going to watch

him meticulously lay down the Chapman Field chalk. Never going to hear his unusual sayings. Never going to see him brush those horses. Never going to say goodbye.

“We gotta do something,” said Alex, urgency in his voice.

“O-o-oh yeah, let’s just go break him out,” G-Man sarcastically offered.

“Well, he doesn’t deserve to be in there,” Alex quickly retorted.

“I-I-I know he didn’t do it, but nobody wants to hear any different. A-a-all they want to talk about is that they caught the big-colored guy. S-s-so what, if he’s not the ‘right’ guy. He’s a colored guy, so most people seem satisfied.” G-Man paused. “T-t-the thing that ticks me off the most is that the real attacker is still out there and my girlfriend is laying in a hospital bed, u-u-u-unable to move or speak.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” I said. “And besides, maybe he *did* do it.” The words cracked as they left my throat. Alex and G-Man looked shocked. None of us had so much as muttered the possibility that Bert had actually committed the crime.

“He is kind of a weirdo,” I said as my friends stared back in awe. I looked down to break their gaze and spotted a piece of chalk sitting under the table. We used it each morning to write the prices on a small board.

White chalk, I thought. Wait a second. Who was I to be passing judgment about Bert? He was always nice to me and to my friends and family. I quickly changed my tune. “Hey guys, remember the time Bert brought us all lemonade on that 95 degree day?”

“Y-y-yeah, you were about to pass out. ‘Just one more grounder, just one more,’ you kept saying,” G-Man explained.

“And the other time he brought us ices? And he always seemed to be checkin’ up on Brand and me. One time he threw his handkerchief over when Brand was having one of his coughing fits. Why would a dangerous man do so many nice things?”

He was a good and decent man, a little strange and scary, but no criminal. He *had* to be innocent. But I had voiced the doubt. The bitter taste in my mouth lingered. I wanted to punish myself for my lack of faith in a good friend and I knew exactly how I was going to do it.

I grabbed my rolled up sketch and made my way across the street to Paige's stand. Millie greeted me in her usual unsubtle manner and told me that Paige was on break.

"She headed over to the carnival rides, I think," Millie said.

"Is she going to ride the rides?" I asked.

"Nah, she just needed some time to sort some things out," Millie answered.

"Thanks Millie," I replied as I quickly started off in the direction of the rides. I wanted to go through with my self-inflicted punishment before I changed my mind.

A tremendous feeling of happiness and nervousness swelled within me and my brisk walk turned into a full-out run. I dodged and weaved between people, my feet moving at what seemed to be the speed of light. A smile widened across my face. I was going to give Paige my sketch.

I came to a clearing and spotted Paige sitting on a bench directly to the left of the Ferris Wheel. My heart raced from more than just the run as I hunched over, trying to catch my breath. I looked up and was about to smile until her eyes met mine. Hers were full of tears. I approached her slowly.

"What's wrong," I asked, as I gently sat down beside her.

"Nothing." She wiped her eyes dry and displayed a fake smile. "I'm alright. Just some stuff at home. I'm fine."

"What stuff at home? Is there something I can do?"

"You have done so much already, James," she said. Our eyes met again.

"It's okay, really, I just get overemotional sometimes, that's all," she reasoned. "So what's new with you Mr. James?"

“Not a whole lot.” I was suddenly very scared. I miscalculated. I needed to hide the sketch. Anywhere. Somehow. Eat it, or something. Too late.

“What’s that?” She pointed to the rolled up paper.

“It’s just a thing,” I said, sounding ridiculous. “I mean, it’s more like something.” Uggh, another home-run line.

“That clears things up,” Paige laughed. It was a magical sound. We both laughed.

Paige took the paper from my hand. I looked all around to see if anyone was watching. My nervousness was draining my brain and flushing my cheeks, which, I’m sure, were now a healthy shade of red.

She unrolled it, staring for what seemed like an hour, flipping it sideways and lengthways and maybe even upside down. I couldn’t tell, I was about to throw up.

“If it stinks I can fix it, or redo it, or burn it up in a long fire...”

“What?” Her eyes widened. “It’s stunning,” she commented. Then her eyes softened. “It’s absolutely marvelous.” My sigh of relief could have inflated a tire.

“Things are looking brighter,” she whispered softly, her eyes straight ahead. A contented look swept over her face.

She carefully rolled it back up and took my hand. We held hands for a time, never once letting go as we stared deeply at the Ferris Wheel, neither of us saying a word.

Chapter 20 G-Man's Speech

Paige wore a smile every time I saw her on Thursday. It was so bright that it made its way across the street and through the thick layer of fairgoers to my watching eyes. I would have lost myself in thoughts of her for the entire day, however, a fear loomed deep and dark within my soul.

My confrontation with Black-Eye was rapidly approaching and was now just one day away. I began to perceive every large man in the crowd as Black-Eye. My head snapped from side to side to try and find the real Black-Eye.

Fortunately, I had a welcome distraction. Paige. I *had* to think about her. I *needed* to think about her. She was injecting feelings into my heart that I had never experienced. Feelings greater than the jubilation of watching Stan-The-Man smack the winning home run in the All-Star Game, and more exciting than seeing my first movie. Oddly enough, my feelings for her were more terrifying than the fear of meeting Black-Eye in a dark alley.

How did this all happen in such a short period of time? How did we get here? It was the fair. The fair had brought her to me and I wished it could run forever.

After another long day of pouring cups and cones, I was looking forward to a relaxing night at home. That evening my parents trapped me for dinner the moment I walked in the door.

“You seem to be in an awful hurry lately,” my mom said slanting her eyes. I could tell she had flipped her mother’s intuition switch to the ‘on’ position.

“I’m just busy with work and stuff. You know, hangin’ out with the gang. Catchin’ up with some old friends.” Catchin’ up with some old friends? What in the world did that mean?

My dad chimed in, “Mr. Curren says you’re doing a good job at the ice cream stand. How does it feel to be working in the real world?”

“It’s pretty cool, but I’m doing a lotta standing around.”

“Listen son,” my dad’s tone became more serious. My dad was never one for small talk at the dinner table so I knew this was going to be a doozy. “I know you like Bert. He has always been nice to us, but sometimes things happen which we can’t explain.”

My parents must have attributed my recent, strange behaviors to my sadness about Bert’s arrest. If they only knew the whole story, I thought. Either way, I didn’t appreciate where this conversation was going.

“Son,” my dad repeated. He could tell my mind was elsewhere.

“He didn’t do it,” I said through gritted teeth. I was still angry at myself that I doubted Bert the day before. Now my dad doubted him too. Was it contagious or something?

“Son, you don’t know...”

“HE DIDN’T DO IT!” Raised voice. Anger.

I saw the shocked look on my mom’s face as I got up from the table. I turned and ran upstairs, the sound of my dad’s footsteps trailing close behind me. I exploded into my room and fired the door shut behind me with all of my might. My dad caught it before it closed. I kept my eyes low to the ground as I sat on the bottom bunk.

“You’re right son, maybe he didn’t do it. We just don’t know. It’s in God’s hands.”

“I had to chase after you so quickly, I forgot to put this down,” he said, holding out a chicken leg as a peace offering.

I accepted it, hunger winning out over anger. I didn’t even know who I was angry at. My dad? Myself?

He mussed up my hair and started to walk out the door, before something on the floor caught his attention.

“Those your pencils, James?”

I didn't answer. I didn't know what to say. I just stared at him. His deep, dark eyes narrowed as if he was studying me. He breathed a heavy sigh and headed towards the door.

"Catchin' up with some old friends, huh?" The door closed gently behind him.

On Saturday, I again found it difficult to stay focused at work as my mind raced with thoughts of Paige, Bert, Black-Eye, Joe and Brand. I was virtually ineffective at pouring ice cream.

"V-v-vanilla is white like you, n-n-not brown like me," explained G-Man after I had poured the wrong flavor for the third straight time.

Soon after, I started pouring the ice cream without placing anything underneath the spout. One customer, a small, balding man looked at me in horror, as if I had just wiped the ice cream on my backside, or something.

I shot the man an offended glance. "What?"

He pointed to the mess I was creating.

"Umm...just testing the machine, sir." I quickly tried to cover as I began to clean up the slop.

"I think I'll take my break now," I said immediately after that debacle had ended. It was only 11am, about an hour before I usually took my break. I threw down my rag and peered across at Paige but she seemed too busy to catch my glance.

"G-g-good idea," G-Man agreed, following my gaze.

The stress was really starting to get to me. I noticed I was shaking when I was trying to pour some of the cones. I needed a change of scenery. Maybe walking the exhibit would clear my mind.

I walked across the street and past Paige's stand. A huge line of disgruntled, corndog-craving, customers had formed, making it impossible for me to approach the window. I decided I'd say hi to her on the way back from the Expo Building. I didn't want to get beaten down by an angry lady, wielding a hot dog on a stick.

I entered the building and strolled past the vendors before going to see the art. “Who buys all this stuff?” I thought.

At the end of the aisle, I spotted a large Hardy Boys sign. The lone book seller had made it back to the fair this year. I stopped off to look at his collection for a moment and shuffled through them until I found the bright blue binding of the Hardy Boys Mysteries series. I leafed through a couple of them wondering what it would be like to have such a simple life, like that of the Hardy Boys. The stories I once thought interesting now paled in comparison to my extraordinary week.

I returned “The Ghost at Skeleton Rock,” a particularly good Hardy Boys Mystery, back to the metal rack, and moved on to a booth that sold bubble gum baseball cards. I bought a pack, opened it, and popped the gum into my mouth. I attempted to fold it against my tongue. It was as stale as usual. The gum snapped, causing the excess powdered sugar to shoot back and tickle my throat. I coughed and flipped through the cards: Jackie Jensen, Carl Furillo, and Stan Musial. Wow! Stan-The-Man!

I studied the cards as I walked over to the art exhibit. Dodgers, Braves. Would I be brave or would I dodge? Dodge Black-Eye. Crap, there he was again in my brain. It was like he was just hangin’ around, waiting for a chance to slip into my mind’s door.

I needed another distraction. I tried to blow a bubble with the stale gum as I entered the exhibit. It paled in comparison to Fizz’s prize-winner. I chuckled after mine got to the size of a pea before popping.

Once again, I came upon the photo of the butter cow, and the sketch of the old man dancing with the young woman. I stood for a few moments studying the sketch. I took notice of the artist’s use of shadow and blending. It appeared as if they had used their thumb to blend one of the streaks. I could just make out the faint image of a fingerprint. I used this technique often. My grandfather once told me that

the oils in our hands could be used to soften even the harshest of pencil strokes.

I moved on. Another painting, this one of a little girl carrying a yellow umbrella, another drawing, another sketch and... I came upon something that caused my cards to fall from my hands.

“I don’t believe it!” I shrieked. “I can’t believe it!” Nausea. “She didn’t!” I was infuriated.

I made a straight line for the exhibit exit, my pace quickening with each step. I charged ahead, knocking into any fairgoers that were in my direct line of the Expo Building’s main door.

When I reached the corndog stand, there was still a full line of customers, but that didn’t stop me from walking right up to the head of the line, blood pounding in my ears.

Paige had just finished handing a drink to a customer when she caught my glance and shot me a smile.

“Hey, Ja...”

“How could you do that to me?” I cut her off. After all we shared? How could you betray me like that? How could you enter my sketch into the contest, behind my back, without asking me first?”

She tried to answer, “I thought you would...”

“I HATE YOU! I NEVER WANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN!” I screamed. I didn’t even wait to see Paige’s reaction. I ran towards the cow. My neck tightened and my eyes bulged from my head. My face must have been as red as a beet. G-Man and Alex had heard my rant. Everyone in a one-mile radius did. They said nothing and let me wallow in my own anger.

I spent the rest of the day kicking milk crates and smacking machines. G-Man and Alex gave me a chance to cool off before approaching me. They knew I needed some more time after I snapped when one of them pointed out I had a lone chocolate sprinkle stuck to my shirt.

Well maybe there’s one on your shirt?! Did you ever think of that?! In the few instances I did serve customers, I

kept my eyes directed downward to make sure I didn't accidentally take in any unwanted images from across the street.

"I can't believe she did that," I grunted to myself, yet loud enough for my co-workers to hear.

"S-s-she only did it because she's proud of it and knew you would never do it yourself."

Aha, my opening. I now had someone to argue with. Someone I could take more aggression out on.

"I told her not to show anyone. So instead she shows the whole town?"

"D-d-did she put your name on a description card?" G-Man asked.

"No," I angrily answered, my arms folded in disgust.

"Y-y-you said you didn't sign it so nobody will even know it's yours."

"That's not the point." I felt the anger climbing. "She betrayed me. She went behind my back. I put my trust in her and she let me down. I knew I couldn't trust that girl since that day I caught her stealing from Joe. I should have known right there and then. I should have listened to my gut. I should have..."

"Y-y-you are one dumb son of a bitch!" G-Man's words struck me like a slap across the face. "Y-y-you have no clue what you are doing!"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I said, shocked by his challenge. "And why are you defending her. Whose friend are you?"

The line had now dissipated enough so Alex could handle serving by himself.

G-Man closed in on me until practically bumping my chest. "I-I-I have listened to your whining and complaining all day about 'Paige did this' and 'Paige did that'. You don't know just how good you have it, do you?"

"I don't have to take this crap!" I yelled back at him and bolted for the door. He grabbed my shoulder and threw me back down into my chair. Alex looked back, shocked at G-Man's sudden display of anger and strength.

“Y-y-you are going to sit and listen! Y-y-you don’t have to hide f-f-f-f-from everyone when you t-t-take a b-b-b-b-break for f-f-fear that people will p-p-p-p-point at you and say mean things.” G-Man’s voice was getting louder and his stuttering more frequent with each word that bellowed from his gut. “Y-y-y-y-you don’t have to sit in bed at night, yelling at your s-s-s-s-s-skin for being so d-d-d-dark!”

His voice gave way and he began coughing violently. He caught his breath after a moment, and continued, “You don’t have to pretend you and she are perfect strangers so people won’t laugh!” He was now screaming uncontrollably and tears began to stream from his eyes. “Your girl is not lying in a bed unconscious after being beaten by someone, probably just because they saw her with you!!!” His voice gave way and he began to cough again, his face contorted in pain.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

“What! What!” he said as he saw me looking at him in a strange way. “Do you have a problem with what I’m saying? Don’t just stare at me. Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“You stopped stuttering,” I said.

Chapter 21

The Dairy Falls

Late Friday afternoon, after my shouting match with G-Man, I finally calmed down. I wasn't sure I agreed with everything he had said but I had no time to think about it. Time seemed to race by as I considered how much longer I didn't have much longer to live. Judging by my watch I only had an hour. I was to be at The Dairy Building at 6:45pm sharp if I ever wanted to see Brand's sketch book again. I thought about how humiliating it was going to be to trade a beating for something that was already mine. Would everyone lose respect for me after getting beat up, or would they think of me as a hero for standing up to a guy twice my size? The oversized, metal cow suddenly felt comforting. I didn't want to leave it.

I wasn't even sure he would turn the book over, as he agreed. In fact, I was certain he wouldn't. I daydreamed about ways to outsmart Black-Eye because out-powering him wasn't an option. He was the size of a small family and his fist was as large as my head.

"You best be alone if you know what's good for ya," Black-Eye's grizzly voice echoed in my head.

A sharp clicking sound brought me back to reality. Alex and G-Man were both snapping their fingers, trying to get my attention.

"I'll go with you," G-Man said.

"Yeah, count me in too," added Alex. "I wanted to go to the dairy building anyway to check out the butter cow. Costello says it's melting because the refrigerator aint workin'."

"You guys know I have to do this alone," I said in a voice that couldn't have convinced a six-year old. I knew I was doomed. "I'll be okay." Was that a statement or a question that escaped my lips?

At 6:30 I said my goodbyes to G-Man and Alex, wiped the sweaty fear off my forehead, and walked out the door to

face my bogeyman. Even though Black-Eye said he'd be alone, I knew the Posse wouldn't be too far from the action. I figured it was better to keep my friends out of this one, though. One beating is better than five. I paused, took a cavernous breath, and continued on.

I saw the dairy building at the end of the road. The street appeared to narrow with each step, threatening to squeeze the last bit of hope out of me. I kept my eyes focused on the building and my mind on Brand's book. I knew my options had run out. It was me against evil for the book.

Black-Eye's silhouette slowly became visible against the remnants of the early-evening sun. As I got closer, his large body blocked the sun's rays from my eyes, sending a cool chill from my brain to my feet. I stopped about 20 paces from him. He looked surprised to see me.

"I can't believe you even showed," he said.

"Yeah, well I had no choice, did I?" I responded. "You'd have hunted me down one way or another."

"How true," he said with a sinister smile. "You ready for your punishment?"

"You got the book?" I replied, even though I could see it barely poking out of his oversized right hand. What would you say to a mountain that was ready to release its avalanche?

"Why do you want this thing so bad, anyway? There's just a bunch of silly drawings in it," he asked.

"It was my brother's." I was probably giving him more information that I should have.

"Ahh, the kid who croaked," he nodded, giving the book a final glance.

That lit my anger. Beating or no beating, I was getting that book back.

"Give it back!" I snarled at him.

"Come and get it little man.," he challenged.

I knew it was coming to this. That book meant too much to me to back down. Not to this thug. Not to anyone.

I ran right at him. A feeling of rage I had never before experienced coursed through my body. "GIVE IT BACK!" I

shouted my battle cry seconds before I slammed into Black-Eye's stomach with my full force. He stumbled back a few feet and appeared stunned. The book dropped to the ground. I lunged forward, but Black-Eye anticipated my move, trapping the sketchbook under his gargantuan foot.

"Not so fast," he said, regaining his air of invincibility.

I stood up slowly, an inch from the kid who could pop my head off like a dandelion. My face only came up to his chest, and I found myself standing on my toes, head tipped back, trying to meet his gaze.

He grabbed my neck with his left hand and instantly lifted me off the ground.

"Your time has come," he said as he traced an outline around my left eye. I clutched at my throat in a panicked effort to take in some air. So many kids before me had suffered the same fate. Was I meant to wear the facial brand of defeat? Was I destined to be just another victim? I saw Black-Eye cock his arm back and form a malevolent smile before I closed my eyes and braced for the blow. But the blow never came.

"Ping." "Ahh!"

I fell to the ground gasping for air. When I opened my eyes I saw Black-Eye down on one knee holding his face, the book on the ground, out of his reach. An orange, marble-sized rock was lying at his feet. Fizz! I didn't waste any time thinking of my good fortune. I grabbed the book and ran as if my life depended on it. And it did because not only was the largest, ugliest, and meanest creature in Springfield chasing me, his Posse members were too. They each jumped out from behind a different tree as I sprang to my feet. Over my shoulder I caught a glimpse of Black-Eye. He was holding his face. He bellowed with fury as he joined the pursuit.

I spotted Fizz with his slingshot out of the corner of my right eye. He had been hiding behind a standup poster of the Lone Ranger. Thank God he didn't listen. G-Man and Alex were with him. They all dashed to meet me in stride.

"What do we do now?" Fizz yelled out.

“Well, I say thank you for saving my life and then we all get our brains bashed in,” I said.

“We need to split up,” G-Man reasoned. “They have strength in numbers so we have to be faster and smarter.” We were nearing the end of the road. “When I say go, Alex, you go hard left, Fizz left, James straight, and I will go right. We’ll meet back at the Dairy-Building in 10 minutes. Hopefully.”

“Then what?” Fizz asked.

“Then we’ll beat on Costello for leaving us high and dry,” G-Man said. If we weren’t petrified we’d have busted a gut laughing.

The idea of splitting up sounded crazy to me. We just got back together. In the movies they always said there’s strength in numbers. G-Man was the smartest of the bunch. I had to trust him. My heart slammed from adrenaline and fear. I would soon be alone again.

The road ended in about five yards and The Posse was breathing down our necks. Four, three, two, one....

“Ready...Go!” G-Man commanded and we each darted in our assigned directions.

I quickly glanced back and saw Black-Eye and his Posse stop in their tracks. That moment’s hesitation bought us some time. It worked, I thought. I glanced back again and saw only Black-Eye on my tail. The Posse must have split up to follow the others.

I was the one Black-Eye was after. I had escaped punishment twice. For that, he would make me pay dearly.

I ran with the book tucked tightly under my arm. An early summer night’s breeze struck my face and I felt alive. I picked up speed. Alex had made a run for the food tent and could hopefully lose his pursuer in the crowds. Fizz had darted off towards the rides, also a very crowded area. G-Man had bolted towards the grandstand. This large, brick building contained a maze of artifacts from the state fair’s 102-year history but wasn’t usually that crowded. He would have to rely on speed and cunning to escape.

My legs burned and my lungs fought to pull gasps of air into my mouth. I looked back to find Black-Eye had gained on me. His elephant-sized strides must have been making up for his less than aerodynamic frame. Sweat poured from my body, causing my shirt to adhere to my skin. Black-Eye's voice echoed in my head. "The kid who croaked?" Damn him! I'm not going down that easy. I felt a new burst of energy and I broke for the center performance stage. I ran through the center aisle of the crowd and straight for the main stage. The band was playing a country song, "The Cattle Call," by Eddy Arnold. I ran up the steps and jumped through the band, splitting the drummer and guitarist. When I was a few paces past them, I heard the lead singer squawk and the microphone squeal. Black-Eye must have knocked into the band! That might buy me some time.

I looked back. Black-Eye was still right on my tail, a broken drumstick clutched in his right hand. My fear reached a new height.

I panicked and decided to head back towards the dairy building early. G-Man was nuts. This splitting up thing wasn't working out. Apparently my friends had the same idea because I saw them coming from all directions, converging on the building. An initial feeling of relief was quickly overshadowed by the realization that numbers weren't going to help us, unless we suddenly multiplied by a hundred.

I continued on, fists clenched, teeth gritted. I was in a race with no chance of winning. I would have to stop eventually, and when I did, I would be terminated, erased from existence. Ahead, I saw the butter-cow, out of its refrigerated home, standing on a wooden platform. It was waiting for its home to be repaired, just as Alex had told me. Hunters and prey, we all continued to converge on it and on each other. Alex...Posse, Fizz...Posse, G-Man...Posse, and me...Black-Eye. We were all going to crash. It was clear that I was the only one that saw we were headed for an epic collision.

I dropped into a roll and closed my eyes. I heard some screams and felt something fly over me, brushing against my back.

SMACK! Holy crap, my friends must have been squashed! I opened my eyes and saw G-Man, Alex, and Fizz sprawled out across the pavement, mostly unharmed, aside for a few cuts and scrapes. Somehow we were all able to avoid each other.

Our chasers weren't as lucky, however. They had collided and landed next to, and just beneath, the butter cow. The three posse members all covered Black-Eye like a Pig in a Bully Blanket. Only his feet stuck out from beneath them. Our very own Springfieldian version of The Wizard of Oz, minus the ruby slippers.

I exhaled with utter relief. I looked over at Alex but his expression didn't match my newfound feeling of safety. To the contrary, his eyes were bulging and his mouth was open as wide as a canyon. He raised a shaky finger and pointed in the direction of the pile.

I slowly turned my head. It was moving. The pile was rattling. The monster was rising from the deep. There! There was its head! We thought we had killed it but it was going to return and take its wrath out on the city. It would destroy them all, until...

"Tip, drip, tip, drip, tip, drip." Melting butter began slapping onto Black-Eye's head. The butter cow was rocking from side to side. It was alive!

I thought about the many Frankenstein movies I had seen. But this was different. No special effects, no makeup, just a wire cow laced with gobs of butter. How was it moving?

Black-Eye got to his knees, shaking off his toadies like leftover crumbs from a lunchtime sandwich. He ignored the butter that was slowly caking itself to his face. He looked towards me and grumbled like a volcano ready to erupt. His hand reached out to grab me and I pulled back.

"Tip, drip, tip, drip, tip, drip, CRASH!" The cow collapsed on Black-Eye and his Posse, burying them.

And there he was. Costello, standing on the platform where the butter cow had once rested. Gobs of butter on his arms, from his hands to his armpits. A tired look on his face. A bead of sweat dripped down his cheek. After several deep breaths, he turned to us and smiled, “Moooooooooooo!”

I got to my feet and walked over to the mess. The bully pile was still moving, but slower now. Black-Eye’s face was slightly visible through loads of butter and the twisted limbs of his gang. I approached him, staring at *his*, now-blackened eye. I pressed my finger into the black and blue mark around his eye and I saw him wince in pain. I drew a slow circle around his eye.

“That’s what you get for messin’ with *my* Posse!” I said triumphantly. “And by the way, The Posse is the *good* guys. The *bad* guys are just called thugs.”

I walked away, tightly clutching Brand’s sketchbook against my chest.

Chapter 22 Deservingly So

Costello was the new hero of the group. We recounted stories of his cow tipping maneuver the next morning before work. Fizz, of course, told the best version of it. He recreated the event, utilizing his full body and a variety of outlandish impersonations. I don't think Black-Eye would have approved, but none of us cared anymore. He was no longer invincible. The Cow Tipper had defeated him.

With Black-Eye out of the way, and Brand's sketchbook in my possession, I was able to focus on something different on Saturday afternoon. My sketch of the Ferris Wheel.

I was still angry with Paige for entering it into the contest but I had to admit, I was intrigued about what attention, if any, it was receiving. Did people like it? Did they think it was drawn by a pro or just a small-town hack?

After grabbing a corndog, I decided to find out. I walked over to the Expo Building, and dodged the pushy sellers to get to the exhibit. I slowly peered through the entranceway. Many people were milling about. Some of them clearly were judges, as displayed by a ribbon on their clothing.

A strange feeling of excitement hit me, realizing my sketch could be judged. If I won, they wouldn't know who to give the prize to, of course, but it was thrilling, nonetheless. My sketch was around the first wall, not visible from the entranceway.

I walked in, turned left and then right, and there it was. I stepped back and to the side a few feet, leaning against a post, to get a better view, not of my sketch but of the exhibit observers.

I studied the fairgoers for any glimmer of emotion; happiness, sadness, love, hate. My heart pounded at every fairgoer who stopped to look at my sketch. A woman glanced over at me and I stepped back, behind the post, convinced she knew I was the artist or something.

She looked back at my sketch and I once again emerged from behind the post. Something about the lady looked familiar. Grey puffy curls in her hair, short legs...Mrs. Stephenson, my art teacher! My art teacher was at the fair, looking at my art. How surreal.

Did she like it? Did she hate it? Did she recognize the style of the sketch as mine? There was no way of knowing because I wasn't going to embarrass myself by asking her. She stood there for about five minutes, motionless. I started to sweat. Then she finally left. Little did she know, I had indirectly followed through on her request from the end off the school year. My sketch was entered into a contest.

The attention my sketch was receiving was gradually increasing. Some people pointed, some smiled, and some just passed on by without ever offering a look, but it seemed they were in the minority.

My emotions swirled and I felt like the corndog was coming back to life in my stomach. Smiles meant approval or pity, laughter signaled astonishment or embarrassment, and no reaction could have meant anything.

Finally, I moved in to take a closer look at my artwork. The last time I was in this room, I didn't stick around long enough to take in all of the details. This time I noticed that someone, I assumed Paige, had placed the picture into a bronze frame where it sat protected by a layer of glass. It looked so professional, like something that could hang in someone's house. This was incredible. It hadn't been just a way to relieve stress and pass the time. I really was talented.

My gaze intensified so much that the image began to blur. Bold strokes became softer and appeared to sway as they transformed into lines resembling television static.

A faint image was coming into view, creeping out from behind the snowy interference. I finally recognized the scene as the stairs of my house. I saw myself as I scampered down them to meet Brand and we trotted out the door. We turned onto Patterson and eventually headed past Joe's Soda Shop. I knew this scene all too well. I had played it out in my mind

every night before falling asleep for the past year. It was the final day. His final day.

I watched the scenes play out in this picture frame turned television. The walk to the field, and playing ball with Brand. It was all as I had remembered. No surprises, except one thing. My expression.

It carried no resemblance of worry and no hint of fear. I was concentrating too hard on Brand's throws. He challenged me more and more with each ball, hurling them further and further away from me, and with greater velocity. It was like he was trying to drain my worries, using a baseball to siphon them out so that all that remained was joy, exhilaration, and fatigue.

My stomach twisted as I watched a ball kick off my glove and roll away from me. *The* ball. The ball that led to Brand teasing me, spurring me to fire the ball back at him as hard as I could. He should have been scared. He should have been upset, but he wasn't. As the ball I threw hurled towards him, he kept smiling, his cheeks as wide as the earth. It was like he was welcoming it.

I watched myself run to see if he was alright. To see if the ball that smashed into his chest had caused significant damage, or worse. I was running in slow motion, gaining little ground. The distance, in fact, was growing between us, not shrinking. I was moving in reverse! I needed to get there, to stop that ball from hitting him. To make sure he was OK, to make sure he...“BRAND!”

“Hey kid, you alright?”

“Huh?”

“I said, are you alright?”

I shook my head and saw a thin-mustached, middle-aged man tapping me on the shoulder. He was holding a young girl; I assumed was his daughter, with his other arm. His wife was standing close by his side, probably afraid I was loco or something. They were all staring at me, and understandably so. Who knows how long had I been daydreaming?

“Not bad, huh?” the man said. He was pointing at my sketch of The Wheel. “I wonder who drew it. No name, no description.”

“Yeah it is pretty good,” I said, feeling awkward about complimenting my own work. “It just shouldn’t be here,” I added, as I walked off, still in a slight daze.

As I walked, I thought about how much I had disrespected G-Man. That wasn’t right, even if it did cause him to lose his stutter. He found a girl who cared deeply for him, just like me. But unlike me, he actually had the guts to tell her how he felt. Unfortunately, she couldn’t hear his words. Not now, and maybe not ever again. I had to do something to make it up to him, to let him know how sorry I was for the way I acted.

On my way back to the cow, I stopped by the corndog stand to see how Fizz and Costello were doing. Approaching the booth, I noticed Fizz frantically serving up corndogs to a slew of customers. Costello was nowhere in sight.

“Hey, what’s up with you?” I asked.

Fizz pointed over to a rocking chair outside the stand. Mr. Swift was sitting, gently rocking forward and back.

“He’s onto me. He caught me tryin’ to skip out this mornin’. I would have been set, too, but I got greedy,” he said.

“Hey, keep your voice down or he’ll hear you,” I commanded.

“Ah, he’s so deaf, he couldn’t hear a train runnin’ through his bedroom,” Fizz responded.

“This is true,” I agreed. “Anyway, how did you get greedy?”

“Earlier this morning, I heard Mamie was supposed to appear today at 2:30, on the center stage.”

I pulled out my pocket watch and lifted the latch. “It’s 3:15 now!”

“I know. Anyway, I left Costello at the stand so I could try to get a preview of the tent where Mamie was gonna be

signing photos. I just couldn't resist," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"What's so greedy about that?" I asked.

"I'm gettin' to that," he said. "So I'm over at the tent and I hear a woman giggling through the window of this trailer, so I think to myself, nah – there's no way. It can't be her. But I had to check it out; it sounded like her laugh in that movie *Two Tickets to Broadway*. Imagine, hanging out with Mamie Van Doren in her personal trailer!"

"That's the big leagues!" I said.

"Major league, my boy!" He said raising his hands to the heavens. "Ok. So I stood up on a rock to try to catch a glimpse through the window but I couldn't reach, so I tried to move it closer. It wouldn't budge."

"So you left?" I reasoned.

"No, of course not," he replied, making a face that suggested I was the crazy one. "I did what any sensible guy would have done."

"You walked away?" I asked.

"Are you nuts? I put my ear to the door to try to hear what was goin' on inside," Fizz explained.

"Of course you did," I replied.

"Only I figured the door would be locked," he continued.

"It wasn't?"

"Nuh-uh!"

My eyes widened, "So did you go in?"

"Of course I went in," he said taking a macho posture.

"In fact, I fell in. I was leaning in so much to try and get a listen that I lost my footing and flew right into the trailer."

"No way! Was she there?" I said tugging at my hair in disbelief.

"No, she wasn't, but the women's high-dive team was.

"The whole team?"

"The whole team! They were getting dressed for their show – needless to say they weren't too thrilled with my visit."

"I'll say," I exclaimed with a gigantic smile.

“I spent the next 20 minutes tryin’ to outrun security guards and hidin’ in the bushes. I couldn’t return to the stand until I was sure the coast was clear.”

“Are you fooling me?” I questioned. This was starting to get far-fetched – even for Fizz.

He quickly pulled a white bra out of his back pocket and held it up in front of my eyes. “I don’t know, am I?” He grinned wickedly.

“Woooooow, I guess not. So how’d you get in trouble?” I asked.

“Costello was doin’ his best to control the lunch rush, but he just couldn’t hold ‘em off,” he explained. “The yell of a complaining customer woke up Ol’ Swifty and I was busted. So here I am, a few hundred feet away from the love of my life but I can’t even see her.”

“Where’s Costello?”

“He went instead. I told him I’d cover,” Fizz said dejectedly. He knew he deserved his punishment.

He didn’t deserve my sympathy. After all, he had taken advantage of Mr. Swift and Costello so many times he had this coming to him. He was getting his just desserts but I suddenly felt bad for him. Deserving or not, the one thing in life he wanted more than anything else was being dangled in front of his face without a chance to have it.

“Oh well,” I said, apologetically. I didn’t want to make things worse by making a bigger deal out of it.

“Yeah, oh well,” he repeated, his body slouched towards the ground like someone cut the strings on the Fizz marionette.

A plan formed. “Look, I can’t sit by and watch you miss the opportunity of a lifetime. Take off for 15 minutes. I’ll man the stand. Old Swifty won’t even know you’re gone,” I said to him.

“You sure?” He asked, suddenly hopeful. “What about your stand?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Alex and G-Man took their breaks already and this could be your last chance. Fizz and Mamie

on stage for one day only!” My arms flailed like a circus ringleader giving an imaginary introduction to the two stars.

He took off his apron and threw it on the counter.

“You’re the best.”

“Ahh, don’t mention it...But since you did, it’s true,” I said.

Fizz smiled and was about to leave when Costello came flying in like a whirlwind and jumped in front of the two customers in line. They were already annoyed by Fizz’s lack of attention and this gesture sent them walking away in frustration.

“Man, you wouldn’t believe it!” He jeered.

“Did you meet her?” I asked.

“Did I meet her?” he said, pulling a signed photo from inside his jacket and promptly flashing it in front of our eyes.

“Wow!” Fizz and I belted out in unison.

“That’s not all, smell my shirt.” Fizz and I made a face.

“You sicko!” Fizz yelled at him.

“No, really, I mean it.”

I bit. “Smells like some lady’s perfume.”

Fizz and I looked at each other and realization struck again, “Wow!”

“But that’s not all!” Costello said, taunting Fizz while turning his head to reveal a perfect red lipstick kiss on his cheek.

“Woooooooow!” we yelled.

“I’m outta here. I’m off to meet my sweet.” Fizz cheered and began to run. He didn’t make it far with Costello’s outstretched hand gripping his bib-overalls.

“Not so fast Sirino,” Costello said. “She’s gone.”

“Goooooone?” Fizz said, following it with a painful looking gulp.

“Gone. The crowd got too crazy to control so they cut it short.”

“Cut it short...” Fizz dazedly repeated as his whole body drooped once again. This time he looked like he was going to vomit.

“Nice work Costello.” I said, patting him on the back.

“What did I do?” Costello queried.

“Never mind. I gotta run, guys.” I wanted no part of the argument that was sure to ensue or any more of Fizz’s sadness. I had experienced enough sadness to last me for awhile.

When I got back to the cow I told Alex and G-Man Fizz’s story of woe. I also mentioned that I was going to hang around for a while, after our shift, to help out the rest of Mr. Curren’s crew. This was a small, but necessary white lie.

“Whatever you want,” G-Man said. “I’ll see *you* tomorrow at the game.”

“Um, yeah. Sure,” I mumbled. He wanted to get a reaction out of me but I was preoccupied with my plan for the evening.

At 6:30, I parted ways with my co-workers. I felt a stronger bond to G-Man and had a completely different view of Alex since just a week ago. Alex appeared to be standing a little taller lately and paying more attention to his image. He had also become some kind of a local hero after the softball game. People stopped by the cow just to talk to him about baseball. Millie even asked him to go to a social. She had stunned him so much with her request that he didn’t even answer. She, of course, took his silence as a yes.

Alex kept telling everyone that he didn’t really want to go with her. After G-Man and I saw him bring her an ice cream, a flower, a bag of cotton candy, some mini-donuts, a pink toy car, a picture of himself, and another ice cream, we had a feeling he was full of it. Did I mention he repeatedly wrote her name in the dirt with a long twig?

Chapter 23

Background to Foreground

At 6:30, I parted ways with my co-workers and headed towards the stables. I didn't have my usual pad and pencils because I hadn't planned on sketching that day. Instead, I had to borrow some pencils and large poster-size pieces of paper from the dairy building on my walk over to the stables. With the fair coming to a close, I figured the supplies wouldn't be missed.

I pushed aside the dilapidated, brown door of the stables and was welcomed by an ominous wall of darkness. A sharp chill hit my spine. The recent events were still haunting the fair, and especially, the main stables. Bert was in jail, but was he innocent? If so, Marie's attacker was still on the loose. Either way, I had a heightened sense of paranoia upon returning to the scene. I hadn't been back to the stables since the incident, and I had a sudden feeling my return wasn't a wise one.

As I moved in further, the pungent aroma of the horses cut through the dark, heavy air and dominated my senses. I squinted to get a bearing on my surroundings. Too dark. I reached along the wall where I imagined a lantern might reside.

After a few minutes and a splinter from a wooden beam, I found two lanterns sitting side by side on a wooden shelf. Now I just needed some matches. Fearing more splinters, I patted my hands up and down across the shelf. I heard a light shuffle as I tapped a small box. Running my fingers along it, I could feel the coarse strike strip of the match box.

I struck a match and brought it to the wick of one of the lanterns. The light flickered and let out a crack as the flame tried to overpower the damp wick. The flame finally caught. An amber ray of light emanated from the cage, causing a spherical glow to project against the immediate surroundings.

My eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the new lighting. I quickly surveyed the area to make sure I had no human company. It was empty, aside from the horses. Then I began my search for blood, literally. I scanned the floor and walls for traces of Marie's blood but I found none. The police had done a thorough job when they swept for evidence. My nerves finally settled a bit, allowing me to plan out my project.

I slowly waved the lantern up and down and peeled the darkness from my surroundings. The stables were a mess of hay, strewn food, and horse manure. It was obvious that Bert's replacement did not possess the same work ethic and attention to detail.

Two horses stood in their stables and each was glaring right towards me. Their manes looked crusty and dry as if they hadn't been brushed in days.

In addition to cleaning the stables, Bert often did extra work, brushing and cleaning the horses, without receiving extra pay from the owners. The horses certainly missed the care that the tall black man, now awaiting trial, gave to them. So did Chapman Field, for that matter. The sunburned grass was in desperate need of a drink and the majority of the chalk-dust had been carried off by the summer breeze.

I grabbed a brush off the wall and walked over to the first horse, a real large male. I recognized this horse as the one Marie rode during the opening parade. I lightly stroked its mane and it gently snorted at me in response. I felt sorry for the horse, realizing it had witnessed the brutal beating of its rider and the sudden removal of its caretaker within 24 hours.

"Don't worry big fella', we'll get 'em back," I said to the horse.

I moved over to brush the other horse, a smaller, brown one with a tan mane. When the brush touched its hair, it began to buck, its hooves making loud "clop clop" sounds on the wooden floorboards. It obviously wasn't pleased to see me, so I left it alone. I had work to do anyway.

As I laid out my materials, a rush of excitement hit me. I was going to sketch again. I unfolded a riding brochure that contained Marie's photo and propped it up against a wooden support beam. I positioned the lantern so its orange light, discolored by the dingy glass, highlighted Marie's picture.

I rubbed my chin and contemplated my approach. I decided I would use shading and smudging techniques to give a blurred feel to the background. This would create the illusion that Marie's likeness was crisper, causing it to pop off the page.

Then I thought about the horse. I had only drawn a horse once before and had made the mistake of blending the mane too deeply. I decided to use hard strokes to convey the strong black hair of the stallion.

Marie's face would require a much more subtle approach to reproduce her soft, but stunning, features. When drawing people, I found that it's often what you didn't draw than what you did, that gave them their individual characteristics.

Bert once said, "We all look alike, except for a few bumps and bruises. We're all human." That was one of his more understandable comments.

I started to sketch the background, using tall-deep strokes for the stable walls. Then came the fun part. I smeared and smudged the walls until I had framed a place for Marie in front of the stable. Drawing Marie in an action pose was not going to be easy but I was determined to make it work. After being forced to utilize my eraser a few times, Marie had feet to stand on and I had started to get the hang of it.

I completed her legs. It nearly felt like my hands had a mind of their own, working before I could even think. I felt the strength of G-Man, Bert, and Marie guiding me through my work. Marie's suede riding outfit, her slim torso, her long, smooth arms. She was coming to life right before my eyes.

With her full body now completely drawn, it was time to proceed with the toughest task in drawing a person. I studied

the photo and followed the warm curves of Marie's face. Her deep, dark eyes were encapsulated by her strong eyelashes and her thick, dark eyebrows. Her shoulder-length brown hair waved past her face, creating the perfect frame. She was beautiful.

Her high, round cheeks always appeared to be forming a smile. The same smile I saw when she greeted G-Man before their breakfast excursions, or when she spotted him across the town square. I had seen it a hundred times. I often took notice of these things because I was envious of their relationship. Aside from the obvious drawbacks, their relationship was a strong one, built on care and respect. I hoped to achieve that bond with someone one day.

I continued sketching, looking less and less at Marie's picture, until I stopped glancing at it completely. I didn't need to. She was there with me.

I finished the final few sweeping strokes of Marie's hair, drawing a few strands so they appeared to dangle over her face. That's how she wore it, slightly covering her left eye. I shifted my head, and gazed deeply at the drawing. Something was missing. I could feel it in my gut. I closed my eyes and sat for a moment, not only picturing Marie's face but remembering her warm smile, gentle laugh, and...

That's it!

I opened my eyes and applied the finishing touch. I set the sketch down, walking slowly backwards to get a wider view of my work. I tried to swallow but couldn't. A tingle rose up from my feet, through my chest, and up to my head, sullyng my balance and blurring my eyes. I closed them and drew an exuberant breath. Even in the dim half light of the lantern, it was clear. It was her. It was really her.

I was done. How long had it taken me? I had completely lost track of the time. It dawned on me that I told my parents I'd be home by nine. They too thought I was staying late to help Mr. Curren and his crew. I moved my pocket watch into the lantern's glow...8:45!

I jumped forward to grab my sketch, fueled by fear about the time. Spooked by my sudden action, the smaller, brown horse grunted and bucked. My ill-advised and unpredictable action had obviously frightened it. I whispered to it and it calmed for a moment. I walked over to pet its mane. As I raised my hand, the horse jolted upward, and I saw the bottom of its hoof directly above my head. The horse brayed and thrashed, and I tumbled backwards. I scrambled to get my legs under me, reaching behind to try to break my fall.

“Smack!”

“Thud!”

With my eyes distracted, I had misjudged the distance to the empty stalls behind me. My body crashed full force into the post that divided the two stables directly across from the angry horse. The top of my back between my shoulder blades rammed first, and my head followed, whipping back into the pole as well.

I heard another loud ‘pang’ and ‘thud’ which could have been something in my body snapping or just the horse taking his fury out on the stable. I gave a half-hearted attempt to move but to no avail. The world went black. I dreamt hard.

As I drifted in and out of consciousness, the previous two hours rewound and played over in my head. I was able to see Marie’s hospital room while I had been sketching her in the barn. Both visions played synchronously, like a double feature on one screen. What were two seemingly unrelated events was now one in two settings, an overlap of cause and effect that would challenge the inner-workings of my mind forever.

I stood behind myself, as I sketched Marie. At the same time I saw G-Man, sitting by Marie’s side at the hospital. He was crouched in a chair next to her bed, staring at her. He wore a look of devastation. His arms were slumped over onto his legs, his chin held by his hands.

Marie looked silent and peaceful but was unresponsive. G-Man gently took her hand and told her about his day, all without a stutter.

“It’s stopped. Just like you said it would. My stuttering has stopped,” he said to her, releasing her hand. He closed his teary eyes and sat back in his chair, succumbing to exhaustion.

I peered back at myself, and watched as I filled in the remaining details of Marie’s feet on the paper. Just as her feet were completely sketched, the covers of her hospital bed fluttered from the breeze of the open window, and briefly awoke G-Man. He opened his eyes long enough to see that Marie’s were still shut. Once again, his closed.

I watched as I crafted Marie’s legs once again, and spotted some movement in the hospital room. This time the wind had tickled Marie’s bed sheets, causing the top one to gently slide off onto the floor. As it fell, the corner of the sheet grazed against G-Man’s hand, and he woke for a second time. He peered at Marie with a slightly confused look, noticing her slightly shifted sheet. He then gazed at the open window. A steady breeze blew into the room, causing his shirt to flutter. Half-awake, he got up from the chair, replaced her sheet and walked over to the other end of the room. He peered through the open window into the darkening sky.

As I completed Marie’s legs and began on her arms, G-Man let out a slow, deep sigh. He closed the window, gently locking it into place. He walked back to his chair and paused for an instant, scratching his head. Slamming himself into his seat, he quickly peered at Marie as if he thought this sudden, loud movement would wake her. It did not, and depression pulled down hard on his face. G-Man inhaled a deep breath and allowed his eyelids to close.

They shot back open. Marie’s left arm was hanging off the bed. G-Man sprung out of his chair like a snake uncoiled from a can. He studied her arm, and again scratched his head. He was clearly confused. Was exhaustion playing tricks on him? Was he hallucinating? He studied her face for a moment longer as if hoping for a hint of consciousness. He slid his chair over to get a closer look. Nothing. His face, briefly infused with excitement, drooped back to resignation

as he tucked her arm under the sheets and drifted back to sleep.

As my likeness completed Marie's body and started on the features of her face, G-Man slept, dreamt and began talking in his sleep.

"I'm glad you could join me for breakfast," he mumbled, an elated expression appearing on his face. "You look as beautiful as ever," he continued. Suddenly, his body began to twitch and his features drastically changed. "G-g-get away from her!" he frantically stuttered. "L-l-leave us alone!" His entire body jolted but he did not awake. Finally he calmed. "It's alright, it's going to be okay," he quietly murmured.

As a helpless observer to these surreal scenes, my head shot back and forth between the hospital and barn. I did not want to miss a beat. The pencil danced across the page. Marie was motionless. I shaped, styled, and shadowed her face. Nothing. I formed, filled, and furrowed her hair. Stillness.

Both scenes paused briefly, and then resumed in slow motion. I saw myself close my eyes, back at the one moment I had searched for that one missing aspect of Marie's likeness. I flipped my pencil over, and gently twisted an edge of the eraser into Marie's eye creating a bright highlight. I watched myself step back to look at the work. A white light shot out from Marie's eye in the newly drawn sketch. In the hospital room, G-Man awoke. Not by the breeze this time or by the shifting of Marie's sheet. He was awoken by the sound of Marie whispering.

"It's okay, Garrison. I'm okay. I'm okay."

"I'm here," he said without a stutter. And then he embraced her.

Chapter 24 And Then There Were Ten

I awoke from my fall-induced nap and grimaced as I touched the egg-shaped lump on the back of my head. I felt dizzy upon sitting up, the dark barn not helping my unsteady vision. The lantern had burnt out while I was out cold. But how long had I been out for? I spread my hands across the barn floor, searching for the lantern, but instead knocked my knuckles into a jagged piece of wood. The pain just compounded the throbbing in my head. I picked up the wood and held it in my hands as I looked around for the lantern, trying to clear the cobwebs from my brain.

Remembering I had left the lantern in the middle of the barn, I stood up and started walking in what I believed to be that direction. Then it hit me. If the lantern had burnt out while I was unconscious, it would certainly be out of oil. But there was another lantern. I had seen it in the proximity of the one I had used earlier in the night. I shifted my feet along the ground with tiny steps so I wouldn't break anything I kicked. With a 'ping' I had found the lantern that had burnt out. I reached down next to the lantern, felt around, and found the matches.

Now I needed that second lantern. I took the long way across the barn, using the outer wall for support and direction. I found the other lantern just where I had remembered. It was sitting on a shelf near the front door. I placed the piece of wood down on the ground, struck a match and lit the wick. I picked up the wood, holding it under the light of the lamp.

The wood in the palm of my left hand was a mixture of brown and red. My eyes struggled to focus. I glanced down at my hand and again tried to study the object I held. It finally registered. A wooden handle to a shovel. It was light tan, a little dirty, and it had blotches of red on it. Was it paint? I ran my fingernail over it but I couldn't get it to chip. Whatever it was had stained the wood, not just covered it.

An intense wave of nausea hit me as my head cleared and realization struck. I ducked aside and vomited my dinner onto a bail of hay. It wasn't paint on the wood, it was blood.

I wiped my mouth and gingerly walked back towards the area where I had fallen, trying not to aggravate my stomach any further. I slowly waved the lantern, scanning the ground for the other piece of the shovel, but found nothing. I had not seen the handle on the ground when I entered. I was sure the impact of my body hitting the post had jarred it loose from somewhere.

A sharp, icy feeling, hit my body as I realized I could be in danger. I was holding the weapon used to beat Marie. Whoever had wielded it was not going to be too happy to see it discovered.

I eyed the post I had fallen into and gave it a kick to try to mimic the force created by my earlier blow. I heard a 'clank,' but saw nothing on the ground. I raised the lantern up a little and repeated my kick. Again I heard the 'clank' and this time I saw its source. The metal trough had swung away from its attachment on the stable fence.

The water troughs were attached to the posts from the top with a series of rings so they could swing up if pulled or forced. Gravity and a significant amount of water usually kept them in place.

This one was almost empty. I pulled on the trough, easily prying it away from the fence to expose the shovel head. It had been wedged between the horizontal fence posts. I stared in astonishment at the weapon that had created welts, the size of grapefruits, on Marie's face and body. I reluctantly removed the broken shovel piece from its hiding place and then I heard a noise. The shovel scared me plenty, but I was mortally frightened by a new development, a man's voice coming from outside the barn.

The barn walls were too thick for me to make out what he was saying or gauge any specific tones of his voice. The bloody shovel, plus a voice outside, equaled my life was in danger. I quickly scooped up the sketch and my pencils and blew out the lantern. The outside conversation was replaced

by the quickening crunch of approaching footsteps across the dry, pebble-laden dirt. I knelt down in the empty stall, trying to shrink myself to an impossible size. As far as I was concerned, it couldn't get dark enough inside the barn now.

The crunching grew louder and then stopped. What if Marie's real attacker was back to get his shovel? I would surely be discovered. I was kneeling directly below where it had been concealed.

The barn door squealed open, and I almost dropped all the stuff I was holding.

"Squeeeeeel!" The door opened further, allowing enough moonlight to enter the barn for a madman to see a kid crouching in a stable.

The stranger began moving again. Closer. Louder. Closer. A few pebbles plunked into my knees which were touching the ground. The man was walking right towards me. I could hear him breathing but I kept my eyes shut under the ridiculous premise that if I couldn't see him, then he couldn't see me. I held my breath and hoped my pounding heart wasn't as loud as it sounded in my ears. My palms started to sweat, making it tougher to maintain my grip on the shovel handle. I opened my eyes and saw the faint outline of a man's face peering over the stable door directly above my head. My muscles twitched, threatening to relent from overuse. I pleaded with my body, telling it I needed to hold on. One more second. Don't drop it, not now. I closed my eyes again and prayed he'd go away, my lungs about to seize from lack of oxygen. I desperately needed some air. I was about gasp, blowing my cover.

"Crunch, crunch, crunch." Footsteps headed away. "Squeeeeeel!" I opened my eyes and the man was gone. I gasped for air. My eyes teared and I hunched over as I tried to replenish my oxygen.

I remained in hiding for a few minutes before leaving the barn. I drew out my watch and nearly fainted when I saw the time. 11:05. I was more than two hours late. My parents were probably in a panic and alerting the National Guard.

I needed to get home in a hurry to calm my parents and to give the newfound evidence to my dad. He was great at puzzles and solving the crimes in mystery movies. He told countless stories of how he wanted to be an investigator, but mom thought it was too dangerous. So instead, he was relegated to solving paperback crimes with Holmes and Watson before bed. I was praying the solution to this mystery would outweigh his anger at my late arrival home.

It was late and the streets were bare, giving me an eerie feeling and a sense of dread as I walked home. I started right up into a run, skipping over the walking and jogging part. If someone was going to follow me, they were going to have to sprint at my top speed to keep up. I constantly looked behind me as I ran. At one point, when I turned the corner onto Main Street, I thought I saw the shadow of a man in the alley off to the left. I just kept running.

I blasted down Patterson Avenue holding the broken weapon, took a hard left across the neighbor's lawn onto Summer Street, and then tore up my driveway. I burst through the door like a whirlwind.

"Dad, Dad!" I yelled, closing and carefully locking the door behind me. "Look what I found!"

My dad came running in from the kitchen and my mom hurried down the stairs.

My dad spoke first, "James, where have you..."

"Oh, William, just as long as he's alright," my mom interrupted, stepping in front of my dad and hugging me so hard I almost fainted.

My mom finally released me from her hug. I handed the shovel to my dad.

"James, what is this? Where were you?" my dad asked. He inspected the shovel, placing the pieces together.

"I was at the stables, and..."

"The stables?!" my mom shrieked. "James, what are you crazy? After what happened?!"

"Mom, calm down, I was just..."

"Don't tell me to calm down, you have some serious explaining to do!" she again interrupted.

“Isn’t that what I’m doing?” I asked.

“Yeah - well it better be good,” she responded.

“Anyway, I was doing a sketch of Marie for G-Man,” I said. “I had treated him bad the other day and wanted to make it up to him. I needed to go to the stables so I could properly sketch the background. I accidentally spooked one of the horses, tripped, and knocked myself out.”

“Oh, James!” my mom said with tears forming in her eyes.

“Don’t worry, I’m okay mom,” I said.

She took a deep breath. “Go on,” she said.

“So I came to and there was one part of the shovel, right near my hand. It had fallen when I fell back into the post.”

“The trough?” my dad asked.

“Exactly!” I answered, in awe of my dad’s cunning. “The shovel head was still wedged in there. It hadn’t fallen from the blow. And look at this, dad. It’s got blood marks all over it. It’s got to be the weapon the man used to beat Marie.”

My dad inspected the shovel more closely. He seemed to be counting something. “I’ve got to run this over to the sheriff.”

“Dad, does that blood show anything important? Anything about Bert?”

“I think it does, son.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means, my dear Watson, a man with ten fingers beat that girl,” he said, grabbing his hat off the coat rack. “It also means I should have kept my faith in a longtime friend.”

“Hey dad, can I come?” I asked.

“No James, you have to work early tomorrow,” he said. “Besides, I think this evidence will be all the sheriff needs.”

“Okay, but be careful. I think someone might have followed me home,” I warned.

“I will son,” he said. He pulled aside the curtains and peered out into the night. Appearing satisfied the coast was clear, he swiftly walked out the front door wearing a determined smile.

Chapter 25
An End to the Suffering

My mom tucked me into bed and kissed me goodnight. Little did she know, I had no intention of going to sleep. After I heard her door shut, I snuck downstairs to the kitchen and swiped a piece of spy equipment. A good old, ordinary, drinking glass. After all that had happened to me, sleep would have to wait.

I stayed up late that evening, waiting for my dad to get home from the police station. I wanted to hear what the sheriff had said to him about the evidence. I looked at the clock. 1:30am, and still nothing.

I drifted in and out of sleep until I heard the front door open, and footsteps on the staircase. The time was now 2:30 and my eyes stung from lack of sleep. I positioned the glass I had swiped against the wall in proper eavesdropping fashion. Unfortunately, what I heard was a bunch of mumbling. I had waited up for nothing.

On Sunday morning, the last day of the fair, I jettied down the stairs to find out what I had missed the night before. The kitchen was empty, and Sunday's newspaper was crumpled on the kitchen table signaling that my dad was up. I looked out the door. His Chevy was gone. I climbed back up the stairs and slowly pushed my parents' bedroom door open. My mom was in bed, still sound asleep. It appeared as if I wasn't the only tired one in the family.

When I arrived at the cow, I immediately told Alex the story from Saturday night. He was astounded by my bravery and ecstatic that Bert was innocent. Of course, knowing he was innocent didn't mean he was free. I had to find out if my dad was able to convince the sheriff of anything last night.

“Hey, where's G-Man?” I asked.

“Don't know, he hasn't shown up yet,” Alex replied.

By 10am, Alex and I started to assume G-Man wasn't coming at all. We knew his tardiness had something to do with Marie. We were more than a little worried.

I thought about the vivid dream I had had after smashing my skull on the stable post. The imagery had seemed so real. I prayed that Marie had woken up just as she did in my dream. I knew, however, not to rely too heavily on dreams. Before Brand's death, I had countless dreams about doctors finding a cure for his disease. In them, the doctors would run into the waiting room and hug my parents. We would all rejoice. Then I'd wake up with a horrible feeling of sadness. Those dreams always felt real. But they never became real.

My body ached from the innumerable hours of standing over the past week and a half. My mind hurt from overuse. Thinking about Brand, Marie, G-Man, Joe, Alex, and Black-Eye, just to mention a few, was a lot to handle in such a short period of time. Too many things had occurred to make sense of them all. It was all compounded by my nasty fall yesterday.

Nothing ached more, however, than my heart. It pounded inside my chest, telling me that it wanted to spend its life with Paige. Holding her hand, staring into her eyes, wanting her to kiss me again. My brain, for once, seemed to agree with my heart, but I still felt slightly uneasy. Where did this girl come from? Where did she live? Who were her parents? Did she like me as much as I liked her? I still had so many questions. I planned to get some answers after tonight's game.

The conclusion of the tie softball game was to resume at 6pm, just one hour after the fair's closing. This didn't leave enough time to get our final cleaning done but Mr. Curren and Mr. Swift were insistent upon the time. They were both afraid of a repeat of last week's events.

"We'll beat 'em by 6:15 and be back to close up by 6:30," Mr. Curren grinned earlier that morning. "You in for the game today?" he had asked me with a hopeful look on his face.

“Nah, I’m injured,” I pointed to the lump on the back of my head. I figured a visible injury would reduce the questions from friends and family why I was sitting out. Again, I was wrong.

“I heard Jackie Robinson played a whole game with a broken nose,” Alex said as he served a customer. “He stuffed a napkin up there to stop the bleeding.” The customer looked appalled at Alex’s poorly timed talk of bloody noses.

“He’s a tougher man than me, Alex.”

“It would appear so,” Alex agreed, rubbing his chin.

I tried to avoid any talk of the game by asking Alex questions about Millie. The second I would feel his eyes on me, I would bring up the barn social or how he was going to be able to kiss Millie since she was a full head taller than him.

He loved to talk about it, although I could sense he was nervous. This made it easy to keep him distracted.

At around noon, my dad came running over to the stand.

“Dad, what happened? Does the sheriff need to talk to me? Are they gonna...”

“Can’t talk now, James,” he interrupted. “The sheriff says you can fill him in later. So don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about what? What happened?”

“Gotta run, James, I’ll see you at the field?” he asked and ran off without hearing my answer.

“Yeah, I guess,” I replied to the now empty window. I was really angry now. When was I going to hear what had occurred. After all, I had been the one found the weapon. I was the one who braved the stables and was followed home by a madman.

During my break, I looked for Paige to see if she’d like to grab a bite to eat and have a chat. I wanted to let her know I was sorry for screaming at her. I also knew she’d be able to calm me down, but she wasn’t at the stand.

“You just missed her,” Millie told me, her curls bouncing on her shoulders.

“Do you know where she went?” I asked.

“Didn’t say.”

“Do you know when she’ll be back?”

“Didn’t say.”

“Do you know anything?” I exclaimed. I tried too late to cover my mouth to stop the words from tumbling out. Frustration had set in.

“Oh, I know *some* things,” Millie said in a coy manner.

“Really? Such as?” I still felt guilty about my insult.

“I know she’s crazy,” said Millie.

“Huh?” I was confused. Around Millie that was nothing new though.

“About you, James,” she finished.

“Oh, um, really?” Warm blood rushed to my face.

“Come on James, you had to know that,” Millie said, rolling her eyes.

“Oh sure...I mean of course...Well, you know I thought, I mean I hoped she did, and well, that sure is good news, thanks Millie.” My brain had ceased to operate as I backed away from the stand, a dreamy smile pasted to my face.

I floated back to the cow, my face still warm from embarrassment.

“What did you get for lunch?” Alex asked.

“Crazy.”

“I know you’re crazy, James, Looney Tunes.”

“She’s crazy about me,” I answered.

Alex figured it out. “So...you saw the lovely Paige, did you?”

“No, Millie,” I replied.

“Millie? That’s my girl!”

“Crazy.” I repeated.

“You’re calling my girl crazy?” he asked.

“Your girl? Paige is *my* girl!” I barked at him. “Man, what’s wrong with you, haven’t you been listening to a word I’ve been saying?”

“I’m thinking that was my one mistake,” he said, calming down.

“Anyway, you were going to get some lunch?” he asked.

“Oh yeah,” I said, getting up and again leaving the cow. Lunch, I know what that is.

As I sat in the back of the cow, I split time between munching down a corndog and peering over to the stand across the street. Paige still hadn't returned as far as I could see.

The afternoon went by pretty quickly. Paige finally arrived back at her stand around 1:30pm, at first looking a little distraught, but then eventually resuming her usually calming glow.

She was magnificent as usual, deep blue jeans, a light blue shirt and her orange 'fly' hat. Her hair was pulled up in a pony-tail, revealing the flawless gentle curves of her face. We engaged in a tennis match of smiles and waves for the rest of the day. Alex tried to redirect me back to my job. It didn't work.

At one point, for the 432nd time that day, I waved to Paige and smiled. A short, fat man waved back to me from the end of the line. Another innocent victim caught in the crossfire of true love. He tipped me a nickel.

When my watch hit 4:56pm, Alex left saying he needed to go home and get his gear for the game.

“I'll close up,” I said.

“Thanks man,” Alex said, shaking my hand.

As he passed through the door, I noticed he was already wearing what looked like his equipment-bag over his right shoulder, but he was gone before I could question him.

I had been instructed by Mr. Curren to keep the cow open until 5:30. To me, that meant close the stand at 5pm and clean until 5:30. His instructions were spoken in perfect English, but meanings sometimes change when translated into Teenager. I figured Mr. Curren would be too involved in his preparation for the game to notice I had closed a half-hour early.

I pulled the door down over the window and snapped the padlock at exactly 5:01. I counted the money, locked it in a box, and gave that cow the best cleaning a boy whose mind couldn't stay on one thought could be expected to.

Butterflies swirled through my stomach. I again wondered what happened with Marie and what effect it would have on G-Man. His heart had already been demolished when she was injured. The afternoon had evaporated and still no word.

Exiting the cow, I glanced over at the corndog stand. It was closed and appeared to be empty. The two girls cleaned house much quicker than I had. I knew I'd see Paige at the game so I walked directly over to the field to speed up the process.

As I walked past Joe's Soda Shop, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a hand rise up and wave. I quickly waved back without looking and picked up the pace. I still felt a little strange about delivering the letter to Joe's son. I knew I'd have to face the music sooner or later about that one. Right now, later suited me just fine.

The town square was buzzing with people. Fine-dressed men walked in and out of Macky's Barbershop. Women smoking long cigarettes bickered about clothing and perfume. A radio outside Chap's Hardware store was playing "That's All Right," by The King. King Elvis, that is.

The over-stimulating square made me eager to pass within sight of the tall trees marking the path to Chapman Field. They calmed me. The trees blocked the view of the town, and shielded much of its noise. The light ruffle of the leaves in the summer wind, however, had the most calming effect. I had never seen the ocean but I imagined that those leaves produced a similar sound as gently crashing waves.

I arrived at the other end of the tree path and was somewhat surprised to see only one person on the Chapman Field grounds. It was G-Man. I studied the way he sat, and it made me feel uneasy. He was sitting in the stands, slouched over. His knees supported his elbows and his face pointed directly at the ground. His hands covered his face, and I thought he might be crying. I feared the worst.

My dreams had let me down again. What an idiot I was for believing them to be true.

I gathered my courage and walked over to console my friend.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey.”

“You look horrible, man. I am so sorry, I don’t...”
He stood up and began crying as he hugged me.

“She’s awake, James,” G-Man said. “The doctors say she’s going to be alright.”

“But you look so down, I thought...”

“I haven’t had a wink in 48 hours,” he explained.

I let out a huge sigh of relief and felt the tension in my body dissipate. I saw G-Man’s glove sitting next to him and felt a wave of shame blow through me. After all he had been through; *he* was still going to play. What kind of a person had *I* become?

G-Man continued his story, “She woke up last night a little before nine. It was the weirdest thing. It happened a little at a time. First her leg moved, then her hands, then her head and face. And then she spoke to me. I thought I was going mad. I thought I was dreaming. I thought I...I’m so happy she’s going to be all right,” he said, catching his breath.

I sat down and threw my arm around my friend, whose girl had just escaped the clutches of death. It happened. It really happened.

I felt a level of happiness I hadn’t experienced in over a year. It was then I realized, not for the last time, just how much this kid I called my best friend, really meant to me.

Chapter 26 One for Two

One by one the rest of my friends showed up to Chapman Field. Costello first, followed by Fizz, Alex, and then Joe. Then came the managers, the parents, and many other fans. And they just kept coming. Some people I didn't even recognize from my town. Word must really have spread about this game.

There was ample time for the story of the unfinished game to chat its way around the entire town. I heard it discussed in the barbershop, the candy store, and even church. Kids and adults took sides on who was the better team and what they thought might happen when play resumed. Chaos broke out at a local bingo hall on Friday night when an 87 year-old woman challenged a 55 year-old man to an arm wrestling match, to settle one such dispute, and he accepted. The town was divided, but almost all were in attendance to see the decisive game of the 30 year rivalry.

The benches in the stands filled up quickly, forcing those who did not bring lawn-chairs to stand and pick out a good vantage point down on the left or right field foul lines. Some kids climbed trees. Each foul line became a solid wall, ten people deep.

When Paige and Millie arrived, they made their way to the Corndogger's bench, but not before sending Alex and me a pair of exuberant waves. We both blushed and looked at each other. I shrugged my shoulders and gave Alex a dumb, toothy smile. He just giggled like a 5-year old. We didn't know how to deal with unsolicited affection from two young ladies.

"Hey, I got somethin' I think you're gonna need," Alex offered as he unzipped the same equipment bag I saw him leave with from the fair. From it he pulled a baseball glove. The faded Stan-The-Man signature was barely legible. It was my glove. "I'm not playing today," Alex said, with a serious gaze.

“What do you mean? Why not?” I questioned.

“To make room for you. You’re taking my place,” he responded, gesturing for me to take the glove.

“I don’t need it. What, are you crazy? I’m not playing and where did you get my glove from anyway?” I spoke in a low but serious growl to not attract any attention.

“Your parents gave it to me when I asked ‘em for it.”

“So *that’s* where you went!” I exclaimed. “I don’t believe this. I thought you were my friend. I thought you understood, but you don’t. You stabbed me in the back!” My voice had transformed from a muffled yell to a full out scream, and people noticed. The crowd around us quieted.

“But James, just...”

“I told you, I’M NOT PLAYING!”

Everyone on or around the field was now staring my way. I hopped down to the grass, rage squashing my desire to keep my feelings private. I stomped over to my parents.

“Mom! Dad! How could you do this to me? To Brand! We had baseball and drawing! It was *ours*, not mine. I can’t do it by myself! It’s not fair to him; it doesn’t mean anything to me without him! Why can’t any of you understand that?” I was hysterical. Tears ran down my face and into my mouth and I tasted my own anguish. My parents were in shock, their faces aghast, and neither one said a word.

Their silence infuriated me even more. “Why can’t you all get it through your thick skulls?” I said, hurling the glove as far as I could towards the crowd who was now stone silent throughout.

I wheeled around, trying to see where the glove had landed. The fans had spread out around it, as if it was cursed. Only one man remained near it. A tall, black man. He picked up the glove, and slowly approached me, coming within a few feet. He stopped and his huge shadow engulfed my entire body.

“You dropped your glove, son,” Bert said, gently. He extended his arm, offering it back to me.

I did not react. I did not want to play, it wasn't right. I wished Bert would go away. I wished they all would just go away and leave me alone.

But I was already alone.

I was sick and tired of feeling alone. Was it circumstance or had I chosen my fate? Did I have the ability to pull myself from this chasm of loneliness?

I stared at the ground, expecting Bert to speak but he said nothing...until I looked up.

"Draw him in your mind over at 1st base. That's what he'd want you to do," Bert said, his deep golden eyes fixed on mine.

I hesitated for just a second, and took the deepest breath of my life, before grabbing the glove. I looked back up into Bert's eyes and they smothered my fears. The crowd remained silent, other than some whispering here and there about Bert's reappearance.

Bert stepped back, smiling. He grabbed his chalk-duster and pushed it towards the field and another hush swept over the crowd. Was it fear or possibly the guilt that was muting the crowd this time? Wasn't all forgiven? He had been cleared of all charges, but did everyone trust that he didn't do it? Their silence made me wonder.

Bert arrived at home plate, opened the chute of his chalk duster, and began coating the field lines. The crowd remained silent. At least most of them did.

Alex, G-Man, Fizz, Costello, Paige, Millie, Joe, my parents, and I stood up and began to clap. We then found ourselves standing and clapping louder than we ever had at anyone or anything. Not at a celebrity or a home-run king, but at a man who was chalking the ball field in our small Midwestern town. Some of the crowd joined in but most remained still. The Groundskeeper lifted his cap to show his appreciation. He then looked towards me and my friends before placing his nine large fingers back onto the handle of the duster.

Before I knew it, I was stepping over the brilliant white chalk on my way to take my position at shortstop.

“Go get ‘em, James!” Alex called from the stands.

My neck was stiff and my stomach swirled. I was too nervous to look at my parents or over at Paige.

Before the game was suspended, the Corndoggers had tied it up on a double. There were two outs and a runner on second base. Paige was the next batter. The Corndoggers were the visiting team so even if they scored in this inning, we would still get our chance to bat.

Mr. Curren and Mr. Swift decided to skip the pre-game practice to avoid risking another postponement due to darkness. I hadn’t played in a year and had no clue if I’d even be able to throw the ball. Just swing your arm back and let go. Easy as pie, I tried to convince myself. The crowd buzzed with anticipation.

“Go Sayer!” a man cheered.

I looked over to see who it was. It was Joe. He shot me a wave.

“Crack!”

I spun my head around to see where noise came from. The ball was whizzing towards me. Without enough time to get my glove down, I used my legs to block it. The runner, Paige, was safe at first and my miscue had allowed stocky Vern Drumble to scamper from second to third. My momentary lapse almost cost us a run.

I picked up some dirt from the ground and rubbed it between my fingers, a regular ritual Brand and I used to perform in between plays. My right leg stung from the impact of the ball on the previous play. Keep your head in the game, I thought to myself.

The next batter, a tall, thin kid named Bill Handley, watched a few bad pitches go by. He was our school’s top track star so I knew if the ball came to me, I’d have to get it over to first base in a hurry. Finally enticed, he smacked a hard shot on the ground way to the right of me. If it got through it would be a hit, a run, and possibly, the game. I darted to my right, and lunged to backhand the ball, my body straining as I felt it settle into my glove. I saw the speedy Handley racing down the line out of the corner of my eye. I

set my feet and fired the ball towards first with all of my might. The image over at first was tough to make out through the dust cloud I had created by dragging my feet. The image flickered back and forth between the first baseman, Carl, and my brother Brand. Brand looked healthy and happy, and was welcoming the ball, just as he had in the scene I had watched in my sketch. The runner was almost to the bag. I had thrown the ball too low and it was heading for the dirt. It bounced up and hit Carl in the chest.

“Ooh!” he gasped.

“No, not again!” I yelled.

He cradled the ball and held it against his body.

Everyone at Chapman Field turned their heads to the umpire.

“Yerrr...out!”

“The crowd cheered.

I stood there, motionless, watching to make sure Carl got to his feet, as the rest of my teammates jogged off the field. He stood up, and flipped the ball to the umpire before trotting off the infield. He was alright.

“Nice play,” G-Man said tapping me on the back as he ran by. I finally began to walk off, the reality of what I had just done still not registering.

My eyes met my parents’ and they smiled. My dad gave me a thumb’s up, which drew a slight smile out of my tense lips.

My teammates and I gathered around Mr. Curren as he read off the lineup, “Garrison, Stannard, Ramsey, Hutchinson, and, if need be, Sayer. Now let’s go! All we need is one run to win!”

I was penciled to bat fifth in the inning. There were two girls and two guys slated ahead of me. If three of them got out or two of them scored, I wouldn’t have to bat this inning, or maybe not at all.

I stood on the sideline and stared at the two Louisville Slugger bats that were propped up against the bench. I hadn’t held a bat in my hands for over a year. I decided I wouldn’t pick it up unless I had to.

“Ok, let’s hurry it along, we’ve only got so much sun,” Mr. Curren said as G-Man stepped to the plate. I wondered if he’d have enough energy to swing the bat after being awake for around 48 straight hours. First pitch base-hit to left field. That settled that.

The next batter, Julie Stannard, also swung at the first pitch but she didn’t fare as well. Sherri Daniels, the Corndogger’s very short, fair-skinned second baseman, caught Julie’s popup without having to move her feet.

Sheriff Jasper signaled the out as G-Man retreated to first base. The pressure to finish before sunset might have been impacting the patience of the players. They all seemed eager to swing, regardless of the placement of the pitches.

J.T. Ramsey was the next to bat. He was a big, muscular kid and a great hitter. The crowd started getting into it as he stepped to the plate. I wondered if Stan-The-Man noticed the roar of the fans when he strolled to the batter’s box. If J.T. felt anything, he didn’t show it. He just chewed an enormous wad of bubble gum as he confidently made his way to the plate.

A chant of “Ramsey, Ramsey,” bellowed throughout the fans of the Ice Creamers. J.T. crushed the second pitch, a towering drive to left field, directly towards Mr. Swift.

No chance he’s catching this one, I thought. This game is as good as over. Mr. Swift turned his body, facing a different direction than the ball’s path. He clearly had not seen it leave the bat. This was no surprise to me considering I had seen him walk into Abe Lincoln’s twenty foot statue leg three times since the beginning of the fair.

G-Man stayed close to first base, ready to tag-up in case the impossible happened. Mr. Swift’s head swiveled around as he tried to locate the ball. He waved his glove like he was waving the white flag to surrender. Finally, he bent down and threw his hands up over his head for cover. G-Man sensed victory and began to trot off of first base. The crowd was silent. The ball reached its peak height, somewhere in the upper atmosphere, and began barreling down towards the

75 year-old man. Actually, towards his glove. Actually, right into his glove.

“Two outs!” Sheriff Jasper called as G-Man hustled to get back to first base. The crowd cheered wildly but Mr. Swift didn’t know what had happened. He was still trying to clear his eyes after looking directly at the sun. By the time Paige came over from center field to take the ball out of his mitt, G-Man had already gone back to first, tagged up, and was on his way to second base. Paige threw the ball to second on a fly, no bounces.

“Holy crap,” I said from the bench.

“Safe,” called the Sheriff Jasper. Paige’s throw made it a close play, but G-Man had slid in under the tag.

Two outs, man on second, and Molly Hutchinson was coming to bat. Molly was the smartest girl in school. I couldn’t recall ever seeing her play sports before this summer. She was wearing blue jeans and a blue and white checkered shirt. Her thick brown hair was twisted into braids and her humongaloid black glasses looked like they would swallow her head.

“Get up there and take a few practice swings, James,” my dad called to me. It was customary for the next batter in the lineup to take some practice swings off to the side of the plate in the ‘on-deck’ area. I picked up two wooden bats, weighing them against on another. I selected the shorter, lighter one, for more control. I doubted I would even get a chance to bat, but if I did, I wanted to be prepared. There were two outs and Molly hadn’t made contact with the ball in any of her previous at-bats, striking out six straight times.

The crowd didn’t seem to care about her last few at-bats, her high IQ, or her inexperience with sports. They were too caught up in the moment.

They started to chant her name as soon as she stepped to the plate. “Molly, Molly, Molly.” I think even some of the opposing team’s fans were chanting it too.

I looked over to the stands and saw Joe chanting right along with everyone else. He caught my glance and shot me another smile, which I returned. I spat into my hands and

gripped the bat firmly. I took my first practice swing, enjoying the feel of the bat's motion as it sliced through the air with ease. The bat felt lighter than any I had ever swung. All of a sudden I craved the chance to win the game. One chance to show the world I was back. One chance to say thank you to my friends for sticking by me. One chance to punish that ball for all the bad things that had happened to my brother and me.

The smell of the field and the roar of the crowd made my stomach swirl with excitement. "Come on Molly!" I yelled. "You can do it!"

The tall, lanky, pitcher stared Molly down. She shot back a glare of her own. The pitcher seemed surprised by her courage. He let fly with the first pitch, a ball.

"Good eye Molly," came from somewhere in the crowd.

"Ball two," sheriff Jasper called as the second pitch bounced off the plate.

The crowd continued chanting Molly's name, louder and louder.

"Ball three," yelled Sheriff Jasper, the first umpire to pack heat during a game. The volume of the crowd was now deafening. One more ball and I'd be up with runners on first and second. The fate of the team and the 30-year tie would be on my shoulders. I welcomed it as I took another practice swing.

"Take another one," Mr. Curren called out to Molly from the dugout. She stepped out for a moment to swipe the dust off her glasses with her shirt.

"Huh?" she said. The crowd was making it difficult for her to hear.

"Don't swing," he tried to yell over them.

"Oh, swing," she said, confident as she readied herself for the next pitch.

The pitcher rocked back, leaned forward, and released the pitch. A perfect seven foot arc.

"Molly, Molly, Molly!"

Molly swung hard, her entire body spinning around and falling to the ground. My mouth dropped, partly because she swung and partly because she actually hit the ball. Barely.

The slow dribbler trickled up the third base line. The pitcher and third baseman ran for it as G-Man took off for third. Molly stood up in a daze and looked in my direction.

“Run, Molly! Run to first!” I yelled and pointed.

“I hit it?” she asked as she started stumbling and bumbling towards first base. The third baseman and the pitcher were almost to the ball when they collided, shoulders and elbows knocking together. The ball lay there untouched. The catcher began to run towards it.

G-Man broke for home. The catcher picked up the ball between third and home and dove towards G-Man landing on Bert’s perfectly-laid third base line. G-Man contorted his body and avoided the tag. Molly had tripped two-thirds up the first base line and was just getting to her feet. The sharp-minded catcher looked amazed that she still wasn’t to first so he got set to throw over. If he got her out, the inning would be over and G-Man’s run wouldn’t count.

Thirty years. Thirty years of heated softball competition decided in one blink of an eye. Perhaps the greatest moment in Midwestern sports history was about to be determined by a girl whose only previous exposure to baseball was in the ‘B’ volume of her encyclopedia. That didn’t matter right now. Molly spun her legs, her knobby knees knocking through the air. Maybe she too had something to prove.

Ball vs. human. Speed vs. IQ. She appeared to be winning the race, she seemed to have it beat, and she seemed to trip over her own feet and was now flying through the air.

“Oooh,” the crowd gasped.

“Ahhgggg!” Molly screamed as she flew towards the bag, head over feet. And then it was decided. Ball in mitt, Molly on first, but not in that order. She had landed with her bottom directly on the base just before the ball arrived. G-Man scored. The crowd erupted. The Ice Creamers rushed over to Molly, picked her up, on their shoulders, and began

to parade her around the field. The crowd joined in on the field, still chanting, “Molly, Molly, Molly!”

She was a hero. I was devastated.

I had played and gave it my best shot for my brother, but I didn’t even get to contribute. Mr. Curren was giddy with excitement as he ran as fast as a 75 year-old man could run, out to left field where Mr. Swift was still standing. He would congratulate his team later on. This was his time for rubbing it in. The rest of the Corndoggers displayed a bit more sportsmanship by shaking hands with the victors.

I sat down on the bench. Paige came bouncing over.

“Hey, nice game. You did great.”

“What do you mean, I did great? I didn’t do anything.”

“Didn’t do *anything*?” she repeated, standing over me.

“Yeah, nothing. I haven’t held a bat or glove in a year and I was finally ready to do something. I wanted to get out there and show them what I can do. For me. For Brand. I’m just a failure.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” she said pointing to my left hand. Actually she was pointing to what I was wearing on my left hand. My baseball glove.

Chapter 27 Perspective

She was right. Something had happened. I was wearing the glove that I refused to even look at for over a year; the one I had intentionally buried beneath my cards and comic books. How did this get on my hand? I smacked the pocket, releasing a puff of dirt into the air, and revealing the faint insignia on the glove. Stan Musial. Stan-The-Man. That's who I was to him, an idol. I had been here the whole time, under a pile of painful memories.

"You probably have to get back and clean your cow." Paige was smiling at me.

"Huh? Oh yeah. No, I mean, I cleaned it before I left," I said, snapped out from my trance. I looked deeply into her inviting eyes. I felt like I could fall into them and wander and roam forever. Her beauty made me nervous but I held her gaze.

"Paige?" I said with my eyes to the ground.

"Yeah, James?"

"I just want to tell you I'm sorry for the way I...I mean I never wanted to...I mean, it's just that..."

"I know, James. I know," she said. "I forgive you."

I breathed a long sigh of relief.

"Paige, do you wanna go for a walk? Just to talk...or walk?" Talk or walk, what was I saying? I needed to come up with something better than that. Oh well, either way, I knew she liked me and the thought of finally getting to sit down and have a long chat with Paige created waves of hope. I wanted to tell her everything; that she saved me from my self-denigration, how she made me feel alive and able to believe in myself, how she brought my brother back to life in my soul, and that she held my heart in the palm of her hands.

I also wanted to listen and hear *her* story, not just words of encouragement or praise, as I had repeatedly received. I needed her to fill the one remaining hole in my heart, the one space reserved for true love and for the deepest secrets of

emotion. It was finally going to happen. As long as she said yes to my brilliant ‘walk or talk’ request.

“I’m sorry, I can’t, she responded. “I have something left to do.”

“Ok, so what time should we meet,” I said, not comprehending her answer.

“You didn’t hear me, James. I said I need to go.”

I kept a smile on my face hoping she was kidding. But there was something very wrong, something far worse than kidding. A mammoth fear coursed through my veins causing my hands to tremor. Again, I looked into her eyes. It was quite obvious to me now that this was no joke.

“It’s okay, whatever happened, you can tell me,” I said. “I won’t judge you, I promise.”

“I trust you, James,” she said, sliding her gentle hand tenderly across my cheek. “But I need to go, I need to go.” She nodded her head as if she was agreeing with herself.

I didn’t understand what was happening. I felt I should try to convince her to stay. But why? I would surely see her tomorrow, wouldn’t I? Tonight wasn’t our final chance, was it? Something told me to challenge her, to grab her tight, kiss her, and never, ever let her go. Something else told me to let her leave, and that there was a dire purpose to her exit.

I was just about to concede when she put her finger to my lips. “Meet me at the bench in front of the Ferris Wheel tonight at 8 o’clock and I will explain.

“Explain what?”

“Just trust me.”

“But...”

“You do trust me, don’t you James?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Yes, I do Paige,” I replied following a long sigh.

And off she went, running through the field and disappearing into the hall of trees. I stood motionless, feeling the rapid beating of my heart caused by the touch of a single finger.

I looked down at my glove and gave the pocket another good smack with my right hand. Some more dirt drifted into

the air, this time towards my nose. It smelled as sweet as candy and I welcomed it with a smile. Paige was right, wearing the glove on my hand stood for more than a means to catch a ball. It was a symbol. A symbol of my return to the field of life.

“Hey, good game,” a voice said from behind me. I spun around. It was G-Man. I still wasn’t used to hearing him speak so clearly. G-Man offered his hand and I shook it.

“Good game, yourself. I didn’t think you had it in you after not sleeping and all,” I said.

“Running on the fumes of love, my friend,” he said with his widest smile. “I’ll catch you later; I promised I’d tell Marie the outcome as soon as the game ended.”

“So what are you gonna tell her?” I asked.

“I’m going to tell her I witnessed a miracle,” he answered.

“Oh, how Molly won the game for us?”

“No, James. That you played,” he said.

“Hey James!” my dad called to me, holding up the picture of Marie.

I looked back at G-Man. “Hang on a sec, G! I have something for ya!” I ran over to the stands, grabbed the picture from my dad, thanked him, and ran back to my friend.

“Here ya go man.” I handed him the picture.

“Whooo!” G-Man exclaimed, stepping back to get a better view. “When did you do this? It’s awesome!”

“Sometime around 9pm last night,” I answered. His elation had calmed any fears I had about the quality of the sketch.

G-Man looked up from the picture, a glint of awareness glimmering through his tears. He startled me with a bear hug, holding me longer than a friend usually hugs another friend. I hugged him back.

“Go get your girl,” I whispered to him.

I watched him walk over to his parents. Each threw an arm around him.

“See you back here tomorrow, James?” he asked, swinging his head around.

I smiled and gave the glove another hard wack. “Yeah, I’ll be here, Garrison.” I answered.

He smiled, turned his head and continued walking off the field.

I quickly scanned the nearly empty field for Fizz and Costello. No sign of them. They must have gone back to their stand to clean up, I reasoned. Joe and Bert were gone as well. In fact, most people had left. Just a few lingering townspeople remained, most discussing the extraordinary conclusion of the game.

I was glad to be done working for the evening and for the summer. There is only so much time a fourteen year-old can spend in the belly of a cow without completely losing it. I had reached that limit.

I spotted my parents standing near the bleachers. My dad was speaking to Mr. Curren while my mom nodded, in obvious agreement. I walked over, solemnly, feeling like I had let Mr. Curren down.

“James, we did it!” he yelled as he hugged me. “We are the champs thanks to your fine fielding. Nobody I have ever recruited would have made those plays. You were masterful. You gotta come back next year and work for me again. Whadya say?”

I was shocked by Mr. Curren’s excitement. I thought I hadn’t made much of an impact, turning what I thought was a few routine plays, and otherwise standing with the bat on my shoulder. Mr. Curren didn’t see it that way. He continued on, shaking my dad’s hand and hugging my mom. I guess it was just a matter of perspective.

Chapter 28

The Fountain of Youth

My dad and I relived the final plays of the game as we walked home. Mom was close behind, allowing for some father-son time. We each bellowed a loud laugh as dad acted out Mr. Swift's unlikely catch and Molly's even less-likely hit.

"Ok, tone it down you boys," mom said unconvincingly, a smile creeping through her directive. Dad continued replaying the moments and mom finally gave in. She couldn't even contain her own laughter when dad pretended to knock his knees together as Molly had during her sprint to first base.

It was then that I realized that I hadn't seen my dad act goofy in over a year. I couldn't even remember the last time he joked around. My mom had changed too. She hadn't been her usual light-hearted, comforting soul since Brand's death. Petty things got to her too easily and she had become the voice of worry and fear, often arguing with me over my participation in routine teenage activities.

It wasn't just me who had gone astray, I thought. All this time I had been thinking of myself. My parents lost a son last August, actually two sons if you count me. I hadn't offered much to the family over the past year and I certainly didn't fill the void. In fact, I probably created additional work and stress for them. They had one son gone and one acting as if he had one foot in the grave. A cauldron of guilt began bubbling in my stomach and rose to my throat, making it difficult to swallow.

As we turned up towards the town square I could see the checkered red and white awning of Joe's soda shop, illuminated by black overhead lighting. I had unfinished business in that soda shop. I asked my parents if I could meet them at home later. Dad agreed and so did mom after a long pause. She shot me a stern glance.

"Aren't you supposed to meet Paige afterwards?"

“Yeah, but, I didn’t think...”

”Just come home right after that. We’ll be up, waiting,” she said with a voice so calming that it could melt butter. She was back. My mom was back.

I turned my head to face the shop, took a deep breath, and gazed through the glass door, squinting from the overwhelming glow of the shop. The countertop, glasses, and chrome finish on the stools all reflected the dazzling red light from the neon clock set midway up the back wall. Joe kept his door so clean it was difficult not to walk right into it.

I pushed the door open and felt a tingle shoot up my spine as the hanging bells let out a soft, but clear, jingle. Joe was nowhere in sight. I headed directly for my stool, or what had been my stool, until last year. It was quite possible someone else had claimed it by this point. The thought made me nauseous.

I put my carry bag on the stool to my left and placed my hands on the counter, feeling the cool, smooth surface. Leaning forward, I put my weight on my hands, and popped onto the stool like a soda shop cowboy. I immediately gave the counter a sideways tug, sending my stool and me into a quick spin. This was my usual ritual when I visited the shop. After three spins, I stopped perfectly, facing forward across the counter, staring directly into Joe’s face. I shuttered.

He must have been cleaning or picking something up behind the counter. Neither of us spoke. I held my breath. “What’ll it be?” he said, a smile emerging on his face.

“It depends on if you will accept a long-needed apology for payment,” I said. “My money’s at home.”

“Sounds like a fair trade to me,” he said.

“Ok then, a vanilla coke, please,” I said, now breathing a little easier.

“You got it,” he followed.

The soda fountain glistened as it sprayed the icy cold delight into a tall wavy glass. The foam barely oozed over the top of the glass as Joe had cut it off just in time. He pulled open the straw dispenser, twirling it slightly to reveal a bouquet of red-striped straws to choose from.

Before I got the straw into the glass, my mouth began flapping. “I’m sorry, Joe. I’m sorry for not coming in here. I’m sorry for avoiding you. I’m sorry for delivering that letter.” I held the straw up high, barely touching the soda as I tried to shield his view of the tears that began filling my eyes. A year’s worth of guilt, sadness, and embarrassment was flooding out of my body, literally.

“Apology and payment accepted, and now I will give you your change.”

He turned around to straighten the already meticulously aligned glasses, allowing me an instant to wipe my eyes with my napkin before he turned back. When he did turn, he looked directly into my eyes and another small smile broke out on his face.

“Thank you for delivering that letter, James. It almost got me into a heap of trouble with the judge, but I can’t thank you enough for doin’ it. I thought it had been stolen until the kid’s mother called me up yelling. I told her I wasn’t the one who delivered it but she still insisted on telling the judge anyway. She told me she was waiting for an opportunity just like this to really stick it to me.” His eyes momentarily broke from mine.

“I knew it,” I said. “I *did* get you into trouble.” My body tensed and I began to sweat.

“Nah, the judge believed me when I said I had lost it. He figured someone read the letter, saw the gift inside, and thought they were doing right by delivering it.”

“Oh, that’s good,” I said trying to play it cool but doing a full happy dance on the inside.

“But you did hurt me, James.”

His words pulled the needle off the record, effectively killing my happy dance. I knew this was coming. It was what I feared all year and was probably the main contributor to me avoiding Joe. My stomach started practicing a variety of knots.

“By not coming, you did hurt me, a lot,” he said, in a raspy voice, again looking away.

A lump formed in my throat making it difficult to speak.

“I miss him too, son. I miss him too,” he continued, wiping a tear off his face with the rag he usually used to dry the glasses or wipe the countertop. “But, apology accepted. You have made it right.” He was smiling again. Simple. Sincere.

There was more I wanted to know. I was just deathly afraid of asking. I took a short sip on my soda, trying to moisten my mouth enough to speak, “Hey Joe, did you do what people are sayin’ you did? I mean, did you cheat on your wife with that waitress lady?” I could not believe I had asked him that. Talk about stepping over the line. I thought he was going to belt me. He had every right.

He didn’t raise his hand, but instead drew a deep breath and poured himself a Coke. He looked at me and walked around the counter, taking a seat at the stool just to my right. He sat there for a long time, looking down at the counter.

“I’m sorry, Joe. I shouldn’t have brought...”

“It’s alright. Just thinking of how I want to say it. You’re a little too young to understand the whole story. I’ll just try to simplify it a little,” he said hunching over and speaking in a more quiet tone. “There are some things we do in our lives that have a reason, but hurt the ones we love, and eventually ourselves. Many of these choices we regret for the rest of our lives.” He paused and took a deep breath. “You see that clock there?”

My eyes followed his index finger to the wall that held the neon clock. “Yeah,” I answered back.

“It ticks too loudly.”

“Yeah, I can hear it sometimes,” I said.

“That’s not what I’m getting’ at. That ticking. It’s a constant reminder.”

“Of what?” I said.

“That I can’t go back and change the mistakes I made. None of us can. We’ve just gotta move on, like the clock, and someday, someday we might be forgiven.”

I took another short sip of my soda, before asking the inevitable question. “Have you been forgiven, Joe?”

Silence, save for the too-loud ticking of the clock.

“I received a phone call last week from my son,” Joe said, sitting up a little straighter on his stool. “I hadn’t spoken to him in three years. Do you know why he called, James?”

The thought of the many awful possible answers to his question was making me sick. I was the cause of whatever he was about to say. It was my idea to deliver that letter. I could have just brought it back to him, but I didn’t. I gulped hard.

“Why did he, Joe?” I asked

“He called to request the whole story. To know the truth, just like you’re asking right now.”

“Did you tell him?”

“I did,” Joe said staring up at the clock. He deserves to know. He’s a man now and can make his own decisions.” Joe took a long sip on his straw.

“Do you know what spurred on that call, James?”

My head swiveled from side to side, slightly less than the chair I sat in.

“That letter and the gift you delivered to him,” Joe said.

“What did he say? How did he react to the truth?” I said, my voice rising in volume and tone as I shifted to the edge of my seat.

“He forgave me.” Joe smiled and pursed his lips as he sucked down half of his soda in a single gulp.

I could only sit there, unable to drink. My smile kept pulling my lips off the straw.

Chapter 29

Deliver Me Home

Joe and I sat and talked for what felt like hours. I poured out everything; Paige, sports, my first job, and my first kiss. He soaked it all up like a rag sliding along a wet countertop. This is how intently he always listened to us kids. Now I knew why. We were the spiritual stand-ins for his son. We shared our stories and gags with him, and welcomed his occasional math help. He experienced his son through us, by making a difference in our lives, the way he wanted to in his own son's. This is why he needed us so much. This is why he couldn't bear to stay if he didn't have our approval. We were all he had, until that letter was delivered.

It felt good to be sitting on that old stool, drinking a vanilla coke and laughing out loud. It felt good to be talking. Most of all, it felt good to have my friend back.

I looked down at my watch and grimaced. It read 8:45. I got up from my seat abruptly, startling Joe.

"Crap, I gotta run! I gotta meet Paige. I promised her..."

"I understand," Joe said with a sincere smile.

I studied him for a moment to make sure my sudden decision to leave hadn't offended him.

"Well what are you waiting for? Can't you hear the clock ticking?" Joe asked.

"Yeah Joe, I can," I said, reaching over the counter to shake my friend's hand.

"I'll save your seat for you?" he asked, firmly gripping my hand in his.

"You better," I replied, squeezing back.

"Thanks, James," Joe said.

"For what?"

"For ordering a coke," he said as he let go of my hand. "For everything."

A last look and smile at Joe and I blasted towards the door and out into the humid night air, bells faintly jingling

behind me. Later, I would realize I had left my brother's sketchbook behind for the first time in a year.

I tripped, having left in such a frantic state, but eventually caught my stride. That must have been fun to watch, I thought as I sprinted towards Main Street, excitement and fear playing a tug of war with my stomach.

Paige always inspired irrational feelings in me, but her last words were more haunting. She said she was going to explain everything. Explain what, exactly? Was it about her family? Was it about her feelings for me? Was she even going to show up? I thought I would die if she didn't.

I felt a drop of rain hit my forehead, temporarily washing away my thoughts. I glanced up, noticing that the sky was now dark. The smell of summer rain was hanging in the night air. I picked up speed, my face accepting more rain drops. My feet ground the pavement beneath, and the wind whistled through my ears as I hurtled a fire hydrant. Five minutes to go and nothing was going to stand in my way of meeting Paige at the Ferris Wheel.

The rain picked up speed and intensity, smacking against my face as my legs hit their full stride. It seemed as if I was running without effort. I didn't feel tired and I wasn't breathing heavy. I was so alive. Soaking wet, but alive.

I made the final turn before the fairgrounds and zipped through the gates. They were kept open all year for other events and for those who wanted to walk the grounds. There stood big Abe. I closed on him quickly and he got small in a hurry after I bolted past him, my rain-soaked t-shirt now sticking to my body. The top of the Ferris Wheel was already visible, towering up from behind the front row of carnival game booths. I pictured Paige sitting up there, the way she was that magical night she completely entered my heart.

I raced on, closing in on the Midway, until I was right at the foot of the great wheel. Its lights reflected off the hard precipitation, sparkling in puddles beneath my feet. I finally stopped and swung my head around to catch a bolt of lightning as it whizzed across the sky. No sign of Paige. I looked down at my watch. It read 9:07. Crap, had I missed

her? My lungs stung as I tried to catch my breath, my seemingly endless energy finally dissipating.

“Boo!”

I screamed and jumped back, my heart freezing in time. I turned wide-eyed and saw Paige, standing there, trying to stifle a giggle. It wasn't working.

I let out a sigh of relief. “Could you please time your laughs better so they follow my jokes?”

“I'll try, but your face was much funnier than your jokes usually are.”

“That's it,” I said, leaping forward to grab her.

“Be careful, I know Hie Chien!” she called out, assuming a bizarre position with her hands out in front, fingers extended.

“Oh yeah? What's that some kind of Karate?”

“Nah, some kid in my math class.”

We both lost it, cackling at our ridiculous banter.

“I thought you might not show,” I said to her, turning serious.

“Not show? I wouldn't stand you up,” she said in a forceful tone. She grabbed my waterlogged shirt with both of her hands. The rain cascaded off her face as her eyes glowed with borrowed light from the Ferris Wheel.

I couldn't speak. I could only look at her. Her beauty entered my soul. I felt her inside of me. There was so much I wanted to know, so much I wanted to say. The Ferris Wheel lights went white as she kissed my lips. I pulled her close in a strong embrace. The kiss could have lasted a minute or an hour. It was impossible to tell. We had drifted into another world. Our lips parted and she put her left hand behind my head, looking directly into my eyes.

“I know how you feel about me because I feel the same way about you. True love needs no words and no explanations. It has no boundaries and it is forever. It is God's greatest creation, as are you, James. You are my one true love.”

I felt her words swirl through my veins. I wanted to tell her she was mine. I wanted to grab her again but there was

something eating at me, something that just wasn't adding up. Things I had to ask her.

"How come you keep running off so suddenly? Where are you going? To see your family? And why have I never seen them?" It all gushed from my lips, like water from a hydrant.

"It *is* my family, James. They need me."

"Well, they got you, don't they?"

"No, they are far away. I was just visiting for the fair." She looked off in the distance and took a deep breath before returning her gaze. "I have to go back now," she said, her head sulking towards the ground.

"Go back? To where? Where is your family? Who have you been staying with?" I was shooting rapid fire questions at her without allowing a second for her to respond.

"It wasn't supposed to happen this way," she said, still looking towards the newly formed puddles.

"This isn't making any sense," I said, clouds of confusion swirling in my mind.

She looked up at me, her head tilted sideways, and a tear forming in her left eye.

My heart sunk so deep I could feel it in my feet. "Why didn't you tell me?" My voice cracked as her tear rolled down her face. I watched a drop of rain mix with it, speeding it down her cheek to fall towards the ground.

I still didn't understand.

"How far away is your family?" I asked. "Surely I'll be able to visit. I'll ride the train, my bike, or walk if I have to. Whatever it takes I'll do."

"That's not going to be possible," she responded.

"Why not?" I asked.

"It just won't be," she said. "I can't explain more than that right now."

"This can't happen," I said in a firmer tone. "I can't lose you, not now, not after everything that has happened to me and all you have done. Not after all I have lost. You rescued me, Paige. Don't you understand? I need you. My brother is alive in me because of you."

“You rescued me too, James, more than you’ll ever know,” she said with tenderness in her voice. “James, I love you so much but you don’t *need* me. *You* were always the one. *You* always had the strength and the courage. It was *your* love for your brother that got you to fight on. It was him and *you*.”

“I want to come with you, or visit you...or...something,” I said in a panic.

“I know you do and I would want that, but it is not going to be possible.”

“Why can’t you let me know where you are going? Why can’t you trust me?”

“I do trust you, but I have no choice,” she said pulling my hand up towards her eyes. She gently helped my hand gather her tears before kissing me once again. As our lips met she pushed my tear-soaked hand into the sky, allowing rain and sorrow to become one.

“Look, many things will be explained if you follow me.”

My head dropped like a weight. Why was she being so cryptic? What had happened since the game?

“Please,” she said, lifting my chin up with her fingers. Her voice and the reflection in her eyes carried a tint of hope.

“Okay. Where are we going?” I replied.

“To Greenlawn Cemetery.”

“Greenlawn Cemetery? Why?”

“I will explain there,” she said. Her thick eyelashes batted what seemed to be ‘trust me’ in Morse code.

Why did she want me to go to the cemetery? What did she have to tell me there that she couldn’t here? My brain pounded as confusion, sorrow, and humidity joined forces against it.

Thunder cracked and a bolt of lightning soared past the top of the Ferris Wheel. I shot a glance towards the blue-white electric tentacles as they raced across the sky. When I looked back, Paige was gone. I frantically spun my head around but saw only darkness and rain. I feared I had seen her for the last time. The world was again crumbling beneath

me. I fell to my knees, my jeans sinking to the flooded ground, my heart suffocating.

“Paige! Paige! Paige!” I screamed, cradling the back of my head with both hands as I crouched into a ball.

I laid there for a moment until I heard an echoing voice, dancing through the rain. “It’s stunning. Absolutely marvelous,” the voice said. It was Paige’s voice repeating the comments she had made to me about my sketch earlier that week. An image popped into my head of Brand and I, reviewing artwork at the fair. A new thought swiftly rushed in, too outlandish to even explain. But what if? I decided I needed to check it out, even before I carried through on Paige’s wish to meet her at the cemetery.

I rose to my feet and began running again, this time back towards the main gate. I passed Abe, taking a hard right, and bolted towards the expo building. The door was locked but a window, to the left, was slightly ajar. I wriggled my fingers underneath it to pry it open and pulled myself upward. In the near total darkness, I felt my way along the side wall until I got through the doorway of the art exhibit. I trotted to the back wall and ran my fingers up and down it desperately searching for a light switch. Click.

I darted towards the front of the exhibit, turned the corner, and froze in my tracks. I rubbed the rain and sweat from my eyes, not believing what I was seeing. I bent down and reached out my hand which was shaking. Slowly standing up, I gently caressed the two rocks that had sat at the foot of my sketch.

“You won,” I said aloud as tears flooded my face.

I ran my fingers along the smooth surface of the rocks before pocketing them. It made no sense. I turned off the light and sprinted back towards the main door and out into the night rain. My mind raced at the same furious pace as my feet. How did the rocks get there? Only Brand knew our tradition. I had never told anyone else. And why two rocks? It wasn’t a coincidence, was it? Paige was connected in some way, but how? I had to speak to her. There was something

she wasn't telling me, something that might fit the jagged pieces of this puzzle together.

I raced out the main gate and took a sharp right towards the cemetery, my path intermittently lit by flashes of lightning. Thunder shook the ground beneath me as the storm moved closer. It was almost to the height of its power when I reached the cemetery gate, my hands grasping the cool, wrought-iron poles. I pulled hard but to no avail, the gate was locked, and it wasn't budging. And still the questions echoed through my head. Why the cemetery? Why did she want to meet here?

I made my way around the back gates where a large brick pillar stood. I remembered it was there because I saw it every time my parents drove me to the library. The top brick had a large piece chipped away. The remaining piece cast a shadow that resembled a face. It always spooked me.

I climbed up thick ridges of the pillar, stepped onto the highest rung of the gate and hopped over. I landed in a huge puddle at the base of the gate. I was so drenched it barely registered.

I realized then that Paige hadn't told me where to meet her. I looked around for any sign of her. Another lightning bolt streaked and I thought I saw an image towards the top of the cemetery hill. I began my ascent. The thick mud temporarily slowed me down so I hunched forward to make use of my upper limbs. Scratching and crawling through the mud, slipping back, and pulling back up, I made my way up the steep climb.

Another clap of thunder slammed overhead, shaking the soil beneath me. The extreme intensity felt like it could crack the earth open like an egg. My desire to find Paige outweighed my fear of electrocution otherwise I might have turned back. I could no longer see the image at the top of the hill but I was certain she was up there.

Pull, scratch, push, scrape. Lightning and thunder were now one. I pulled on every bit of energy in my body and soul before toppling to the ground, my muscles failing. Lying flat on my back in a bed of rain and mud, I gasped for air. My

lungs burned but their flame would not melt my determination. After a few seconds, I stood again, stumbling around, trying to get my bearings, pausing during the brief interludes of lightning, and trying to avoid stepping on any plots.

“Boooooom!”

I tripped backwards over a small stone, startled by the loudest clap of thunder I had ever heard. I stood up and looked for any sign that Paige was out in this storm with me. Nothing. Another lightning strike, which I felt before I saw, brought my eyes to the stone I had just fallen over. In the brief, flickering electric light, I made out the letter ‘S’ carved into the headstone. I shivered and waited for the lightning lamp to come back on. The name ‘Sayer’ flickered off the stone. My legs gave way and I fell to my knees just as another booming thunder crack hit.

Brandon Jess Sayer, born April 13, 1943 died August 5, 1954.

I collapsed over the stone, weeping, clutching it tight to my body. My eyes shut as a year’s worth of pain, guilt, and anguish poured from my exhausted frame. I hugged the stone, blocking the epitaph that was already burned into the farthest corners of my brain.

‘He Will Always Be With Us!’

“Oh Brand. Please forgive me. I wanted to come see you, I just couldn’t. I couldn’t bear it, I missed you so much.” My arms began to ache from the strong edges of the stone forced against my body by my intense grip.

My face pressed against his stone, my tears once again mixing with rain, I told my brother that I was back and would never ever leave him again. And there I sat and sat, the rain coming over me like a blanket in wintertime. Later that night, after the rain had stopped and stars began peaking through remnants of clouds, I placed one of the two rocks on my brother’s resting place.

“We won,” I said in a comforting tone.

Chapter 30 Every Second

I love to draw. I am now enrolled at Illinois State University, pursuing a degree in art, but comic books and animation are what have really grabbed my attention.

I have entered my sketches into a bunch of contests and even won a few. Just recently I won \$20 and one issue of my very own comic published by Detective Comics under their DC Comics label. The thought of having hundreds of people read my comic book is exhilarating. This opportunity could be the key that unlocks the door to my future.

I currently spend most of my free time creating comic book heroes. My latest hero, and the star of my DC Comic, is "Captain Corn." He's a movie theater popcorn vendor turned crime fighter. His weapon of choice is an overpowering right-handed punch, wearing a glove filled with freshly popped corn. Granted, he's not Batman or Superman, but he can fly and he smells delectable.

It has been four years since that magical summer of '55 and I'm 18 years-old now. Stan-The-Man is 38 and still playing ball, but he seems to have lost a step. He only hit 14 dingers this season, a big drop off from his 33 in 1955. Stan says he's gonna keep on playing, though. He feels he has a little more left in the tank. I agree.

A lot has changed in four years aside from Stan's home-run power. Eisenhower is president, the price of gas has gone up to 25 cents, and Ben Hur is all the rage at the movies. Elvis is still king, though.

Being 18 sure is different from 14. A world's difference. I have much more responsibility now. My job is a little more demanding than slinging ice cream from the window of an oversized cow. I work at a local diner bussing tables. The manager's a jerk and the pay is crappy but it pays for my art supplies and my car. I drive a seafoam colored, 1955 Chevy pickup which is great for hauling my junk around Springfield.

I still live at home. Since that summer however, things have changed between me and my folks, all for the better. Gone is that somber cloud that seemed to cling to us following Brand's death. We tell jokes and goof around now and can feel free to share things that make us happy. My dad has been working part-time at the public defender's office since Bert's release. He talks crimes and clues every night at the dinner table, which I think is cool, but my mom feels is, 'too gory for mealtime conversation.'

My dad's stories have inspired the plot for my Captain Corn comic books, "Captain Corn, Crime Cruncher," and the follow-up, "Captain Corn Pops Again." Truth is definitely stranger than fiction, even in our small, Midwestern town.

My mom is back to being the calming force she was before Brand's death. She's the one I talk to whenever I have a problem at school or with a girl. She's still a little overprotective but I've learned to almost enjoy that.

I still go to the fair each year. One day I reserve for my family, the other for my friends, and one I just go by myself. That's my day to reflect.

The fair has changed a lot. Other than the prices going up, the entertainment is becoming a huge deal. Harness racing has captured the imagination of many, and there is talk of adding car races in the upcoming years. There are also rumors that Bob Hope will be performing and Jayne Mansfield will be appearing this year.

Marie's attacker was never found and she says she has nightmares about the incident once in awhile. The sheriff fingerprinted all males living in Springfield in the fall of '55 to try and get a match to the bloody prints on the shovel. He was unsuccessful, but made sure to announce to the papers that Bert's prints were significantly different than the ones on the weapon.

Springfield has been a safer place for teenagers since Black-Eye and his family suddenly moved away in the fall of '55. Nobody knows the real reason they left. Some say Black-Eye's dad lost his job because of drinking too much,

some say he went crazy and had to be committed, but my friend Costello's got his own theory on their sudden departure.

"They were chased off by a fearless hero and a wire cow wearing a butter suit," he had said to me that fall.

Nothing to argue there.

As for my friends; they are all attending college, except for Alex. He fell in love with cars and now works as an auto mechanic. He drives a supped-up hotrod even cooler and faster than the one his brother Donnie used to drive. I wouldn't have thought he had it in him four years ago. Oh, he's still dating Millie. They were each other's first kiss. It happened at the barn dance social in the summer of '55. He stood on a chair and she, well, she just stood.

Fizz and Costello are roommates at the local university. They still bicker at times but when it gets to be too much, Costello pulls out his trump card and reminds Fizz how he saved all of our asses that one summer and shuts him up. Costello is studying to be an architect and Fizz, well, Fizz just wants to be. No surprises there.

G-Man is the first one in his family to go to college. He hopes to be a public speaker and a teacher. He wants to help kids with speech problems. He's still dating Marie and says one day he's going to ask her to marry him. She already told him what her answer will be.

G-Man and I get together a lot, even though our schedules are hectic. A good portion of our time is spent recounting that summer of '55 and laughing. The stories have been embellished quite a bit, and it is getting hard to tell the difference between the real facts and the exaggerations. Either way, they are still magical, and always funny.

Joe still runs the soda shop and I'm once again, a regular customer. Cherry coke is my drink of choice at the moment. Joe's dating a new woman and is so crazy over her that he keeps pouring everyone the wrong sodas. Sound familiar?

His son, The Chief, comes over to his house every Sunday for dinner, much to his mom's dismay. The judge

threw out the original gag order 3 1/2 years ago. I run into The Chief at the soda shop from time to time. We'd been exchanging nods until one day when the Chief came up to me and said a heartfelt thank you for delivering the letter. Since then, we've been friendlier and he frequently teases me about falling out of his tree.

The Chief graduated from The University of Illinois and is now working as a banker in Springfield. He played basketball for The Fighting Illini until he blew out his knee his sophomore year. People said he had a good shot at playing professional basketball before getting injured.

Bert suffered a stroke in the spring of '57. Nobody thought he was going to make it, but he came through. His condition forced him to retire from both jobs, however. He gets by because the people of Springfield, recognizing his contribution to the community, set up a special fund for his retirement.

I drink lemonade with Bert on his porch every once in a while. He still says some pretty strange things but that's not so strange for Bert. I'm kinda used to it by this point, anyway.

Alex tends to Chapman Field now, after getting off work at the garage. Someone's always doin' double duty in Springfield. His chalk lines are pretty good but nobody laid them like the master. I like to tease him about it as much as possible. Sometimes I even push Bert to the field in his wheelchair just so he can give Alex a lesson or two. And Bert is always willing to lecture him.

'Ol Swifty passed on last year, three weeks before Mr. Curren. It wasn't close enough to argue who went first. Mr. Curren gave the eulogy at the funeral, calling Mr. Swift, "a friend he wished he could have truly known."

I bet you're wonderin' about me? Once a week, I climb onto the pillar, hop the gate, and climb the cemetery hill to visit my brother. Sometimes I draw with him, sometimes I fill him in on my life and how mom and dad are doing, and sometimes I just sit there, resting, and think of the times he

and I spent together. I always check to make sure his rock is still there and I always carry mine with me.

I still cry on occasion, because I miss my best friend so much. I want him to see my comic sketches, and catch my throws over at first base. I want to chase him around the house and tickle him until he spits on himself. But most of all, I want to catch him imitating me in the mirror. I miss being someone's idol and I miss caring for my brother.

I don't carry Brand's sketchbook with me anymore, and haven't since the day I left it in Joe's Soda Shop. I have it hanging on my wall, next to the sketch of him and me, sitting at Chapman Field, drawing. It reminds me to smile.

As for Paige, I never saw her again after our last kiss alongside the Ferris Wheel. There has been a hollow place in my heart since that day. Sometimes it feels like our time together was all just a dream, but then I remember the soft curves of her face, the shimmering auburn highlights in her hair, and the sweet taste of her lips. Such lucid moments are hard to experience in a dream.

A year and a half ago, while I was doing some Art History research at Springfield's public library, I found an interesting article. It was the caption that caught my attention. "Girl Gives All For Brother." The article described how a girl had come home, after seeing a movie with her friends, to find her house ablaze. Her whole family was inside. Witnesses said she ran in to save her brother, and never came out. The incident occurred August 5, 1934, exactly 20 years before the date my brother died. The girl's name was Paige.

I stopped looking for her after I read that article. My heart told me to let her go. And I did. Still, every once in awhile I catch a flash of red hair, or a glimpse of an orange hat and my heart skips a beat as I wonder.

She had been right that day by the Ferris Wheel. True love needs no words and no explanation. It has no boundaries and it is forever. She has been inside of me every second of every day since I met her, and will be forever.

I have begun dating other girls. I try not to compare them to Paige but it's difficult. I still miss her so much. She was my one true love.

I miss those 10 days in the summer of 1955. They were some of the best days of my life. Summers are magical when you are a kid. The midway ride lights are brighter, cokes taste sweeter, and the kisses last forever. I think we sometimes forget to embrace life as we take on more responsibility and stress. You can replay the events with your friends, but you can never go back.

It was only 10 days, but those 10 days changed the lives of so many. One stopped stuttering, one emerged from the abyss, one was humbled, one was exonerated, one was forgiven, one disappeared, and one was celebrated as a hero.

And as for me, I learned my most important life's lesson. All from a girl I will never see again. I learned to live. Not just every hour, but every second of every day. I learned that I owed that to myself and to my brother.

And, in case you were wondering, Fizz did meet Mamie the day after the fair ended, right near the old movie house. He tells the story much better than I ever could. You'll have to ask him about it some day. Right now, I've gotta go and finish some sketches for my new comic book. I'm sure you've got plenty to do, yourself.

Have fun, the clock is ticking.

about the author



JONATHAN ZEMSKY is a creator who enjoys engaging in all forms of expression. *Beyond the Shadows of Summer* is his first novel. He has lived in New York, Massachusetts, and now makes his home in Springfield, Illinois.

Jonathan is an occupational therapist. He has learned his most important life lessons through working with children and families living with Autism. He utilizes these teachings to inspire people to squeeze the essence out of life. Jonathan is a true believer in the power of hope, love, and the human spirit. When he finds a free moment, he enjoys traveling with his loving wife, and laughing with his family and friends.

SHADOWS SUMMER

Beyond the Shadows of Summer is the story of fourteen year-old James Sayer and his struggle to believe in himself a year after his brother's death. Working his first job, at the Illinois State Fair in the summer of 1955, James is torn between fond memories and feelings of sadness and guilt. Along the way, magical experiences with his zany friends, his first love, and even a maniacal bully keep James from the road to emotional destruction.

Will they be enough to revive the passion and hope that James once had, or will he slip further into the shadows of summer?