

# Miller's Grove

By Bob Schaller

## Part I

### Chapter 1: A Final, Fatal Good-bye

At the little white church.

Where the town gathered to pray for hope, and ask for forgiveness. Where lives began spiritually with baptism for babies. Where unions began with weddings. And where life's ultimate ending was mourned, though the promise of everlasting life was held tightly by the Christians in the community. Where God was feared as much as He was loved. Where a lily-white community praying for eternity with Him didn't welcome minorities with open arms, never fearing for a second that racial insulation was un-Christian.

It was the second Thursday in November, and the warm air inside was being drained by a crack between the two big wooden doors and the floor at the entrance to the church. The blowing snow seemed to drop the freezing temperature outside by at least 20 degrees. This storm was the second of the week - a little unusual, with two cold fronts moving through during such a short time frame.

But you could still smell the musty wood of the old church pews when you entered the church. If you sat close enough to the altar, you could smell the burning candle wax. If you sat too close to Cindy Slater, who had all that perfume on – just like she always did – you left the church smelling like whatever had been on the clearance table that month at the Five-and-Dime.

There were just two “city” blocks in the town of Miller's Grove, Nebraska, located not on any map, but known as the midpoint between the western Nebraska hub cities of North Platte and Scottsbluff. The town was just a stone's throw from the sweeping – and often wind-swept Sandhills of western Nebraska. But it was a half-day's drive to either Omaha, Nebraska, to the east, or Denver, Colorado to the southwest. The closest four-lane road, Interstate 80, was more than an hour's drive south.

The train tracks in Miller's Grove were more active than the local diner, with coal trains steaming to and from the rich mineral mines in eastern and central Wyoming, back

through Nebraska and to final destinations in the east, every hour or so. At night, the train's blinding front light kept motorists on their toes, as the tracks ran parallel to, and not far from, the paved one-lane highway framed with just a nine-inch shoulder.

Outside of the church, there was little flow on the surface of the North Platte River during the colder months. Under the sheath of ice raced a healthy, frigid current. But that wasn't visible from the highway, or from the steps of the little white church, which stood only a few hundred yards from the water. All the corn and sugar beets had been picked from the fields weeks and weeks earlier, thus the harvest was complete.

However, at the closest sugar factory, 14 miles east of town in Redbluff, the beets were still piled up, covered with hay to preserve them in case of an unexpected, early cold winter.

That day's service was three days ahead of the weekly scheduled mass. The town folk marched to the little white church that only held 70 people - and that was enough most of the time, since only about two dozen of the town's 658 residents were Catholic. Today, the church was spilling over as folks gathered to pay their last respects.

The deceased held the most public post – the office of mayor. But he led the most private life, and even his one-time high school sweetheart would quickly admit she didn't know him all that well. Since his parents died in an airplane crash while he was in college, their only child would have no blood relations at his funeral. His death, at the young age of 31, generated a lot of talk in the coffee shop. Found in three feet of snow right in front of the church, the autopsy revealed a completely crushed sternum, although the official cause of death was likely to be listed as freezing or exposure.

Questions remained about the crushing of his sternum. The police had investigated, but the coroner said, "not even a whipping with a lead pipe could inflict that kind of damage." So they were guessing – perhaps it was they were hoping – it was an accident; maybe William Thayer Jr. fell and was knocked unconscious and froze to death.

Perhaps, it was reasoned, an elk stomped on his chest, since the animals grazed for whatever grass they could find during the cold final weeks of fall. Maybe an animal had wandered close to the church, since the green tips of grass often peeked out of the snow, even during the winter months. If it was spooked, maybe it stomped him to death as a potential predator.

Police from the county and state patrol couldn't find a reason why anyone would have wanted Thayer dead - sure, there were petty grudges, but nothing that motivated a murder. And the circumstances weren't exactly cut from an Alfred Hitchcock plot; when he died, Thayer had just completed shoveling the walkway and the steps of the little white church, although it was to no avail, because the second storm had dropped another two feet of snow.

Then again, police work in this small town, and other communities nearby, wasn't exactly the stuff of network television series. Indeed, three of the four murders in the last 12 years in the county had gone unsolved, including the killing nearly two decades earlier of a young boy from a town not 15 minutes away, down the state highway, from Miller's Grove. Regardless, because of all the unanswered questions, the Thayer case was listed as an unsolved homicide.

Running perpendicular to Nebraska State Highway 26, on the north end of town, Main Street in Miller's Grove was stereotypical small town, U.S.A. Once it was a relatively high-traffic roadway with some 35 businesses and a blinking four-way stoplight. In November of 2000, there were only 11 left; the coffee house/diner, the Five-and-Dime (which included a drugstore), a small grocery store, a hair salon (open four days a week from noon until 4 p.m.), a gas-and-shop convenience mart, a hardware store, a video store (which doubled as a flower shop), Jake's Garage and Transmission, the Post Office and a bank.

The other buildings were either boarded up, or in the case of four businesses on the southeast end near the railroad tracks, blackened from a fire 14 years earlier. That meant half of Main Street was "rural blight," with no real prospects for new business or industry in a town so small and located closer to the barren Sandhills than any metropolitan center.

The summer of the fire also witnessed another tragic event in Miller's Grove: The sugar factory had been the town's biggest employer before an explosion that summer. Sugar dust caused an explosion that leveled and blew the remains of four silos beyond the site. Only four of the eight silos still stood. Authorities brought in "flesh-sniffing" dogs to find the one body that wasn't accounted for (parts of it were found on days two and four of the search, just before the removal of the rubble commenced).

After the explosion, the company decided not to rebuild the factory, choosing instead to relocate the operations down the road in Redbluff, at one of its other factories. Losing the sugar business was bitter - a major blow to the small town with little prospects of another industry. The town was faced with the possibility of becoming just another one of the many bedroom communities dotting the prairie of the Heartland.

Still, in these small towns, resiliency was as much the cornerstone of the community as was faith.

Ironically, the little white church that only three days earlier had been the home to new life in the form of a baby's baptism was where William Thayer Jr. breathed his last breath as he shoveled snow.

Among the throng gathered were 11 who knew Thayer the best of anyone in town. The list included: Cindy Slater, Thayer's old high school sweetheart, sat next to her husband Jimmy. Tom Leonard, the junior-senior high school principal who had been a war buddy of William Thayer Sr., was in the second row with his wife.

Thayer's best friend, Jack Jeffers, grieved almost as much as Thayer's fiancée, Janet, ached. The widow Ester Jones, who lived in the house next to the Thayer family for 50 years, appeared distraught and disillusioned. Carolyn Sampson, a fellow council member who was president of the local bank, tried hard to hold herself together. Les Newman, a one-time appointed councilman who never seemed to be employed but was always talking about getting rich (the words usually passed through his alcohol swilling lips) brought his wife, Carla.

Businessman Rich Cardell looked unhappy, but everyone knew he and Thayer didn't get along, so it was hard to figure if Rich was angry about having to be there, or actually mourning. And of course Father Al, who served Miller's Groove and three other towns in the county, would lead the funeral mass.

At least one of those 11 was responsible for the death of William Thayer Jr.

Those 11, along with the others in the church, took time to reflect silently about their relationship with Thayer, whether it was personal or business.

On that frigid day as the wind whipped up the residue left by a cold-hearted Mother Nature – she was “The Bitch” in Nebraska, for the summer heat that brought mosquitoes

and hail in the summer, and icy roads in the winter – two days earlier, Thayer was remembered by all.

Yet there were parts of William Thayer Jr. that were known by none. Before Thayer's spirit bears its soul about those attending the service, listen to the thoughts of those who knew him best as they bid him a final good-bye.

## **Part II: From those gathered**

### **Chapter 2: Cindy Slater**

I'm staring at you. But this time, it is all right for me to look at you, because everyone else is, too. I feel the warm air getting sucked outside of this little white church by that damn crack under those two big doors at the end of the aisle. My nose feels cold and I'm sniffing. I hope it's nothing too serious.

You know, I wish you were still here. Because I had a blood test the other day, for that thing, you know, the four letters, because I think I'm pregnant again, and they wanted to test me for that other thing because I confided in the nurse that I had another partner. I know I shouldn't have had that affair with that guy in the other county. I already knew about one venereal disease he gave me, because I gave it to Jimmy. I lied through my ass to Jimmy about it, claiming it wasn't me who caused those blisters on his penis, that he must have been sticking his thing somewhere where he shouldn't have.

Gosh, I found out that guy I slept with a few times has been with half the women in this county, and most of the ones in his own county.

As I look at you lying there, I hurt so badly inside. I know my husband is thinking that this is good, probably something like, "That dickhead is dead, long rest the dickhead." He never could like you, Bill, because he knew in my heart, I always loved you. I'm not mad that I married Jimmy. Sure, he's not perfect, or nothing like that. Maybe he has hit me a few times – and don't you think for a second that I haven't thought about leaving him.

We have two kids, and I wouldn't give up Cathy or Cal for anything in the world. If anyone hurt my babies, they'd have to deal with me. I guess my pain isn't about what wasn't between us, but what could have been.

I wonder if you remember how many times we went down to the river when we were growing up. You taught me how to skip rocks. I remember you making it sound like science or something, when you talked about making the “flat surface of the rock meet the surface of the water.” I never really did completely understand that. But I sure did like it when you would hold me, and help me with my arm motion. We talked about so many, many things those days. I wondered if you thought of me when you saw that movie, “Forrest Gump.” Not that you were just like Forrest, or that you were slow or anything. But remember how they would sit down at that lake, Forrest and Jenny, and just talk for hours and hours? That was the kind of friendship you and I had. Plus, my daddy was like Jenny’s, sort of messed up and wasn’t always good to me and my sister.

When you broke those bones in that climbing fall in junior high, I felt like absolute hell. I know it was my fault. If I hadn’t been screwing around, being silly, you would never have fallen. I can’t believe you still covered for me, you didn’t rat on me or anything. I still think the teacher knew it was me, but since you wouldn’t pin it on me, I didn’t get in any trouble. You never did say a word about it after that, even though you had every right to.

Since the sophomore dance, I thought we’d be together. I remember when you first kissed me, in the third grade. It was after school, and you and I offered to help the teacher bang the chalk out of the erasers. I kept waiting for that second kiss, long up until our second year of high school.

I don’t remember the fireworks being what I had hoped for, but it was nice. You were always so gentle with everyone, but especially with me. I just wish that night at the lake in the back of my parents’ station wagon would never have happened. You seemed to be fine, and when I got your shirt off, you had a damn fine chest - I think you liked mine, too, the way you felt my breasts and kissed them. I pulled my pants off and you liked that. But when I undid your zipper, I felt you start to shake. I could feel that you were excited, and I thought that was all it was. But when I ran my hand down the crack of your bottom, it was like someone had pointed a gun at your head. You pulled your pants up, slipped your shoes on and jumped out of the car. I thought you were going to get hurt putting your shirt on, running that fast, what with it being dark and all.

We shared nothing ever again. I could tell something was wrong cause you wouldn't look into my eyes any more. I was kind of surprised that you let me tell everyone that I dumped you on your ass. My friends said they asked you if it was true, that I gave you the boot, and they said you never denied it - actually, they said you never answered. I never did understand that. Then, you went off to college, and I was thinking you were going to meet Mrs. Right. I figured that she was gonna be some lawyer or doctor or something, and that you'd be rich and have all these perfect children with this woman who let you take HER pants off. So I got engaged to Jimmy, mainly because he was working on the railroad here at home. And plus I got pregnant after we had been dating for the first three months after you left for college.

You probably never heard about the time I tried to kill myself. Well, maybe I should say the time I almost had to kill myself because of Jimmy. We had just the one baby, Cathy, at that point. But I was pregnant again, and I was a mess. Jimmy had started hitting me already, and it was getting worse. I threatened to kill myself, even though I was pregnant. He kept ignoring me, and I started crying. He said something really mean and stupid - I don't remember exactly what it was, but it wasn't nice. Then he said something like, "You'll never make it as a mother."

After I checked on Cathy in her room to make sure she was still taking a nap, I grabbed this big knife from the kitchen. My first thought was to go after him, so I started walking toward the living room where he sat, opening a beer and watching State College on television. But I knew, as stupid as this sounds, that he wouldn't pay any attention to me. He'd brush me to the side or get all pissed off and just kick my ass, maybe even kill me. I was about seven months along, so the baby wasn't even two months off. It seemed like I was crying or screaming all the time, you know how it is when a woman's pregnant, not to mention the physical crap: The constant constipation, the cramping and back pain - you name it, I had it while I was pregnant. So he saw me with the knife, and said, "What are you going to do, cut your wrists?"

I just looked at him.

"Go fuck yourself," I told him. "All you want is to be by yourself. You don't want me or this baby."

“That’s probably a pretty damn good assessment of the situation,” he said. “I didn’t think you had a brain in that body. But if you’ve figured that out, then maybe I was wrong.”

“You mother fucker,” I said. “You’ll get your wish.”

I stuck the knife at my stomach. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking, if I wanted to push hard enough to draw blood and scare him, or if I really wanted to hurt me and my baby.

“Go ahead,” Jimmy said. “Quit playing with the fucking knife. Either do it, or put the knife away. If you want to die, go ahead. If you want to kill you and your kid, go ahead. But if you are going to do it, just fucking do it. Don’t play these bullshit games with me, you cunt.”

God, it pisses me off when he uses that word, but it also makes me want to suck his cock, too.

Anyway, he just kept on talking vulgar and mean.

“We’ve got the ball on the 10-yard line and I’m probably missing a touchdown during the biggest game of the year,” he said, “so I’m really not into this game with you today.”

I locked myself in the bathroom, and I was pretty hysterical, crying my eyes out and screaming at him, even though he probably couldn’t really understand me that well. I thought he’d come and apologize, or at least try and get the knife away from me. Nope. Neither. I thought he’d check on me, or just come and hold me, because that’s what I really needed, to feel loved by the man whose baby I was carrying inside of me. I must have been in there for an hour, because I went to the bathroom twice - hey, I’ve found a cure for constipation when you’re pregnant: Threaten your life and your baby’s life, and you’ll crap like there’s no tomorrow. But I just sat there and sat there, no sign from that asshole.

Finally, I heard a knock at the door. I knew I looked like absolute hell - I mean, for God’s sake, I had come a lot closer than Jimmy would’ve ever believed to killing myself, and my baby. My eyes were bloodshot, and my hair looked like it had been in the blender. He knocked again, and I was ready to forget his bad words, and just make up. All I really wanted was a hug and to be told that everything was going to be all right, even though both of us probably knew deep inside that nothing was going to be all right.

So he knocks a little harder, and says, "Listen, are you all right in there?"

"Yeah, I am," I said. "I guess I am, anyway."

"Good, that's good," he said. "Because I've gotta take a leak, and if you don't get your ass out of there right now, I'm going to piss all over the kitchen floor."

"You son of a bitch," I said as I sat back down on the toilet. "I'm not coming out of here."

"What am I supposed to do?" he asked.

"I don't care what you do," I said. "You can piss all over yourself, for all I care."

I start hearing the sound of pee hitting plastic.

"Great," I start thinking to myself. "Just what I want to clean up when I finally get out of the bathroom."

I open the door, and that bastard is standing there, with his cock in his hand, peeing in a cup. I couldn't believe it. He was right, he really had to go bad, because he filled that thing all the way up. He just set it on the kitchen counter when he was done, just like he would with a juice cup, or something.

"What in the hell are you doing?" I asked.

"Hello - weren't you here when I said I had to take a piss?" he said.

"I didn't think you'd do it in the kitchen," I said, as he put the cup down and walked right in front of me. He poked me in the chest with his finger and said, "Don't pull that shit again, or I'll kick your lazy ass."

He walked past me and that was it. I lost it. I threw the cup of piss at him, and I got him right in the back of the head. He had pee in his hair and everything. The living room didn't smell too good, but, come to think of it, he never really smells that good, either. I grabbed Cathy, who was still sleeping, and I ran for the back door. He almost caught me, but I was a step ahead. He came out the back door just a few steps, but turned around and went back in. Oh, he was pissed - and pissed on, too! I guess he didn't follow me because he would've been humiliated if everyone saw him running around with his own pee all over him. I thought that was hysterical.

I took Cathy - she wasn't enough old enough to walk yet - with me to my parents' house, and told them what happened. My Dad wanted to kick Jimmy's ass, but my Mom thought it was my fault.

“What are you going to do, bring these children up by yourself?” she asked.

“I’d rather do that than stay with Jimmy, Mom,” I said. “He’ll kill me.”

“You don’t have a job, you have no training or skills because you didn’t go to college, and me and your father aren’t raising two more children,” Mom said. “We’ll be glad to be grandparents, but that’s it sweetheart.”

“Fine,” I said. They did let Cathy and me stay a couple of nights. Jimmy didn’t call or anything, not even to check on me to make sure I was all right. I went back a couple of days later in the morning when I knew he’d be gone for work. Since he was with the railroad, I knew he’d be gone for a couple of days. The house was a pigsty. There were wrappers and trash everywhere. The house stunk. I cleaned for the rest of that day and part of the next. When he came home the next day, the house was spotless. We didn’t talk about the fight or anything, and he wanted to have sex that night, so I figured we were sort of making up.

It was kind of strange, because I had told my friends about that fight, and a couple of others where Jimmy really knocked me around. But from that point on, my friends and Jimmy’s friends never came around the house anymore. Jimmy and I still didn’t talk much when we were alone - it was still the sort of thing where we were either fucking or fighting. There wasn’t much more for us to do when we weren’t doing that, but we were married, and I suppose that most married people are that way.

Life started getting kind of tough from there on out. Jimmy stayed gone whenever he could, even volunteering for long overnight trips to Wyoming and all. That’s when I started touching myself, thinking about you until I got off. Hell, I thought of you sometimes when Jimmy was doing me, although the way he pushed me around when we had sex, which I liked when I first met him, always reminded me that I wasn’t really getting fucked by you at all. I remember one time he caught me masturbating, and he watched me until I was done. It was kind of weird, but I was pretty hot. He didn’t know that I was thinking of you, yet he still left me in pain that night. He turned me around and shoved his cock up my ass. I was screaming for him to stop. But he was so turned on, he kept going harder, slamming me into the bed and pushing my face into the pillow so he couldn’t hear me yelling. I didn’t like that one bit. I was crying into the pillow until he

got off and was done with me. I made sure never again to let him get behind me. Gosh, I couldn't walk right for what must've been a week.

After we had Cathy, I thought we'd get along better. But our relationship actually got worse. He wasn't worth a shit around the house or with Cal, when he was born. Even with the guy things, he was useless. He wouldn't mow the yard or anything. The only time he was ever nice to me is when he wanted to have sex with me - that's how I got pregnant with Cal. I thought about getting my tubes tied.

But when I told Jimmy about that, he said, "Well, that's probably a good idea - you're the kind of girl who should get her tubes tied."

I was like, "What in the hell does that mean?" So I guess just for that reason, I didn't get my tubes tied. That was stupid, because even though we didn't have sex very often anymore, I could still get pregnant. And I hadn't been, like I said, the best wife in the world. I was so happy each time I've got my period. Now, I'm just having sex with Jimmy, on the odd occasion when we do have it, but I still hope I don't get pregnant again.

When Jimmy was beating my ass when I was pregnant, I thought about you often. I knew what a great father you would have been. You probably would have done all the housework and spoiled me rotten. Because you'd understand, or at least try to understand, what a woman goes through when she's pregnant, and how hard it is on her body and mind. It's not a lot of fun, but I always thought it could be if I would've had your baby.

Everyone always knew you were a decent man when you came back - that's how come we all voted you the mayor. You knew so much about that business stuff. And since you had made all that money and came back six years ago, we figured you must have really loved it here. Why did you come back, anyway?

Janet is here, as you'd expect. I remember about a week ago, one of the girls doing my hair said that she heard you were going to ask Janet to marry you. I was so crushed! I guessed you never did it, or if you did, no one ever learned about it - of course, that's pretty hard to do in this small town, keeping a secret, much less a secret like that.

Now, I will look away from you for the last time. How I wish it didn't have to end this way, considering what happened the other day...and all that. But now you are out of my life, and maybe Jimmy will start being nicer to me now.

### Chapter 3: Jack Jeffers

Even after you've left us, lying there in the center of the church you are still the focus of the community. Here it is the second Thursday in November, and we should be getting ready for the biggest football game of the season. Our team, our state college is in the championship playoff! On TV and everything! I've got your ticket in my pocket, buddy. I think when everyone clears out, I'll leave it with you, and you'll have it forever.

What the heck happened to you buddy? The police said your chest was caved in, like you had been hit by a wrecking ball, or something. I hope there's no foul play involved here. I'm going to go to the county attorney just to make sure our Keystone Kops didn't overlook something in their investigation. The county attorney was a classmate of my mother's, so we know his family pretty well. Although I have to admit that of all the scenarios, it seems fitting that you were serving the community when you died - shoveling the steps of the church in a snowstorm. You were probably worried about the children and senior citizens coming to church, that they'd slip and get hurt or something. You just always made the time to do something nice for someone else. That's what everyone in this church today, whether they liked you or not, will remember.

We spent so much time together over the years - except when you were off at college, and even then I saw you when I'd come down to root for State. But there was something always eating at the inside of you, Bill, and I wish to hell I knew what it was. I figured you'd have married Cindy long ago. If you had, she wouldn't look so slutty and cheap now, although that loser she is married to has changed her quite a bit. I remember how sweet she was in high school - and how sweet she was on you. After that night at the lake though, it seemed like everything went wrong. You never told me a word about it.

I didn't know if you had sex with her and thought she was pregnant or whatever, but it seemed to really mess you up for a while.

I know losing your parents was tough on you. It was tough on me, because your folks had been so kind to me when I was having all of those problems at home. You remember, don't you? My old man was chasing a skirt from the diner, just making a total ass of himself.

When all that crap was going on that summer, your father and mother took you and me camping to Yellowstone. Man, that was the perfect escape for me. Your folks were so cool, letting us take the car to Tower Falls and everything. We sat down at the base of the waterfall, and just talked for what must have been hours. Remember when the hot dog I wolfed down earlier decided to come back up. You were the best friend in the world, helping me back to the car, never once razzing me about it, and you kept your promise not to tell anyone.

The funny thing is, I never blamed my mom for taking him back. I was just so glad to be able to play ball with my Dad and still be able to have Mom's cooking at home. Mom's here today, you know. Dad would've been here if he hadn't had too much to drink that one night and tried to beat that train.

I keep thinking about that field trip we took in eighth grade - the one where we went climbing over in Wyoming. We did all that practicing in gym class. I can still remember you being so serious about it. When anyone in the class needed someone to be their climbing "buddy," they all wanted you. That day in the mountains, though, man, I thought you were a goner. Man, you must have fallen 60 feet. The look on your face, with everyone around you...

But you stayed calm when everyone else was going crazy. It seemed like everyone was crying, except for you. I know I was crying, and I wasn't ashamed about it either. When that helicopter took you away to the hospital in Denver, I still worried if you were going to be all right.

Your mom, since your father had flown down and stayed with you at the hospital, was so cool to let me ride down with her to pick you up and bring you home from the hospital. We talked the whole way down. She kind of knew about my dad and stuff, and she was so supportive - all this while she was worried sick about you. They were still there for me, and I never forgot that. You have so many friends here, bro. I mean, just about everybody here had a lot of love for you, in their own ways, of course. Except maybe, Richie Cardell, but no one can stand that guy. Half of us who still do business at his overpriced store just do it because of his family, not for him. Heck, I might even cut him off one day, and I steer a lot of business his way. I sure hope he gets his act together before it's too late.

Good ol' Les looks a little sauced, and it's not even noon, for crying out loud. You know that I still have a beer, watching football or whatever, but I don't see the appeal in getting plowed seven days a week like Les does. I bet he still thinks none of us know that he's a raging alcoholic. Damn, and his wife is just the sweetest person in the world. He's pissed away just about everything he has. I hate to say it, but I hope you're wrong about that airline stock he plunged all that money into. Someone told me he put his entire inheritance in it. Man, he could've paid off his mortgage, or done a lot of other things with that money. But no, he's risking that, just like he does everything else.

Mr. Leonard is here, too, as you'd expect. I think he sat in the same place for your parents' funeral.

You know something, I always thought Mr. Leonard – can you believe we still call him Mr. Leonard? – was one of the coolest teachers. I remember playing ball in your driveway, me and you against your Dad and Mr. Leonard. Man, those were some games! I know both of them went to the Air Force Academy, so they knew a thing or two about staying in shape. Still, whenever I think about Mr. Leonard, I think about the one time you got in trouble at school.

What were we in? I think it was third grade. Yeah, it was third grade, because Mr. Leonard and your Dad had just gotten out of the service, and Mr. Leonard became a teacher at our school that year. We were watching Mrs. Johnson write something on the overhead projector. She got mad at Cindy, because she was giggling or something. And Mrs. Johnson did the same thing she always did to get our attention when she was working on the overhead - she pounded her fist down. But that time she put her fist right through the glass!

After she looked at her hand to make sure she wasn't bleeding or anything, we all broke out laughing, and that's when she really got mad.

"The next one who laughs is out in the hallway," she said. Cindy was sitting behind you. She said something and poked at you with her pencil, and I remember you laughed, just a little - or maybe you just smiled. But whatever it was, Mrs. Johnson either saw or heard it, and sent both of you out in the hallway.

"You two can have more laughs after school," Mrs. Johnson said, "when you bang out the erasers for me."

You two were out in the hallway, and I knew you weren't too happy about it. So I asked if I could go to the boys' bathroom a few minutes later - really I just wanted to check on you. I walked out the door of the classroom, and you and Cindy were sitting on opposite sides of the doorway, just as Mrs. Johnson had told you to do. But Mr. Leonard was sitting next to you with his arm around your shoulder, telling you not to worry about it. I knew then he was cool. Because he was new, and he could have gotten a lot of crap for butting in like that, especially if Mrs. Johnson would've come out and caught him.

We were so lucky to get him for homeroom the next year. That was the best year of school I ever had. His classes were tough, but we always had fun learning. Remember how he used to always say, "Learning is fun. And it is fun to learn." Those words stuck with me when I was studying to be a contractor. I know I wasn't always the best student in school. But when I figured out what I wanted to do with my life, learning really was fun, and I had a lot of fun learning - I still do. I have passed that adage along to other people over the years.

I still kind of worry about him being the principal at the high school. He gets so much grief from parents. When we were in school, the teachers and principal had the final word - there wasn't the kind of debating there is now. It's like the parents and school board want him to be a politician or something. That's how we lost our last principal. The board wouldn't back him when those kids on the wrestling team were suspended for breaking into a school when they were there for a meet. Man, if we would've done that, our parents wouldn't have gone to the board. They would've taken a board to our backsides! It scares me the way things are changing, man, it really does. I hope they don't end up running Mr. Leonard off. He's the best thing that happened to that school in a long time. And if they want to keep good teachers like Janet, they're gonna need an administrator who will back them up when parents want to stick their noses into everything. The school board will have to back the principal, too.

I just wonder what the world's coming to these days. Think back to all the coaches we had in junior and senior high school: How many are left? I can't think of any. I mean, sure, some of the coaches who quit or were pushed out are still teaching. But none of the coaches we had are coaching - and some aren't even working at our school anymore. It's like every parent thinks their kid has to be the star. I think those parents should coach -

that would sure be interesting! I've long thought about running for a seat on the school board. It popped into my mind when you were elected to the council. I really do want to help my community. But I don't know if I want to put up with all the crap that goes along with it. It used to be all about the kids, and preparing them for the future. Now, the parents seem to be living through their kids, or protecting their kids from everything. If a kid gets a bad grade, I don't see how that's the teacher's fault. If a kid breaks a rule and gets suspended, why blame the teacher or the administrator? I just don't see where we're making our kids accept responsibility any more. That scares me, man, it really does.

Janet's here, too, and she looks just beautiful. I'm sure this is really tough on her, since you just proposed to her last week. I wonder what you two would have done, had you married. I know you wanted to stay here, and put the town in a position to be - now, how did you put it? Oh yeah, "Economically sound and technologically qualified to make a run at controlled growth into the next century." You know, I didn't understand exactly what that meant. But I caught the drift. You wanted us to be able to survive, and not become any more of a bedroom community than we already are.

It's so weird to drive down Main Street. All those boarded up windows, all those paddle locked doors. The paint is coming off all the wood buildings. The stucco ones need to be patched and painted. I remember when we were kids, downtown had already taken a downward turn, but we still had way more businesses than we do now. I bet you remember that old man who lived next door to you, Harold Jones, always talking about the "old days." Harold would talk about all the traffic on Main Street, not being able to park and everyone shopping for clothes and appliances downtown. These days you have to go out of town to get either, and everyone I know drives the full 40 minutes to the mall for clothes and that kind of stuff.

Look. Oh, great. Les is headed to the parking lot for a shot of whiskey. This should be good; I wonder what the ruse is today: Is he going for a hat, gloves or another coat? See Bill, if you were here we could wager on this. I'd say the hat, because the snow is blowing, and going for gloves is stupid because they're going to be so cold when he gets them that they won't do him no good. So that means you get the coat. Oh man, you were right - you're dead and you still won the bet! That does it, you get the ticket from the game in the casket, whether you like it or not!

Anyway, what was I thinking about? Oh yeah, I remember. I know you never said it out loud, but I hope you really did know how much you meant to Harold and his wife. I don't think I ever mentioned it, but I heard that Mrs. Jones did have a baby one time when she was younger, but he died when he was like a year old, or almost a year old, or somewhere around that age. It was one of those things that wouldn't kill a kid these days with the medicine we have now. I can't think of what it was, it had a weird name, but their baby died. That would have really changed their lives. I mean, yeah, their "kid" would be like 60-something years old and have kids - and grandkids - of his own by now. Boy, that would've meant a lot to Mr. and Mrs. Jones to have kids running around their house all the time - man, they would've absolutely loved that!

I wonder what you remember when you think about our childhood days. I remember you in school, knowing all the answers to all the questions the teachers asked. The teachers always liked you the best - and that's still true, because look at you and Janet! But you never did butter up to the teachers or make anyone feel bad that you were so smart. When we played baseball together, you were always one of the best players. I know you are always saying that I was the best, and maybe I was. Still, you might not have been the biggest or the fastest, but you never made mistakes and you could play - hit, throw and field - wherever the team needed you most.

I remember when we played high school football together, and we were undefeated for those first six games of our junior year before we lost the last three games. When we were winning, we had gotten all that ink in the local weekly, even got some attention from that daily paper in the other county. I kept telling you that we were going to have to play college football together at the same school. You always just smiled. You knew you weren't big enough or fast enough to play in college, and you probably knew I didn't try hard enough in high school to get into college.

But you always encouraged me. "You're smart enough to graduate from college, you just didn't try hard enough in high school to get into college," you told me. I took that to heart. You didn't say it in a hurtful manner or mean anything bad by it. I took it as motivation. Even though I never told you this, I spent some time looking at myself, wondering if I was going to amount to anything. And then I thought of your words. I chose to amount to something. I did something well, and I went after it. Now, I'm earning

a good living, and being married to Lila is the best thing that could've happened to me. Of course, in a few months when our first little one is born, life is going to change. If you were still here, I'd tell you this much: If it's a boy, his name is going to be William. Man, I wish I could've shared that with you when you were alive. But we never expected you wouldn't be with us.

I knew you were excited for me to be a dad. I knew it would change our relationship, and cut down on the time we'd have to go to ball games and that kind of thing. But I thought when you married Janet and had kids our kids could've played together. Our sons could've been on the same team, and you and I could have been the coaches. Man, that would have been something! We'd have won the county tournament. We'd have won state. We'd have gone to nationals! Listen to me - I'm just going off. You'd say something like, "The important thing is we have fun, learn to work as a team, and grow from the experience." And then I'd say, "And win." And then you'd say, "If winning is a product of the system and the effort, then so be it."

Boy, it's going to be tough to go watch State College games without you. Whether we were at the Sampsons, at your house, my house - or even going down there, like we were going to do this weekend - we always had a blast. The ride down was half the fun, and I'm not big on five-hour drives. We'd talk about everything under the sun. We had fun when your Dad used to drive us when we were younger, or when I would come down and stay with you when you were a student at State College, or just going down to the games like we did these past few years.

Watching State football has always been one of my favorite things to do, but hanging with you on the way to the games, and at the games, is what made it so special.

When I decided to get married, I was all set to have a bachelor party. But when you said you wouldn't come to something like that, we decided to go to a game - and that would be the "bachelor party." Not only is my wife eternally grateful that you changed the plans, I am too. That was one of the best talks we ever had. I remember it, and still think about it. You were driving your dad's truck.

"Congratulations, Jack," you said. "This is a big step. Are you ready for it?"

"Oh, yeah," I answered. "I know I love her. Things won't change that much."

“You think so?” you asked. “I’m no expert on marriage, or even a serious relationship. But I think things will change. They have to.”

“I’ll still be able to spend time with you and my other buddies,” I said.

“Yeah, Jack, you will,” you said. “But you have to act like you’re married.”

“Act like I’m married?” I asked.

“That’s right, buddy, you don’t come home late anymore, not unless you call her and let her know what’s going on,” you said.

“I’ve never had to do that before, not even with my parents,” I said.

“Well, you’ve never been married before,” you said. “You’re making a commitment to her, and it’s not going to work without your full effort. It’s almost like a job.”

“Hey, that sounds fun,” I scoffed and then laughed. “What, should I call the whole thing off?”

“No, you’ve found the perfect woman to marry. You’d be a fool to call it off, and you’d regret it the rest of your life,” you said. “What I’m saying is that you have to try. What I meant by drawing a parallel between marriage and a job is this: If you don’t try at work, show up late, don’t plan or organize, what does that say about who you are? And how are your co-workers, not to mention your boss, going to feel about you and the job you do?”

“Not very good,” I answered.

“But if you do your best, choose something you have a passion for, cooperate and compromise for the good of the entire company, which means you too, everything falls into place,” you said. “It’s the same thing with a relationship.”

Man, those were some beautiful words you came up with that day. When we went to the Black Hills for our honeymoon, I even plagiarized some of it to my wife. She was pretty impressed - even after I confessed that the words had come from you! I’ve taken that approach in my relationship, at my job and in my life in general. I never got that kind of thing from my father. And here you were, my age, giving me the best advice about life and being a marriage counselor, and I wasn’t even married yet!

It’s just so hard to imagine life without you. You were always there for me. My wife didn’t like it when I’d go out with the guys at my office for a beer after work. So I kind of stopped doing it because I didn’t like it when she’d come home with alcohol on her

breath after she went out with her friends after work – that compromise thing you talked about! But she never said a bad word about you and me hanging out together. If you and I hadn't done something together for more than a week or so, she'd say, "Why don't you see if Bill wants to shoot some hoops or something?" She was so cool with that, it made me feel good. She knew you were like a brother to me.

I'll have to check in on Widow Jones from time to time. I know that you were the only "family" she had left since Harold died last month. Boy, I'll bet you she's taking it almost as hard as anyone else here.

All of us who cared so much about you just have to find a way to pick up the pieces and move on. That's what you would have wanted. That's what I'll do.

#### **Chapter 4: Tom Leonard**

I'm in the same pew that I sat in for your parents' funeral.

And the feelings are the same.

Good Lord, your father and mother were way too young to die as it was, not to mention you, William Jr.

Oh, how I wish I could have spent more time with you. I know, we had time together when I was at your parents' house, especially when you were younger. But once I became the principal of the high school, it was hard for me to get free time on the weekend. I truly did and still do enjoy spending time with my wife and my daughter. As much as we love our daughter, we knew the time would come when she would go away to school and marry someday, leaving just the two of us at home. But my wife and I have grown even closer and love the freedom to explore the dreams we have today.

You were truly a special young man.

Your father and I were friends even before we went to the Air Force Academy together. I remember what a big deal our little newspaper made out of your father and I receiving appointments to the Academy the same year, when we were seniors in high school.

That first day at the Academy was something. We stayed together at first, but we were in separate squadrons for Basic Cadet Training. So after we got our heads shaved - you must know the philosophy - they shave your head to make you fit in with all the

other new cadets, tear you down and then build you back up with the identity they want you to have as a fighting man.

Anyway, we weren't in the same squadron, but we got together and talked whenever we had a chance. That first summer was rough, really rough. For training we marched out to a place called Jack's Valley. We lived in tents, took cold showers, marched everywhere and learned a lot about teamwork. There was this thing called the "Tiltin' Hilton," a series of floors built within four wooden poles. The idea was to get up to the top, floor by floor, without ropes or stairs or anything. I was watching your father, because he was in the group in front of me.

They asked who wanted to go first, and there weren't a lot of hands. But your father stepped forward right away. He climbed up to the first floor alone, and then helped pull up a couple of his classmates. He kept going, the same drill, up each floor until he got to the top. After he helped all of his classmates up, he led them down the other side. I have to admit I had no plans to volunteer when my squadron's turn came. But after seeing your father did, I knew I had to do the same. Your father's leadership is what the Academy wants to instill in cadets. However, it often takes someone stepping forward, like your father, for others to see the light at the end of the tunnel - or in this case, the sun from the top of the "Tiltin' Hilton."

I didn't see him for a couple of days until we got to the obstacle course. That wasn't bad for either of us, because we were both in pretty good shape from running together the whole spring and summer down along the river bank, before we left for the Academy. But there was one rough part of the course, where you had to crawl underneath barbed wire. For skinny guys like your father and me - well, we were at the time, anyway - it wasn't hard. You just had to stay low. Well, there was this really big guy in front of your father - the guy must have been a football player or something. He was so thick in the chest that the barbed wire tore into his back, ripping his shirt and everything.

The upper-class cadets who were in charge had a lot of fun with people who struggled, riding them, getting in their face, that kind of thing. This big guy started to panic because he got stuck - there just wasn't enough room between the ground and the wire for him to get through. You had to shimmy under the wire as fast as you could

because the other cadets were right behind you, and your time was part of the obstacle course. Lucky for the big guy, your father happened to be directly behind him.

He was twisting and turning like a fish out of water. The guys training us were all over him, yelling at him to get his “fat ass through,” charging everyone else up because he was slowing down their time. Your father was getting kicked in the head by the big guy’s combat boots, getting dirt pushed in his mouth and eyes, the whole works. So your dad put down his M-1 rifle, and grabbed the guy’s boots to stop him from getting more tangled in the wire than he already was.

“Blake! Blake!” your father yelled. “Settle down, big guy. Come on, settle down!”

Blake’s chest was throbbing, pushing the barbed wire deeper and deeper each time he took a breath. Your father kept calming him down and, working him free from the barbed wire and finally pushed him to the other side. Aside from what I ended up seeing years later during the war, what your father did for Blake was the best display of leadership I had ever seen. Just incredible. The big guy came out scratched and bloodied on his chest, on his back. But your father stayed calm when everyone else was out of control, even the upperclassmen who were supposed to be coaching us through it. It got to the point, when Blake was out of control, that we all thought he might die or something, it was really that bad! Your father really saved that Blake kid that day. But, it didn’t look good for your dad, being behind this guy, because there were at least two cadets waiting behind him. Your father saw things clearly (to help his fellow man) while most of us waited, stood helplessly in shock and others (each man for himself) tried to get under the wire at the same time.

You know all those stories your father and I told you about the times we had together when we were in Vietnam? They were all true, every word, from start to finish. Your father, William Sr., was the best buddy a guy could have. Being in the Air Force was not unlike being in the Army in a lot of ways. While we weren’t marching into battle, we did fly together, on the same plane. No, we didn’t drop any bombs or anything. But we did refuel fighter planes in the air. Your father was the navigator on the flights, and I know you remember me telling you stories about how I was in charge of the operation of the flight, which included supervising the enlisted men who operated the “boom” - or transferring device - that actually put the fuel in the jets while we were in the air.

Some of those times were pretty scary: I know your father has the slug from an AK-47 on a plaque at your house. That was a bad night. I could hear your father trying to guide us out of trouble as we were about to prepare to come out of refueling an F-111 at a low altitude. Actually, that was the only way the Viet Cong could get a shot at us with any accuracy. Most of the time, we flew too high to have to worry about them. I could hear your father calling out coordinates - you would have been so proud of him, he was completely calm in the face of a potential emotional, deadly storm.

A lot of us were wondering if we were going to get out of it alive. We had to break off the refueling, and we were only about three-quarters of the way done. God, fuel was spraying everywhere. We had been hit and we were worried that if any other bullet got either us or the plane we were refueling, it would ignite a fire and blow both planes out of the sky. But your father was calm - almost funny, as I recall.

He called out coordinates, I remember him saying something about "404." The pilot asked for the coordinate again. And he said to the pilot, "Come on, Dale, you know, Ted Williams' batting average in 1941 - .404." You just knew from that point on that everything was going to be all right, because the guy giving us directions sounded awfully damn sure he knew the way home.

The real scary times for us were on the ground in our camp. The Cong would come in and booby trap our foxholes with explosives and barbed wire. We'd hear an air raid siren going off, and the drill was for us to run out of the barracks and jump into a bunker. We got called out one time at four in the morning. We had just gotten back at about 1 a.m., after playing for cards. Your dad really had to shake my cot to wake me. He waited for me, and we went running out to the foxhole. I could barely see where I was going, because I wasn't completely awake or aware of the drill we practiced over and over.

Somehow I managed to get one step ahead of your father, and right as I started to jump in the foxhole, he dove at my knees and knocked me down about a foot and a half short of it. It was like a tackle that saves a touchdown in football. Only this tackle saved my life, because your father was thinking. I didn't have a flashlight, but he had his. And he saw the wires before I jumped. Had I hit the wire, they wouldn't have needed a body bag to send me home. They'd have sent me home in a series of envelopes - piece by little

piece. I broke my ankle that night, and I was the luckiest man in the world! I couldn't believe how close I had come to dying.

After your dad had knocked me down, we just sat there for a minute. We could see the grenades wired across the bunker. You know, you couldn't even see the wire in the dark unless you were at exactly the right angle. Your father always paid attention to detail, and because of it, I'm still alive today. I would never have seen my daughter - my wife was three months pregnant when I shipped out overseas. Because of your father, I was able to teach my daughter to ride a bike, take her to her first communion, and hug her crying mother after we dropped our daughter off for her first day of school.

For some reason, your father was there on a night when fate had done its best imitation of destiny, only to be unmasked a fraction of a second before I was about to meet our maker. Your father never bragged on that story, even though I told everyone I knew. He got a commendation for it - had he been able to talk himself up about it, I have no doubt he would've gotten a medal. But that wasn't who your father was, and that's not who you were, either.

We both left the military as captains when we returned from Vietnam. Had your father pursued a career in the military, I believe he would have one day made the rank of general.

But he always wanted to work for the railroad, and I had always dreamed of teaching school here in town.

I always kept an eye on you in school. I worried about you when you started hanging out with Cindy, because I knew she had a propensity to find trouble. I even talked to your dad about it once, but he maintained that you had good judgment, and you'd learn for yourself, that he trusted you to make the right decisions. Of course, he was right again, as he usually was. Whenever I saw him, like when we went golfing or fishing together, I'd always tell him how well you were doing in school. He'd just smile. He never really asked me any questions about how you were doing. He gave you all the love and guidance of a father, but gave you room to grow and learn on your own. Since my daughter was several years younger than you, I was able to glean a lot about parenting from how your father handled you.

Your father and I were about the same age, but he was always like a big brother to me.

One time, when I was up for principal, I sought out his advice. He told me he couldn't tell me what to do. But he did help me make out a list of the pros and cons. We weighted the big things accordingly, moving the pros or cons that had lesser importance down the list. You might recall that the principal I replaced had been fired by the school board. That was a biggie on the "cons" list, because I didn't know if I could count on the school board if the going got tough.

But after looking the list over and then talking about it with my wife, I decided to apply for the position. Obviously, I got it, and it's been a rewarding career move since my first day as principal.

And I applied it to my life, too. When my daughter was trying to decide between two colleges, we made a list of pros and cons, just like your father had done with me when I was debating whether to apply to be principal. My daughter made the right choice. We did the same thing when she was deciding where to go to law school. Again, I learned that process from what your father taught me. He was quite an amazing man.

When he got promoted to management with the railroad, he worked so many hours that we didn't stay in touch as much as we should've in what turned out to be the last years of his life. That still eats at me almost every day. Your Mom was such a saint, too. Even though she was a nurse, we trusted her as much as we ever trusted any doctor. When our daughter was sick, you probably remember my wife or me calling your house at night. Your Mom was such a positive role model. I know all the hours your parents worked minimized the time they could spend with you, or together, at home. But they were building for the future. They were so smart to lease out all that land your family had. Your Dad wasn't the kind to talk about that kind of thing, but I imagine that's how they were able to pay off their property so quickly.

I hope that land goes to good people, because your parents worked hard for it. I remember the last time we golfed together, your father was talking about building a big house way out of town on the property. He said he was going to put in a chipping green, so he could really take me to town on the course! But then that night...the one when they got on that plane to go see their friends in Colorado. I had a bad feeling about that trip. I

don't know if I'd go so far as to call it a premonition. But I had seen so many things on the news about the problems commuter airlines had been having, with the crash in Michigan and the other one in Chicago in about a 10-day span. I knew your parents were flying on one of those little puddle-jumper planes because they were leaving from the small regional airport.

I had bad dreams the night they left, not about a plane crashing or anything like that. In fact, I don't know what I dreamed about. But I do remember being restless and unable to sleep most of the night. My wife even made a remark about it the next morning, asking if I was coming down with a cold or the flu or if I was going through a stressful time at school. I told her I didn't know what was wrong, but that I was pretty exhausted because I woke up every hour the night before.

I was at school the next morning when I got a call from the state patrol. They were looking for your house, because they knew you were back from your job for vacation - your boss in Denver told them when they called. Apparently, they didn't get your parents' home phone from your employer, so they called the school. I guess since they thought it was a small town, everyone knew each other - I suppose that was a good guess.

They sent a trooper out to tell you, and that trooper said that he was going to stop and pick up Father Al on the way into town to inform you that your parents' plane had crashed, and there were no survivors. I told them that wasn't necessary, that I was a friend of the family and I'd handle it. I thought about getting the school counselor and bringing her with me. But I know your parents would have wanted you to hear that kind of thing from me. I remember the lump in my throat when I got up out of the chair in my office. You know me - it takes quite a bit to make me cry. I don't ever remember feeling as bad as I did that day. I felt so nauseous that my knees almost gave out when I stopped at the water fountain outside the lockers in the junior high hallway.

I lost it when I got in my car. I tried to gather myself as I came out to your family's home. You were outside, splitting wood, because you knew your father had been having a little trouble with his back, and since winter was coming, you were going to get enough firewood stacked to last them until spring. You waved when I came up the long driveway. I still remember it as though it were yesterday.

“Hi, Mr. Leonard,” you called out. I never did know why you kept calling me “Mr. Leonard” even when you were an adult, but that’s the kind of kid you always were growing up, and I’d never thought to say anything about it.

“William, can we go inside for a minute?” I asked.

“Sure, everything all right?” you asked.

We went inside and sat down. I didn’t know exactly how to tell you, how to begin.

“William, there’s been an accident,” I said. “Your parents’ plane got caught in a squall or something, and crashed before it got to the airport in Denver. There were no survivors.”

You just looked down for what seemed like an eternity.

“They’re sure my parents were on the flight?” you asked.

I nodded, yes. You stood up, and I put my arm around you. I didn’t know what to say, so it seemed appropriate to just keep my mouth shut until I could find the right words, the right time to say something.

“I sure will miss them,” were your first words. “At least they were together.”

You wiped your eyes a couple of times, but you took it like a man. I know I wouldn’t have been that strong.

“Well, if this is the Lord’s will, then I guess He had a reason to take them now,” you said. Then, I was amazed when you smiled.

“At least they’re in a place where they’ll never feel pain again,” you said. “They’ve earned it. But I will miss them.”

I worried that you’d become a recluse. I never feared that you’d take your own life or anything like that. But knowing you were an only child, I wondered whom you would lean on during the tough times. You took care of everything. I remember being at their funeral, and the eulogy you gave.

“It seems like there’s a lot of talk about role models these days - who is a role model, and who isn’t a role model,” you said, standing in front of the two closed caskets. “My two roles models are right here in front of me. They aren’t with us any more, but they’re still my role models. I learned from my mother to care for people, even if they were mean to me, or if I didn’t know them. My father taught me to stand up for what I believe in. He told me it was all right to dream. He said, ‘You won’t do anything you don’t believe you

can do.' I always believed in myself because of my parents. I received more love and understanding from my parents during the short time we had together than many kids do in a lifetime. My only regret is that my children won't get to meet the two most special people I've ever known. But their memory will live on. Let's not mourn the loss of my parents, even though it is a tremendous loss. Let's celebrate their lives today. If Mom were here, she'd want to hold everyone's hand and make them feel better. If Dad were still alive, he'd want us to focus on the things we can control and the power to change ourselves, and let the rest of it go. My parents are resting in peace. May peace be with all of you, today, and always."

I saw that you hadn't prepared any sort of speech in writing, that you were just speaking from your heart. That's what made your words so special. They were as real as you, as real as your mother and father always were.

After that, my wife always wanted me to call you, not so much to check on you, but just to let you know we were thinking about you. When you came back, it was so nice to have you to the house for Sunday dinner every so often. You were still so comfortable talking about your parents, even laughing when you talked about the only thing your father would be disappointed in you for was your lousy game of golf!

The cultural diversity programs you started as the mayor will live on. And they will, at least in the minds of many of us, one day be your legacy. No one will forget your commitment to forever holding this small town so very close to your big heart.

## **Chapter 5: Father Al**

I know you are in heaven, my son. This is such a tragedy to have all three members of a young, respected family pass at such young ages. We all worried about you after your mother and father passed over in that horrible plane crash.

I can't believe that as I approach my 65th birthday that one of my former altar boys, and both of his parents, are already with The Lord. The smell of the burning candles up here on the altar takes me way back to when you were a boy.

I can still remember your first communion, and that was even before you became one of my altar boys. You completed all the assignments in the prayer workbook I gave you. Your collages of Jesus were the best I had ever seen a young boy do. Your father came

with you for all of our meetings, and I think we were both pretty impressed with your whole heartedness to accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior, even though you were only about 7 years old.

You were always one of God's special children. When your parents first brought you to be an altar boy, I didn't know if you would make it, because you were younger than the other two we had at the time. But you worked hard at whatever you were doing. You ended up being an altar boy for five years, longer than any other we've had at this church during my years of serving this parish.

Everyone always liked you here - and I really mean everyone. I don't remember hearing anyone ever utter a bad word about you. I know there aren't a lot of people who are going to come up to me and badmouth someone. But I hear more than most people think - I drink coffee at the diner a couple of mornings each week, so I have a better grasp of what is going on than most would know.

When you were hurt during that climbing accident in junior high school, I prayed for you every night. They told me that you were fortunate to have just a broken leg and collarbone. Of course, you had stopped being an altar boy a year before that, so I didn't see you much, except at Sunday service with your parents.

Ever since you returned home, I've felt that you've been distant from the church, almost to the point of being standoff-ish. Perhaps it is selfish on my part, because I believed you could have been one of the leaders of this church. It certainly would have helped with fundraising and the other activities we had. Although, I have, on more than one occasion, mind you, thought about the fact that you didn't give any of your yearly income to this church. Yet your parents paid their share each month while you were growing up. I always thought you held the church closer to your heart.

I tried to distance my feelings from the fact that I knew you made a lot of money. Even the newspaper articles here over the years charted your successful career pointing out sums of money so vast - many of us have never seen the likes of in this town. Still, you shut us out of your giving, while at the same time donating a lot of money to various other causes, including the schools and both the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. I don't fault you for that, my son. However, it does raise troubling questions in my mind about why you decided to shut me out of your life. I pray that there hasn't been a strain in your

relationship with the Lord – especially in light of what has happened, with your sudden passing.

When I found out you were in a relationship with Janet, such a lovely school teacher, I wondered if you would marry in our church. I thought you would most certainly be one of our Sunday school teachers. You were the perfect candidate not just to teach, but lead the program. For whatever reason, you never showed any interest. You didn't even stick around after Sunday service to visit with me, even though almost everyone else in the town always took a few minutes. Had you no prayers I could answer?

I worried so much about you when you went off to college, because I remembered the two years I spent at college, such a breeding ground for sin and evil, before entering the seminary. It's hard to stay pure in a tempestuous environment, especially when you are used to the safety and sanctuary of a small, close-knit community like this one.

No one here knows it, but I've struggled at times as a priest. We took so many vows in the eyes of God, and I confessed the times I fell short. There were times when the vow of chastity was just too much for me. The love of God had to be enough for clergymen for their entire lives. That wasn't always an easy thing to keep in mind, especially when the desire burned deep inside, like a fire that couldn't be put out. The first time I felt the pleasure, I must have been about 24 or 25 years old, even though I did it alone.

I got to the point where I was doing it several times a day. I didn't confess that sin daily, as I should have, but eventually I did. There was just so much pressure. It wasn't always easy making ends meet, and it was just as hard having that constant cloud of loneliness hanging over me. I made plans to leave the priesthood several times. In fact, I was counseled at the dioceses several times about my feelings. I realized what I was doing was succumbing to the urge of sin. I knew I couldn't let Satan take over my life. I had dedicated my life to sharing the word of the Lord, not letting Satan convince me to satisfy my own urges.

Once, I bought a sports magazine because State College's big win was on the cover. I opened the magazine when I got back to my quarters. Then, I saw women and more women in swimsuits, and I felt the urge become as strong as it had ever been. I began to do it again, alone of course, when Mrs. Jones happened upon me. Oh, the shame I felt! She gasped and left right away. She never said a word to me about it - or to anyone else,

at least as far as I could tell. That was about 10 years ago, when you were off at college. I kept expecting her husband, even though he was up in years by then, to come by or call me about what his wife had seen. But he never did. I prayed long and hard that I wouldn't be caught, and that the urge would go away.

Now, the urge is gone, for the most part. I get aroused only by the word of the Lord. I have confessed the sins over and over, time and again, because I know that is what He expects from all of us, especially those of us who spread His word.

The responsibility was so enormous at times. Couples would come to me for counseling, even some in this church right now. Young couples would come, talking about divorce. I always told them that divorce was not the work of the Lord. They had to keep trying and trying, and look to the Lord as they continued their Christian walk in the eyes of God. Yet I often felt funny, because some of the relationships seemed beyond repair. I had one woman come in with her husband, and she had a black eye - you could tell she was scared to death of her husband. I called the woman at home a few days later, and asked her to meet with me one on one. She told me she would, but she couldn't let her husband know, or he would "kill" her.

This was maybe seven or eight years ago. Oh, that woman was so beautiful and so very young, I believe she was about 25 the evening she came to my quarters. I don't know if I was already thinking about her in this way, but I locked the doors to the church; something I only did when I was out of town at other churches, or on vacation. She came in and looked like "Mary" herself, her breasts pushing her shirt out. I had her lie down on my sofa as we talked. Everything seemed fine until she started crying. I comforted her for a moment and then put my hand on her breast, and felt the firmness I had only imagined when I was looking at the magazine. She said "stop" a few times, but I pressed on.

I unzipped my pants and she touched me. Oh, my God, I had never felt the touch of a woman before. She stroked me until I thought I was going to explode! Then she took me in her mouth and performed oral copulation. I felt like I loved her even though we didn't have intercourse. When she left that day, she gave me a hug. But I never saw her again. She and her husband moved out of state not two months later. I wondered what happened to her. I confessed that too, knowing I had sinned. I longed for such a relationship, but I knew it wasn't God's will for me to ever be with a woman. After all, even if I hadn't

been a priest, she was so much my junior, and a married woman as well. I don't know if I'll ever understand what came over me that evening. The feeling of her wet mouth on my penis, the tender grip of her hand, not mine, as I came, finally! I don't know how men who have had an orgasm with a woman can ever go without it for a month, a week, a day, an hour, a minute, even. It is something I will never forget. It "turned me on" as much as anything ever has.

But that was more than an eon ago. So much time has passed. However, so little has changed in regard to the confusion I feel from my pleasure – the pleasure that seems to inflict so much god-forsaken pain. You are a part of that feeling of repulsion, the unanswered question that I dare not ask. What was it that distanced us so? How can there be so many emotional miles between those of us who were at one time so spiritually close?

Even the night of the explosion at the sugar factory, I still felt you intentionally keeping your distance from me. We both knew that there was likely a loss of life at the time, but once again you made a point of avoiding me, while others at the scene were actively seeking me out for support.

Your intentions in coming back here were noble. If I didn't serve the three other towns in the county, I don't know that the diocese would keep me here. Of course, the tragedy at the sugar factory really left us in dire straits. But the town did start showing signs of rebounding a few months after you came home.

I wonder if we'll stay on that track without your leadership.

## **Chapter 6: Janet Lynden**

You're lying in front of the altar where I thought you and I would be standing, getting married next spring. We've only been dating for a year, I know. Still, it just seemed like we would be together. I felt that's why God brought us together in this small town.

I remember about 18 months ago when I found out I had to commute here, 45 minutes each way to complete my student teaching. I thought the final day of the first semester, I'd never set foot in this town again. But then, I didn't get the two other jobs I applied for even though I was among the top candidates, so I ended up taking this job.

It's just not going to be the same without you. I still enjoy teaching the kids and everything, but you made everything so much easier. I'm so glad now that I never moved here. Even though houses are cheaper, from what I've heard, they are harder to sell and I can't imagine staying here without you. The best times in Miller's Groove were having lunch with you, or watching TV at your house in the evenings, or going to the cinema for a movie on the weekend. I never did warm up to the small town style of living. But you made it bearable. When I told my family that you were the one, and that you had proposed, they wanted me to pack your things and bring you back to the city.

I have to admit that my parents were a bit concerned with our age difference at first, me being seven year younger. But once they met you, and got to know you, they warmed up right away. I never dated a guy who had such a good head on his shoulders. And I never met anyone who planned so well for the future.

Oh sure, you say you were "lucky a few investments paid off" and allowed you to basically retire. But I know, from talking to Jack, that you worked like a maniac those first few years out of college. Yes, you did hit the jackpot on a few good moves, and you made your decision to get out of the rat race and do something – semi-retire – that the rest of us knew we couldn't do until we reached the ripe age of 65. But it wasn't luck or 40 plus years of work for you, it was your dedication and life sense – your ability to see the big picture, and know what you wanted out of life and who you wanted to be.

It's just so odd seeing you in front of the altar right now. I feel a certain irony in that, and I wonder if you do, too. You never did want to talk about it at first, but even before you told me, I knew for a while that there were some sort of bad memories here for you.

Because the rest of the time, you were Mr. Happy Go Lucky. But we'd pull in the church lot on Sunday mornings, and you'd look preoccupied. You'd take a deep breath and sigh when you put the car in park each time we came here. Although, I don't think you noticed yourself doing it.

When I'd come over in the evening, you were so cute and sweet about making sure I went home before your neighbor, Mrs. Jones, went to bed - you didn't want her to get the wrong idea. But when you came all the way over to the other county to stay at my house, we had the most intimate weekends. I'd give just about anything I have to see you get out of my waterbed to get the Sunday newspaper off my porch. You'd make us coffee and

then come back to bed in your Mickey Mouse boxers and do the crossword puzzle in bed, in ink, nonetheless. You always asked for my help, although I suspect you didn't really need it. You just were being considerate and making me feel smart.

I'll never forget the first time we made love. I felt bad because I had been with someone while I was in college, but I was your first. You never said a word about it. I told you that I had to tell you something before we made love, and you said you had to tell me something, too. So I told you that I wasn't a virgin, and you were so sweet. I believed you when you said that it didn't bother you at all. Then you told me about what Father Al had done to you when you were an altar boy. He was one lucky bastard never having to face criminal charges and public humiliation for such unspeakable acts!

But we still made love that night, and you were so gentle, so considerate of my feelings and what pleased me. That was the first orgasm I ever had in my life, and it was with you, the only man I ever loved.

The worst part of all this is that I never got to tell you what I found out Monday afternoon: I am pregnant. You would have been a father in seven months. I'm scared to death, but in a way, relieved that your genes will live on, and that I can be a part of it. You can bet that this child will know all about his or her wonderful father, the good things you did, the price you paid to breathe life back into this pulse-less town. Oh, how I loved the thought of raising children with you. We wouldn't have had to live here forever, either. No, we could've moved out of town, or out of state - I really wouldn't have cared, just so long as we were together. I'd been thinking about how to tell you about the pregnancy. I thought I'd take you out of town this weekend, after you and Jack got back from the big game, to our favorite restaurant for a late dinner, Sunday night. Remember how you always wrote me those poems? They were always from your heart and meant so much to me. So I thought I would tell you our special news in our special place in a poem I wrote the day I found out I was pregnant.

*The petals from the roses are tucked safely in my hope chest.*

*I don't say it often enough, but Bill, you are the very best.*

*There were times in the past I hurt, and wondered what to do.*

*Then I met you, and started to love, and soon my one, became with you, two.*

*You have been so understanding, just the perfect man for me to love.  
My heart aches when we're apart, to go home alone, myself I must shove.  
There have been so many good times, and yet it has only been a year.  
Every time when we must part, I feel into my eye crawl a tear.  
I guess I should be stronger, because usually I'll see you the next day,  
but that day seems like eternity, yet where there is love's will, there's still a way.  
I always thought that I had been in love once, now I know that wasn't the case,  
because now I see life's answers, when I look into your handsome face.  
You come over after working out, and offer to shower before we hug,  
but I pull you closer to me quickly, take you to my room with a firm tug.  
Your sweaty shirt comes off right away, the shorts soon follow suit,  
from your solid chest to your sexy legs, and your smile, which is so cute.  
You've held me close, and when I've needed it, you held me tight.  
You've made the bad guys go away, and now I've got you, my Mr. Right.  
For some reason you decided that you want me to be your wife.  
I feel like I've won the lottery, for it is with you that I will spend my life.  
I now understand what I've heard, when I've heard love put into verse.  
It is so special, an emotional high, yet in the past, I'd go in reverse.  
I'd run away when it got too close, I'd run faster when I heard "love" or "dear."  
Now that's all in my past, even my mind's eye discards life's rearview mirror.  
Because sometimes you like, and sometimes you love,  
I am now certain that you were brought to me, from someone up above.  
Really, it's hard for me to understand, too much for me to grasp.  
We walk together in the park or shop, our hands together, clasped.  
I always feel like a princess, when you keep me by your side.  
Had I not found you when I did, I'm afraid my ability to love would have died.  
Sure there was this one guy once, but he wasn't you, that I know for sure.  
Now I wonder in this, my first true love, if I'll always feel this secure.  
You tell me you love me in the morning, at noon, and again at night,  
as though I am entitled to that honor, I now take it as a birthright.  
It just seems so right, to have a loving bond so strong,*

*and just as the schoolgirl dreaming at night, the man of my dreams was in a song.  
I never did stop thinking about tomorrow, as Fleetwood Mac told me not to do,  
but it sure seemed like an eternity, before God brought me to you.  
I thank him now, and I will tonight, as I get on my knees to pray.  
It sounds silly, a grown woman on her knees praying, but hey, that's just me being  
me.*

*You know that too, but rather than laugh, you join me with your thoughts.  
If they had a class on the meaning of true love, it would be a class that you would  
have taught.  
Because you are so romantic, so caring and sensitive that I wonder if it's a dread.  
Then you send me flowers or write me a poem, and you are truly what you seem.  
The affection, understanding and patience, flow readily as though it is your wine.  
Yet on the physical side you are a portrait, one that I know is very fine.  
You respect me and give me room to grow, while we both move forward as one.  
If our journey together is like it is now, life will truly be nothing but fun.  
You are probably wondering now why it is I wrote this poem.  
It is always you writing them to me, sometimes you bring them to my home.  
Well I have this condition, Honey, and it is not what you would call mild.  
In about eight months, my love, into this world will come our first child!  
I love you gobs and gobs!*

*Janet*

Oh my gosh...I feel the tears welling up...I can't take this...I don't know if I can raise a child alone...You shouldn't be dead, you can't be dead - you wouldn't let yourself be dead! I never really understood when I heard people say their heart actually ached, until today. Come back, tell me this isn't real! I tried to read the Bible last night. I really need sustenance, now more than ever.

I was thinking far off into the future, too. I could've spent the days with our child as a teacher at their school. Of course, you wouldn't have to work, with the money you have put away. Or maybe you would have, I don't know. Maybe you, too, would have become a teacher. You told me that you had thought about a career in teaching. Then again,

you've been a teacher in so many ways your whole life, the one everyone looked up to and came to for advice on critical issues.

Les, that old horse-faced jerk, is sitting here with the ugliest smirk. Of course, his nose looks as red as his eyes, so he's probably already all boozed up, as usual. Last time I talked to him, he was saying some pretty nasty things about you, which really made me see red. I was just about ready to sock him one!

It was something about an investment he had made with all that money he inherited. I guess he came to you for advice, and apparently you didn't tell him exactly what he wanted to hear. Like it's your fault or something if he's making a mistake - doesn't the guy realize that you wouldn't make or lose any money giving him advice? You had nothing to gain. You were just being a friend to someone who has as few friends around here as anyone I know - except for that creep, Cardell. I still can't get a reading on that guy.

A couple of months back when the council turned down Cardell's plans to put in a loading zone out past the sidewalk, he just went ballistic. I saw him at the gas station a couple of days later. I said "hi" to him, and boy, did he scowl. He's not the best-looking guy in the world to begin with, and that scowl made him even more of an eyesore!

As I look around the church, I hope no one is staring at me, because my mind just can't be in this church with all these people anymore. I need you!

The only thing keeping my own heart going is our little baby's heart, beating deep inside me. Oh, Bill, how I wish you were here to hold us, and tell us that everything is going to be all right.

## **Chapter 7: Jimmy Slater**

You're dead and my wife is still, as usual, looking at you – probably just below the belt, knowing her. Fucking Cindy. How long do I have to put up with this shit?

I shouldn't be thinking this. You know, you weren't really the prick I made you out to be. And even though Cindy gave me herpes, I know it didn't come from you. No, I think she was screwing some guy from out of town. Besides, you were always sending flowers to that school teacher who's been here about a year. You should have married her - wait a minute, strike that thought, because I don't wish marriage upon any man.

You just never did understand how much it hurt me to know how often Cindy thought about you. It always seemed like she wanted me to be more like you. That was never going to happen - not that I really think anything bad about you, or how you carry yourself. It's just that I'm my own man, just like you were. I could never put it into words with Cindy, but then again, maybe I never wanted to.

I was convinced that you were Cindy's first. But then when I got to learn more about you, mostly these last two years, I figured you never messed around with her.

You're lucky you didn't. She's such a pain in my ass. She's either running around behind my back, or bad-mouthing me to her family and friends. She calls me at work over nothing, causing me all kinds of shit with my boss. It just ain't any fun. If it wasn't for the two kids, I can damn well promise you that her and me would be history - H-I-S-T-O-R-Y. But the past is the past, I guess. I don't know what in the hell the future is going to hold for our marriage - if you can even call it that.

You never knew how much you had been drawn into our relationship. Whew! At first, when you were in college, she really made me pay for it - not being more like you, that is. And you know what? I made her pay for it, too. There was this one time - and one time only, I should point out - that I had done something to set her off, and I don't even remember what it was. Anyway, I did this one thing, and you know by then, Cindy was already pregnant - her sisters are like that, getting pregnant all the time. They all spit out babies like they're some sort of maternal PEZ dispensers. So like I said, I did this one thing that she didn't like. Boy, was she pissed! I was kind of laughing about it, for whatever reason. So she's as pissed off as a rattlesnake, and she can't get me to get mad.

At some point, all she wanted to do was get a response out of me. Now, I can't tell you why, but I wasn't responding. So she gets up and says, "Bill Thayer wouldn't think about that the same way you do!"

Oh man! That was it. I pulled that bitch inside the house, drug her down the stairs by her hair and just slapped her - way harder than I should have. She was begging for me to stop, and I was sort of scared too, because that was the first time I ever hit her. But when I did stop, she started with the same old shit about how, "Bill wouldn't do that."

So I grabbed her arm so hard that my fingers were actually touching each other - I remember how strange that was, because I didn't remember the upper part of her arm

being that small around. But I was pissed, so I was squeezing pretty damn hard. She looked at me and said something else about you, I can't even remember exactly what it was, but it was "Bill" something. So I spit right in her face. Man, that felt good. That little bitch had it coming.

The weirdest thing was - after the police came and all that - we had the best sex we've ever had that night. Looking back, I hope to hell she wasn't thinking about you while she was screwing me. Hmm. Anyway, the next day, we pick up again, almost right where we left off. It wasn't like we were fighting about you any more. No, that wasn't it. It was just like we kept on fighting and fighting and fighting, and even up to today, the same old shit.

She was yapping about this and that, about how I wasted "our" money getting the car fixed. I suppose she thought that I should've let her spend the money. That would've been a great move. She probably would've gotten some more of that slut spray at the mall. I don't know why she has to spend so much money on trying to smell better, and look better, too. There was a time when she wasn't a bad-looking babe. I know having the kids was hard on her body - her hips could be used as a scale model when they draw the map of Montana. I didn't even mind at first. I mean, when we started going out, she'd suck my dick and guzzle it wherever we were, even once at the movie theater. It used to be that I didn't even have to ask. Before we got married, I was in the bathroom, and she came in while I was at the sink, and did it right there until I blew my wad, watching in the mirror as she took it in her mouth. We'd go on car trips, and, shit, sometimes she'd do it to me twice. It was so fucking awesome. It was like I had won the nymphet lottery!

When she was pregnant, she sucked me off more times than I could count - that's the only thing that kept me in a good mood and happy about having her saggy ass around. But then, one day, even though I practically begged her to give me head, she said, "no," and she's never done it since.

She probably spent five hundred bucks on thigh-masters and butt-toners. I cut up her only credit card after that last one - three "easy payments" of 99 bucks for something she used for about a week and then threw in the closet. I told her I'd get her a nice pair of running shoes, and she could run until her butt came back. I was really just looking out for her with that offer. But you'd have thought I insulted her, or something, because she

just went nuts again. If I recall, the cops came that night, too. They told us the best thing we could do was to stay the hell away from each other. She went out that night and didn't come back for a couple of days.

We had another good go-round the night before last. I told her she needed to get a real job, and she said she had one, watching the kids. Like watching two kids is a full-time job or something! Can you believe that crap? The last time I told her she had to get a job, she invested another 250 of my dollars in that Avon crap. She went door to door for about two weeks before she figured out that the old ladies in this town don't want to smear mud on their faces each night to look good for a husband who couldn't get an erection watching a titty flick. Man, the stuff I put up with when it comes to her.

I figured out she was fooling around one morning when I felt a fire in my crotch as I was taking a piss. A couple of days later, it looked like they had taken my manly tool and fried it on a grill. I tried to talk to her about it, because I figured she picked something up when she was fooling around. She said it was me - that I was fooling around. Yeah, like I wanted two women, giving me headaches - no thanks, one was enough! I almost wished she had gotten pregnant with whoever she was fooling around with, but then I'd probably lose my kids when she hit the road, because she said if we split, the kids went with her. That's a crock of crap if I ever heard one. I'm the best dad in the world: I put food on those kids' table, put clothes on their backs and shoes on their feet, and she's going to take them from me? Right, when hell freezes over.

She took off the other night in the sedan. It's snowing out, you can't see your hand in front of your face, and she's barreling around town like a bat out of hell. I don't know what her problem is.

We really just don't like each other any more. I don't know what the hell happened, but I do know it started with that first fight. I remember when I met her - well, when I got interested in her...we all still thought she was spoken for because you and her were always together. You two would go down to the river and talk, all the time, just talking. Me and my friends would sneak down there, hide in the bushes and listen some times, because we thought you were talking nasty or kissing her and feeling her out. But you weren't, you were just talking about school, the news and that history crap. Anyway, once I figured out she dumped you, I started liking her more.

We used to do everything together, watch football games, go out for a beer, shoot some pool - of course at first, she didn't drink any beer, but she does now. I was happy when she started drinking. It kind of loosened her up a bit, you know what I mean. But then she started that smoking crap, and she still does it to this day. I can't believe that bitch smokes, even when she was pregnant - that just made me sick. She thinks just because I still smoke, she shouldn't have to quit. But come on, I wasn't carrying a kid around all those years.

So, back to where I was, she was the best girlfriend in the world when it came to having sex, and it seems that was all that mattered then. We'd watch the ball games; my friends could come over when we were first married. Her girlfriends would come around, and it was no big deal. Then we had that first fight, and none of her friends were my friends ever again. It was like I had pulled their hair, or some crap like that. But that wasn't what happened. Even my friends think I was right to smack Cindy that day, even if the police did show up - although I have to admit, I'm getting damn sick and tired of the police coming around a couple of times a month just because my wife won't listen to me.

My friends started to tell me what a loser Cindy was, and they were right. But then her friends, even though I was right, started treating me like I was the loser. I can't even guess the last time either one of us had a friend over. Now, we see the neighbors when we're out front - course, we're never together. Besides, she's just wasting time gossiping when her lazy ass is out front. She just goes out to get the kids, and then whines with that bitch next door about how awful their husbands are. How awful we are! Can you believe that? Who puts food on their table? Who takes care of all the important shit? And most of all, who puts up with all of their shit?

When I'm out front with the guys who live on either side of us, we're either getting done working on the yard or on the cars, keeping her 1982 piece of crap on the road even though it's worse with oil than that dickhead in Iran, or Iraq, or wherever the hell it is - the guy who burned all those oil wells - that guy.

It was kind of funny when you came back to town. Here you're that rich investment banker...broker - whatever the hell it was you did - and she's wasting my money on a monthly subscription to the Wall Street Journal. Can you believe that, the Wall Friggin'

Street Friggin' Journal?! We got a lot of use out of that all right - each of the kids had enough paper to put underneath their Play-Dough!

That piece of crap wife of mine...you come back here, and she thinks she's Mrs. Friggin William Friggin' Thayer or something. She never ever said a word to me about it. Of course, I used that in all of our fights; that you were back and she'd go running to you to make it all better. You know something though; I never really thought she did. Maybe I feared it a little bit, that she'd steal my kids away and have you be their dad. But I never thought it would happen. I just knew you were too smart and had too much going for you to be dragged down by her.

I can't figure out what the hell you were thinking with Miss Lynden, that teacher from the school. I would have been porking her the first day I got back, if I was you. She wears those skirts so short...you know she just wants it hiked up so a man can give her what she's begging for. But you pussy foot around with it, and you leave her just standing here, holding the bag. Actually, I guess that's me holding the bag, because Cindy smells like those friggin' candles she burns at home - or maybe that's some of that new perfume that came in the mail last week, I really don't know, and I could care even less.

I see your old buddy, Jack Jeffers, over there. Cripes, he looks like he's going to cry or something. Jack's a good guy, we all know that. You were like his big brother or something, only he was a lot bigger than you. We didn't talk a whole lot, because I'm sure he felt kind of funny because I married Cindy, and you and her were such an item way back when, and Jack was your buddy. But I never did have a problem with Jack, none at all. When you were gone at college and then off getting rich, he never had a bad word for me. He'd see me and Cindy at the bar or the store, and he'd always ask her and me how we were doing.

He ended up marrying a girl who was from halfway across the state. You and Janet must have liked her because you four were always doing stuff together the past year or so. I remember when me and Cindy saw you all at the movies for the first time. Her and me, we were in a big fight over...over...oh hell, I can't remember what it was over now. Well, let's just say that we were in a big fight, and you all come up laughing and joking like you're living in the Magic Kingdom of friggin' Disney, or something. The good part was that Cindy stopped ragging me about whatever it was we were fighting about. The

bad news was that we both realized that evening that our marriage was a sham, because we absolutely hated each other, no matter how much we loved our kids.

We got home that night, and she started again. I tried to go down the stairs to get away from her after I had taken my shirt off to go to bed, and she raked me down the back with her fingernails. It hurt like hell, but I never really knew how badly she had gotten me until the next morning when I got in the shower. Man, I shot out of the shower, thinking my back was on fire, and it looked like there was a red set of Hot Wheels tracks laid on my back, or something.

One day she wants me, the next day she's calling the police on me. Well, I guess you won't be around any more, so it doesn't really matter what you think.

### **Chapter 8: Les Newman**

There you lie, probably with a lot of money in the bank – and you can't take a freaking dime of it with you.

I'm the only guy you could never figure out around here. You can't tell right now, but I've copped a pretty good buzz. Got a flask out in my car, hidden under the tapes in the compartment between the two front seats. I've perfected my poker face - no one knows I drink almost every waking hour of every day. Whoa! That whiskey is making me feel awfully warm even though the temperature outside seems about 20 degrees colder with all the blowing snow.

You thought you were so damn smart, making all that money and then moving back here to rescue us. Well, I bought a bunch of stock in that new airline - sunk every penny I have to my name, all \$25,000 from my inheritance. And I saw today that the price is climbing higher. Looks like all that "uncertainty" crap you shoved down my throat was just that – crap! Guess you weren't so smart after all. Ah, it feels good to have the last laugh.

I still can't forget the day I had my first drink. For crying out loud, I was only 17 years old. We were down on Main Street. I guess it was a Saturday night - no wait, it was Friday, because it was after a home football game at the high school.

I didn't have anyone to do anything with after the game. I knew if I stuck around the school cafeteria for the chili feed that the booster club was putting on, I'd probably just

get picked on, as usual. I bought some cigarettes the last time I went out of town, so I decided to go smoke and just relax. I went down by the river, but there were just too many damn bugs. I was getting mauled by the mosquitoes. So I headed back toward Main Street. All the businesses were, of course, closed for the night. But there were the four street lamps, so I didn't want to hang out right there, since I was smoking and all.

So I went down by the tracks, behind where the old Laundromat used to be. It got a little windy, and I was having a hard time getting my smoke lighted. I went through match after match, until I only had a couple left. So I decided to light a match, and quickly torch the whole book. That way, no matter what, I'd have a big enough flame to light my cigarette. I got the match lit, ignited the matchbook cover and got my smoke going. But the fire lit two match heads still left inside the match book, it burned the shit out of my hands - oh, it was just a killer! Man, I hit the ground and so did the match book.

That didn't turn out to be a very cool move.

There were a bunch of tumbleweeds and brush out back there, and it all caught fire so fast, I really couldn't believe it. Now, I've been to a lot of controlled burns on farms before, so I know how fast dry grass can catch fire and spread. But before I could even get up to stomp on it, there was a row of flames maybe 15 to 20 feet long. It spread behind the pawn shop, which was also boarded up. It had a bunch of trash out back still - I remember when the owners left, there was a big stink at the council meeting about them leaving that mess. Well, I took care of that trash problem for them! The bad part was, my ankles really got burned, and my pants were pretty singed, too. I could smell my burning skin, just like the grill when we'd barbecue.

There was fire, everywhere. I ran down toward the river as fast as I could. I didn't look back until I was down the bank and in the water. By then, the fire had spread to another boarded up building. The wind didn't help slow it down, either. Finally I heard the siren of the volunteer fire department. I walked in the water for a while to cool down my charred ankles. I kept walking, for at least two hours, until I got about six or seven miles north of town. I cut across a cornfield and walked to the highway, where a trucker picked me up. When we got back in town, I gave him 20 bucks and asked him to buy me some booze at the liquor store. I waited in his truck. He spent maybe 5 bucks on a pint of

whiskey, and the son of a bitch kept the rest of my money. But he did give me my first pint, and then he dropped me off just east of town. I walked a quarter mile back into town - a perfect alibi; how could I start the fire when I wasn't even in town?

I went home and changed clothes. Then, I went downtown, because that's where my family, and everyone else, was. I pretended I was as shocked as everyone else. I could've won an Academy Award for that one.

People were asking, "Who could have done this? Who was that stupid?" I wanted to tell them that they were stupid, because sometimes these things just happen, and you can't help it. All I wanted to do was have a damn cigarette and forget some of my worries. It just got so out of control so unbelievably fast, I couldn't even believe it. There was quite a bit of stress around town about those four businesses being wiped out. But they had already closed down anyway! I didn't wipe them out; they had already wiped themselves out! Like I had done something wrong. No one gave a rat's ass about that part of town then, and no one does now. Heck, no one ever gave a hoot, or that area would still be in business. I helped remove an eyesore - that's all I did. In a way, it probably even helped the community. The only misfortune that came out of it was we ended up getting those bums who jumped off the trains and then slept in there. Since there weren't any boards on the windows or anything, they'd stay in those burned out buildings until the cops came and chased them away. At least our cops were doing something close to real police work.

Richie Cardell and his friends used the bums for entertainment. I remember hearing about the time Richie was shooting at them with a pellet gun. These homeless guys were running around, trying to get away from Richie, and he was just pumping pellets at them as fast as he could. He'd chase them until they jumped in the river, and then they'd be on the first train out of town to get the hell out of here. Pest control - that's what Richie was doing, a public service.

Anyway, back to that night of the fire, I was kind of messed up inside, but I kept it to myself.

I went home to my room, and opened that bottle of whiskey. It changed my life. Let's just say it was the start of a long relationship.

That first drink took my mind off what had happened - that those bastards hadn't cleaned up behind their store when it shut down, and if they had, that part of town wouldn't have burned. I didn't know what the hell to do about my ankles, because I couldn't go to the doctor, so I just coated them with Vaseline. Didn't help much, but the second drink took the edge off. The third drink made all the pain go away. The fourth - the last one I remember - gave me a new identity.

I wasn't "Lester the Molester" as all the assholes used to call me in school. No, I was someone special all of a sudden, a border-line tough guy. When I drank - and when I drink today - I feel like a new man, one the community looks up to, and people fear, at least a little. I never felt that way before I started drinking. It's like everything that bugs me goes away. I know I don't always feel so good in the mornings, but it only lasts until I get a swig of whiskey. I don't see how that's any different than people who get their day going with a cup or two of coffee. I won't ever get a physical again that's for sure. It scared Carla to death when the doctor could tell I had been drinking, a lot. I had been dry for a full day before I took that physical!

I could give up a lot of things, but not my whiskey. No, really, it's good for me. I never raised a hand to my wife, especially when I drank. Plus, over the years, the people with problems and the bullshit around me seemed to get worse so I had to drink just to survive. We haven't had a lot of luck with money, and that kind of thing. One thing I did love was being the mayor. Sure, I got lucky, and I wouldn't have been picked for the council if my uncle wasn't on it at the time. But I got to be the mayor, even though it was just for a month. I can't believe I didn't get elected to the council - during the two months I served after I was appointed, I did the best job anyone in this town has ever done.

You messed up my life when you beat me out for mayor. Everyone thought I was doing a great job, until you bought your way into my position. Mr. Money Bags comes home from the big city and thinks he's going to change our world. You just thought you knew everything, all the time, didn't you?

Things are going to turn around for me, real soon. I've been so close to turning it around so many times, that I think this really is the time things are going to finally go my way.

I wouldn't even be here today unless my wife dragged me along, saying we had to be here to pay our respects and be good Christians. Don't think I didn't notice how you were the chosen son of this town, how everyone thought your shit didn't stink - except for maybe me and a couple of others.

But those few of us who didn't like you have the same kind of smiles on our faces right now that you have on yours as you lie there - but we can change our facial expressions if we want, and you can't!

Bill, I am going to get so freakin' rich off this airline thing. I'm going to be the genius this town looks up to. That newspaper is going to have to admit it, too, with story after story about how I have all the money - they did the stories on you, so they'd better damn well do the stories on me when I'm rich, or I'll burn their freakin' building down, I swear.

It really goes back far - the reasons why I hate you. Remember in school, when I was always the last kid picked? Yeah, well, I remember, and you were always picked first - or second, after your butt-buddy Jack was picked. You two were so stupid! You were on opposite teams and you still laughed and joked with each other, all the time, every time. You should have wanted to tear his freakin' heart out because he was on the other team.

But no, you had to be Mr. Perfect Freakin' Sportsmanship, because you were Mr. Wonderboy, the President of the Male Species who couldn't do nothing wrong. You know, I'm getting up right now and walking down the aisle, like I'm going to just take a leak or something, get my coat and come back in.

Here we go - Brrr! It's cold out here - but now I've had a shot of whiskey, and I'm coming back in. Man, that is some cold-ass weather out there. Oh, good, you're still lying there with that crooked, freaking smile on your face - glad you didn't leave! If you did, you would have missed saying, "goodbye," and then what would they have said about your manners, Mr. Perfect Mayor? You were one screwed up loser, and I'm not going to miss one thing about you.

Well, that's not entirely true. Because once this airline thing comes through, I would have stomped you as the richest guy in this town. But no, you have to chicken shit out and die, still Mr. Important to everyone in here. You know what's funny? They're all a bunch of losers, too. Well, Jack's OK. And I got no personal problem with Carolyn. Janet

seems to be nice, even if she was involved with you, and old widow Jones...anyway, the point I want you to hear loud and clear – oh, man, is my throat burning still from that last swig! – is that we don't all miss you as much as you'd like to think.

You were probably just jealous of me, yeah, I'd bet you that was it. I have Carla and you don't have anyone, unless you count Janet, and now you've blown the chance to hook up with her, haven't you? Mr. William Thayer, big man of the town, has a "portfolio" and all that shit, and you can't even take a bride. What kind of a man were you?

And looky, looky, looky: That piece of trailer-park trash who you thought was so hot in high school - Cindy - looks like some whore from an old Western movie. Come to think of it, she kind of smells like one, too. You sure could pick 'em, Mr. William Thayer, Esquire Butt-Hole!

### **Chapter 9: Mrs. Les (Carla) Newman**

You were one of the few rays of true hope this town ever had and now you've left us, for a better place I know, but in my selfishness I wish you were still with us.

I thought you were the one who could straighten out my Lester. Even though he acted like an ass to you most of the time, I think deep inside he always wanted to be more like you.

He's put himself in some pretty rough circumstances, and he's literally betting the farm – all his inheritance money that we got from his parents' estate – that this new airline investment he made will turn our lives around. It's kind of our last chance, you know, especially since we lost all of that land when the bank foreclosed last year at the end of the bad harvest.

I think, when Les' mother died, it hurt him more than he would let on to anyone. That whole situation with his father and mother troubled Lester for a long time. You might remember back when Les' father shot himself.

His father was working for the railroad, and suffered terribly from depression. He also had an alcohol problem, which made the depression even worse, I would guess. One morning he came home from work at about 5 in the morning, which wasn't unusual - you'd know as well as anyone that a railroader's hours are odd. But he came home and

went into his room. Because Les' mother and father had problems in their relationship, they slept in separate bedrooms. Well, that morning, Les' father snapped, apparently.

He went into his room, pulled out his gun, and shot himself in the face. That was a tragedy in itself, much less what happened next. After hearing the gunshot, Les, whose room was right next to his father's, went running in and found his father. It was a sight hard to stomach for anyone, much less for Les at 13 years old.

Even though his father lost his nose, was blinded in both eyes, and lost a lot of blood, he ended up surviving. They airlifted him over to the regional medical center in the city where he stayed for a month undergoing three surgeries, and I think some skin grafts. The doctors put him in a mental facility as part of his rehabilitation. He could still walk and everything, but he had to be fed with a tube and he couldn't see.

After his father had been institutionalized for three years, Les' mother filed for divorce. Not only did his father contest the divorce, he petitioned for custody of Les. Of course, the court would have nothing to do with that. So his father moved back to the area. Life seemed to get even harder for Les, because you probably remember that Les didn't associate with the "in group" at school as it was. With the gossip about his family, his father's suicide attempt and the divorce, Les sank further into his feelings of isolation. He was about 17 then, if I remember, and that's when I started dating him.

He never talked about his father. But when I was over at his mother's house, she'd go on about the constant conflict and moral battles Les' father waged against her. When we had to go into his father's room on one occasion, you could still see where the bloodstains had been. The hole in the wall from the bullet had been patched, but you could still tell. That room was a constant reminder of the scene Les had found when he went in the room that morning his father tried to kill himself.

It was a terrible tragedy from start to finish, taking its toll on everyone, but maybe especially on Les' mother. Because even when Les' father died a few years back, his mother was just emotionally exhausted. Just when she had the chance to pick up her life and move on, she fell ill with cancer and passed away earlier this year.

I don't think Les ever recovered after losing his mother, even though we got a fairly significant inheritance.

We learned so much from you. Whenever Les was getting ready to make a big decision, I'd think to myself, "What would Bill Thayer do in this situation?" Of course, I never said it out loud. But I remember when you made it big, the local weekly newspaper had all those stories on you for a while there. You talked about "patience and persistence, and the power of positive thinking" – see, I read it so many times I know it by heart.

Even though you were the athletic kind and in the student council when we were growing up in school, you were always so nice to me. Not everyone was, you know. There were some kids who teased me because my parents were poor, and we lived in that small house behind my grandparents' house, next to the railroad tracks. We didn't ever have any money, but we did have each other. Those were some rough times.

When the trains would go by, the noise alone would shake our roof, and you could feel the weight of the train because our floor was dirt, and the whole ground shook. The worst part was in the winter, when the roof would get weighed down with snow and ice. We were so close to the tracks that it was almost like a small earthquake when the trains passed, especially the ones full of coal coming from Wyoming. The passing train would start shaking the house, and each year we'd get a couple of holes as pieces of the roof along with the snow and ice crashed on the floor in the main room of our little house. You might not know this, but your father stopped at least a half-dozen times and helped my dad fix the roof. He was a decent man, just like you.

My dad would peek through the holes in the ceiling at me and my brother, and make it seem like a game so we didn't think about being poor. Of course, with what little heat we had from the wood stove seeping out through the holes in the roof, we knew we were poor. The last few times that happened to our house, when I was in high school, I think your dad drove by on purpose because he wanted to help. A couple times he told my dad that he had these "extra bags of groceries" that he was just going to have to "throw away" because they were given to him by "accident at the market." Have you ever heard of such a silly thing? Of course not. Your father wouldn't take 'no' for an answer so my father would offer to "take the groceries off your hands so you don't have to haul 'em home." We ate so well for the next few weeks. One time, around the holidays, he even brought a turkey in one of those bags! A turkey!

I always wondered if he hadn't let your Mom in on what was going on, because we ended up with mixes for pies a couple of times when your Dad came by. I knew your father would never tell you or anyone else - except maybe your mom - what he was doing for us. He didn't need pats on the back and compliments for being kind. I know you wouldn't have told anyone to embarrass me or my family or anything like that; but I also believe your father was a fair man who wasn't going to put you, or my family, in that position. What a great family you and your parents were! It's so sad to think that three of the brightest lights in this small town have burned out so much sooner than they ever should've.

Les doesn't look too happy right now, I wonder what is on his mind. I really do hope this thing with his airline stock comes through. I guess I want it more for him, than me. As you might know, and as just about anyone in town might well have figured out, Les has a drinking problem. I'm hoping if he gets this money, that'll take away his reason to drink. I don't need the money - I know how to live without much -, and I'm not sure if I even want it, although it would be quite a nice change not to have to worry about money for the first time in my life!

Still, my parents showed me that all you need in your house is the Lord and love. If Les would just accept the Lord, I really believe all of our other problems would take care of themselves. Since my grandma died and my grandpa moved into the veterans' home, my folks moved into their home, with a good roof and everything. It's such a nice house, and my parents are so happy in it. When Les overdoes it on the drinking, sometimes I go there and stay the night. But I know God does not want me to leave Les. He has such a hard time getting going each day as it is, I don't think he could do it without me. Besides, I think I might have been the one who drove Les to drink. When we first got married, I got pregnant right away. But I miscarried, and I think that's when he started drinking.

And, I promised God that I'd stay with Les through "thick and thin," although it sure would be nice if things could stop being so "thin" for a while. I just wish you could have spent more time with Les, warming up to him a little bit. I know he's hard to get close to, believe me, the road hasn't been easy with Les from the first day. But deep down, I know there is some good. He's never hit me, and if you've seen Cindy Slater walking around

with one of her eyes blackened from Jimmy, you'll see how I can count myself lucky even though my husband isn't very ambitious and has a drinking problem.

I'll just keep praying on it, because I know God will take care of everything, especially in the long run. I just love Les so much, because he was the first guy who ever showed an interest in me.

I just wish you were still here, Bill. You were so kind-hearted, and you and Janet were such a lovely, handsome couple. I know Les and me, together isn't exactly the picture they'd use to make a postage stamp out of, but he really is good to me most of the time, especially a few years back - if we could just get back to that point.

I always thought you'd end up marrying Cindy. She's had some hard times with Jimmy, as we all know. I would never judge her or anyone, but I worry about some of the decisions she's made. I was getting my hair done the other day, and she was saying some nasty things about him. I know the Lord doesn't approve of that kind of talk. The Lord might not approve of some of the things Jimmy does, but she shouldn't be telling the whole town about it. I know Les and I don't have everything, but at least we have each other. I know he's not perfect, but I don't want to be alone in this world, either. Our four children will not grow up without a father. I still worry about whether Les is setting the right sort of example for them. I know my daddy wasn't perfect, but he always worked hard. He preached to us about having a good work ethic - and keeping the Lord in our lives no matter how good or bad things came to be.

You have a lot of people here today, Bill, who held you in such high regard. Well, Rich Cardell is here, but I still think he respected you down deep. The funny thing is, Rich seems to dislike everyone here in town, but I don't think all of us really dislike him. I know I've prayed for him more than a few times. No one wants to see his family's business fail. They've been in this town since anyone can remember. But he just keeps fighting and fighting with anyone who comes his direction. I don't know what he is trying to prove. He could do a lot more for himself by closing his mouth, and listening more. He's convinced this town wants to see him suffer. However, I think just the opposite is true. He's a stubborn one, though.

Janet looks as beautiful as she ever has today. This must be tearing her apart, because I know you meant the world to her, eyes always sparkling when I saw you together. She

really put a hop back in your step, too. I try to ignore the gossip, but I did hear when you started dating. The two of you were the talk of the town. I was so thrilled for you. I always thought you'd have a bride when you came back here, because you were such a handsome, caring guy, and any girl would feel lucky to catch you. But you must not have found what you were looking for when you were gone. I feel my heart sinking a bit when I think about how Janet must be feeling. She's such a sweet girl.

My son loved having her as his teacher. My kids don't always pay attention as well as they should, but Janet really worked with them - you could tell she really cared about the kids in her class. She was always so constructive at parent-teacher conferences. Les went to the first one with me, and when Janet pointed out where our son could improve a little, Les lost his temper a bit. I didn't take him with me to the other conferences that year. I know we can all improve ourselves throughout our lives, but not Les - he thinks it all has to be right here, right now. It's a part of his personality that bothers me. But I have prayed about it a lot, too. So I believe once Les accepts the Lord, he'll be just fine.

I have often thought of going back to school. But each time Les asks me, "What do you need to go back to school for? What don't we have that you want?" There's a lot that we don't have. But when it comes down to it, it's only my faith in God and my family that really counts. Maybe I'll go to college down the line. Maybe I won't. Whatever the Lord's will is for me, I will do my best to follow it.

Oh, no, Les is heading out to the car to get his trench coat. He'll freeze. This isn't really the time, right in the middle of Mass - oh, well, too late to worry about that now, because he's out the door.

Oh, dear, there's still so much to worry about. I guess I'll let my faith handle all the other stuff, because today, I am celebrating your entrance into God's Kingdom.

While I miss you, I know you are happy with your parents, and all of you are at God's side.

## **Chapter 10: Carolyn Sampson**

Even in death, you're right where you belong; right in the center of the community. And even though Janet was your girlfriend, you were the love of my life - at least in a

brotherly sort of way. You always told me to slow down and smell the roses – work wasn't everything.

My husband just loved having you over to the house to watch ball games. It was nice when Jack would come, too, but my husband really liked spending time with you. He felt absolutely horrible about not being able to be here today, but he did pay a visit to the funeral home. He's got a big auction that he's really banking on today down at the county seat. The McNichols' property, which borders ours, is on the block because they couldn't make it after all that hail and two horrible harvests in a row. Hopefully, we'll be able to get some of the land to help build our acreage and the McNichols will get a fair price. You just never know at these auctions, because sometimes the price goes sky high, and sometimes it sells for a fraction of what a realtor could get for it.

That brings back a funny memory - and makes it even more ironic that my husband would be at an auction for the McNichols' property today. When you were over at the house watching State College, there was talk that the McNichols were in foreclosure, or at least headed that way. You kept telling my husband that if he could get that land for a fair price, that it could be a good investment for us. And now, that's where he is.

It was weird when we talked about the auction last night, because he repeated what you said, almost verbatim. He almost sounded like you when he talked about it. Even if he gets just 50 acres out of it, we'll be in much better shape for next year. Our family's land is cut so odd, looking at the map. If we could plant another 50 acres, we could really stay in the black for years and years to come.

When the sugar factory exploded last summer, it was amazing to see your poise. The newspapers and television stations had come to town - why is it that they never come here for good news, like with the school or the high school sports teams, but they're always here when someone is killed or we have something else negative happen? Anyway, you were so calm that night.

The county sheriff's office sent all those deputies over to help with crowd control. You and I tried to help the area manager for the sugar company hold things together. But when we knew that several people were still missing, and it was pretty apparent that at least one person had died, nobody could calm him. We did all we could that night - and the next morning, and in the days that followed - to keep a positive attitude. When they

found the two bodies after they brought in those dogs, sniffing through rubble for survivors, I had a pretty bad feeling that our major employer was headed down the highway.

I was so proud of the fund you helped me set up for the survivors of the two families who lost their husbands, their fathers. To the sugar company's credit, it did step up to the plate and donate \$50,000 to each account. But that might've been to avoid getting sued, which could still happen down the line. You and I worked tirelessly to get the sugar factory to consider rebuilding here. But since they already had a factory 15 minutes away sitting practically idle, it was kind of a no-brainer in the business sense to move the operations there. What a development coup for that town. At the same time, it was devastating to us. I don't think everyone will move down there - I think of the 50 or so workers from our town who went to work down there, maybe a handful have moved there.

Still, it just made our job on the council that much tougher. I remember finally going home the night of the explosion - or should I say the next morning, because the sun had come up - and watching CNN, repeat their coverage of the blast. When you joined the council, I dreamed of our little town getting coverage for the revolutionary economic plan we were pursuing. Well, we got coverage about economic news all right, it just happened to involve the death of two of our community members and the fact that the economic pulse of our community, with the explosion, had been pronounced dead on arrival.

Now...how did you put it? OK, I remember, you said, "It's our obligation to glean one positive morsel from this. For all the tragedy, and make no mistake it is a tragedy, we have to see this as an opportunity to show the resiliency this town has with our commitment to hard work, the closeness we have with our families and neighbors, and point out that while the explosion stole a part of our past, it would not steal our future."

I felt tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat while you said those words. I wanted to hug you, but, looking back at it now, that would have really given some fodder to those who thought you and me were sleeping together!

The talk now is that I'm going to be the next mayor. I don't want to fill your shoes - I don't think anyone can. You were the voice of honor and dignity when a lot of people in this town acted like complete asses. Speaking of complete asses, I see Rich Cardell is

here - he's the one I thought would kill you when we turned down his request for that loading zone. There's something about him that really does give me the chills. He just seems like the kind of guy who could kill someone and then go have a cup of coffee and breakfast without blinking.

I'll bet that twit comes to me now to try to get that loading zone. I won't cave, though, Bill. In fact, I'll probably tell him that as far as I'm concerned, he can unload his trucks in the front yard of his house, but he never will in front of that store as long as the kids and the seniors need to get through there to get home.

When you first came to the house when you moved back to town, I almost fell off my seat when you said you were going to run for mayor. All the things you had going for you, and you wanted to come back on some sort of a civic mission to help your hometown. My husband and I were a little skeptical but in awe when you talked about your vision for this town. I really could see the day where our economic reinvention would be realized. We were going to recruit a decent size business here to bring a hundred or so jobs to the community. I wonder if you knew how much pride I had when we'd go to those meetings to talk with business officials who were thinking of relocating here.

Listening to you speak made me so proud of our little town. You talked about how our work ethic was second to none. How did you put it? Oh yes, I recall. You said, "You'll pay for eight hours of work from your employees, and that's what you'll get in our town. You don't shortchange our folks, and you will get your dollar's worth." We are so close to landing one of the six businesses we approached. Can you imagine if they pick us? We might even see some new housing construction. When was the last time a subdivision was added here? Maybe 1950? I really don't know. We could get that growth, and maybe even refurbish some of the vacant buildings downtown. That would give people a reason to shop here, and they'd do what you were always preaching, as far as "turning over local dollars in our community." I firmly believe that if we give them a reason, they would bypass the mall in the city - not altogether, but with more frequency than they do now, which is basically not at all.

We could put in an activity center for the young people, so they could stop complaining about having "nothing to do." Your vision was revolutionary to a lot of us,

especially at first. But it also seemed quite possible, more and more so as time went on, and we saw parts of your plan begin to reach fruition. The programs you helped me set up at the bank are going to go a long way to ensure this town survives, at least that's my hope. And the cultural fair looks promising, but we're really going to have to pick up the slack, because it really seems to be among the more progressive concepts ever broached in this area.

Now that you're no longer with us, it's going to be hard to keep the economic ship afloat, much less heading in the right direction. I don't know if I have the drive, or the means, to sink my heart into it like you did. I don't know of anyone who has your qualifications and insight. This town has, for so long, been within one last breath of dying out, and becoming just a bedroom community, and what happened at the sugar factory could be the last breath of air from our economic hope chest.

Most of our downtown business owners are good folks who have strong ties to the area. But they aren't progressive in their approach to doing business. They don't see that to get to the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, we first have to create a rainbow - an economic rainbow isn't going to happen by chance, and they still don't get that.

For every good, solid business we have - and that's paring the list down to one hand - we have an idiot like Rich Cardell, who thinks high prices and poor service are no reasons to take their hard-earned dollars out of town. I could never tell you this, but he is in the hole something awful. He's taken out a second note on his business, and a second mortgage on his house. A couple more bad months and he'll be out of business. Since they opened that new hardware megaplex over in the city, people are figuring out that it's worth an hour-and-a-half round trip to save anywhere from 15 to 60 percent. How can we change the school of thought when we have Cardell and his backward sense of reasoning out there?

Now, I want to see this town survive, and maybe even some day prosper again. But you can't see the forest through the trees when the trees have all been cut down and no re-seeding has taken place. Hey, that sounded pretty good; I might have to use that at the next council meeting! Listen to me, sitting here chuckling to myself as I think of you.

You're not even with us anymore, and you can still make me smile. Since they closed down our branch of the sugar factory and took the business down the road to Redbluff,

we've really been a hurting economic unit. I know from opening my books at the bank that the farmers are still carrying us. We don't get more than a couple home loans a year. We're still doing OK on car loans because the farmers still have to have a new truck every so often just to do their business. But that's barely enough to justify the one full-time loan officer position I have now. And whenever I get someone trained, they head out of town to a better paying job at a bigger bank. I don't blame them one bit, but I do wish we could provide them with enough economic incentive and career advancement to keep them around a while longer.

When someone only stays here a year or less, they don't get involved in the community or attached to the town. I can't think of the last young family that moved here, even in the farm industry. Even the teachers are often commuting because we have nothing to offer a young family. Listen to me - I'm feeling sorry for myself. Whenever someone would whine, you'd say, "You can either cope or mope. Take your pick." I hate to admit it, but right now we have quite a few more mopers than copers.

Without you here, I don't see that changing for a while. It's just been so long since we've had a new, fresh attitude around here. And I know someone like you doesn't come along - or come back - that often. If progress is one step forward and two steps back, then we had better start taking some gigantic steps forward.

Even though I was a few years ahead of you in school, I have some great memories of you and that smile. The first day of - what was it? - I think you were in seventh grade and I was a junior in high school, you saw me drop all my books the first day. You came over and helped me pick them up. You were so tiny then, really sort of small for your age, compared to the other boys in junior high. But no one in the senior high end of the building ever gave you any hassle. It's probably a good thing Rich was a year ahead of me and graduated before you hit eighth grade. Because I remember what a bully he was to the kids in my class when we first came to the junior-senior high building. He's always been so mean-spirited. I'm curious if his parents were that hard on him, or if he just brought it on himself. Whatever the case was then, it's pretty clear now that he brought it on himself.

This town has so many dark secrets. I was always curious about how many of those secrets you knew, because you weren't the kind to gossip or talk about other people's personal lives. But I have heard a lot – like you, I don't pass it on, either.

There are just so many skeletons in the closets of these homes. The outside folks, the ones from the city, think this is Storybook America, and that we all lead the good Christian life. They think we all band together, and fight through the rough times. I suppose that's true, at least to a degree. And the work ethic here is second to none. Then again, anyone trying to make it in this day and age as a farmer or rancher has to keep his shirt sleeves rolled up and his nose to the grindstone 16 hours a day just to break even. But I can't believe the mean-heartedness and back-stabbing that goes on daily around here.

I've been called in a few times by my loan officers to approve, or reject, a loan. I've had applicants bad-mouth other folks who have gotten loans, saying, "You have to approve mine if you approved that other guy. My family has lived here longer." Some of the stuff I've heard just makes me want to laugh or get sick to my stomach.

I feel light-headed right now. My mind has been drifting during the service. I just want to go back in time when you were still with us. I'll miss your wisdom, in addition to your sense of humor and compassion. But I'll prod along forward, probably at a slower pace until I get my feet back under me. I know that you're watching from above, counting on me.

And I will do all I can to cope, not mope!

### **Chapter 11: Rich Cardell**

Even in death you have that same little grin on your face as the night you denied my bid for a loading zone at my hardware store. Maybe you just think it's funny that it was hard for me to get here today because two cold fronts passed through here in the last week. I'd like to walk right up and clock you now, but I can't. Because there are some losers here, just like you, who'd think that's a lousy thing to do to a dead man.

You think you know so much about running a town. Well, you don't. You have to make a few deals behind the townspeople's backs; you have to grease the wheels a little

here and there. You have to take the high rollers out and put down a few beers with them and butter-um up. Not you, you probably couldn't even handle a beer.

I didn't always feel this way about you. But you screwed me over when I was in high school. You were just a junior high runt, and I was a senior. I saw you walking home one day a few miles outside of town, and I offered you a ride. You didn't even look like you wanted to accept the ride, so why did you? I wish you wouldn't have, looking back at it. So I came around the corner a little too fast, and we skidded out into the field. You couldn't just go along with my story that I swerved to miss an animal.

Officer Rostenkowski asked me what happened, and I gave him a story about an elk. Of course, I had been in a little trouble here and there, and so he didn't really believe me. But like everyone else, Rosty liked you and knew you'd never lie. So he asked you if there was an animal, and you said that you didn't see one. So he wanted to look through my car, and he found a little bit of pot. That was the only time I ever had any pot in the car. Well, I think it was. But I got busted for pot, and it was damn hard to sneak it around after that. You caused me so much grief that I almost had to stop smoking it for a while. I just worked around the problem. But that accident caused me even more pains in the ass. Because I ended up with a ticket for careless driving, and my insurance went up so high I couldn't afford to drive. All because of you, you little weasel. I'd have covered for you, or anyone else, in a second.

My Dad almost cut me out of the family business, too, after that. So many times he said, "You know, William Thayer would never have done that, what makes you do those things?" Man, if I would've had my 12 gauge at the time, I would've blown his head right off. Luckily, I didn't. And since my two brothers didn't want to stick around this town, I got his whole business when he ended up in a wheelchair after he had a stroke.

That loading zone would have really cut down on the time I needed to unload my inventory, and you had to know that, since you think you're so smart and everything.

You tried to justify it by hiding behind this town's brats and old fogies. Who pays more taxes here - my business, or old people on social security and a bunch of snot-nosed kids? You have to remember who butters the bread around here before you go shooting down a respected businessman's permit to increase his business' opportunity. I'm not going to make a profit this year - the third year in a row since I took over the business.

And I can blame some of it on you. If it keeps going this way, I might have to try to do things differently just to stay afloat. I barely make enough now to keep my house and truck. We'd go to those chamber of commerce meetings, and almost all the businesses, except mine, are seeing the "bright horizon" - as you call it - for this town's future. I don't see anything bright about it.

People are still driving almost an hour to that big hardware megaplex near the mall to get their lumber and tools. That's really killing me. You helped all those other businesses devise "economic reinvention plans," but I'd have nothing to do with it. I wouldn't even listen to that crap. Here you are, telling folks who have been selling stuff here their entire lives how to run their business - you arrogant jerk! No one, especially you, was going to come back here and tell me how to do things, no one. You and that bitch Carolyn might have helped the bank start a bunch of new programs - and I'd really have to admit that the new drive-through comes in handy - but you haven't done jack shit for me.

And, telling them down at the market to increase their volume to keep prices lower. What the hell is that all about? Telling them to spend more, what kind of business advice is that?

I wonder if you are taking any real secrets to your grave with you, I really would like to know. I'd bet everyone takes a secret, or two, with them when they kick it.

None as good as mine.

You probably wouldn't remember it very well, but back when you were about 8 years old, there was that 12-year-old boy in the next town down the highway who was killed. The paper said he had his head bashed in with a rock, down by the river. Remember that? I do, because I was 16.

But that's not why I remember it. No, the real reason I remember that so well is because I knew that little turd. I had been down there with my folks, because we had to get some nails for the store - our inventory wasn't in yet, and we were scraping because the sugar factory added that small building of offices. Plus, Redbluff was only 14 miles east, so it wasn't like we had to head to the city or anything. When my folks pulled in, I asked if I could go down to the filling station for a bottle of pop. My dad said that I could, and my mom gave me a dime.

I walked down to the station to get my pop, and I went down this alley because I saw some really cool looking bikes parked behind one of the businesses. I wasn't going to steal them, or anything like that - how could I, since I was with my parents, for crying out loud? But just as I walked up to the bikes, these three kids showed up, and told me to give them my money. I knew one of the kids' names, but he was pretty big, and I think he was 18 at the time. Another one was about my age, and the other was smaller. They started pushing me and then the big kid tackled me. The two big guys held me down while the little one reached into my pocket and took my dime.

I'll never forget the smile he had on his face when he took that money from my pocket - that little bastard. I cleaned myself up back at the filling station - I wasn't beat up or anything, but my pants had gotten dirt on them, that kind of thing. So I went back to my parents, like nothing happened. My mom asked how the bottle of pop was, and I told her it was fine, I didn't want her to think anything had happened. I wasn't some kind of coward who'd go running back to his parents when something like that happened.

I decided I'd get my own revenge.

I waited a couple of days, until Saturday night rolled around. I drove my dad's car down there, and sure enough, found the youngest one of the kids on Main Street. The rest area just past Main Street on the highway was pretty full at the time, so I parked the car there, behind a couple of big-rig trucks. I walked down the back streets, watching that kid from the alley whenever I could, because I really didn't want to be seen. I saw him say something to his friends, and then he turned toward the frontage road by the railroad tracks, and headed down to the river. It was perfect because he was down on the banks, out of sight to anyone who wasn't crossing the bridge at the time. I snuck up on him. I knew I wasn't going to just scare him or beat him up. I knew he had to pay for what he'd done.

So I grabbed this big ol' rock with my right hand. It was about the size and shape of a football that had been cut in half - the long way. I snuck up behind him, but he heard me when I was about 20 feet away.

"What are you going to do - run?" I asked him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

“I’m the guy you and your faggot friends stole that money from on Main Street last week, in that alley by the filling station,” I said. “Remember me?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “I was just doing what my brothers told me to do. Come on, I’m not looking for any trouble.”

I kept walking toward him slowly. I put the rock in my left hand.

“OK, prove it,” I said. “Shake my hand.”

“And we’ll be friends?” he asked.

“Yep, friends forever,” I told him.

He put his hand out, and I grabbed it hard. I mean, I must’ve broken every bone in that little puke’s hand. I squeezed the daylight out of it. He dropped to his knees and started to yell, so I hit him upside the head with the rock, got him real good. He was out cold, so I dragged him to the river from the top of the bank. I must’ve hit him 10 more times in the head with that rock. Smashed his head inside out, there was gray shit all over the rock and everything.

The paper had the story all wrong, about where exactly he had been when the incident happened, that the police thought a baseball bat had been used. Come on...I left the rock right there, did anyone take the time to look for it? I dropped it right there, in the river. But I guess the wolves found him and dragged him around a little bit, going crazy with the smell of fresh blood. By the time they found him the next morning, they had torn him up, pretty good, ate a lot of his organs and that kind of crap. Hey, he should’ve known the rules - you play, you pay, and he paid the big price for screwing with me.

I’ll tell you this; I was scared to death for a while that they were coming to get me. I was just sure it would get pinned on me. But no one came, no one called, no nothing. I remember the night it happened, I went back to the rest stop to get my parents’ car, and I was pretty fired up. I started smoking pot then, and it really calmed me down - if I wouldn’t have had weed that night, I might have lost it. I worried for a while that they’d find me.

I saw the picture of his funeral in the paper, and it showed his two brothers; one was crying - I laughed my ass off. I sat in my basement, yelling at that picture, “How does it feel, mother fuckers! Your turn to suffer, just like you made me suffer that day!” I felt so much power, like I was a superhero or something. I bet you those brothers never screwed

with anyone again, and it was all because of me, that I wasn't afraid to stand up for myself. I saw one of his brothers at the mini-mart here one time. He looked at me, and I just kind of smiled at him. It felt so good.

I'll also say this honestly: I've never killed anyone again, not even one more person. See, I'm not all bad; I just did what I had to do to protect myself. Man, you'd have just pissed your pants if you knew that story, wouldn't you?

You'd also be surprised to know who fucked with that nigger friend of your father's, "Uncle" Tom Leonard. Me and my friends went over to his house when he got engaged to that nigger-loving chick, and just fucked his house all up. We spray-painted shit on the wall, and just trashed his desk and bookcase. No one had any idea that I was involved. Everyone always saw me as the son of a respected businessman. Plus, I knew people were pretty much scared to death of me, and wouldn't consider fucking with me because they'd get the horns if they grabbed this bull.

Good night, who farted in here? Christ there's nothing I hate more than some ass wipe who farts in a crowded, hot building. God, it's got to be someone close to me, and they didn't enjoy their last meal very much, because it's seeping out, smelling worse than the feed yard! Whose doing that? I'm looking around, and I can't tell. I've got women on both sides of me, so I can rule them out. Man, smell that crap! I'm going to have to breathe through my mouth for a while, I guess. I should find out who it is, and then really screw them around the next time they come in my store, give them some bad wood or something, or give them those sale bolts that are already stripped. Yeah, that's what I'll do. Let's see, I'll just remember who is around me right now, and I'll get them good.

All these people here, and not one good-looking woman whose not taking full-time wood from some guy. All the women who aren't married in this town are the same anyway. They all have big butts and bad perms, and each gets worse as the years grow on them. I should've gone to the city when I had the chance. Then I'd have a family and a good career, with all the business sense I learned over the years. But I'm stuck in this dump of a little town with a bunch of people who don't know their ass from a hole in the ground. I'll keep going, just as I always have. If we have a couple of really good months at the hardware store next spring and summer, I should be sitting pretty. Then, I'll buy me one of those fancy-ass sport utility vehicles like the one you had. Hey, I wonder if

anyone is going to sell that, now that your sorry ass is history...oh, I wouldn't buy any fucking hand-me-down from you anyway, I can do better than that, you know it, and I know it.

Still, things are going to have to start turning around. I bet you they will just because your sorry ass is the hell out of the way now.

Bill Thayer, you son of a bitch, you cost me more money that you'll ever know. I guess it doesn't matter, because I get the last laugh now.

### **Chapter 12: Ester Jones**

Just a month ago, I was sitting here mourning my husband. Now, it's you lying here in our church.

I would have never guessed.

Of course, he was 91, so it was much more his time than yours, young man. You were always so nice, and I know my Harold adored you as well. We felt so bad when your parents were killed. I remember you coming over to shovel our walk when you were in grade school. Harold was already nearing 70, and didn't get around like he used to.

We enjoyed watching you shovel the snow, and we loved to see your rosy cheeks when you'd come in for hot chocolate when you were done. Living next door to your family was the best thing for us. Harold used to love to walk down to the little league ball fields and watch you play. He'd always come home and tell me how well you played.

We never had any grandkids - you were the closest thing. I wonder if you remember when you'd bring over your team pictures, and then your class pictures from school, too. Oh, how we treasured those pictures! We framed all of them each year, and then when we put the new ones on the mantle in a display, we'd take the old ones down and carefully put them away. When you left for college, Harold took it really hard. We went downstairs and went through all the old pictures. We both cried because we were so worried about you going to the city.

You probably didn't know, but we had a baby of our own - long before even your parents were born. But the little one didn't have it in him to make it. He got a real bad cough in his first summer. We thought it was just the croup. I held that little baby in my arms night and day, praying he'd make it. The doctor came out to the house, and they

took him into the city. Back then, of course, medicine wasn't what it is today. I don't think the little guy ever had a chance.

I don't know if you ever heard, but I remember when your parents first married and moved into the house next to us. Your mother had just started commuting to the hospital each day for work. It snowed something awful that week - it was kind of like it is outside today. Your father was in Wyoming on one of those overnight trips for the railroad. He just started, and was driving trains on the long routes, like they do with most of the new hires, even though your father had been to college, and not many men entering the railroad field at that time had a college degree or anything. Your mother was coming home from work, and there was this big accident on the state highway about 10 miles east of town.

A big tractor-trailer had jack-knifed trying to take the curve too fast as he went over the river bridge. The truck behind him plowed into him, and the next two cars couldn't stop either. There was a fire. A bunch of cars and trucks, plus the semi, were scattered all over the road. Harold and I were late leaving home that night to go to dinner over in the city - it was our anniversary - so we were fortunate because had we left maybe 10 minutes earlier, we might have gotten caught smack dab in the middle of the accident.

Harold got out seeing if he could help. Several men were pulling people out of the wreckage. They were bloody and the driver of the semi was wedged into the cab so tight that he couldn't be pried out. Your mother attended to him, settling him down and figuring out his injuries. She went from person to person that night, doing what she could medically and everything she could to calm everyone down. I remember there must have been three or four ambulances there that night. When the last one pulled away, your mom, who had happened upon the scene on the opposite side of the accident from the way we came, was covered in blood. She still had on her white nursing outfit, but there was blood all over her. Harold asked her if she wanted to ride home with me, and that he would drive her car home to your house.

But she said she was all right. She ended up heading back to the hospital - you have to remember, by the time the last ambulance left it must have been midnight, and she always worked those 12-hour shifts starting at 6 a.m. But she said she had to go back to the hospital. I listened when Harold talked to her.

“Come on, Ellen,” Harold said. “Let Ester drive you home and I’ll drive your car.”

“I can’t, Harold, but thank you,” she said.

“Ellen, I can’t let you go like this,” Harold said. “You’re in no condition to drive.”

“But I have a better grasp of these people’s injuries than they’ll have at the hospital,” she said. “Plus, there might not be a lot of doctors there, especially if they have trouble tracking down one of the doctors on call right now. These people need me to be at the hospital. That’s where I have to be.”

Harold nodded and your mother ran back to her car, turned on the headlights and turned around, heading back toward the regional hospital. I know two men died at the scene, but I read in the newspaper where the four who were taken to the hospital survived. I can at least guess that was in no small part due to your mother.

You’ve done more than all right for yourself. You’ll never know how much a part of our lives you were. I hope you and Harold are together now, watching a ball game and sharing your wonderful smile with him. You’re also with your parents - God rest their souls.

Your parents were always so patient with us. They always had time to share a thought outside or visit the house, which meant a lot to Harold and me. We called your mother quite a few times over the years. She never made us feel bad about encroaching on your family time. Her concern was completely genuine. When Harold got really sick one year, I thought he was just playing it for all it was worth - you could probably tell how he loved my cooking and when I’d spoil him.

He didn’t seem as sick as he thought he was, but I wanted to be sure because he was coughing pretty badly and it was about 8 p.m. I, of course, called your mother, mainly because the hospital was 40 minutes away, and the doctor only came to his office out here Monday and Wednesday mornings until noon. Your mother came over right away. Harold was starting to lose a little color in his face and was feverish.

Your mother said we needed to go to the hospital, because she could tell there might be something in his lungs. Although I didn’t come out and say it, I was afraid to drive to the hospital that late at night. I’m not the best driver in the world anyway - I’m sure you know that! So your mother called your father, and they took us to the hospital. It turned out that Harold had pneumonia in both lungs. He ended up spending 10 days in the

hospital. I was thankful that the railroad's insurance plan paid most of the bill. Harold worked for the railroad for 45 years, and we never really used the benefits that much until he retired.

Luckily, they caught the pneumonia not a moment too soon. Harold ended up living into his 90s, and I can credit your mother for that. I think when your parents passed, part of Harold and me did, too. Even though it always seemed like they were taking care of us, we still had an interest in them, not unlike parents do with their own children. And you were like our grandson, especially since we didn't have any kids, or grandchildren of our own.

It just seems like such an injustice that I outlived all of you. It's going to be a tough walk from here to when my time finally comes. I have felt lonely since Harold died. It sure was nice when you moved back to town. I know you were really busy, running the town and all as the mayor. But you made a point to call on us once a week. That was so sweet how you'd come over at least twice a year; at the start of, and during, winter to split wood. If you hadn't done that, I don't think we would have used our fireplace at all. We just didn't get around like we used to. But we loved to have a fire going at night. As Harold and I grew older, we spent more and more evenings in the living room, because it was so cozy and warm, and it helped with our aches and pains, especially my arthritis.

I knew being the mayor wasn't an easy job for you. When the council turned down Cardell Hardware's loading zone, I could tell he had a lot of bad blood over it. Richard isn't a very nice young man, not at all. When I come into town to go to the senior center or get groceries at the market, I'm always afraid that he's going to be on the road, too. Even though he knows who I am, he'll ride right up on my bumper and honk and yell at me to get out of his way. I can't believe the way he disrespects the seniors in this town.

Of course, that shouldn't be surprising, because he never goes to visit his father or anything. It just breaks his father's heart. I know that because I call on my friends sometimes down at the center, and his father looks so sad. I wonder how long he has left, because you can see the pain in his face and sense the loneliness. His family wasn't the friendliest clan around, either. I guess that all comes back to you in the long run. Still, it's sad to see someone feel that bad, especially when you know their children are around here. Richard got a pretty good deal when they let him take over the store. I don't know

what he would be doing with himself if he didn't have the store. I have a feeling he'd still be up to no good, just like he was when he was growing up.

### **Part III: From the grave**

#### **Chapter 13: Jack Jeffers II**

Dammit, Jack: I promised I'd go to the big game with you this weekend, but I'm just "dead" tired - Ha! Thought you'd like that one. Here I am - was, I suppose - the mayor of this metropolis, and I can't even swing tickets. But you're the big contractor, and you can get anything you want from the state officials - I'm damn proud of you.

I hope you'll use those tickets this weekend. I don't care if the game is on TV, you'd better be there. And use that ticket for your wife. Don't do some stupid, sentimental kind of crap and throw it in the casket. Hey, if you want to do something like that, bring me the stub of the ticket after the game - the ground here is frozen, so you'll be able to find me in the fridge at the mortuary for at least a couple of weeks, I'd guess.

Geez, they put this stinky stuff in my veins! They should've put anti-freeze in me with this weather - Hah! Hah! You'd have liked that one too, buddy.

Jack, we had so many good times together. Those are among the most prized possessions in my emotional treasure chest, along with my parents and, of course, Janet.

We had so many long talks over the years. I really missed hanging out with you when I went to college. Of course, you came down quite a few times to root on State with me during those four years. Still, the experience of being apart helped our friendship grow because you really got on track with your own life.

And when you told me you were going to marry, I was elated for you. Especially after I met Lila, and found out what a stable person she was. I envied you that day at your wedding. Serving as your best man was something that meant more to me than you could have ever known.

I still chuckle when I think back to your wedding day.

Rather than marry at home in the little white church, you and Lila decided to marry in a church in her hometown, which I recall was about halfway across the state. But since her folks were footing the bill, why mess with tradition?

Remember how we all had those powder blue tuxedos? Those were a style statement! Of course, half the fun was watching you dance the wedding jitterbug. I didn't know you could dance, Jack – ha!

That morning of the wedding brought back a lot of memories for me. We ate at that cafe just off of the interstate. You were so nervous. I thought you'd just have coffee or something. But no, you had to go and put down a stack of pancakes that could've fed you and me at least twice over!

Then, the nerves set back in on you, and you went to the bathroom and heaved as though it was some kind of Olympic sport! It reminded me of the seemingly endless hotdog regurgitation in Yellowstone!

“OK, Jack, it's all right, buddy. Come on now,” I said.

“I don't know, Bill,” you said. “This just doesn't feel right.”

“Getting married?” I asked.

“No,” you answered. “The pancakes!”

With that, you heaved again. And again. And again. I wondered if perhaps you had pancakes for breakfast, lunch and dinner the day before! When you threw up the first couple of times, I thought you had emptied your stomach. But after another half-dozen or so, it seemed like you had pancake reserves down to your toes! And the smell...for crying out loud, I thought I was going to puke. I've never put maple syrup on anything again since that day!

But you had always been such a good friend to me, that I couldn't abandon you - not that it didn't cross my mind when I stood you up in front of the mirror in the men's room to get you cleaned up!

I don't know if your nerves went away after that or what, but you were so calm at the wedding it was almost eerie. Maybe you just didn't have any energy left after that demonstration of projectile vomiting that morning!

The future looks awfully good for you Jack, and that certainly gives me a feeling of peace.

Good for you, Jack: State College won on a field goal as the clock ticked down, and you had the guts to go without me. But you went alone. Well, I will keep the ticket you left me after the funeral service close for eternity. That was a brotherly gesture from a

man who I was proud to consider as my one and only brother my entire life. You are the best, Jack.

You're going to have three children with Lila. There's going to be a scary time with your son. Let's see here, his name is...oh, you sentimental dog, you named him William!

William is going to have a rough go when he's first born. He's got his umbilical cord wrapped around his neck during the delivery. His heart rate is dipping so low that the doctors are worried. But he ends up pulling through. Boy, are you going to have years of fun with your kids, especially William.

Your contracting business continues to grow. Oh, I am so proud of you. I wish you could see this now, as I can. But it's good you'll have to wait; because you have to put in a lot of effort to make it work. But I'm also glad to see that you didn't become a workaholic and abandon your family to work, work, and more work. No, buddy, you did it all right.

Lila still looks beautiful down the road. She ends up starting her own business, writing on a free-lance basis for magazines. Darn, she's good. She's going to win a few writing awards on the way. She also puts pressure on you to go to college. You head over to the other county for community college classes. Good for you, you get your two-year associate's degree. You decide not to go to a four-year to finish the final two years toward your bachelor's degree, but that's not a bad thing because you are at all your kids' games. And aside from your youngest boy, who joins the navy; your other two kids go straight to college out of high school - and on scholarship, nonetheless!

Your daughter is an all-state volleyball player - wow, it looks like she got Lila's height and your athletic ability.

The road isn't all smooth, though, buddy. There's a nasty flood coming in a few years. You are in your new house down by the river, and the house is washed away - bricks everywhere. The kids are still little at that time. But no one, at least not in your family, is hurt.

Gosh, all the times we worried about floods ... I remember Harold telling us about the flood back in 1948. It washed out the paved two-lane highway that runs through town. Of course, by the time you and I were born, the rebuilding was done.

This one, though, is going to take quite a bit more rebuilding. The damage is just brutal. But there is a silver lining in this cloud for you, because you get a ton of business. And since you own your own business at this point with Carolyn Sampson, in addition to the job you keep as a general contractor, it ends up being quite a coup for you. You aren't going to end up stinking rich, but pretty close. Let's just put it this way: Before you are 40, you aren't going to have to worry much about money the rest of your life.

I also see where you finally run for the school board. It looks like you do a pretty good job, but you get fed up along the way and don't run for re-election. That's not a bad thing, because all that being on the school board did for you, aside from the pride you took in it, was take away a couple of weeknights a month from your family.

Lila ends up really sick when the kids are in school. Oh, no, she has breast cancer. But it's caught soon enough and, after a significant scare, she's treated and cured. You two are going to have a long life together, my friend, and as I lie here beginning my march into eternity, I am once again envious of you.

Thanks for checking in on Janet and splitting wood for the Jones'. You're it, man. I am so proud of you!

## **Chapter 14: Father Al: II**

Yeah, I bet you remember me well, you bastard. You stole my childhood, which led me to abandon my adulthood, at least until I met Janet. You see Cindy over there? Sure, she's married to Jimmy now. But she'd be mine right now, and I bet we'd have a handful of kids already. We would have been joined in the eyes of God, had you, Father Al, not violated me in the Biblical sense.

Of course, you called me "Little Billy" back then, when I was training to be an altar boy. I was only 10 years old! Chronologically, if you remember, it was two decades ago. Emotionally, it was yesterday. And it is today. And if I were to have a tomorrow, it would be then, too. The physical wounds, the bleeding and such, went away, but I was still wetting my bed in high school. Oh, you can be sure that I hid it from my parents - I remember when my mother would ask why I was washing my sheets...I told her that everything was fine, that I just wanted to help out, to do my own laundry. You always

told me how brave I was, and how proud you were of me for being your “big boy.” I don’t remember every time it happened, but I sure do remember the first time.

You told me that I had to work harder and harder if I was going to be an altar boy. You said that I hadn’t completely learned to obey you, and that you might have to talk to my parents if I didn’t do everything you said. I was so confused, because I worked harder than most altar boys. I had done everything exactly the way you had said from the first time I entered the altar boy program. How long did you scheme and plan for what you really wanted me to do? A couple of weeks later, you told me I was making progress. I don’t know that I did a single thing differently, except maybe I tried to hurry a little more to please you.

Then, it all turned to pleasing you.

You told me it was time to change clothes, and that I could do it in your office. I was the only one training that day, so you knew well in advance that you were going to hurt me. You might well have asked for forgiveness for all your sins. Or, had you faced the charges in court, you might have claimed it just happened on the spur of the moment. But you know the truth. You knew step by step what you were doing. And then making me stand there in my underwear in front of you like that how could you, much less in a house of worship? And then making up a story that you had to check me to see if I had wet myself a little bit, sticking your hand in the front of my underwear...it’s too bad I keep it a secret, because who knows how many other boys you took advantage of through the years and years you were here. You held a highly esteemed position, one of trust, in our community. Yet, as you, and everyone else, will learn when you answer to God, you were just a piece of shit.

You’d shake my father’s hand at Sunday service, and tell him what a fine, young man I was, and how proud they should be of me. And then when you were through with me, you’d tell me that I’d have to keep our “secret” so I could stay a fine young man. You’d tell me about how if I told anyone, that my parents would never be proud of me again, that no one would love me.

So I hid it from everyone, even my parents.

I had to hide myself from Cindy. If I wasn’t the way you made me, Father, I don’t believe that I would be here today. No, I’d be with Cindy. I remember the sophomore

dance, holding her close to me for the first time, just as I had dreamed about doing so many times since sixth grade, when she first got breasts. But I had always loved her, deep down inside. She was my first best friend, and you decided to take my world and break it over your knee. Cindy was the one for me at one point. Although after the way things turned out, I certainly counted my blessings to have Janet.

After the sophomore dance, Cindy and I were going steady. But I couldn't do it - I couldn't let her touch me. I couldn't imagine being naked in front of her, when only the local priest had seen me naked. I had half a mind to call "60 Minutes" when they were doing that show on sicko priests. You'd have been the perfect one to interview.

I took this to my grave. As will you. Live and die with it, Father!

Ask for forgiveness, Father, for you have sinned. And then ask for more. Good luck in Hell, Father.

You are going to have an interesting few years here. Some guy who says you fondled his wife comes back and beats you bloody in the face. You are naive enough to think of yourself as being all powerful, and you report him to the police. Sure, they stop him, but it ends up costing you in the long run. Because after he tells the story about how you fondled his wife and forced her to perform oral sex, not one but two other women came forward to say that you made forceful, unwanted advances toward them.

You will go on trial and get only six months in jail because you are so old, and have "no prior record" - let me tell you something, Father Al: When you die, regardless of whether you are old, busted by the police or not, you have a prior record. You get out of prison after only three months, but you are a cast-off, lonelier than ever when the diocese strips you away from people, and replaces you with a young priest who really does care about helping people.

I hope you like isolation, because you are, almost literally, an island. You live to be 90, and not a day passes when you don't wonder how the first 65 years of your life meant nothing. You mope about not being given a fair shake, when all you did was shake yourself in your chambers with a dirty magazine when you couldn't get a naive young boy, or a married woman in emotional chaos, to shake it for you.

If payback is a bitch, Father, then you are getting the economy-size version of the queen dog to end all female dogs. You are not loved by any in the two-plus decades leading up to your death.

But to your credit, you did confess the sins as you went along - although you obviously didn't learn from them, because you kept on repeating them. However, in the years leading up to your death, you seem to pray harder and harder, so maybe you really do learn from it, and have remorse for your victims, not yourself. Those who are in a position of trust, and violate it, are among the more dangerous in society.

Danger might really be just around the corner, as we are told growing up. It's just a shame that it is sometimes preaching from the pulpit on Sunday morning. But as you, and those who have gone before you and done the same, will learn, there is no such thing as a victim-less crime in the eyes of the Lord.

## **Chapter 15: Les Newman II**

Hey, Les...What's the blood alcohol level right now? Let's see, it's 10 a.m., so you're probably what, twice the legal limit? You sneak those swigs from that disgusting flask of whiskey, and everyone in town knows about it even though you think we're all blind to it.

Gum, Les, you need to chew gum or something. And get some eye drops, because the constant shade of bloodshot is a dead giveaway. I learned something from you, Les: Never give business advice to someone who only pretends to want it. You weren't seeking my advice; you had already invested some of that fat inheritance in the airline. But you kept pushing and pushing and pushing. And I kept telling you that I didn't really know if I'd invest in it, or not. And that was the truth. But you kept on bugging me. So I made a few calls, and found out what I could. I'm sorry you didn't like the information I passed on to you. I heard that it was an extremely high-risk investment, but if it was successful, it had the potential for a monstrous payoff. I also told you that the way it was set up was shaky because it didn't have a solid foundation and the odds of it being successful were, at best, 35 percent. Why did you even ask me?

Oh no, Les - what the hell happened to your airline stock? Looks like there were two crashes the first day the airline started service, and one of the accidents took out two other planes on a runway at that airport in the state capital. Bad news: Les, the investors

on the board of directors all resign, and the company goes belly up less than 48 hours after it got off the ground. Well, go have another drink and the pain will go away - at least until your next drink. Les, where the heck are you going, we're right in the middle of my funeral Mass? Oh, I get it, something to wet the ol' whistle. You should be in the alcoholic army, because you drink more before 10 a.m. than most people drink all month!

I don't hate you, Les, even though you might say you hate me. Because I know what you've been through, finding your father the morning he shot himself at your house. That would have been shattering to even the most secure person, much less someone like you.

I still have problems grasping what it was that happened with the council situation that made you so mad. You didn't know what the heck you were doing. You thought it was sort of a status symbol, to get appointed to the council because someone resigned. You knew there were only a couple of months until the next election. All you wanted was the position of mayor. You had no vision, no plans - you never really said anything smart. When I was attending the council meetings, trying to decide if I should run for mayor, the first one I went to was the one you lobbied for, and were appointed, mayor for the next two months.

Once you got the title that was the end of the road for you. Why didn't you talk about the problems the town was facing? Or you could've just focused on the positive things, and suggested ways to do it better.

Let me tell you something right here Les: Your political career was not ended by me. No, you ended it yourself that evening when you showed up blatantly drunk for a meeting. You were stammering through the minutes from the last meeting and even the roll call. Everyone was whispering in the crowd about how you were liquored up. I didn't say a word. But it was that evening when I decided that this town needed more leadership than it was getting from you. What kind of a role model were you? I remember watching Mr. Leonard, because he was there with an elementary school class and their teacher...I felt so sorry for those kids. I knew they deserved better. While I hate to judge anyone because I was always very aware of my own shortcomings, I knew that anyone - myself included, I suspected - would do a better job than the drunken fool masquerading as a civic leader.

It should have been Halloween night, with you coming as the mayor. But you were the mayor in title only. I felt awful for the other council members that night. Heck, I felt sorry for this whole town, the kids in the audience, and anyone who was there to do town business that night.

If you recall, I never ran “against” you for mayor. Rather, I ran for the position of mayor myself. I never took a single shot at you, even though you were as big a target as the broadside of a barn. I just talked about what I would do if I were elected, not what you hadn’t done since you were appointed.

And then you missed the next meeting - that was the last straw. No one knew where you were. Even Carla was here with the kids. She was so proud that her husband was the mayor. As you had done, and would continue to do so many nights, you broke her heart that night. Your children were asking where their father was. I have to admit that I was more relieved that you weren’t there, rather than worrying about where you were. I could tell from my seat in the audience at the town hall that the rest of the council was more than happy to press forward without you that night. The mayor is supposed to be at least a facilitator, an enzyme working deep within the heart of town government to keep things moving forward. All you ever did was act as a blockage in the artery of this town’s heart – that and raise its collective blood level to the legal limit, and points beyond.

I truly wish in my heart that you would have learned from that experience. You could have cleaned yourself up, and even come back and made another run for the council. But instead of learning to swim, you drowned your sorrows with that stupid-looking flask. You skirted death more times than you will ever know.

Whatever destiny has done to keep you dancing around death to this point will soon change. All those times you drove drunk, and all the lives you put into danger...did you ever take the time to think about that, Les? What about the mother who has half a dozen kids in her minivan - what do you think is going through her mind when you’re sauced up and flying past her, weaving over the double-yellow line?

I wonder how many people have seen their lives pass before their eyes because you chose to drink and drive.

I can see the future now, Les. And if you could, you would change your ways. But you won’t, and it’s going to come back to haunt you in a way you haunted so many

others. Remember that night you raced past me over the bridge so you could beat that train? Well, sure you beat him that time. Of course, I nearly got run off the road because the truck coming the other way moved into my lane when it became obvious you had no intention of slowing down and letting him pass us first.

Not far down the line, you're going to go to the well one too many times. You'll be heading home from the bar - but not before you guzzle another fifth of vodka as you let your car warm up in the parking lot. You think you are going to pull that same stunt and get over the bridge to beat a train.

And it's not the train that is going to get you Les. An unsuspecting trucker just trying to do his job is going to be in your way. You hit this guy going about 70 miles an hour - where the speed limit is only 30, nonetheless.

It's not a pretty sight Les. When Officer Rostenkowski arrives at the scene, all they can see is part of your crushed body. The smell of alcohol permeates the winter air, as does the unmistakable smell of death - and it's your death. That guy driving the truck is taken to the hospital. He is all right, as it turns out, but the emotional damage you inflicted on his wife and two baby daughters takes much longer to heal.

Imagine his wife's feelings when the state patrol tells her that her husband, working a second job to help pay for his youngest daughter's treatment for an abnormal heart valve, is in the hospital because someone driving with a blood alcohol level twice the legal limit decided to take not just his own life, but anyone else who dared to be on the road at the same time.

It's not a pretty picture, Les. Carla and your kids are torn up inside as well. While a few people pay a courtesy visit for the funeral mass as you occupy the front and center position that I have now, you die in shame.

Thankfully, Carla's inner strength and faith help guide her into the future. Unfortunately for you, and fortunately for your family, with your death comes a new life for them, one practically free of pain and full of love, happiness and self-fulfillment. But you leave nothing but scars on all those who knew you, Les.

Unlike many who suffer from a drug or alcohol addiction, you never reached out for help. Rather, you left those who came in contact with you crying for help and answers.

You will face those questions at the hands of a higher power, Les.

## **Chapter 16: Mrs. Les (Carla) Newman II**

You can't spend your time driving down the road of life wondering what could have been as you look in life's rearview mirror. You seem so happy with Les, but that's because you're such a sweet person. Your glass is always half full. But if Les keeps drinking, your emotional and marital glass will be half empty at some point. Soon after that you will find it bone dry. I know you are religious, and I admire the depth of your faith, but I wouldn't put a lot of money on your prayers turning Les into more.

As I begin to see what the future holds for you, I can tell you will experience highs and lows that you never could have imagined.

Unfortunately, I was right about Les' investment. It looks like one bad turn after another for Les.

And the worst turn of all is yet to come. In three years, Les is going to be pretty liquored up while he's driving home. He's zipping toward the river bridge, and hits a patch of black ice. He never had a chance. He overcorrects saving him from going into the river. But he ends up right in the path of an oncoming semi-truck, and it's not pretty. He was D.O.A. when the first emergency crew arrived at the scene. Fortunately, neither the trucker nor anyone else was hurt. And, through the accident, the truck driver ends up becoming a Christian. So it wouldn't be accurate to say Les' death went for naught.

Still, it really hurts to see what lies ahead for you. But with your faith and sense of spirituality, you are going to be just fine.

After the wound from that tragedy begins to heal, your life takes a turn that no one, except maybe yourself - and even that's stretching it - could have ever imagined.

Faced with raising your children alone, you happen upon Carolyn Sampson and my buddy Jack Jeffers having coffee at the diner. They are making plans to re-open Cardell Hardware after the bank is forced to foreclose. While Rich is driven out of business and into the real world, Carolyn and Jack are nonetheless taking a risk and betting on the survival of "Highway Hardware." However, while they are having coffee the day you see them in the diner, they realize they'll need someone local who is reliable and honest to work in the store.

Carolyn asks you to sit down and join them.

“Carla, is there any chance you might be looking for a job?” Carolyn asks.

“As a matter of fact, that’s what I’m doing now, getting my resume together to take it to the print shop,” you answer. “I’m taking two classes, one on computers - learning how to use one, accessing the Internet, that kind of thing - and introduction to business finance.”

“We’re going to open Cardell Hardware as Highway Hardware,” Jack says. “We have a manager, a young man who is working at the hardware megaplex. He has some cousins out here, and he wants to run his own store. But we need someone else as well, a sort of assistant manager. We figure to keep the local flavor we need someone from this area. It has to be someone who is reliable and trustworthy. I think that would be you. Carolyn?”

“I agree wholeheartedly,” Carolyn says. “If you are interested, we could talk about it some more.”

“Am I interested?” you ask rhetorically. “I would like very much to hear more. With the sugar factory being closed, I know of no other bookkeeping jobs in town. I’m concerned that I’ll have to commute to work out of town to find a job. And that would take me away from the kids. I know my parents will help me out, as far as watching them in the late afternoon and when they’re out of school. And both of my folks support me taking classes at the college. They’ve offered to watch the kids both nights of the week.”

“How about this? If you agree to work with us for at least two years, we will pay for your college,” Carolyn offers.

“Yeah,” Jack says. “We’ll invest in you as you invest in yourself.”

“I would be so grateful,” you answer.

There are still several specifics to be worked out, but all the I’s are dotted and T’s will be crossed within a week. You start classes and are a straight-A student. In the winter, when the store is slower, you take a couple of extra classes during weekday mornings. Because of who Carolyn and Jack are, and because of who you are, they decide to pay you while you are in school.

Your salary at the hardware store isn’t anything to write home about, but it is adequate to keep you going. Additionally, you and the manager are part of a profit-sharing plan. That doesn’t amount to a king’s ransom the first two years. But after summer school your second year, you have your associate’s degree.

And then the flood comes.

Now, I know you are deeply religious, Carla, so maybe this flood really is some sort of divine intervention in some way. Because while the flood washes away a lot of things from a lot of people and businesses, it's like winning the lottery for a few businesses, including Carolyn's bank, Jack's general contracting business, and Highway Hardware.

It is absolute pandemonium when the sugar factory is rebuilt. See, the factory in Redbluff is washed away. Since there's still the administrative office at the sugar factory in our town, the owners at the sugar company decide to relocate and rebuild in our town.

Your profit-sharing check the next spring, since the flood happened in November, is \$2,500. The next year, with the accompanying new construction associated with the new sugar factory and the housing development that follows, is \$12,000.

You know how the adage goes, about how good things always happen to good people. Well, great things must happen to great people.

After you help the hardware store through that crazy period, you finish your four-year degree, graduating with a bachelor's degree in business management. Man, your father and mother are sobbing tears of joy at your graduation. While you are making plans to get your Master's in Business Administration, Carolyn asks if you would like to join the bank as a vice-president. She trains you before her and her husband move to the city.

You have your own office and work with great people. When Carolyn leaves the bank and they bring in a new president, you help ease the transition and step into an even larger role. You still spend time with your children in the evenings, and your life is going to become more than you ever imagined for yourself minus one desire.

It is truly one of the great stories in town for the decade. Your children turn out just fine. Perhaps Les' passing helped them grow up without his alcoholism affecting their emotional environment. It's sad that you'll never remarry because you have so very much to offer anyone lucky enough to hook up with you.

But you are very content. When your children go off to college, you finish your MBA. You begin teaching at the community college in the county. Since two of your children are students over there at the time, you get to spend more time with them, even though they no longer live at home. They live in the dorms just a half-hour away.

And good for you: You invest your money carefully through the bank. Even though you do pretty well at the bank and with the money you eventually get when you start teaching, your kids still qualify for financial aid and several scholarships.

Your deep faith and busy schedule keep you from experiencing anything other than normal pangs of loneliness. You are self-made, and self-fulfilled.

The one-time little girl who walked with her eyes fixed on the floors through the hallways of our school will be holding her head high as one of the most revered members of our community.

I am so happy for you.

### **Chapter 17: Carolyn Sampson II**

I miss you already. Here you are, president of the town bank, and you're still a relatively young woman. I remember when you were in high school and I was starting seventh grade at the junior-senior high school. You always had a smile and kind word for me.

I hope you consider that job offer from the big bank in the city. You have too much talent and everything else going for you to squander it away here. Your husband has been a true friend, and the job he's done to keep reinventing your farm business has been the kind of work Bill Gates would stop and notice.

I came back because I had nowhere else to go. You have the world at your feet, so don't view it as you being at the feet of the world.

You'll do well at being the mayor. You're probably thinking that there's just so much you will never understand as the mayor. Guess what? I still have more questions than answers. People are just people, and some are just jerks for the sake of being jerks. You've got to deal with those people as little as possible. That way, you can spend your time and effort working with the people who can, and want to, make a positive difference.

It was so comical to hear about how people thought we were an item! You handled that hurtful gossip with such class and dignity. You will be successful beyond your years. I know you always said that you envied me for trying to come back to my hometown and make a difference. But don't you go buying into that, at least not around here. This town

has more skeletons in its closet than the county dump has bags of dog crap. Wait, that's not fair on my part. I shouldn't chastise anyone for wanting to implement the same sort of change I had dedicated my life to when I came back here. Still, the window for that opportunity slides unpredictably, and you are better off to take care of yourself and get your future planned and in place before you decide to take on any sort of civic mission similar to the one I failed at so miserably.

I do have to admit that you and I were quite a team at times. You always had your own ideas on any issue, but you were always willing to compromise and work together for a greater good. I know you apply that in your job, too, and I hope you do in your relationship as well.

As I see your future unfolding, I see where that frown you are wearing is going to be turned upside down in a big way.

First, you were right on the Cardell call - he does have a few bad months, and he does go under, although you work with him to let him keep his house, and he takes an entry-level job with the railroad to pay off all his debts.

But the neat part is you and Jack go into business, investing equally in starting Highway Hardware. You two are quite unsure of the direction when you first start it.

"Carolyn, I guess my concern is that I don't see a point where we'll break even," Jack says.

"I think we'll be all right, Jack," you tell him. "We've got a sound management plan in place. The young man we've hired to run it is affordable to us, and has a proven track record. Plus, we've got Carla Newman helping out, and she's not costing us much. All we have to do is maintain a constant cash flow. We don't really have to have any super selling months, although you are right - we won't make it - if people abandon us for the megaplex over in the city for their summer home improvement hardware supplies."

"You really think we'll be OK?" Jack asks.

"I'm pretty confident," you say.

"Even without a loading zone out front?" Jack asks with a smile.

"ESPECIALLY without a loading zone out front, you turkey!" you answer with that perfect wide smile of yours.

There is going to be a huge flood in three years. It's going to be just brutal. You and Jack aren't exactly getting rich off the hardware store, but you are making ends meet. And much to everyone's delight, Carla Newman is turning into a star employee. She's learning about hardware, and she's taken a couple of bookkeeping and finance classes at the community college.

But then comes the flood, and all heck breaks loose. Also breaking loose is the base of the building of the sugar factory in the town just 14 miles down the road in Redbluff.

And everyone thought the explosion at our sugar factory was bad a few years back - well, it was bad, but this flood wreaks far more havoc on the sugar factory down the road.

Because that town is right in line with the flood basin, it's swept away. The silos are knocked down by the rushing water, and the administrative complex is completely washed away. While that's nothing short of total tragedy for that town, the sugar company decides to rebuild back in our town.

Carolyn, you are going to be one busy woman. Because of all your hard work over the years leading up to this point, you keep the bank afloat. Now, because of the flood, you are almost literally awash in new business. You add a loan officer and two tellers. The Wall Street Journal does a story on you, and how you kept the bank going during the rough times, and even has a picture of you during the expansion, which comes when the sugar factory gets set to reopen here after the flood.

Remember how you and your husband were so worried about the McNichols' property? You don't have to worry anymore. You and Jack are going to get rich off Highway Hardware, because all the contractors are using it for their projects. A new subdivision - well, eight homes anyway - goes up on the north side of town, just off the highway. Jack's handling a lot of the contracting, and you handle all eight home loans. Amazing!

However, you decide to leave the council after the subdivision opens. Of course, by then, the sugar factory has been rebuilt - much bigger than it was before, by the way - by the time you and your husband decide that you have had enough of small-town living.

You have two children, and by then they are 4 and 5 years old - adorable. I knew you'd make a fantastic mother! You and your husband make a healthy profit, selling your

land. You have absolutely cleaned up with Jack on this hardware store, so you sell your half of the business.

With all that money, you and your husband are set, and while your oldest child is just beginning kindergarten, you will have so much money put away that they could go to college wherever they want.

You move to the city, and buy a gorgeous home. And it is just a beautiful house. Ironically, it is not far from the hardware megaplex! But you rarely shop there, choosing instead to once or twice a year make the hour-and-a-half round trip back to Highway Hardware whenever you, or your husband, plan a home improvement project.

I am so proud to see you take a job as vice president at the big bank in the city. You do so well, that four years down the road, you're promoted to Bank President. After five years in that role, in which you experience considerable success and are recognized for both performance and minority recruitment, including women, you step out of full-time work. You start a consulting business on how to re-engineer banks. You do very well, and you have all the time you want with your husband and your two lovely children.

## **Chapter 18: Rich Cardell II**

What the heck are you doing here, Rich? You've pissed and moaned since the council rejected that asinine bid for a loading zone. You didn't care that the area wasn't designed for a loading zone, or that it posed a serious danger to our children when they walked through that area each day after school, not to mention the senior citizens of our community, who passed through there each day.

Too bad you couldn't have taken it like a man. You knew as well as I did that it was the worst place in the world for a loading zone. I know the semis had to cut a sharp corner to make it out to the back of your store for deliveries. But to stop all traffic, both ways on our two-lane main street and put our senior citizens and the town's children at risk so you'd only have to move your inventory six feet, instead of 20 feet?

Get over it, dude, and don't even think of bugging Carolyn about it, either. She'll sit your sorry butt down a lot harder at a council meeting than I ever did.

Rich, you are going to go from being one unhappy camper to being one very, very, very unhappy camper who doesn't have a penny to his name. The store goes under before

the end of next year. You land on your feet on the one hand, because you end up with the railroad. On the other hand, you barely make enough money to keep your house and pay off all your debts - and you are one lucky guy that Carolyn was willing to work with you on that, because she had every legal right to rip your house out from underneath your nose and foreclose. I see you are blaming the whole thing on me; You should know I suffer from no posthumous guilt pain, because we all knew - even you - that you didn't have a leg to stand on. Then again, the day will come when you have no leg to stand on as you answer for all the pain and sorrow you inflicted during your life on others.

At the same time, you are the big loser out of all this. There is a huge flood on the way. By the time it comes, you are already out of business. But Carolyn Sampson and Jack Jeffers went in together to try to make a go of it with the hardware store.

Main Street isn't hit by the flood because it sits above the flood plain. But Redbluff is devastated. The sugar factory down there is completely wiped out. There's so much water and sugar mixed together from when the flood dropped the factory's full silos, that Redbluff could be the syrup capital of America.

And guess what happens next, Rich? The sugar company decides to rebuild over here, with what was left from the time when the sugar factory exploded. Of course, they still have those offices, plus the new small building of offices they built the year before the explosion, so it wasn't like they were totally starting from scratch.

All the jobs that were taken out of town after the explosion are brought back with the flood - and all the jobs from that other town are brought to our town as well. One of the big winners is the bank, because of all the business the sugar factory generates when it reopens.

But the jackpot winner is Highway Hardware - of course, Rich, you'll remember it as Cardell Hardware, you know the building. Highway Hardware is tapped for supplies to help rebuild the sugar factory. Sure, it would've been cheaper to go out of town to get the supplies, like over at the megaplex in the city, or even to truck it in, or bring it by railroad - the sugar factory usually does something like this.

However, there were so many hurt feelings when the sugar factory wasn't rebuilt after the explosion, the parent company wanted to do everything possible to restore the town's faith in them and capitalize on the publicity. For goodness sakes, they have added two

more full-time employees at Highway Hardware. Getting the sugar factory was a major score for Miller's Groove, leading to a small housing development, as well as a motel here on the highway across from the convenience mart. And guess where all those folks are going when they need hardware?

And Highway Hardware is doing all this extra business without a loading zone in the front of the store. How can that be? I remember hearing how a front-end loading zone was essential for your business to survive.

Good Lord, Rich! You have more skeletons in your closet than Imelda Marcos has shoes in hers!

Man, if Santa was making his list, he wouldn't even have to check his list twice to find out that you are one bad dude. I can now see what you did to that little boy, the one who helped his brothers steal your pop money - a life for a dime, Rich? That's taking an eye for an eye to an extreme! You think it is a big secret that no one knows you didn't get busted or have to suffer the consequences. Well, let me fill you in on something, Rich: When it comes time to be judged by the only one who can judge in this world, everyone knows what you did. You will have to answer to that little boy, his family and friends and, more importantly, to your maker for what you did.

Rich, I can see a lot of pain in your future, and it has nothing to do with you finally, and thankfully, losing your family's business.

You put in a few years with the railroad, complaining at every step about how stupid the railroad company was along with the workers. Amazing. You can't teach an old horse new tricks. Yet when you are finally led to water in the form of a last opportunity to get yourself out of the financial hole you created at Cardell Hardware, you don't drink. You fall into the water face first!

You are riding a train, and fail to yield at a light. It doesn't come as no surprise to those who know you. Well, someone who really has a green light kept their train heading down the tracks. You bail out and jump to safety, suffering a broken left leg and a broken right arm. You're in pain, but you make it.

The same can't be said for the poor guy in the other train. He is smashed into the control board in his engine. They have to pull him, piece by piece, from the wreckage.

You lie about a malfunctioning light and all this other crap, but it is to no avail. You lose your job and spend time at home as your broken bones begin to mend.

But late one night, you hear noise at your back door. Of course, we all know you keep a shotgun right next to your bed, so you pick that up and load it, ready for whoever thinks they are going to mess with Rich Cardell.

However, there are three of them. They knock you down and take your shotgun away from you. When they finally get you tied up, they ask if you are the one who killed their buddy in the train accident. You say that you are not, pleading ignorance.

But the casts are a dead giveaway, as is your driver's license, which they take along with your cash when they go through your wallet. By the way, that sure was a lousy idea to cash your check at the bank and carry big bills around. But you have bigger problems at the moment, so I'll go ahead and bypass the lecture.

These guys know who you are and what you did, as far as not yielding at the signal. They don't yield to you this night, Rich.

First, they stuff a sock in your mouth and duct-tape it closed. They beat the plaster cast off of your arm with the butt of your own shotgun. You're in more pain than you could ever, ever imagine. The leg cast is fiberglass. Ouch! I wish you would've passed out or been knocked unconscious.

They remove the leg cast, hitting at it with the claw side of the hammer shattering the fiberglass and re-shattering your bones - the fibula and tibia had just about mended. These guys have some dirty minds. One of them is pissing on you as another twists your broken arm behind your back - man, I couldn't even do that with an old Gumby doll that my college roommate had.

You survive until the next day, Rich, but barely, and not for long. You die hooked up to tubes and a respirator. The sad part, and I really do feel pity and even sympathy at this point, is that you die alone. No friends or relatives. Your poor father takes it hard, even though you weren't much of a son, almost never going to visit him at the senior home.

That certainly explains some of the "inconsistencies" in your personality. You are one sick man!

Well, Rich, I can see that you won't ever change your tune, and as a result you are singing the blues the rest of your life. Whew, I wouldn't want to be you when you finally

have to be accountable for what you've done over the years. I wouldn't wish what you're facing upon anyone.

I just hope enough people prayed for you over the years so that you may have at least a degree of mercy.

## **Chapter 19: Ester Jones II**

Mrs. Jones, how, I miss the smell of your kitchen. I will never forget how your hot chocolate was never too hot, never too cold - it was always just right - when I'd finish shoveling your driveway during my childhood winters. At first, my folks used to make me go out and do it.

"The Jones' driveway needs shoveling," Mom would say.

"Mom, it's so cold out," I would answer.

"Son, when we are older and don't get around all that well, do you want us to have to go out in the cold and falling, or would you like the boy next door to care enough about us to spend maybe 30 minutes of his day making our day brighter, not to mention safer?" my dad would ask.

"All right, all right," I would answer. "I'm going."

I remember dragging my snow shovel, pouting the whole way for the first couple of years. But when I was done, you would always invite me in. You would make me that hot chocolate with the marshmallows and Mr. Jones would give me a quarter. I remember, because a couple of years later he started giving me 50 cents each time. And then it went all the way up to a dollar, which was a lot of money to me!

Since my grandparents lived on the other side of the state, I didn't get to see them much - about a seven-hour drive. You and Mr. Jones always seemed more like grandparents to me. Each year when I got school pictures, I'd come running over to give you one. I was so excited that, even when they first handed them out in school, I'd cut out the one I was going to give to you and Mr. Jones. I'd put it in my math book, because that one always seemed to be the thickest, so the picture wouldn't get damaged. I remember one year when a couple of corners got bent on the way home. So I made that one the picture I gave to my parents, and gave you and Mr. Jones the best copy!

It meant so much to me that it meant so much to you and Mr. Jones.

Whenever I was playing little league, Mr. Jones used to come down and watch me play. I used to ask my dad if he could ride with us. But dad would say if he wanted a ride, he'd asked for it - and then we'd be glad to take him. But Mr. Jones always came on his own.

I'd come home and have dinner with my parents. But then I'd run over to your house, still wearing my uniform and everything. Mr. Jones would talk about the plays I made or didn't make. To tell you the truth, he made me sound a little better than I was each time. He always pumped me up, and sure enough, I'd play even better the next game.

If it wasn't too late, we'd sit outside and you'd let me have a bottle of pop, if my parents said it was OK.

"Now Billy, are you sure your Mommy knows you're having pop over here?" you asked. "Because I can just ring her up on the telephone and double check, if you're not sure. That's not a problem."

"No, ma'am, Mrs. Jones," was my patented answer. "I asked her, and she said that'd be just fine."

"All right then," you'd say as you opened the bottle for me. "Just don't drink it too fast or it will upset your tummy. A big-boy baseball player doesn't want to have an upset tummy."

When my dad first started with the railroad, before he was management and had an office, I wouldn't have anyone to play ball with. Mr. Jones already looked like a grandfather, but let me tell you something, Mrs. Jones, he could catch and throw!

Sometimes, when I'd be a little down or something, Mr. Jones would tell me a story about when he was little. I'd be sad or angry about a friend or something at school, and Mr. Jones would tell me about how he didn't even have television growing up. Or how his parents couldn't afford a car when they first came out, so they had to walk into town for school - two miles each way, I still remember that. He was the ultimate storyteller.

The best part was when my Dad took Mr. Jones and me to a State College football game. Boy, that drive seemed like it took all day when we went before. But the day Mr. Jones went with us, the time just seemed to fly by. I sat in the back and listened to them talk the whole way. My father and your husband really liked each other. Most of the time, they talked to me. But sometimes when my father had something on his mind from work,

your husband would talk with him about it, since he too worked for the railroad for so many years.

So we got to the game, and I sat between them – just me and my two best, adult friends. I couldn't believe how excited Mr. Jones got and how he yelled for State College that day. He was pretty fired up. Whenever someone would stand up in front of me, making it so I couldn't see, Mr. Jones would pick me up in his arms.

“Here you go partner,” he said as he picked me up. “Now how's this seat?”

“The best in the house, huh Billy?” my dad said.

“Yep,” I answered proudly. “I've got the best seat in the house.”

I could see the whole field and what was going on. Plus it was cold that day and when Mr. Jones held me, I warmed right up.

“Billy, you must be hurting Mr. Jones' arms and back,” my dad said.

“Oh, fiddlesticks,” Mr. Jones said. “The boy can stay here the rest of the game if he wants.”

My father and I just smiled at each other. That was one of the best games I ever went to in my life. State College won by a lot that day, but we stayed until the end and even watched the band. We went out to where the players left the stadium and waited for autographs. My father wanted to let me do it on my own. But there were a lot of bigger kids and adults pushing their way toward the players.

So Mr. Jones picked me up and just backed his way into the crowd. I ended up getting four players' autographs on the game program. I held it like it was a precious diamond on the way home. My Dad put it in a frame for me, and I took it to school for show-and-tell the next week.

“Man,” Jack Jeffers told me as he looked at it in class, “you're lucky to have all those autographs.”

“And I'm lucky to have Mr. Jones, too - he's the one who helped me get them,” I said.

“He's so cool,” Jack said.

“Yep,” I answered, “he sure is.”

As I see how your life unfolds during these, the twilight years of your life, I worry about you. You feel the loss of Harold, my parents and me, and it takes its toll on you.

You still have a lot of friends down at the senior center, and Jack, Carolyn and Carla Newman come down to check on you. Heck, in a couple of years when there's a big flood, you even work part-time at the hardware store, working the cash register.

Six months later, without ever living anywhere other than that home on Hummingbird Lane next to my folks' old house, you die peacefully in your sleep.

It's a long happy life, and no one deserves it more.

## **Chapter 20: Tom Leonard II**

Boy, it sure seems weird to have you sitting there, Mr. Leonard. I remember you sitting in about the same place at my parents' funeral.

I don't know how you do it - balancing everything you have to do. You are the principal at the junior-senior high school, and you have a family to take care of. On top of that, being the only black resident of this town must be tough. Not that the racism is, in most cases, overt or anything. This is just a lily white area and people are not used to seeing blacks. That's too bad, because a lot of kids who grow up here, leave with no concept of cultural diversity. All we know is ourselves, and that's not enough in the real world.

You were like a sibling to my father, and you were often at our house. I know you put up with a lot ever since your family moved here before your junior year of high school.

I was fortunate to go to college at State because it's in the far eastern corner of the state and there is some racial diversity. And working in Denver exposed me even more especially to the Asians. Quite a number worked in my office and I took the time to get to know them and respect their ways. They allowed me to grow, celebrating our differences rather than allowing our differences to separate us.

But people around here were just so racist. I can remember when the migrants would come to town each year. Those people were treated like dirt. I know they got into some trouble here and there, but white people did, too, you just didn't hear about it. And I think the police had an inherent racism about them. They kept on the lookout for any gathering of Hispanics. I will say this though: The Hispanic culture places an emphasis on family that is sorely lacking when it comes to a good share of the white culture.

It's just that Hispanics don't often get the same opportunities to make better lives for themselves. It was through my association with you that I developed a social conscience. I tried to walk the walk - and not just talk the talk - when I had the opportunity to hire a minority or woman at my office in Denver, I did. I carried that with me when I returned here as well. Carolyn and I were able to set up a fund for a food bank and other relief programs for migrant workers. Quite a few people really stepped up to the calling. We were able to put in place a program to inoculate their children and provide checkups each year.

I know whenever people drag their feet - they always fall back on the "Rome wasn't built in a day" theory. But after two centuries of mistreatment, I really think society is on the verge of turning the corner. Our Native American council didn't go over real well at first. But when we opened the Lakota Learning Center, I have to admit that even I was surprised to see so many families visit it.

On the one hand, it certainly helped the over used saying, "There's nothing to do around here." On the other hand, it really seemed that through educating everyone about the Native American culture, several of the many barriers between the races could be broken down.

For too long - even in setting up the center - we took a reactive approach, and dealt with problems only after they had come up and caused grief. Now, by being proactive, we find ourselves with a better-educated population.

And I can credit the curriculum at the center to you - the manner in which we set it up. I remember how you used to always say that "Learning is fun" and it is "Fun to learn." I see people having a lot of fun. As you know from your involvement, we were planning a festival for the upcoming summer, in which representatives from the Oglala tribe in South Dakota were going to come down with their relatives who live here in the valley, for a cookout and dance festival. I heard a couple below the belt comments from a few of the guys at the diner. But all in all, everyone seemed to support it even though it may have been primarily out of curiosity. That was fine. Whatever it took to hook them was my motto. I believe the program itself reeled them in and will really open their minds once we get going.

My father and mother always held you in such high regard. I remember when you first got engaged, people were literally beside themselves trying to comprehend the concept of an interracial marriage. A couple of guys, with too much time on their hands, went overboard.

I heard my father tell my mother what happened at your house when the engagement picture of you and your fiancée was in the paper.

“I can’t believe people still feel this way,” my father told my mother. “It is almost 1970, and people are acting like it is 1700. What’s the problem when a man loves a woman and wants to marry her? So what if the man is black and the woman is white?”

“I know, honey,” my mother answered. “I can’t believe they feel this way either.”

“Feeling that way is bad enough,” my father said. “But to express it like this, it’s just awful.”

My father continued filling my Mom in on what had happened. You had come home from a road trip with the elementary school basketball team. Your house had been vandalized. On the living room wall, someone had sprayed, “Nigger” and “Leave white women alone.”

Rather than call the police, you called my father, because you two were best friends.

“What do you think I should do?” you asked my father.

“I think we should call the police right away,” you said.

“Bill,” you said. “I don’t want these people to think they’ve scared me. I will not run away from these lowlives.”

“But the reality is, if they are capable of doing this and there’s no report filed, they will think they can do it again,” my father said. “And Tom, the next time it might not be a can of spray paint, it might be bullets sprayed toward the house. And you could be inside.”

You guys called the police, and they came out and later filed a report. They never did find out who did it, but it was suspected that Richie Cardell and his friends had played a part in it.

“Thanks, you guys,” you said to the police as they left.

After the police left, you and my father sat down, jumping and running to the window every time you saw a beam of headlights. My father called my mother and told her that he would be staying at your house for the night.

“Bill, you don’t have to do that,” you said. “I’m a big boy now. I can handle my own problems. I don’t want to draw you into the center of this.”

“Tom, you are my best friend,” my Dad said. “There is only one place for me to be in this - and if that place is the middle, I gladly accept.”

“I just don’t know what goes through people’s minds when this kind of thing happens,” you said. “Even though I grew up in the eastern part of the state, I heard the racial slurs and epithets. But I thought the day would come when this would all go away.”

“That’s why I’m staying,” my dad said. “If it won’t go away on its own, then we will push it away with every ounce of strength we have. Most of the people in this community, while lacking any sense of racial and cultural diversity, would be appalled by this sort of thing. We’ll take the high road with these lowlifes.”

I think you’ll be happy with what the future holds for you. While you are content at your job, there’s no question that dealing with our school board takes its toll on you.

Down the road five years, you move to the eastern part of the state and get your doctorate. You teach at State College, which gives you the added benefit of being close to your son and daughter-in-law, and your three, precious grandchildren.

After teaching for three years, you are offered a chance to work in administration at State College. After two years in the dean’s office, you earn a vice president’s position, where you work for 15 years until you retire.

It is a fulfilling, rewarding life. You and your wife remain the best of friends for another 50 years. After leaving here for State College, you and she make a commitment to vacationing each year. That ends up being one of the highlights of your life. Through your travels around the world, you end up with a contract to write a series of books on racial harmony/discontent.

Your books make you a truckload of money. After ensuring that your daughter’s family has enough money to set them up for the future, you begin a foundation.

The foundation, in your name, is two-fold; One is for minorities and women, and the other is for anyone who shows academic achievement and prowess. Hundreds of kids

who otherwise wouldn't have been able to afford a four-year education get the opportunity. And most of those kids end up as solid members of society.

When you finally pass at 84 years of age, you have left more than just memories.

According to the newspaper the day after you die, you have left behind, "A legacy of achievement and dedication to the healthy blending of society, tearing down walls of hate and rebuilding a society that crosses areas where barriers no longer exist."

My father, from his lofty perch in heaven, smiles as you come to join him for a round of golf on heaven's course. Eternal salvation is the reward for the kind of life you lived, and the kind of person you always were.

## **Chapter 21: Cindy Slater II**

I remember the first time you kissed me, in the second grade. We had to stay after school and clean the erasers because you kept trying to talk to me during class.

Maybe now that I'm gone, Cindy, Jimmy will stop knocking you around so much - then again, maybe not.

I came back here six years ago because I felt this town needed me - and maybe I thought you did, too, Cindy. But, you weren't the person I knew so many years ago or perhaps I just knew myself better. I still was cautious, but didn't have any desire to be alone with you. You were married, and I had no interest in you that way, although I certainly have never stopped caring about you or worrying about you.

I always wondered "what if," at least until I met Janet. Obviously, I wish I could have had the chance to be a father.

It never was your fault that things sort of blew up that day at the lake. If only you had known the real reason I couldn't be intimate. I had a lot of baggage at the time, which had nothing to do with you. I have to admit that you did move a little too fast with me that night, but I know I could've handled it better. Fortunately or unfortunately, that night at the lake just arrived a little too soon for me.

Seeing you around town since I've been back has been tough. There's little doubt in my mind that you brought a lot of this stuff on because of your lack of self-esteem, maturity and security. But I firmly believe that no woman should ever suffer abuse in any way - especially the kind you get from Jimmy.

I wish you would leave him and get on with your life. I feel guilty about that, too. I don't know if Cal and Cathy are ready to be raised without a father because I'm not sure Jimmy would be the most responsible guy about being a father if you kicked him out of the house. Then again, you don't want to raise your kids in that kind of abusive household. I'd imagine when you and Jimmy go at it, your kids are at home, too, so they can hear the fighting and yelling. There have been a couple times when I've been in town late at night, and saw a police car outside your house. The first couple times, I worried that something catastrophic had happened. I'd heard the gossip that Jimmy had been beating you. But I guess I didn't want to believe it.

It hurts even more to know those poor little children are seeing, or hearing, that in the house they have to grow up in. You think it's not fair to you, and I bet Jimmy thinks it's not fair to him. Regardless of whether you or Jimmy are right, this much is certain: It's not fair to the kids.

When I was applying for college a month or so after that incident at the lake, I was approached by one of your friends in the school library, asking if you really did dump me. If I remember correctly, I didn't even answer. I just shrugged my shoulders or something.

However, my thoughts, as I filled out college applications that evening, shifted to you. I tried to look into your future, to see if you would go to college. I feared you wouldn't, that you'd be stuck here your whole life. Not that I think of living here as being "stuck." It's just that we had talked so many times about your goals and dreams.

I felt like it was my fault, in a way, that you didn't go to college, and thus are in the mess you've got now because of me, indirectly. Because if we'd have stayed together, I don't doubt that you would've kept your focus in school a little better the next two years and ended up going to college. It just tears me up to think that one night at the lake could have come to this. And it left me wondering if I contributed in a less obvious way than the people in your past and present, leaving you feeling rejected or not being worthy of love which of course landed you in the lap of someone like Jimmy.

But it still pains me to see you suffering. Indeed, while I learned in college that people don't really change, as far as their character goes, I know environment plays a

significant role in whom we become, especially how we choose to deal with it, those around us and ourselves.

I'm so grateful I ended up with Janet even though it was for just a year. She's very educated, and we have the same sort of interests, dreams, goals. Most importantly, I took the time to know me and thanks to Janet, was able to learn how to love and not die a virgin.

I guess I'm just still worried about you. Because I remember going to the lake with you when we were younger, just sitting there talking or skipping rocks. I knew what your dad had done to you was wrong. And I know how when your mom left him for that year, your dad's friends came over to your house, and one even molested you several times before your Mom moved back home.

You've just had such a tough life. Even though your own decisions sometimes brought more strife upon you, it didn't matter to me: Whatever it was that caused you all that pain made me hurt inside, too.

You just always seem so down, whenever I see you. When Jack and Lila were double-dating with Janet and me at the movies that night we saw you and Jimmy, I couldn't stop worrying about you. I could tell by the way you and Jimmy weren't even standing that close to each other, much less talking, that the relationship wasn't doing much for either of you.

Since I've died, I am now able to see into the future - it's bizarre to see how things are going to unfold for everyone here.

Oh, my God! Cindy, you're not going to be around for very long.

You have a message at home right now, to call the hospital over in the city, where you had your blood test. The good news is you aren't bringing another child into your world of abuse. The bad news is you are leaving this world in less than two years.

Boy, Cindy that was an uncanny call on the Forrest Gump thought you were just having, because it looks like you might have more in common with Jenny than you could ever have imagined.

It doesn't look bright, Cindy. No, in fact, it's grim as in the Grim Reaper. You are in for a lot of pain. Jimmy is going to fight you for the kids at first. He even takes them out of town to his mother's house. But for some reason, his mother is a voice of reason. She

makes him get educated about AIDS, and he even gets tested himself, where he finds he doesn't have the virus.

In about a month, he brings the kids home, where they'll be for about the next 18 months. But for the last six months of your life, you deteriorate to the point where you can't even recognize your children. The virus just completely ravages you.

I don't know if I would go so far to say that Jimmy turns over a new leaf. But the last two years of your life aren't as bad as the first nine years of your marriage. Jimmy is almost nice to you, and it is truly out of love, not pity. You do a good job of living for the present, since you know the future is not going to be kind to you.

In two years, you end up with the front and center perch that I have. And it snows badly that week too.

It is just so sad to see you lying here in two years. You were way too young to die. But that was how you were – reckless - with the affair and everything: That is, being selfish and having an affair is something a lot of people do. Still, that doesn't make it right. Maybe I'm biased because the only person I ever made love to was my fiancée. If you are looking for love, having an affair isn't the place to find it. That's not making love, that's having sex. You poor woman, you never realized there was a difference - which no doubt came from your childhood and escalated into adulthood. How different your life may have been if you had learned to love yourself.

On a brighter note, Cathy doesn't repeat the cycle of abuse with her boyfriend. Cal doesn't ever beat up his girlfriend, which is amazing, considering all the statistics I've ever seen say that kids living in an abusive household are exponentially more prone to end up in abusive relationships themselves when they grow up. Jimmy remarries in about another year. As it turns out, he never did fool around on you.

He meets his wife with the kids at the mall one day. Now let me tell you, she isn't exactly Miss America. But while she's not top-of-the-hill physically, she's not the emotional dump you chose to be.

And she loves Cathy and Cal as though they were her own children. Cathy and Cal even get a little sister when they are in high school, and they both love her with all their heart. Jimmy is a much better father the second time around, although coming out of his marriage to you, he certainly wasn't lacking for room to grow.

Jimmy never does turn into “Father Knows Best.” And his preoccupation with anal sex is equally appalling – if not troubling – to his next wife. But because of some sort of physical pain brought on by stress, he does learn to manage his anger better. He lives a pretty decent life and ends up being quite a fantastic grandfather to Cathy’s and Cal’s children.

What you will find out in two years when you die is this: Remember the other day when you were hauling around in the snow, wiping out near the little white church? You spun out when you made the turn at the roads that intersect, and you ended up sliding into the church parking lot. You were spinning around, out of control. You thought you hit the church and did some damage, so you floored it, kept your tires going, and got the heck of there and went back home.

But you know what: You didn’t hit the church at all. You weren’t paying attention; I could tell when I saw you, because I had just finished shoveling the steps here at the church. When I turned around because I heard your engine running hard, I knew you’d never make the turn. You came into the church parking lot backward after spinning around and overshot the intersection.

What I should have done was hopped back up on the stairs. But I had taken my glove off to brush away the snow that got in between the bottom of my coat sleeve and glove. I was thinking that because it was starting to get dark out, I should hurry and get a shower before I went to Janet’s house for dinner - not just to clean me up, but to warm me up as well.

Anyway, I dropped my glove and hurriedly bent down to pick it up before jumping back on the steps when I saw you flying toward me.

I never had a chance. I reached down to get the glove which was maybe a second or two. I could see your rear license plate getting closer and closer. I went to jump for the stairs, but I hit the shovel with my foot and slipped.

Then, when I tried to stand, I slipped, ending up on my knees. Your bumper hit me right in the chest. I yelled just before you got me, but no one heard me, including you, because you had the radio blaring and a cigarette going. Another two feet of snow fell, which covered me as well as your tire tracks.

I was out cold, lying there in two feet of snow. Of course, I didn't help my own cause by choosing to come down here to shovel in the early evening. Because it was pitch dark – the real winter-like kind of black dark – not an hour later. I remember opening my eyes once because I thought I saw some headlights, but that was the last thing I remember. After that, it got colder and it was harder for me to breathe, as though a sledgehammer had been slammed through my chest.

When they found me the next day, my eyes were still open. But I might as well have been an icicle, because I was frozen to the bone. They never did figure out what killed me. But maybe that's just for the better, especially with what you are facing the next two years of your life. You certainly don't need to face manslaughter or vehicular homicide charges as you battle this illness. But I will never understand what makes a person go speeding around in the snow during a cold, icy night, even if they do have problems at home.

Guess what? We all have problems. I lost my parents way too early. But if we all handle loss or stress by endangering other people, then we probably have much deeper problems than the one that started such an irresponsible reaction in the first place. Ultimately, we all make choices, take action or not and can't place blame on others.

Killed by the bumper of a car that could be trailed because it dripped enough oil to start a small Muslim country...man, you talk about me being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

You were so lucky that no one saw you. Like I said, though, you have a lot of problems to deal with when you get home today. Good luck and know that I still care about you.

## **Chapter 22: Jimmy Slater II**

I barely knew you, Jimmy, when it comes right down to it. Sure, you married the woman who was my first interest - or more aptly put, my first curiosity when it came to the opposite sex.

You gave me the dirtiest looks and took every opportunity to bad-mouth me. I don't know what I ever did to you to deserve that. Maybe you thought you had your own reasons. But I sure would have liked the opportunity to answer any question you might

have had about me because I never had any interest in Cindy after my junior year in high school. I certainly cared about her a great deal, and continue to, about all my friends with whom I grew up.

You were just the ultimate control freak. I feel guilt for not approaching you after the first time I saw Cindy with a black eye. I reasoned that I would only make things worse for her if I tried to talk to you about it. Because she is a big girl, and must make, and live by, her own decisions. I didn't see an opening where I could approach her, either because if you found out, or if she used what I said against you, I would have been right in the middle. And I can think of fewer places that I'd rather not be than between the two of you.

However, since I'm no longer on this earth, I have a perfect view of the future. Much to my surprise, and probably the eventual surprise of many in this room, you have among the brighter futures of anyone, which is really saying something, because the immediate future, starting this afternoon and fast-forwarding ahead two years, is the low point of your life, at least until you begin to deal with the wide range of emotions you will be forced to experience.

You are going to have your eyes opened when you get home today. Cindy is going to find out that she is HIV-positive. She contemplates whether to tell you. As perhaps could be expected, you sort of go nuts. But in a week, after you have tested negative for the virus - you will also be tested for the next 18 months, all are negative and you never contract the virus - you begin a personal transformation that will forever change your life, one that I doubt any of us could have envisioned or predicted.

Unlike a lot of AIDS patients, Cindy will die quickly, within two years. Initially, you are content with a plan to have your parents and Cindy's parents take care of your children. But you have a change of heart, and decide that being a father is a role you must learn, and adapt to, for no other reason aside from the fact that you love them with all your heart.

Once you find your heart, and your soul, you are on the road to happiness.

It's a good thing you didn't have your parents raise your children. Your father was a control monster! That's where you learned it! Had your parents, even though your father has mellowed as he's grown older, raised your kids, you would have been devastated to

watching Cathy pick a husband just like her mother did, one who knocked her around and kept her emotionally beaten down every day.

But for some reason, the loss of Cindy brings you a new perspective. You attend counseling, something Cindy begged you to do, and you are in a group with men not unlike yourself - a man's man, but one who has no place being around a woman. You learn about the cycle of abuse, and it is painful when you must confront your past, and your father's treatment of your mother. You learn that you don't have to be in control all the time. And that someone you love's self-fulfillment never comes at the expense of your own self-fulfillment.

In short, you are one bad dude right now. But in a relatively short period of time, you will genuinely be a good guy.

You won't be alone for long. In the months after Cindy's death, you meet a woman who moves to town to take an accounting job at the sugar factory. She isn't the knock down, gorgeous girl Cindy was when you met her.

However, unlike Cindy's black eyebrows, this woman's eyebrows match her blond hair. She is a pretty solid girl - you won't ever have to worry about her wasting three easy payments of \$49.99 on a butt-master, because she is comfortable with who she is. And that, ultimately, helps you become comfortable with who you are, and you change for the one person who needs it most: Yourself.

On top of all that, your new spouse loves Cathy and Cal as though they were her own children. In fact, after you and she have a little baby girl, both Cathy and Cal start calling her Mom. They start doing it just so they won't confuse the baby. But make no mistake; Cathy and Cal are quite comfortable with it, because they view her as their mother as well as the baby's.

You still don't ever hit the gas at work; you remain a pretty simple guy with simple pleasures. By the time you begin dating the woman from the sugar factory, you understand who you were, who you are and who you want to become. You never do get a real grasp on where you are going in your career, but you were never much more than a forward-and-backward kind of guy, so any sideways tangent could probably be discarded as a possibility anyway.

You do pretty well with the railroad financially. While there are no real sparks when you first meet your new wife, she enjoys the same simplistic pleasures that you do. She likes football, and she ends up really hitting it off with your friends, and of course, more importantly, your children.

She never embarrasses you and never calls the cops. But in fairness to both her and Cindy, you never give her the same kinds of reasons through your behavior to warrant such a response.

You and your new girlfriend move pretty fast in your relationship. You are excited to live together, but then you have a change of heart - the right direction, I'm glad to note - and decide you can't live together without getting married because you are worried about what it might do to Cathy and Cal.

So, after talking it over with Cal and Cathy, and getting their approval, you get married. You're not abusive any longer. Although, you still have mood swings and a bad temper, you can recognize both, solving potential problems before they arise.

Actually, it's pretty impressive.

You still aren't Ward Cleaver, but you are married to June, and it is a pretty good life for you. After the devastation of the coming two years is dealt with, you move forward. And I'm so happy to see that you still visit Cindy's grave. I see you crying there, kneeling at her headstone telling her how you regret what you put her through. You even shoulder some of the blame for her affair, claiming you, too, probably would've sought out someone else if you were treated the way you treated her.

All that does is make you a better father, husband and person. Your friends at work and at the pool hall kid you from time to time about how you've become a "softy" over the years. While you don't enjoy the ribbing, you are quite comfortable with who you are.

Bluntly put, for the first time in your life, you like yourself, and others find it much easier to like you as well. You aren't a leader in the town, but you are respected. People who used to gossip about you are now taken aback by the new, improved Jimmy Slater.

For where you came from to where you end up, it is truly a happy ending to what started out as a tragedy. Your growth as a man, father and husband is as spectacular as it is unpredictable.

Good for you.

## Chapter 23: Janet Lynden II

Oh, my Princess, what I wouldn't give to dry those tears and put a smile on your face.

I finally found everything I was looking for in a woman, and here I lie, months away from our wedding as you are facing the future alone. You shouldn't have to be alone for long. You are the perfect woman; the best friend, the most beautiful, the smartest and most caring woman I met in the world, just like my mother in so many ways.

We had so much fun together. I loved the mornings we had over at your house. I really did want you to stay at my house, and it was really hard to see you leave a couple nights in particular. But I didn't want to offend Mrs. Jones, having you spend the night and me being single. Still, you understood.

Proposing to you was an unforgettable moment in my life, and I know it was in your life, too. I remember when we looked at rings, and while you knew I had money, you wanted something modest. You had picked out three different designs that you liked, and none was excessive. So I called the woman at the jewelry store the next day. I had her merge the three rings into one, taking the special characteristics you liked in each ring, and putting together one that captured the beauty of all of them. Yes, maybe it was a little bit gaudy. But I knew I had to have the absolute perfect ring for the absolute perfect woman.

I picked you up for work the day I got it. It had snowed, and it was pretty brisk out. I had it all planned out: A big dinner over in the town where you lived. Then, we would go for a walk, and I would ask you to spend the rest of our lives together.

Remember that night? Oh, it was so crazy! We went to all three restaurants over there, and they had all closed early because of the storm. It kept snowing and snowing, and we had to put my Explorer in four-wheel drive just to get to your house. We didn't have the romantic dinner I planned, and the three dozen roses I bought for you started to freeze.

But we got to your house, and your face lit up when you turned around at the steps to your door, and saw the roses sticking out as I tried unsuccessfully to hold them behind my back.

"Hey, what have you got there?" you asked with a big smile.

“Oh, just a couple of flowers,” I said, as I pulled them out for you to see.

“A couple of flowers!” you said as your face lit up. “What did you do, buy every rose in the store?”

“Not every single one,” I answered. “But they did mention something about being able to close early today!”

As you leaned forward to kiss me, I could see our collective breath in the cold. Your lips were still so very tender and warm.

We went into the house and it was about 7:30 p.m. Since neither of us had eaten since lunch, we were both starving! We looked around your kitchen, and ended up settling on salads and turkey sandwiches. Boy, can I treat a lady to dinner, or what!

We put “Love Story,” our favorite movie, in the VCR. I got a fire going, and we snuggled in front of it as we relaxed and looked into each other’s eyes.

“You like the flowers?” I asked.

“I love them,” you answered, giving me another kiss.

“They won’t last long,” I said. “I saw when you put them into the vase that they were stiff from the cold.”

“They will last forever,” you said.

“Forever?” I asked. “Well, maybe forever if you freeze them!”

“No, silly,” you said. “I’ve saved every flower you have ever given me. I press them and keep them in books to preserve them forever.”

You got a dictionary and showed me how you did it. The petals still smelled good. Anything that was ever around you, even for a moment, captured your essence and smelled heavenly to me.

“Well,” I said. “I’m glad you like the flowers. But I also have something else for you.”

“What?” you asked. “What else could you possibly have for me?”

I reached into my pocket, but pulled out nothing but some change and a wrinkled dollar bill.

“Oh, Bill,” you said with a grin, “you shouldn’t have.”

“No, not that,” I laughed. “I didn’t get you a buck forty five.”

I got up and went to my jacket. In the pocket was the ring.

“Would you like some of that champagne we bought when we had dinner together the other night?” I asked.

“That would be fabulous,” you answered. “It’s still unopened. Remember, we got so caught up in each other, we never did open it.”

“That’s right,” I answered. “Why would I need champagne when I have you?”

I pulled out the champagne glasses in the cabinet, and put your ring in your glass before I filled it. Then, I carried the two glasses into the living room and we sat by the fire.

The wind was whistling against the windows.

“Boy, I sure am glad we’re in here and not outside tonight,” I said. “I had actually planned to go for a walk tonight.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” you said. “Because then you would have been my little Bill frozen on a stick!”

We drank the champagne and toasted our relationship.

“To the woman of my dreams,” I said.

“To my knight in shining armor,” you said.

We toasted to our life together and took a sip.

“Oh, what was the other surprise?” you asked.

“Let’s finish our champagne, and then talk about it,” I said.

“I can deal with that, as long as I’m with you,” you said.

As you went to put your succulent lips on the glass for a drink, it finally caught your eye.

“What...is...” you looked stunned.

“Bill,” you said as you fished the ring out. “Oh, my God, Bill! Bill! Bill! This is...I mean, I think it is...Bill!”

I stood you up and went down to my knee, holding your left hand.

“Janet,” I said. “I love you more than I ever imagined I could love any one in this world. Everyone thinks I have it all together in my life, and now I do with you. I want you for the rest of my life, and I want you to be happy. I want to watch you grow and be part of that happiness. I will do everything within my power to be the best husband in the world. That is, if you will marry me, and be my wife.”

“Oh, Bill!” you said. I slid the ring onto your finger, and just as I had hoped, it fit perfectly, just like we do with each other.

“Honey,” I said after another kiss. “Will you be my wife?”

“I would love to be your wife,” you said as you began to cry. We both cried and found sustenance in the clench of a long hug. I could taste the salt in your tears as we kissed.

“Look at me,” you said. “I’m becoming a mess.”

“If this is what a mess is,” I said, “then I’ll be happy in a mess.”

We held each other feeling we would be together for eternity.

“The ring, it’s so beautiful, but it’s not one of the rings we saw,” you said, studying it. “It’s like it’s all three rings, with the diamond in the middle, the two on the sides and the emeralds in a circle.”

“I knew you liked all three rings” I said. “But you deserve the best. So, to get the best, I had them put all three rings together.”

“Oh Bill,” you said, tears still flowing. “It is the best. It must have cost a fortune.”

“It was worth every cent,” I said. “For you, it was a bargain.”

We kissed again, and fell to the floor. You unbuttoned my shirt, and we laid down in front of the fire, laying on the quilt and covered ourselves with blankets of kisses.

We kissed and kissed, and I watched your head as you kissed my chest. I always wondered over the years why I kept working out at the YMCA and running at home on my treadmill. I knew I did it to stay healthy and in shape, but I never thought someone else would enjoy it.

“I want this hard chest against my breasts,” you said.

I helped you take off your sweater, and felt your hard nipples. When I went to touch you, I could feel the wetness in your little panties.

Usually, you guided me inside you with your hand when we made love, since I was so new to it. But this time, I needed no direction. As we made love, I watched as tears continued to come out of your beautiful big blue-green eyes. I pushed your black hair to the side, and kissed you until your pinkish lipstick was nowhere to be found.

I was overcome by emotion, and I began to cry too. Neither one of us had gotten more than a swallow of champagne, yet we were both feeling bubbly. The world was –

well, the world was the world, out there somewhere. My world was inside you. I could feel your satisfaction as I came at the same time.

As the tears dried and we sat naked in front of the fire, I ran my finger down the soft skin on your high cheekbone. Your little jockey panties were on the floor near your black bra. We never did get back to the champagne, because we made love again and again. When we finally went to your bedroom that night, it was long past 1 a.m. We were talking about which house we should live in when we were married. We thought we'd probably live in my house – make that “our” house.

But that day would never come. My, god, I can't believe we made love just a week ago and look what has happened now.

I can see the tears on your face as you sit there now, and it's breaking my heart. You might have more tears when you get home. Remember how you said you used to love the poems I wrote you? I worried when I wrote the first one, that you'd think I was silly or just a sappy fool. As it turned out, you would gush over the feelings I put into words in those poems. You have the final one in your mailbox today. I wrote it before I came down to the little white church to shovel snow. Since it was Sunday, I left it in my mailbox. So you will get it today.

*I woke up last night, and you were in my arms.*

*I reached out to touch you, but all I found was my clock and alarm.*

*In the dream you were smiling, as you always seem to do.*

*The nights and the days, now mean so much more that I have you.*

*All the times that I worried that I'd never find the one meant for me,*

*now it has all fallen into place, and I know I'm so very lucky to have thee.*

*For it is your smile and your walk, everything from your head to your toes,*

*that makes me want to hug you forever, caught in passion's greatest throes.*

*Sometimes I miss you so much, that I feel in my stomach a deep pain.*

*Then you'll call or stop by to check on me, and I'm back on love's runaway train.*

*It started with a picnic, over in Wyoming at Fort Laramie's historic bridge.*

*I read to you from a novel, about a lover stranded on a ridge.*

*He called out for his love, knowing she had fallen just before.*

*Life didn't seem worth living for him at that point, and he was ready to join her at death's door.*

*Then he realized that if she was still there, she'd be pulling back from the brink, to savor memories and moments, in the glass of life from which we all drink.*

*The king said to love me tender, and in addition, to love me true.*

*Had the king known Janet Lynden, he'd have found a way to continue too.*

*Life is really just a puzzle, and we all keep up the quest to put together the pieces.*

*My puzzle wasn't complete, I had just survived all of its teases.*

*Then you walked into my world, and the picture started to become clear.*

*Like when you back away from the puzzle, you see the picture of your only dear.*

*I live for the summer, for it was then we'd go to the river and have long talks.*

*We'd often have lunch and share a moment - oh my, gosh, how I love to hear you talk.*

*Your words so deep, they all come straight from the heart.*

*I file them in my memory, they become me, which is why of me you are such a part.*

*There were times when I really did question, if I'd be alone forever in this life.*

*Yet I never gave up because in my mother and my father, I saw for every man there, was a wife.*

*As I moved my belongings back into town, when I first decided to return,*

*there was still an aching in my heart, so much love and nowhere to let it burn.*

*As it flickered to a mere spark, I found the love at what could have been a final turn,*

*because I was ready to give up, to just accept that in my couple there would be just one.*

*Then we started dating and spending time together, and learning to love was nothing but fun.*

*The future is so bright, and my love is shining bright for the first time.*

*Once headed for love's dumpster, my passion, because of you, turned on a dime.*

*It left a nickel's change, that's how hard I fell for you.*

*You are the first I made love to, and now I know, in love, what to do.*

*We'll have a half century, or longer, together, because I know what I've found.*

*Now that you've said you'll marry me, we'll head into the future, together bound.*

*I'm heading to the church today, because there's snow upon the stairs.*

*I worry about the children and the seniors, because not all in their life is always fair.  
But when I'm through, I will be calling on you, to have an evening with just us.  
You'll look beautiful and your smile will warm my cold body, as we once again board  
love's bus.  
We'll have a quiet dinner, and make our future plans.  
Then we'll sit in front of the fire and whisper sweet nothings, as we sit close and hold  
hands.  
I feel like the luckiest man in the world, because I have in you better than I deserve.  
Should we hit life's rocky bumps, we'll stay together as we miss them and swerve.  
The future is just beginning, yet I feel like a school boy thinking of you and together,  
do.  
The woman of my dreams, the one I will love to the end of time – Janet - you.  
I love you gobs and gobs!  
Bill*

I had a lump in my throat when I wrote that, Honey. You wouldn't believe the emotional high I get just when I think about you and our life together, not to mention what I feel when I actually see you, hug you and hold you!

Now, I guess we both have to deal with the reality that I am no longer here, and you will have to pick up the pieces and continue to move forward. I have no doubt that you will - in fact, I know you will. Because that's the kind of person you are.

I can see into the future as I lie here. The picture is clearing, and I can see you. But you are not alone. You must be holding a child from school. Wait a minute! You're holding a baby...our baby!

Good Lord, Janet, you are pregnant! Oh my God! We have a beautiful baby boy. What I wouldn't give to see my child, and hold him. Goodness, how will you manage alone? I sure am glad I went to my attorney.

Because if there is any sort of silver lining to be mined here, it is this: I went to my family's attorney two weeks ago, and put everything in your name. It sounded silly at the time, and I almost canceled the appointment, because I thought, "Why do it now? What could ever happen to me?"

Well, here I lie, with the answer.

But you will be taken care of, at least financially. I had more money than anyone, even you, ever knew. My parents had a \$1 million insurance policy, which will now roll over to you and our son. I also had \$2 million dollars invested or in the bank. I bought two \$750,000 life insurance policies about six months ago. Of course, those will also be paid to you, probably within the next few weeks. Carolyn Sampson will walk you through the portfolio, the 401K plan and all the money in savings. Also, the house and land is paid for, and that's all yours, too.

I see you crying again when you learn of all this – I guess the total is about \$4.6 million that you will get, in all. Nothing will bring me back, obviously, but at least you won't ever have to worry about money.

It appears you are going to leave teaching to be home with our baby. I am so proud of you for making that choice - it's obviously what you wanted to do. If I were still alive, I'd stay home with you and the baby all day, every day!

You named him William Thayer III. And he will be playing with Jack's baby, who is also named William. I will watch from above as our child grows up with his great Mom. You decide to go back to school to earn your doctorate, and teach at my alma mater, State College. I'm so proud of you, honey, and you still get to spend plenty of time with William.

But I don't see where you are alone forever. Indeed, you meet a man who is in administration at State College. He is wonderful to you and William. And he has a child of his own, a little girl, about two years younger than William. You marry him in five years. He is a widower – his wife died giving birth to their daughter. I have to admit that it hurts to see you as his wife. However, you are both so happy, and he is a perfect father to William.

Since William is 5 years old when you marry, your husband is able to teach him how to hit a baseball, and he even coaches William in little league! Oh, wait until you see the smile on William's face when you and your husband take the kids to the zoo for the first time.

You will be just fine, Janet. I am so proud of the strength and courage you show. You live your life with the dignity and compassion that first drew me to you. As a mother and

wife, you are truly a dream. I am so proud, and remember, I'm never more than just a breath away.

### **Chapter 24: The Final Verse**

I'm at Heaven's Gate, and they're showing me how things are going to unfold. Ugh! They can't get me in the ground for two months! I'll smell pretty fermented when they drop me six feet deep. Geez, I hope they keep the vandals - and vultures, for that matter - away from the mortuary's freezer until then.

Wow, I hope Grandma Jones gets rid of that gas; even her face looks pained.

This little town nestled in the sweeping valley of prairie along the North Platte River has a lot of hard times still in front of it. With the flood comes both destruction and construction. In other words, life is going to continue as it has for two centuries. The bad times won't be as bad as they seem, but the peaks will be a pleasant surprise at each and every turn.

There will come a day when computers replace a lot of the workers at the sugar factory. But Carla Newman is among those preaching and practicing that folks need to continue to change with the times. She's even set up a computer/technology class in town via satellite from State College. I see railroaders and all other walks of life in the classroom at the high school.

Change is coming for this town. Not the dynamic sort of change that the bigger cities must deal with, but change nonetheless. There's still the coffee shop gossip to contend with, but all in all, the work ethic and family values of these people will continue to be the cornerstones of this community. A lot of the talented, young people will continue to move on in search of bigger and brighter things. The average age of our population will continue to grow, as will the obituary section in the local weekly as they die off. Recruiting talented young people will continue to be one of the biggest challenges this town faces - be it for jobs at the bank, sugar factory or in the schools. That mountain will neither be fully climbed nor conquered, although because of the backbone of these people, the achievement will lay in the continuing efforts to keep the town from becoming a bedroom community.

That said, I have to admit that I will miss most everyone in this church, to varying degrees and for different reasons. I will miss Cardell and Les because I wish I could have influenced more change and positive direction in their lives. I will forever remember my friends' spirits and hold the love of my life, Janet, close to my soul.

There they go, the last one's gone, and this place is colder inside than it probably is outside. I wish they'd cover me up, because they're not going to be able to put me in the ground until it thaws a bit.

Look, it's time for me to go, too. The steps are going up, so I guess that's a good sign.

Love those who I loved, and those who I did not. Become more patient and compassionate. Make everyone's life a little better whenever possible - after all - we're in this together.

They all came to the little white church today.

They stayed for eternity, or maybe just for a moment.

None of them know the difference.

## **Short stories**

**Over the edge**

**The Night Mom's Bible Study saw Jesus**

**Why Willie had to Die**

**The Night Stocker**

**Mom Shot the Mistress**

**Bagging the Bag Boy**

**The Muse**

**Over the Edge**

"Dwinky-winky?" he pleaded.

I was feeding him lunch, and I thought about it. Why couldn't I give him a sip since he was eating so well?

After wiping his chin, I went into the kitchen to get his drinky-winky. I stopped to catch my breath, leaning back against the sink. I ran my hand around the clean, white porcelain. It was a year ago today I had it installed.

And, the one-year anniversary of my first date with Martin.

I was watching TV, and some commentator was telling me about how much the world could change in one year. That a dramatic event could change life as you knew it, forever.

Now, I know that to be true.

I was excitedly anxious the night Martin came over to take me out to dinner for our first date. I showed him the sink that had been installed only hours earlier. He nodded, not really interested, compared to his interest in me, which I thought was off the measuring meter. He eyed me up and down. I had chosen a body-hugging sundress, probably not the most conservative outfit for a late summertime date, especially a first date.

But I looked good, and I knew it. And I knew Martin liked it. Really, I had wanted to go out with Martin for a long time. I was breaking a cardinal rule to go out with him: He had dated a friend of mine – that’s how we met. But I didn’t steal him from her or anything. In fact, they hadn’t been going out for maybe two months when I ran into him at a convenience store. He was sweaty, the veins on his muscles bulging as he put the gas pump back in its rack. I figured I’d fill my car, pick up something cheap but tasty to reheat inside the convenience store, and then rush home to catch *Ally McBeal* before falling deep into the Catherine Coulter romance novel I picked up the day before.

As I pulled in, I took notice of Martin, not recognizing him at first. I was wearing a black, micro-mini skirt, and I probably showed a bit too much of myself getting out of my car. He smiled at me, and sort of did a double take.

“Kath’s friend, right?” he asked. I stopped and looked again. The last time I had seen him was at a party. He was in a double-breasted, Olive green suit, with matching suspenders – I really took notice of him when he took his jacket off. Then Kath introduced us. She had been across the room talking with the girls.

This Martin was just as sexy. He was a bit abrasive “too strong of a personality,” but I remember Kath said he wasn’t controlling or anything. He walked toward me as I took the gas cap off.

“I think I’m probably better dressed for this,” he said, reaching for the pump, “Mind?”

“No, uh, not at all,” I said, trying not to look at his round little bottom in his Lycra shorts.

“Martin, right?” I asked.

“Yes, the party last year,” he said. “I was seeing your friend, Kath.”

Kath and I hadn’t stayed in touch much. I had seen her once with the girls at a Friday night bull session at a bar a month or so earlier. She had sworn off men. The problem with Martin was that she really liked him, but she was offended that he thought she wasn’t ambitious enough. He didn’t respect the fact that her inheritance had given her a cushy life. He wasn’t “from money,” she told me, and he thought she should go back to school, finish her education and then go to the “real working world” before “semi-retiring,” which she had done four years earlier, dropping out of college at age 22 when she apparently inherited a windfall.

I watched Martin as he put the nozzle in. She gave up this guy, I thought, because he pushed her to better herself? His back was flexing and his little tank-top was no match for his widening back muscles.

“Cash or credit?” he asked me. “And ‘pay here or inside’?”

“Oh, yes, well, cash and inside,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Cassie,” he said. “You’re Cassie.”

I sort of giggled and nodded. I knew this was one of my semi-girlfriend’s boyfriends – she was actually close to a mutual friend of ours, Jenny, which is how I met Kath – and so I shouldn’t be looking at her ex-boyfriend all starry eyed. We girls have to stick together. And that was my intention, until...

“Would you like to get a bite to eat sometime?” he asked. He pointed toward the stoplight at the busy intersection a block away. “New Italian place down there. Fettuccine to die for, or so I’m told.”

I pumped my gas, chose not to pick up a burrito – I saw Martin waiting for me out front and it wouldn't make me seem to sophisticated if I came out with convenience store cuisine after accepting an invite to a chic Italian place – and went back out front.

“Friday?” he asked.

“Friday? Great,” I said. He pulled out his cell phone.

“Could I get your number?” he asked. I gave him my number and he programmed it into his phone. I wondered if that was the equivalent of a “little black book” and thought about what number I was...10? 25? 150?

“Give me a sec,” he said. “I just got this thing today. After my mother, you're the second number I'm putting in it.”

“Sure,” I said. That was either the most sentimental thought I could've hoped for, or the worst line ever. I chose to believe the former, at least for now.

I thanked him for pumping the gas, and he smiled. He called me the following night, and we set up our “date” for Friday night. He showed up looking very fine, a Calloway golf shirt that was tight across his defined chest. He was wearing Dockers with a belt, showing off a trim waist. Why did Kath give this guy up again?

We hit it off Friday night, and went to a movie on Saturday night. The following Tuesday we met for lunch. He worked in an insurance office, and apparently did pretty well judging by the car he drove. He did live in a smallish apartment, but I figured insurance was more stable even than a stock broker or heaven forbid a dot.com boy, with the economy turning downward so suddenly.

I made him dinner at my townhouse that weekend. I was a bit disappointed, but pleasantly surprised when he didn't put the moves on me. I had a couple of glasses of wine, though he turned the offer for wine down.

“My parents had alcohol problems – so I don't touch the stuff,” he said. We did though have a hot, sensual make-out session on my couch, and he sat with his arm around me and my head on his chest the rest of the evening while we watched “Sleepless in Seattle” on cable. I ran my hand across his chest, and could feel his stomach muscles under his shirt. He played with my hair on the back of my neck, giving me goose bumps.

We continued to see each other once or twice for lunch during the week and then at least one night, sometimes two, on the weekend, for the following two months. Finally,

after our 10-week anniversary dinner at Barracone's Italian, we came back to my place. The kissing was more passionate. He was a very physical man, and I was turned on by that. I had to take off my own shirt and bra when I could tell he wouldn't. But as soon as I did, he took off his shirt, and I knew I was ready to make love to him, even though neither one of us was probably sure that we loved each other.

He grazed my breasts with his fingers and I pulled him close, probably a little too firmly. He kissed my breasts and got a little too rough. I pulled back.

"A little more gently," I whispered. He was gentler for a minute, and got worked up again. I pulled back, and again he calmed down. He made the next move, undoing my pants. When he ran two fingers up and down my clit, I was ready to scream with pleasure. But when he put a finger inside me, it was again a little too hard.

"Hey," I said. "Come on, not so rough."

He apologized and sat up.

"I've only been with one woman before you, and only a couple of times," he said, looking down as if in shame.

"Kath, right?" I asked.

"No, actually," he said. "We never had sex. It was back in high school. I was, you know, just learning. I wasn't any good at it. Actually, you probably think I'm still no good at it now."

"Not at all," I said. "Just go easy."

But by then the moment was lost. Kissing was still intimate, and I did that as I laid my bare chest against his. We really did fit together perfectly, I could tell.

That night ended with a big wet spot in my panties, and I could see his erection hadn't lost any steam when he headed to the front door. As I kissed him good-bye, I ran my hand along his cock and told him, "Next time we'll take care of that."

He just smiled, and kissed me goodnight.

We had another romantic week. He sent me flowers at work Tuesday, and asked me to lunch Thursday. His work had been hectic the first few days of the week because there was a hailstorm on Sunday, "An insurance guy's worst nightmare," he said.

But the flowers were sweet.

"I can do better for you," he wrote. "I have a warm spot in my heart. Martin."

That gave me a warm spot. We went out Thursday, and then Saturday night we went to the movies. When we got home, I was ready for Martin. We got started, and after having to request he again “go a bit easier,” we talked about birth control. He hadn’t brought condoms, and I wasn’t on the pill.

“But I’m all right,” I said, knowing I had just finished my period the day before. “I won’t ovulate for another 10 days to two weeks.”

He was rough, but it sort of turned me on as much as it turned me off – the first time at least. He was forceful kissing my breasts, so much so that I had to pull his head away at some point.

We kissed and he held me gently after he climaxed. When I told him I missed my orgasm, he resolved to do it again that night, “for you,” he said. He got out of bed to get us a glass of water to share, and I watched the muscles in his calves and hamstrings as he walked out my darkened room to the bright lights in the hallway and kitchen.

When he came back, we downed the glass of water, and started kissing again. I gently aroused him with my mouth, and he got on top of me. But his aggression was a turn off, because I was already a little tender down there – Martin was very large between the legs.

“Here, let me get on top” I said.

“Sure, yeah, sorry if I’m still botching it,” he said.

“No, well, yes, it does hurt when you get wound up,” I said. As I straddled him, I looked down at my breast. I turned so the light would hit it and he could see the darkened spot.

“See,” I said.

“I did that?” he asked. “I’m so sorry.”

He touched me softly after seeing the bruise, and I got off before he did. It was breathtaking until right before he came – he was grabbing my butt very firmly, but to the point that it was hurting when he came. But again we cuddled closely and just talked. How many guys hold you and talk to you for two hours afterward?

I wasn’t able to meet him for lunch the following week. I had a project due at work. Our marketing firm just received a new account, and I was in charge of the presentation. If things went well, I knew I was looking at another \$20,000 or so a year, meaning I could buy my own house if I wanted to – and I did want that.

Martin and I went to the Italian place. He was wearing his suit from work – the one I had met him in. We planned to go to his gym the following morning, and he'd take me through a workout as my "personal trainer." I was in the best shape of my life since college, running at night and occasionally walking with girls from work on our lunch hours, but I did want to add some strength training.

After dinner, we went back to my place. I had a glass of wine as we sat and talked. Then I had an intoxicating idea: Maybe some wine would loosen him a little, at least relax him so he'd be in a gentler frame of mind if the evening was headed for sex, which I thought – and hoped – it would.

"I don't know," he said. "My parents..."

"I understand," I said, continuing to pour him a glass. "But I think it might help you relax a little, that way...maybe when we get in bed, you won't be so, so..."

"So have a glass of wine for you?" he asked smiling. "I guess I could do that."

He sipped his wine – I had chosen red – and it went down smoothly. So smoothly that he requested another. He was a little silly, and it was quite endearing, to be honest. He started kissing my ears, something he hadn't done before. He laid down in bed and let me undress him. When he reached for my breasts I sort of flinched, but he only caressed them lightly with his fingertips.

It was the best sex I'd ever had, and, he told me, the best he'd ever had as well. There wasn't going to be an encore performance, though. He fell asleep until 3 a.m., though he did hold me in his arms the entire time. I shifted around, feeling his thighs and his arms – even asleep and limp, the leanness of his body was staggering.

We did the gym thing the next day. I knew I was going to be sore for a day or two, over doing it, but I wanted Martin to see how fit I was. We made love again gently that night. He was up to three glasses of wine, though, so I insisted he either let me drive him home – I had only one glass – or he stay over. He chose to stay.

The next three weeks were like a honeymoon. He came over several times on weeknights. I introduced him to white wine on a Wednesday. That weekend, he went to the fridge for the wine, and I felt a little funny. He was drinking more than ever.

"Sure we need that?" I asked.

“Problem?” he asked. He moved toward me, nipped my neck, put his hand in the back of my pants, inside my thong, touching my bottom...

“No, no, it’s fine, sure, yes, I’ll have a small glass, too,” I said.

And so we had a few glasses of wine, and a small dinner. That weekend, he showed up having already imbibed substantially.

“Flurst time wiss guys out club from offish,” he said. I overlooked his drunken state. He slurred poetry in my ears, and I was like putty - we made love. When I got up for our post-sex glass of water, I noticed I forgot to flip the calendar to the correct month. I did, and was frantic when I realizes I was either ovulating, or on the verge. I felt a chill up and down my spine, but it faded when I slipped back into bed.

Two weeks later, I stopped for female hygiene supplies. I was only two days late. I wasn’t worried. Well, concerned, yes, but not worried. A week later, I was out of my head scared. Martin came over for dinner – we had gone three weeks without seeing each other during the week, he was busy at work, he said, but didn’t give a reason – and we ended up in bed. The sex was really rough almost violent that night, so much that I didn’t feel close to him.

“How about a glass of wine?” he asked. “We could do it again, the way you like it.”

We didn’t. But we talked about me being 17 days late for my period.

“If you’re pregnant,” he said, “I will marry you, I suppose.”

Suppose? Our relationship was so much deeper now. He confided to me that he hadn’t been especially busy at work. He had been drinking in the evenings at home, and as per my wishes, hadn’t driven, screening out my calls on his machine. He hadn’t as per my wishes, been completely honest. But who was I to call him on the carpet for that? After all, I had turned this man into an alcoholic. He came by, relatively sober, Friday night, and said he said that he wanted to make an “honest woman” of me, and I wanted to make a sober man of him. I owed him that. I owed me that. I would end up owing someone else that, too, but at that point I still had no idea.

He had a glass of wine. I knew I couldn’t resist him after a couple of glasses of wine. He became charming, caring and gentle, the Martin I truly cared about. He was still working out at the gym, for the most part, though he admitted to a glass of wine or a couple of beers every night after the gym to “take the edge off.”

“Besides,” he said, “if I have four or five beers, I forget to eat dinner. I’ll bet I’ve dropped five pounds of fat.”

He didn’t have five pounds of fat to drop, but I didn’t make an issue of it. Once again he told me he’d marry me, “if you still feel like having the child, and all that,” and suddenly I realized I didn’t want to be with this man. Not for forever. Not even tonight. He got up, and didn’t return with water as per our usual ritual. Instead, I got up to see him halfway through a bottle of white wine – drinking from the bottle! – sitting on the couch watching country music on TV.

“We have to get this under control,” I said.

“I’ve always liked country,” he said.

“Not that,” I said, grabbing the bottle. “This.”

He grabbed it from me, far too forcefully. He drained the bottle. So in addition to whatever he guzzled that day and evening, he now was under the influence of a full bottle of wine.

“Let’s go to bed,” he whispered moistly in my ear.

“No way,” I said, pushing him back. He fell onto the couch, sliding onto the floor. He was naked, and hit his elbow on the wine bottle.

“Damn this thing!” he said, and heaved the bottle toward the kitchen, where it shattered on my floor.

“Out!” I yelled. “Get out of my house!”

He headed for the stairs, falling at the base, standing and righting himself on the rails on the way to my bedroom. He came down dressed, his shirt inside out, his fly open, socks in his hands but shoes on his feet.

“Couldn’t get these damn things on,” he laughed, holding the socks. I held the door for him. Then I realized I was making a mistake.

“You can’t drive like this,” I said. “No way. Get back in here, now. You can sleep it off.”

“Too-da-loo,” he said. I was in panties and a T-shirt, nothing else, and I couldn’t exactly go running after him.

If only I had.

I heard his car back out and looked out the window. He had backed over the curb onto the sidewalk that led up my walk to my door.

“Stop, Martin!” I demanded in my loudest voice. “Come back in here!”

The engine gunned, and the scrape of metal on concrete drew the attention of neighbors as a few porch lights came on. The tires hit the asphalt and he peeled out, swerving just in time, narrowly missing the two cars that had been parked next to his car.

I started calling his machine at home the moment after realizing his cell was turned off – I left messages there as well.

“Just call me, please, and let me know you’ve made it home all right,” I said. I called and left variations of the same message four more times. At 3 a.m., I gave up, and fell into bed. I had cramps in my stomach – thank God, my period was starting – and slept.

At 4:30 a.m., I suddenly awakened and had to go to the bathroom. No blood. No spotting. False alarm period. Wishful thinking, probably.

I headed back to bed, and I heard a thump out front. It was the newspaper. I turned toward the stairs, and my phone rang.

“Hi there?” the voice asked. “Is this the Langdon’s?”

“Yes, this is Cassie,” I said.

“This is Bill, Bill Lambright,” the voice said. Bill worked with Martin. I had seen him once, maybe twice, when we were out, once for an office party where Martin was named top producer for the quarter, the second time in the past year he had done that well.

“What’s going on Bill?” I asked.

“It’s Martin,” he said.

I knew what he was going to say before he uttered another word. Martin was dead, driving drunk. I was 100 percent sure he was at the police station.

“Martin has been involved in a very, very serious accident – I’m at Regional Medical Center now,” Bill said. “I thought you might want to come down. He...”

“Is he alive?” I asked.

“Yes, yes he is alive,” he said. “But barely. The injuries...well, I couldn’t list them all for you right now if I had a list in front of me. His neck, well, it appears it is broken. But he’s probably going to make it. You should also know the police are here.”

“The police?”

“Yes, he hit a minivan, a family coming back from vacation,” he said. “They’re all dead – well, both parents and one of the three kids were killed, the other two kids, well, one is bad, in critical care, and the other, a little one in a car seat, is in surgery, so, frankly, I don’t know the status...anyway...”

“I’ll be down...soon,” I said, and hung up. I hadn’t drunk, since I suspected I was pregnant. So I could drive. But my hands were shaking so badly I could barely put on my clothes. I looked in the kitchen, and could see shiny shards of glass that I missed when picking up the bottle he broke before I headed to bed – I figured as much and planned to vacuum the kitchen in the morning.

Instead, I headed to my car to start picking up the pieces of my life, and probably Martin’s.

The man who less than 12 hours earlier was slipping naked onto my floor was wrapped in bandages when I got to the hospital, a tube into his mouth, hooked to a ventilator. The doctor told me that they would have to stabilize him before surgery.

“Was he with you before he got on the road?” a policeman asked before introducing himself.

“Yes, well, I begged him not to drive,” I said. “My neighbors, they heard me yelling at him. If only I could’ve gotten the keys.”

“If only,” the policeman said furiously. He glanced toward his partner. “How many times have we heard that?”

The partner just shook his head in disgust.

“Martin is going to be charged, charged out the ass,” the cop said. “Three are dead, another child is holding on by a thread, but the youngest child, it looks like she is going to make it.”

I gasped. Life lost all around me. Except inside me, where a life was beginning. A life started by Martin, who had taken so many lives tonight, and was clinging to his own life only by the way of a breathing tube.

Shaking and sobbing, I couldn’t gather my thoughts. I couldn’t believe I was here. Couldn’t believe Martin was here. Couldn’t believe three members of a family were no longer here. Couldn’t believe two kids were fighting to live while their parents and another sibling were already without life.

Why, why, why? How?

I went down to a row of seats outside the hospital cafeteria. When the chair caught my weight, the air went out of it, making a quick hissing sound. My air was gone. I started gasping for breath, and a woman next to me asked me if I was hyperventilating. I tried to remember particular events from the past few months. What I could remember was in bits and pieces, at best.

“No, no,” I choked out.

I closed my eyes and leaned back. I hoped this wasn't happening. Maybe I was dreaming.

Not even my worst nightmare could drag my soul this deep into the dregs of moral hell.

Martin had driven drunk and killed three people, possibly killing or maiming two more. But he was drunk because of me. He had sworn off alcohol again and again and again – his whole life. And then I came into the picture.

All of these lives changed because of me.

He might've been the bullet, but I was the one who pulled the trigger. Who held the weapon? Who aimed the weapon? My head was spinning faster and my world was turning upside down. I had to get out of the hospital. I couldn't face the relatives of this family. Surely parents – who were also grandparents – were on the way. Maybe brothers too, who were also uncles and sisters who were aunts and maybe even cousins. A whole family's life crashed, wrecked in seconds – or taken away in the cases of those killed – because of my need, my want, for sexual gratification.

I left the hospital. One of the police officers who had cornered me on the way in stopped me on the way out.

“We need some contact information,” he said. “It sounds like you tried to stop him from leaving – we have an officer on the scene who talked to a neighbor who heard you screaming for him to stop and not drive away. But you should've tried harder. You should have taken his keys. Christ, you should have done whatever it took to stop him.”

Stop him? I started him down this path, I thought. But I didn't say anything. I just gave him my phone number, address and work number.

I barely remembered driving home. I intentionally avoided the highway Martin had been on where the accident happened. The accident – what a joke! I drove down a road I'd never been down before – never even known existed – but there it was that night, a safe back way. How could I never have realized it was there before?

There was nothing accidental about what had happened that night. I turned a man into a lethal weapon, and then unleashed him on society when I didn't want him around anymore.

When I got home, I took inventory of my medicine cabinet. How many painkillers did I have left from my broken ribs the year before? How many aspirin would it take to end it all? Could you even kill yourself with aspirin?

But I couldn't kill the baby. There had been enough killing that night, a bunch of it that I would have to answer to someday, somewhere. Maybe not on this earth, but I had no doubt that my accountability and debt had a due date.

I cried like I had only cried one other time: When I was 18, a freshman in college, and my mother and stepfather were killed – by a drunk driver. I vowed that night to never drive drunk. My father died when I was a little girl. Since I was only 2 at the time, I didn't have any memories of him. My stepfather, who my mother married when I was 6, helped raise me.

At least I had 18 years with my mother, and a dozen with my stepfather. The kids, a brother and sister were in the hospital without their parents or sister. In time, they'd heal – at least from the physical injuries. I was told they were going to live with their grandparents, who would have to answer questions about their parents and sister. Eventually, both children would make full recoveries from their injuries.

Not Martin. He was paralyzed from the neck down. His speech was slurred as though he was in a permanent state of drunkenness. His mother came the day after the injury, flying in from Virginia. His father – they were divorced – would come as soon as possible from his job working for an oil company overseas. Since I was “just the girlfriend,” as the police officer had put it, I wouldn't receive regular updates as his family would, but I was free to visit the hospital whenever I wanted. I never went again.

His mother put him in an assisted care facility near her home in Virginia. He had more insurance than anyone would likely ever need – I suppose a byproduct of working

in that industry – so I was thankful his living arrangements wouldn't break his mother. I was told when I flew to Virginia 18 months after the accident that Martin “has the mental capacity of a 6 year old, and we don't see it getting any better,” a nurse said. I had to get permission from his mother to see Martin. She grudgingly gave it, holding me responsible for what happened to him based on the sketchy but partially damning information the police gave her.

“He never drank,” she told me on the phone. “I know it was you. I just know it. I don't know how you can live with yourself!”

But Martin was short on visitors, so she told me I could see him.

“Come at noon – I see him each morning until about 9, and then I go by after work around 6:30 or so in the evening,” she said. “I don't really see the point in you seeing him. But the nurses said anything from his past could help his recovery. So...”

So I flew cross country with our nine-month-old son. Martin was gaunt, bones and flesh.. His eyes were lost in deep, black circles, his lips curled at an odd angle as though he was sucking on a lemon.

His face rocked back and forth when he saw me.

“Hiiiiiiiiiii,” he slurred, drool pooling and then running down his chin.

“You can help feed him if you'd like,” an older nurse told me. “Just keep your baby a safe distance. He won't lunge or anything. But if he shifts, things, well, sometimes they fall or what have you.”

I left the baby in his car seat. Martin looked down at him.

“Babeeeee!” he said. “My babeee?”

My baby? What did he mean? He started puckering his lips and making kissing sounds.

“Loooooove babeeee,” he droned.

My son had kept me going the past 18 months. I was working on some free-lance marketing at home – thank goodness for the easy cash that came with the dot.com boom – before my son was born, and went back to work part-time afterward, just to keep medical benefits.

I fed Martin some slop that smelled like a vegetable-meat mix that had been pureed soup thin.

“He’s put on a lot of weight the past couple of months,” the nurse said, and I shuddered to think what he must’ve looked like even lighter. He couldn’t have been more than 100 pounds that day.

He finished almost all of his food.

“Dwinky-winky?” he pleaded.

I wish I had something to numb his pain. I scolded myself for the thought, and reached down for a diluted juice that he could drink through a straw. His nurse came over and complemented him, and me, on getting lunch in him.

“It’s one of the hardest things each day,” his nurse said. “I don’t mind changing him several times a day, but feeding him. Well, it can be a real grind.”

I picked up the safety seat I had brought our son in. He was asleep.

“Babeeee, ni-night-tee-night,” Martin cooed.

My son never woke up, never made eye contact – never saw his father. Maybe it was better that way. I had some pictures at home of Martin that I planned to show the little guy some day. But what would I tell him about his father? How would I explain what had happened?

I realized when I arrived home on the red-eye flight – it was cheapest – early the following morning that I needed to move on. Stories were in the paper for a year following the accident about the family we had killed, what upstanding people they were, how active they were in their church, and how their daughter had been an honor role student. About a week after I got home from visiting Martin, the local TV news did a story on the surviving kids, and how brave they had been to move on.

“I miss my mom, my dad – it was hardest on what would’ve been my little sister’s birthday,” the little boy said, choking back tears as his grandmother put her arm around him. “We just loved them. That’s all.”

One of the companies I had free-lanced for offered me a full-time job at their office in Austin, Texas. That was a long way from Fresno, Calif. But it was a chance to start again. The company was very supportive to my situation.

I woke up, shivering, my sheets soaked, my head throbbing as though I’d been clubbed with a sledgehammer. In my dream I had a child, a boyfriend turned drunk who drove and killed a family...or maybe the parents, or what was it, exactly, I dreamed?

I looked at the alarm clock. I had left work feeling feverish the day before. I came home early, went to bed at 2:30 p.m., awaking this morning when my alarm went off at 7:30 a.m. What a horrid dream! Wait, make that a nightmare!

I took my sheets off my bed, rolled them up, and threw them in the wash before showering and getting ready for work. I didn't have a boyfriend, had never had a baby. When I hopped into my car and headed to the office, I noticed I was almost out of gas. I pulled into a Mini-Mart about halfway between my home and the office.

A cold wind was blowing, and a handsome guy walked over to me. I could see the wind take his breath as soon as the air escaped his mouth and was met by the freezing temperature.

"You're all dressed up," he said. "I'm Marty, remember, I was dating one of your friends? Here, let me help you with that since I'm all slobbed out – I just got done at the gym."

He lifted the pump.

"Cash? Credit? At the pump? Inside?" he asked with a smile. "I'm heading inside for a warm drinky-winky here in a sec. Would you like anything?"

I didn't even replace my gas cap. I pushed him backward, jumped in the car, started it, and headed to work, my gas cap – attached by a cord – banging against the side of my new (new to me, at least) Toyota Camry. Motorists were honking and waving as if I had no idea my gas cap was pounding a series of small dents into my car.

I wasn't anywhere near ready to have a child. Or a boyfriend who drank. And killed people, with the blood left on my hands! I was shaking head to toe when I went into the office.

"Good night! Are you crazy, not wearing a coat in this weather?" asked my friend, Kath. "Get over here, girlfriend."

She draped me in her coat, and brought me a hot cup of coffee.

"Sounds like you had a rough night," she said. "You weren't feeling well yesterday when you left – what, right after lunch? Tried to call last night, but there was no answer. Better today?"

I shook my head no. Then yes.

"Okay, come on now Cassie," she said. "Tell me all about it."

## **The Night Mom's Bible Study saw Jesus**

My mom was the coolest mom. She was righteous and everything else, but she was still the coolest. She could quote Scripture to correct you in one sentence and then later that night let you stay up a half hour past bedtime if it was a weekend or Daddy was working. He worked for the railroad, so he was gone a lot.

Mom had lost a lot of weight after my twin sister and I were born. She had to work hard to do that, she told us. I didn't remember her ever being heavy, like she said she had been. But she told me she had lost 55 pounds. And that was only about five pounds less than I weighed that year, in third grade. So she lost a whole me almost – that's a lot to lose. She prayed that she wasn't "depriving my children, these gifts from you, Oh Lord Almighty" of the things that kids were prone to enjoy. Like candy, especially chocolate. Brownies...yum.

We didn't mind. Mom packed the greatest lunches. She gave us an extra banana or packed an extra fruit drink to go with our thermoses of milk. She didn't know it – heck, maybe she did know it – but we used to trade the extra drink or banana for "something good." A lot of times some of the bigger and wider kids had extra cookies, chocolate or Twinkies and they'd trade.

I guess the only thing my sister and I ever really missed a whole bunch was brownies, and fudge, the two things grandma made best. We didn't have those at home. Dad was great about it, though. If he took my sister and me to do our stuff – I was in band and stamp club, she played basketball and softball – the other one always went along.

"They are just so supportive of each other!" my mother would coo to her friends. But to honor His Son Jesus with the truth, we mainly went along because Dad would let us get Hershey's bars and Reese's, Three Musketeers and Snickers. He'd, like, actually let us gorge on candy.

"Hurry up now, I turn here, and we'll be in sight of the house," he'd say. He'd jam all the wrappers into the store bag and put them in the trunk, and then I suppose he'd throw them away when he went to work. He made over my mom plenty, about how pretty she

was and about how “a few more pounds wouldn’t hurt you, you know” – he was speaking from experience, healthy as a hog, with the accompanying appetite.

Mom didn’t like us eating sweets. She said she started when she was younger and couldn’t quit and that’s why it was so much harder to quit when she was an adult. Don’t start, and you don’t have to stop, was her reasoning.

We had a party at school for a student who was leaving. Mom’s homemade rice cakes – her staple for such events and the like – were a big hit. But no one ever ate them, even with the cinnamon she added that gave them “that extra something.”

“Nothing” – even with “that extra something” – still isn’t much. The kids loved them though, because they flew across the room like Frisbees. The teacher certainly didn’t approve. But she was aware that every time my sister and I had to bring a treat, it was going to be rice cakes. And that was just that, so she let everybody take his or her rice cakes out to recess to play with. Of course we never told mom.

“Jason” was leaving school the next day, and everyone brought something – though we were the only ones bringing rice cakes. It was probably the best party ever, with mothers in the baking mood; cookies, fudge, lots of brownies – and two cakes even!

Melissa Cathens’ sister made brownies, a huge batch, maybe 30, maybe even more, almost enough for two for each kid in the class. I was glad to hear that Melissa’s sister was getting into something that wouldn’t get her into trouble. She had been in reform school, I think it was like jail sort of, the year before – maybe two years in a row, I forget.

All of the rice cakes were gone early. By the end of the day, the only thing left was brownies – five trays of them, as I think eight or nine kids brought brownies that day. Kids were dumping them into their friends’ backpacks as we loaded up to leave school. The teacher said that it wasn’t a wise idea, that food should be put in bags first, otherwise the brownies would turn hard, and the crumbs would attract bugs. No one wanted ants in their backpacks.

Melissa had most of her sister’s brownies left. She was chewing on one of them and looking a little sick as she dumped her brownies into two big plastic grocery store bags. She gave one whole bag to me, and another to my sister. We must’ve had close to 25 brownies. When she put them in my sister’s backpack, there were so many that my sister’s shoulder slumped. Melissa laughed like she’d just heard the funniest joke in the

world. Melissa, she was sort of one of the bigger kids – and tougher, like her sister – grabbed two chocolate squares and stuffed them in her mouth. She was laughing so hard that the rest of us laughed too. Our teacher said, “Melissa, now you stop stuffing yourself! What are you thinking?”

Melissa opened her mouth and tried to say “Sorry” but the only thing that spewed out was part of a chocolate square and soggy brownie chunks. We all exploded. A couple of the kids were on the floor laughing, almost retching. My sister and I had to hurry. Our bus left first since we lived the furthest away from school, so it would’ve been a lot to have to ask Mom to come into town to pick us up if we missed it.

We ran and barely made the bus. The driver was yelling, “Hurry it up!” and yet she started yelling at us, “No running!” as we stepped on the bus.

There was no eating on the bus. Me and Sis talked about the brownies, but we had both stuffed ourselves with chocolate that day, including a lot of brownies. Maybe later tonight, after supper, we agreed we’d try Melissa’s sister’s brownies, as those were about the only ones we hadn’t sampled at school.

When we got home, Mom was sleeping. We tried to be quiet. Dad was going to be gone that night and the next – he had packed his bag for a “long run” but that was good because whenever he was gone three or four days straight he’d always be home for almost an entire week.

Mom woke with a start at 5:30.

“You kids must be starving,” she said.

Both Sis and I were hungry, hungry for real food. Since the bus ride home, we’d both had stomachaches, and had taken turns using the upstairs bathroom. At 6:30 p.m., there was a knock at the door.

“Hi Virginia?” my mother said though it sounded like a question.

“No one else here? I’m early, I know I probably am,” she said. “I know we don’t start until 6:45.”

Virginia looked around, forced a smile, and said without even appearing to mean it, “Can’t wait for those rice cakes that you’re so famous for. But we are here to praise Jesus, and we will take the gifts that He sees fit for those of us following His Word.”

My mother immediately realized what was going on.

“Heavens!” my mother said, looking up. “It’s tonight! Here! Why, I…”

Mom’s Bible Study, one she did with five other women, was the first and third Thursdays of each month. They rotated it among their houses. She had only been in it for four or so months, so we had only had it at our house twice before. Both times Mom served rice cakes as the “treat.” The women weren’t thrilled with plain the first time, so she added a dash of cinnamon, and they seemed to go over maybe a little better the second time.

My mother didn’t have time to whip up a batch of rice cakes. My sister took her by the arm, led her down the hallway, and opened her backpack.

“We got these at school today,” she said. Then she pointed at my backpack, “There’s a whole other pack in there too. Should be enough for all of you.”

“You two are lifesavers!” she said, pulling me in and hugging us both close. “What would I do without you?”

She took the brownies out, and put them on plates. After cutting off the edges from ones that had been dinged up on the way home – she had to throw out a few that weren’t salvageable – she put out two healthy plates of brownies on the kitchen counter. Two of the other women arrived shortly thereafter, one more almost a minute after that – I was closing the door when I saw the headlights. And the other one arrived at 6:48, explaining she had done her family’s dishes, “before leaving, against my better judgment. But with cabbage you don’t want to let it get hard.”

My mom first took the phone off the hook – “We don’t need anyone interrupting the work of the Lord” – then brought two heaping plates to the living room.

“The Lord has brought us a bounty!” said one of the women, Mrs. Olegloaf. Or maybe it was Mrs. Loaf, and her husband’s first name was Oleg. I’m not really sure.

“Yes, well,” my mother said, as the women started to nibble as Mrs. Loaf did the first reading.

“You must,” Virginia said, handing a brownie to mom. She finished it quickly and took another for herself.

My sister and I smiled and headed down the hall to do our homework. Seeing mom treated a little bit made us feel special – even if it was Melissa Cathens, and her sister, who had made the brownies.

About 45 minutes into the 90-minute Bible Study, we heard giggling from the living room. My sister and I peeked out our doors at each other, confused. The noise died down, and then we heard the living room erupt with laughter. We heard the pounding of stocking feet on the hardwood floors. We snuck down to the corner of the living room, and sought to see for ourselves what was so funny. Virginia was standing on a chair, her hand waving over her head as if trying to erase a halo.

“I’m telling you Jesus had to be this tall,” she said, extending her hand.

“You are mistaking the Son for His Father,” said a woman, Marge Ellen. As she talked, bits of brownie sprayed from her mouth.

“He didn’t look too bad with his shirt off, did he now?” Virginia giggled.

“Too lean for me,” Claudie said.

“For God’s sake, he was being crucified!” Margie implored.

“For heavens sake, Margie, cover that trap door,” Claudie laughed as brownie morsels burst from Margie’s mouth. “You are going to feed the bugs who sneak in here when they see the feast you’ve not seen fit to swallow.”

“Bounty comes to those who honor his Word!” my mother proclaimed, and the room erupted with another fit of laughter. A big thud startled everyone when Virginia leaped down from her chair, and everyone laughed again, my mother and Mrs. Loaf helping right her as she teetered on her feet.

“These brownies are incredible!” Claudie said. She looked at my mother, and smiled broadly. “Nothing personal, but those rice cakes were the food of Satan!”

“Devil’s Food!” injected Mrs. Loaf, and everyone laughed, Virginia announcing she had to “pee” and would it be all right if she used the “little girl’s room.” My mother pointed one way, Virginia went another – thankfully, she passed through the kitchen and didn’t go in front of us, as she would’ve had she followed my mother’s direction.

In the kitchen, she passed the phone, which was making an annoying noise. She hung it up, and stumbled down the hall to the bathroom.

“Are they drunk?” I asked my sister. She shrugged. They were happy as could be, that was for sure.

The phone rang.

“Well, I’ll be,” my mother said, rising from the couch. “With God as my witness I hung that thing up!”

“I’ve got a Bible right here if you want to swear on it!” Claudie tried to say with authority broken by giggles, and the ladies laughed hysterically, most of them holding their stomachs, and some even in tears.

“What else we got to eat?” Marge Ellen asked, and they all laughed.

My mother answered with a “hello” and a giggle, and her face went solemn.

“Yes, well, that is MOST unfortunate,” she said. “I understand...No, my children have had none of them, I’m absolutely positive...They had leftover roast beef – I mean, roast beef – for dinner. No brownies, no...yes, I understand...and yes, well poor Melissa, but yes, her sister should be dealt with severely, I agree...thank you...Yes, again, we appreciate the call...God help that older daughter of yours...Good evening...”

My sister pulled me down the hallway. She sensed what was going on. I was still in the dark. Virginia came down the hall and back in the living room, her belt undone.

“I got some on me!” she said, and everyone laughed. I saw my mother come around the corner, walk down the hallway toward our rooms, her arms folded.

“No brownies?” she asked my sister and me. “I mean, none – you didn’t EAT ANY, right?”

“No mom,” we said together.

“Good,” she said.

My mother went back to the living room. She started to speak and the women grew quieter, and finally silent.

“I never!” gasped one.

“God, don’t spare that teenage girl the rod this time!” Claudie said.

“I’d suggest this all stays with the confines of this living room, never to be uttered past these walls,” Virginia said.

They all agreed. A couple of them said something about “sin” or “blasphemous,” but I couldn’t really hear much more than that. They filed out of our house, one by one. My mother consumed three peanut butter and jelly sandwiches after they left. She was licking jelly off a butter knife when she came down the hall to tuck us in.

“You all right, Mom?” I asked.

“Someone did something very sinful with those brownies,” she said. “I would ask that you respect me and not mention that I and the other ladies consumed...that we ate those brownies tonight.”

I nodded, and she gave me a big kiss – though much more wet than usual, and quite sticky, too – on the cheek, and turned out my light. After she closed my sister’s door, I realized I had to use the bathroom.

I quietly tiptoed across the hall. I heard my mother talking on the phone. She was asking how work was and if the train ran all right so I knew she was talking to dad. I did my thing, and went back across the hall.

“Stoned out of their gored,” she was saying. “Only Jesus removed the chains from us and freed us tonight.”

Just like in the Bible.

### **Why Willie had to Die**

“Why’d do you it, son?”

The gray-haired detective was looking at me. I wasn’t a little boy, but he was maybe 55, 60 years old, so yeah, I was young enough to be his son. I started to open my mouth, but closed it when I saw his young partner, bleached blond hair on top, black stubble on the sides above his earrings, smirking.

“I am a veteran, you know?”

“Got it, ‘almost Sarge,’” the young one said. The older guy looked annoyed. “You like boys, eh, boy?”

If Willie were here, we’d have killed this punk cop.

“You aren’t a veteran,” he said to his partner, who looked irritated. “This man served his country. Respect that.”

I appreciated that the older guy wanted to be nicer to me than his partner.

“How do you know I did it?” I asked, referring to the crime I assumed they were investigating.

The younger cop started to laugh. His partner motioned him quiet with the wave of a hand.

“Your prints were all over the 45 pistol,” he said, a little bit annoyed. “Come on, after you fired the second shot, you threw the gun in the woods. We found it 12 feet from where you passed out.”

They wanted to know why I’d killed Willie.

They, or at least their law enforcement brethren, were there, at the end after the blast from the gun, but in time to see all the blood and fresh chunks of flesh.

As the young punk cop looked down to hide a chuckle with his hand, I realized I couldn’t tell these men what happened. I remember one time Willie tried to convince me to bleach my hair because my ex-girlfriend dumped me for a guy with that bleached look. It just wasn’t me to do girl stuff to my hair, so Willie relented.

If Willie were here, I thought to that young punk cop, your ass would be in for a good kicking.

The mocking stare from the young cop started to wear on me. I did a quarter roll to my side, so I wouldn’t have to look up knowing the two cops were hoping for eye contact.

I couldn’t go into 25 years of history with two people I didn’t know.

Back – all the way back – in the beginning, it was always Willie and me - me and Willie - us!

Killing Willie wasn’t something I ever planned until the day it happened. Oh, sure, I threatened Willie all the time, almost every week toward the “end.”

The first warning came when I barely knew Willie. I was in junior high school. Misty Marilu sat in front of me in Spanish class. Misty smiled at me. I didn’t really want anything to do with her. But Willie wouldn’t let it go. He prodded me to write notes to her, in response to longer letters she’d written to me. Once I pulled her ponytail, and she turned around, looking annoyed. I almost pointed to Willie. Instead, I got in trouble.

I felt like an idiot writing those little notes. It wasn’t my idea. I didn’t even really like Misty, except for copying off her paper on quiz day each Thursday.

But when I really felt dumb was when the teacher caught us. I wanted to blame Willie. I even thought about blaming Misty. But Willie wanted to protect her.

“Thanks for leaving me out to dry,” I whispered as I headed to the office, the teacher standing in the classroom door to make sure I turned left toward the principal’s office at

the end of the hallway. My parents were called that afternoon. When I got home – not until 4:30, because I had detention and had to ride the activity bus home – my father took me outside. Willie was nowhere in sight.

Yet Pappy knew exactly what happened. He knew Willie was to blame, that I was otherwise an unwilling participant. But he took it out on my hide with the old, faded belt that he kept up on a nail in the shed where we kept our bicycles, the lawnmower and the always leaking gas can for the mower.

He walked out with the belt, swinging it like an old tennis racket – just to get the feel again, I suppose. He pointed to my pants.

“Down,” he said. I undid them. He pointed to my underwear. He was seriously upset. Up until a year or two earlier I got swats with my underwear still pulled up. Not anymore.

I pulled them down just enough so he could give me a good whack. Then he told me I’d be getting three for that day’s transgressions.

“You know what’s gonna happen, don’t you?” Pappy asked me between my first and second licks.

“No sir, Pappy,” I answered.

“Dang it boy, you’d better do better than that, or I swear with St. Pete as my witness, I’ll give you licks ‘til this goll-durned strap breaks!” he yelled.

I told him I was sorry for embarrassing the family name. A family name that his Pappy’s Pappy and his own Pappy had built up. Unfortunately for me, it wasn’t the answer he was looking for.

“But it’s a start,” he told me, and gave me a second thrash.

“Willie’s gonna get you killed some day, boy,” my father said. “You think it’s all fun and games now. You can do this and you can do that and you don’t give a rat’s fart about the rules.”

As he watched the welts rise on my bare behind, he told me to lower my pants farther – one more chance to remind me about the rules. He had hit me real hard with the first two shots, his anger raging through the strap. I could feel warmth from the blood where he had broken the skin. I wanted to scream. But I’d had the belt taken to me too many times before. I knew if I screamed, he’d whip me until I shut up. Better to take it like a

man, he told me the first time he whacked me, when he saw my 7 year old lip start to quiver.

“Scream til them damned cows come home,” he told me. “I’ll whoop you ‘til morning if you do. We ain’t got but one neighbor for 3 miles.”

This time, the strapping was just part of the process, one I had started by messing up. Willie egging me on, and me listening to Willie.

“Drop them drawers all the way,” he said. I did, and he whacked me the third time across the back of the legs. It was an act of compassion to go lower with the final shot, because my butt was bleeding from the first two licks. But the third strapping hit a tender area in my hamstrings. Pappy let it all out. I suppose he was angry that he had to hit me somewhere else. So he took out his inconvenience with a hard shot across the back of my thighs. No blood that time – I was glad, because in gym class we had to wear shorts. But I wish Pappy would’ve just whooped me thrice on my bottom. It was hard to walk the next morning because of the pain in the back of my legs.

The sting lasted all week. Willie never bothered me that week, even in Spanish class, because he knew the pain I was in. And though it went unsaid, Willie knew it was him who’d gotten me the licks. I never said a word about it, though.

I survived junior high, but high school was rough. Willie was always all over me. He made me feel like if I didn’t “do it” before I graduated, I’d failed as a man. Misty was my girl through the first part of high school. She didn’t want to do it though. Willie thought she was just a tease. So I went with Sally Jane, who lived out in the country, about five miles down the county road from our place. I guess that road had a name, because how would Sally Jane have gotten her mail?

Well, I didn’t know the answer to that one. But Sally Jane had made a lot of boys smile in high school. She was like, almost professional, at doing the deed, I was told.

“You sure you ain’t been with nobody else?” she asked me after school as she stood outside the front office smoking a cigarette.

“Sure as sure can be,” I told her. I had to hurry, because the front buses were starting their engines. And even though I was on one of the last buses, once they closed the door, well man, that was it. You were calling your momma or pappy for a ride. If I’d have

called my pappy for a ride, I'd have gone to bed without supper, or maybe even gotten a strapping.

Willie thought Sally Jane was a pretty girl for doing the deed. It didn't take much work or anything else. I had my driver's license for four months when Pappy said I could take the car out on a Saturday night.

"You don't be doing nothing stupid that would wreck this family's name," Pappy said.

I did something, but it ended up being something that could have carried on the family name. Willie got his way. I had sexual intercourse – that's what the science teacher told us it was called when we learned about sperm going into girls – with Sally Jane in the backseat of our '57 Falcon at the drive-in movie place in Mount Sehorn, 14 miles west of Miller's Grove. We went there because we knew what we were doing. Sally Jane even suggested it. She had been there with her last two or three – she told me, but I forget – boyfriends. But after we did it that night, on the way back to her house, she told me I wasn't her boyfriend.

"Nothing against yous," she said. Since she said "yous" I didn't know if she meant me, my family, or what. "I just like it when it's the first time for a boy. It feels better, you know?"

I didn't know. I didn't know all the other boys she'd rolled with in backseats were having their first experience with sexual intercourse. I thought Tommy Nelson had done it with three or four other girls. I remember him talking about two or three girls, and the next time I saw them, Willie was flirting, wondering if they really "put out" or did the deed.

When Sally Jane told me I wasn't her boyfriend, I asked her if we'd be going out, or whatever, again.

"I don't think so," she said. "You're cute and all. You felt real good. You liked it, right?"

Oh yes, I told her, no complaints on this end. I didn't tell her that I only did it because of Willie. That, honestly, my pappy had told me, "Boy, you stay out of trouble with girls," and that if he found out I'd get strapped, 16 or not.

"Maybe sometime I could suck you off," Sally Jane told me.

Monday at school when I saw Sally Jane, Willie thought it would be good if I took her up on her offer.

“I’ve got another boy already, another first timer, sorry,” she said, looking away, like she didn’t mean she was sorry at all. “If he wasn’t a virgin, I’d take care of you. But, well, you understand.”

I nodded as if I understood what she meant. I knew it meant I wasn’t getting sucked off. Willie thought Sally Jane was a “bitch” for that. I didn’t see Sally Jane after high school. Years later Momma told me in a letter that Sally Jane was in a home for abused women in town – I think she called it a shelter. I was sorry someone was mean to her. I don’t think I was, but I really don’t know. I know that even though all of the guys wanted to be with her, that she didn’t go to homecoming or prom. I thought about asking her to go to one my senior year. But she already knew I had done it, and if she was looking for a first time guy, then, well, that just wasn’t me. Willie agreed that being humiliated in public by her saying “no” was worse than maybe passing up the chance to get sucked off, as she had said, or even having sexual intercourse again.

“I skipped my period,” she told me one day after typing class, a few weeks after she had been my first. I had no idea what she meant.

“You practice, you get better,” I said, thinking she was talking about her typing, and hoping there was some chance she’d suck me off still.

“Fuck you,” she said.

We had already done that. But I was up for it again. Willie thought that would be a grand idea. But what she meant, she told me a week later, was that she thought she was pregnant.

“I wasn’t even sure if it was you, you know the father, but I got my period, so don’t worry about it,” she said.

I could stop worrying about something I had never given a thought to. That was cool. But had I known what she meant, that it was something with her uterus and not the old Coronas we were typing on, I probably would’ve been worried. Thank God, Pappy never found out about it. He’d have worn my butt out over that one.

When I look back at it, I never really liked Sally Jane. I thought she could’ve been a lot smarter in school if she paid attention. Toward the final two years of high school, she

spent a lot of time reading books outside alone. Guys who had been her first had girlfriends. Those guys, and their girlfriends, didn't like Sally Jane very much. One day Sally Jane was punched by a girl who called her a whore. They wrestled on the floor, scratching and pulling each other's hair. They were screaming and cussing up a blue cloud. The fight didn't end when teachers came in and insisted they "cease this behavior right now." It only ended when Sally Jane ripped the girl's shirt, and you could see the girl's bra and everything. She put a hand over each of her tits. That was cool.

Willie was turned on, big-time. I, on the other hand, had two cartons of milk that day for lunch and a huge drink of water after P.E., so I had to pee. One of the guys who had his "first" with Sally Jane was in the boys' restroom masturbating, his penis in his right hand and a paper towel in the left. Oh well, even if he got busted, at least the janitor wouldn't have to clean it up. I mean, those poor guys have a hard enough job, wiping up the mess guys leave in the toilets and the gobs of spit on the mirrors. But that sticky stuff everywhere - No thank you. I thought about this while I peed. The other dude kept at it. He was panting, even moaning, "oh yes, oh yes," and I wondered if he ever thought to either close the bathroom door, maybe prop himself against it, or at least get in a stall, where if he could be a little quieter, people would maybe think maybe he was taking a passionate dump.

"I had to," he said, not evening stopping when I was there!

I nodded but I didn't know. It just hurt to watch, you know, blue balls! I didn't look much at my balls, even when I did what he was doing, though I did it at home. I think my balls are dark tan, maybe even pink, or at least they had been when I was little and took baths. Getting out of the hot bathtub, my balls would be pink.

Those thoughts were forced out of my mind. I wanted to get out of there. I finished peeing and headed back down the hall. I saw Sally Jane headed to the office. I suppose the other girl would get in trouble too, but probably she was just getting a shirt or went to her locker to get her jacket to put on over her bra. She was pretty, but all the guys thought she was a prude. She didn't even kiss on the first date. Willie thought she wasn't worth spending money on for prom or homecoming.

When I got to typing class, I thought about how weird that day had been. Willie thought that guy in the bathroom was homosexual or something. I had no idea. He had,

after all, had sexual intercourse with Sally Jane. And since I was on the list, I don't guess I wanted to imagine any of us were gay. We didn't have a lot of gay people in our small, rural area. Or maybe we did, and they were just afraid to be gay because our area was pretty set in our ways. We didn't like outsiders, and I just guess a gay would've been an outsider. Hell, if he or she was nice, who gave a rat's fart if he or she was gay or liked the other sex? But I don't guess Willie or the town agreed with me.

With high school finally, mercifully over, I thought I could escape Willie's control for a while and start enjoying life, but it was just a thought.

I finished one year at vocational tech school. Carburetors and pistons weren't for me. Willie didn't like them much either. All guy classes. That sort of sucked. At least at regular college you got to be around girls and have sexual intercourse almost all the time, or at least that's practically the only thing my friends who went to college talked about when they were home on breaks.

So me and Willie went into the Army. The first "tour" was great. I ended up with carburetors and pistons after all, and worked in the motor pool at several bases in Europe. I saved a lot of money, ate three squares a day, and kept my uniform clean. There were girls in town that took care of things. Willie liked that. It wasn't a lot of money to have sexual intercourse with these women. They looked pretty from a distance and almost all of them weren't fat. But when you got closer, they looked a lot older. They looked worn out. And they always smelled funny, if it wasn't the smoke smell on their breath, it was the body odor, which I wasn't altogether sure was their own, to be honest with you.

In Amsterdam, it was like a buffet of sexual intercourse. Those girls were the perfect lay. They didn't want to talk to you or anything. All they wanted you to do was pay them, stick it in, push real hard and fast and get off. And then get off them and get out of their place. Some of them had dots like periods all over their arms. I didn't know much about that. I just worked on cars in the motor pool.

I had another month left in my second hitch in the army, and I had a really bad problem. I went to the doctor.

"You've been sticking this in places you shouldn't have been, haven't you?" asked the doctor.

He was a captain, even though he wasn't maybe as old as me or much older, so I had to call him sir.

"I reckon that's right, sir," he said.

"Quit it," he said. "It'll kill you. Don't you go to the films? Don't you get the pamphlets we send out?"

I said, yes, sir, but that was a lie. Pappy would've whooped my bottom for that one. I wasn't "career army" material as it turned out. I failed the exam for sergeant again and again.

"Must be some kind of fucking record!" our Lieutenant, a 24-year-old, chortled to the 45-year-old master sergeant, who was under the Lieutenant on the chain of command but far ahead of me. "You're going nowhere in the army. Get out now. Get back into school and get your education. You've got 40 grand to get smarter. Use it wisely."

I did some schooling, didn't enjoy it, and then took a job at a "National Fix-It-Up" car service center. It was in a strip center in Miller's Grove not far from my hometown. Willie didn't like Miller's Grove much.

The work was harder than the army, but the hours were better. I didn't work late at night, and I never worked on Sundays. I met a girl who rang up people's bills up front. She was a cashier, but she was also a floor manager. I didn't know what a floor manager did. But this floor manager did me. Then she told me after the fourth or fifth time that her husband was curious why she was always gone during the weeknights. Those were times when she was at my apartment.

Carolyn told me I was "cute, real cute" and she might have a friend to fix me up with. That friend was Jill, and though I never knew her last name, she was a lot like Sally Jane. She came over and took me in her mouth or between her legs, and we had a great time. She came over the next week and told me she had a disease that wrecked your immune system. I knew what AIDS was, but she told me she was "only HIV positive" and that she might get AIDS if she didn't straighten up.

I went without sex for almost two years. I guess I had been lucky not to get anything except a horrible itch from "crabs" – not the seafood, don't worry that was my first question, too – when I was in the army.

Anyway, after Jill, the only thing I did was work and get tested for HIV and AIDS. I don't know why, but I was never scared. Willie thought it was funny, but only at first. In time he was angry that I had put the sex life on hold because of this whole immune disease thing.

After 22 months of testing, a nurse at the center told me I didn't need to come back any more. "You don't have HIV or AIDS and if you're smart, you won't ever get it."

But then we had a new girl who was an assistant to the assistant manager or something like that – she was called a management trainee. Angela was a sweet girl and was only back from college for a year to save money. After that she was going to go back to college and majoring in marketing. I didn't have a lot of experience in marketing, or really know what it was. So I just told her it was great, really great, and she'd probably do great at it.

She laughed, "Great," smiled and touched my arm. And then we were having sexual intercourse several times a week, and more times on the weekend, at my apartment. Her father called my boss, got me fired. She was having her life all screwed up by me. It's not like we told each other "I love you" or anything, but I think I did love her. I don't guess she loved me, but she was going to stay home one more semester from college, she said, to spend more time with me, before she "got on with life." We stopped seeing each other after I was fired. I moved to another town an hour away. My parents were humiliated when they heard, not from me, about my predicament at "National."

"I told you Willie'd be the death of you," said my father, his raspy voice barely audible after his throat had gotten sick from cigarettes. "You'll never learn."

The move was good but only at first. A lady whose car I had fixed told me I had great dimples and that, well, if I'd like, I could come by her house at 10 a.m. the following Tuesday.

"But don't be early and don't be late," she said. "Park on the road by the playground, and come in through the back door – I'll leave the gate of the back fence open. It's the eighth house up on the left. You'll see my Camry you fixed in the driveway."

So, anyway, I went to her house. Willie thought that was a good idea. The Camry was there and running like a charm. She just wasn't big on having her plugs replaced and that kind of thing, so it wasn't like I was a genius at making her car's idle better or anything.

We had a grand time between her sheets.

“You’re a little bigger than I’m used to, so go slow at first, all right?” she asked. I didn’t say anything, but I did go slowly. It was harder to get into her than anyone – Sally Jane, and much harder than those girls when I was in the army, getting inside them was no problem at all. She said, “I did, thanks,” about a few minutes into it and motioned to Willie, “you can now.” So Willie pumped as hard and fast as he could and finished with her.

Then a buzzing noise startled her, and she said that she hadn’t told me, but she was married. I hadn’t seen a ring on her finger, so I hadn’t thought to ask. Well, she found a ring right away in the drawer of her nightstand.

“My husband!” she said. “He’ll kill you, and then me!”

I didn’t know what to do. Her bedroom – I guess after all it was their bedroom, not just hers – was on the third floor. She pushed me into her closet, and pulled the folding door closed. .

Her husband had come home, “Time for me to get some.”

I watched her smooth the sheets and replace the comforter back on the bed from the floor. She had on her t-shirt but didn’t have time to get her pants zipped or buttoned.

“You heard me coming,” he said looking around the room. I closed my eyes and then realized that wouldn’t keep him from seeing me through the slit in the closet where the rubber edges didn’t quite meet. He didn’t see me though, lucky enough for me – and lucky for the woman I’d just had sexual intercourse with.

“Let me take care of it,” she said, bending down and undoing his zipper.

“I didn’t sneak out of the office for head,” he said, lifting her up, shoving his hand into her unbuttoned, unzipped pants. “I want it all.”

She resisted for a minute and then he got a little forceful pushing her down on the bed. I thought I should come out and stop him because she wasn’t stopping him. But then she opened her legs like she had for me. She didn’t even get under the sheets.

“You’re already wet,” he said to her. “You want it.”

She didn’t say anything, just nodded. She didn’t kick and moan like she had for me. She just lay there, but she did put her hands on his butt. He moaned and said stuff. But then he was done with her. She finally got her pants zipped and buttoned for the first time

since she had taken them off to have sexual intercourse with me. The garage door purred again, and he was gone. I came out, and I guess Willie was making his presence known. I was scared to death while I was in the closet, but I guess Willie liked watching. I have to admit I didn't close my eyes after that first time, when I was trying not to be seen.

“Want to, again?” she asked. “But he did, you know, inside me.”

I didn't mind as she took off her clothes again. She opened the comforter, and we rolled in the stained sheets, which were still wet. Stuff from her husband, or Willie or maybe even me was dripping down her leg. She took a handful of it, and touched herself, moaning and shifting her hips back and forth, as she had the first time we did it.

“You can go down on me, if you don't mind that,” she said.

That actually didn't sound too good – I mean, did she think I had no idea about what was in there, down there? So we just had sexual intercourse again. She didn't kick and scream again, but she did whisper in my ear that I could stop and go down on her whenever I wanted before I came. She spread her legs farther and pushed me up. I know I went deeper inside her because she closed her eyes and said, “Oh God!” But I could see the ring on her finger, and I felt bad about that. I knew I'd never have a girl with a ring on her finger, but if I did, I wouldn't want the guy who fixed her car putting his Willie inside her. But my Willie didn't care. We finished, and headed to the door.

“Listen, I really liked this,” she said. “But I've got to stop doing this. This is, like, the fourth time I've nearly been caught. I might have to take my car somewhere else.”

To be honest, I really didn't care about her car. A few weeks later, I was questioned by the police about how well I knew this woman. She had her throat slashed, and they thought it was by a guy she had been having an “extramarital affair” with. They had video from a back porch surveillance camera that showed my picture clearly. She hadn't told me about the camera. Apparently, the police said, they had been robbed six months earlier, and the husband had put up the security cameras (there was another out front they told me).

When they went through her car they found the receipt for the work I'd done on it. I guess they figured I was the one that worked on her car, and then her. Even though I could have a lawyer there, the police told me, I was honest and said that, yes, one time we had done it – twice, but it was the same time, I told the police, just to clarify.

They found the guy who killed her – he showed up at her funeral. My boss got wind of what had happened. Even though I was innocent, at least when it came to the killing part, he said he didn't want "people like you" working for him. So, I moved again.

Steadily I had moved to where I was about a hundred and fifty or so miles away from my parents. The day I started my new job – I had to move an hour away this time because the local newspaper had given so much coverage to the murder of the woman, and even though I wasn't named in the paper, well, word got around – my father died.

After the funeral, I went back to work the next day. My boss told me I could have a few days off, even though I was new, but I needed the money, and I knew if I sat still for too long, even a day or two, Willie would have me running wild again.

Sure enough, about three months into my new job, a woman who worked two stores down in the strip mall that housed the auto repair place I was working at – she worked at an office supply store – told me she'd like to go out, and gave me her phone number. I didn't tell her I didn't have a phone yet. I hadn't called her after a week, so she came down one day around lunch time, and asked what the deal was.

"I'm not pretty enough for you?" she asked.

She was pretty enough for me. I always thought all women were too pretty for me. I couldn't tell her about Willie though. But, Willie told me that night that he thought she was pretty enough. I tossed and turned as I waited for Willie to go away and let me sleep. But that wasn't going to happen. Not that night, not the next night, the night after that, or ever. I was Willie's prisoner. I walked around with a hard-on at work the next two days, doing all I could to bend over and act like I was checking on tire pressures or what have you every time someone got close to me.

I made up my mind. I had to do it. I stopped at a pawnshop. The guy told me I could buy a 45 if I filled out all kinds of paperwork and came back in five days. I pulled a wad of bills out of my pocket, looked at it, and put it back in my pocket. I told him I'd think about it and then come back in a few days or so. He told me to forget it, fill out the papers, give him the money and he'd predate it, which I thought meant the five days wasn't as big of a problem as he'd told me at first.

I knew that night that I wouldn't have problems with Willie any more. I couldn't. It wasn't fair to Willie, either, to keep stringing him along like, thinking we might have

“sexual intercourse” with the next woman who told me I was cute, whether she had a ring or not.

The fact was - I was more than sure that Willie was going to be the death of me, unless one of us went.

I was nervous, not unlike I'd been when I had sexual intercourse that first time with Sally Jane. And I was scared, like I was that first time I had sexual intercourse with Sally Jane. And I was also erect, as I was with Sally Jane. It was like Willie was standing up for his right to defend himself. Maybe it was nerves, maybe I was just shaking, but on that first shot I only grazed Willie's head. I swear Willie jumped to the side the second I pulled the trigger.

Goose bumps went up and down my arms, my back, maybe even my chest. I felt cold all over. I took aim a second time, deciding all of Willie had to go, if I was to live a normal life.

I don't remember the gun going off the second time. And if the pistol ended up in the woods, well, then I don't have any idea how it got there. I never saw my “male organ” again, though as I faded in and out before waking up from surgery the punk cop said on the phone, “The subject's pecker is in pieces.”

What I did know as I sat with the detectives in my hospital room was that I did what I had to do: I had to kill Willie, or he would kill me. There was no reasoning with him. He wanted one thing, and I wanted another.

One thing was clear in my cloudy mind: One of us had to go. Willie had ruled the roost for too long.

Really, I wanted to tell the detectives all of this, but didn't.

I rolled over, catching the attention of the older cop.

“What it comes down to,” I told him, “is that it was just his time.”

## **The Night Stocker**

Parole ended.

It seemed like an eternity of drug tests, telling my snot-nosed probation officer – this was September 2002, and his diploma from State U. on the wall read 2002 – what he

wanted to hear. I realized I didn't change a bit. The only thing I learned was the right answers; the ones probation officers wanted to hear. I realized what I did to that lady was wrong. I realized the pictures were not appropriate or legal, and that the sick people who took those pictures (I just downloaded them off the Internet, I didn't take pictures of naked little girls) should be in prison forever, I told my probation officer.

In prison I met some of the weirdoes who took those kinds of pictures. I found it odd that they seemed sort of similar to me. Off probation, I was free. Well, the legal system's version of free. I had to register at the police station wherever I moved, and be available for "random" drug tests for eternity, or five years, whichever came first.

On the outside, I wasn't qualified for many jobs, especially when I listed my felony convictions, and that I did hard time. But a bookstore was hiring night stockers – not night stalkers, though I laugh because when I told my few friends I had back home what I was doing, they thought that I said I was a night stalker – and the bookstore manager didn't ask about prior records.

So I didn't tell her.

The best part of the shift was the beginning, at 10:30 p.m. There were still customers in the store. It was all I could do to contain myself watching women shop for books, bending over, picking things up, balancing books against their breasts like schoolgirls.

I wasn't allowed to work days or be a bookseller (a cashier), otherwise I would've had a list of women to call day and night – just by checking the name on their license or credit card and then looking them up online or in the phone book. That sort of sucked. But I did have a beautiful, longhaired brunette almost fall into my lap. I was pulling out a stack of books that I'd start on once the store closed. Though we were in the way with the store still open, store managers didn't mind because it sped up the remaining customers. She backed into me. I froze looking at her long legs and tiny bottom. I could tell by her panty lines that she had bikini underwear on – I wondered if she bought them at Kmart.

I could see her breasts from the side – not too big, but full and round, luscious! I kept backing up and backing up to stay out of her way, but finally I couldn't. She stopped as I toppled a pile of John Irving books. She apologized and flashed me a big smile. I knew she could love me some day if she knew me. The only problem was getting to know her.

I watched those long legs stride up front to buy a couple of books. I saw a ring on her finger but no kids in tow. Maybe she was unhappily married because she didn't have kids. I really didn't know - if you have to know the truth. But I was certain I might be in love with this woman. I saw her walk outside the store and cut to the right. That meant she was parked either on the side or around back, near the entrance I came in 20 minutes earlier. So I hustled out back, telling a co-worker I forgot my jacket and, well, it was going to get cold that night (the store saved some money keeping the thermostat down in the winter and up in the summer) and I wanted to get it from my car. He just nodded.

By the time I got out back, I saw her again, but she was getting in her Dodge minivan. I couldn't flag her down - I could get in trouble for that. I tried to think of some dumb excuse to talk to her. Surely, though, she'd remember me from inside the store and maybe freak out thinking I'd tailed her. I watched her back out of her parking spot. Damn, both her reverse lights and tail lights worked perfectly - that was the excuse I used with my "victim" so it was a tried and true method - but I couldn't use that as a ruse given the circumstances. The thought of never seeing her again wasn't a picture I liked.

If her husband was one of these controlling assholes who kept tabs on her and didn't like her going out much, then who knows when I'd see her again? Or maybe she just shopped for books every so often. I made a note to myself to get a library card, in case she was really, really into books. But I knew when I moved to this city that they run ID checks on everyone who applies for a library card, something about keeping pedophiles away from kids who frequent the library.

When she pulled backward, I saw a bumper sticker: "Proud parent of an honor student at Kennedy Elementary" on one side of the car, and "Proud parent of honor student at Belles Middle School" on the other. I actually wrote it down when I got back in the store. Both bumper stickers looked rather new, so I guessed she had two kids, and not just one who had done well in both elementary and junior high. But she looked smart, let me tell you, so I have no doubt that any and all of her children were beautiful and intelligent. Thank goodness she didn't mind publicly bragging on her kids - that night might've otherwise been the last time I saw her.

I didn't want that.

Since I got off work at 7:30 a.m. (“lunch” breaks at 2:30 a.m. were no treat, let me tell you that much), I’d go sleep at home until one or two. I had no idea where these two schools were. I looked them up in the phone book the next day, a Monday. With caller ID and everything, it’s not a good idea if you’re a convicted felon, especially of a sex crime, to be calling schools asking when the final bells rings. I went to the elementary school the first day. I figured more moms and maybe even some dads would pick up their kids at elementary school than junior high, just because if I recall correctly it becomes a little less fashionable to be picked up in the family cruiser being a teenager.

Damn, everyone drove a minivan! None matched my lady’s that day at Kennedy. That was a bummer. I alternated between Belles Middle School and Kennedy the rest of the week. No luck Tuesday through Thursday. But Friday, I saw her pull up in her minivan at Kennedy. She hadn’t really looked at me in the store – or least we weren’t making eye contact when I stared at her – directly for but a second when she backed into me and I knocked over the books. Still, I knew I had to be careful. She was walking toward a group of other mothers standing near the flagpole in front of the school. She was wearing a great pair of black jeans with no pockets on the butt. If I was a pocket, though, her butt’s the one I’d want to ride on, if you know what I mean. She had on a button-up shirt but it was sort of open at the top, and there was like a white t-shirt kind of thing under it. It was all I could do to control myself. I remember all the times in prison, seeing girls in the Kmart circulars from the newspaper modeling underwear, and going to sleep wondering if I’d ever see a woman like that again, much less have her almost back into me at a bookstore and then see her picking up her kid at school. And here I was. Heaven.

“Hi Nikki!” one mother said, going over to maul her, I mean hug her. I realized at that point that some day, some how I would have to hug Nikki, too. The lady, twice Nikki’s, size finally took her paws off her and said, “Are you heading over to Belles to get Elisa after this?”

I wanted to know her younger kid’s name. But that didn’t happen. I was dressed nice – I was heading to work that night, and I always got ready early in case I got sidetracked or something – so no one really looked at me much. It was a big school, so that helped me. Rather than wait for Nikki and chance her seeing my car, I went back and headed straight for Belles, before the final bell rang at Kennedy. I thought that was a smart idea.

The line of cars at Belles was a little bit worse than it had been my previous two visits – I'd chalk that up to it being Friday – but it was still nothing compared to Kennedy. I put on sunglasses and pulled a baseball cap down deep. She showed up with her kid, a little boy, maybe second grade, and walked him toward the middle school. About 10 to 15 minutes later, the bell rang, and her daughter came out. I'm guessing her daughter was at the upper end of wherever middle school ended – eighth, ninth grade? She was put together like her mother, only rail thin, whereas her mother was slender, but with womanly curves and much larger breasts than her daughter.

I tailed them home that day, but not all the way. They lived on a loop at the end of a street in a development. When it said it dead-ended, I knew that even if I didn't get caught, I'd be leaving myself open for the future. I wanted to start a long relationship with this woman, and if she got suspicious up front, that could end it. But I was still disappointed she didn't live in the middle of some street so I could've watched her pull in her driveway and just go buzzing by, maybe even act a little annoyed so she'd have no idea I didn't live around there. Though I had an older car, it was in good shape and had been painted. Still, her neighborhood was a far cry from the room I rented upstairs in a shutdown restaurant downtown (don't even get me started on how they screw downtown residents with parking).

My entire life was shaped around waiting at Kennedy the following month. The next couple weeks were unsettling – she didn't even pick him up on those Fridays! She did better the following week, picking up her son three times, and I was there every time. I didn't get out of my car. I was too excited, aroused, I mean, and I knew that wouldn't fly in a school zone (it didn't the first time, anyway, or so they told me at sentencing). I got a little braver that weekend. After she picked up groceries at Mega-Mart (I was out of my mind as she squeezed and picked over produce), she went home. Fortunately I didn't have to go work until late that evening, so I was able to spend the entire day with Nikki. I waited way down the street where she'd never see me, across from a park, but I could see her or at least her house. I got out and walked a few laps around a sidewalk, dodging skaters and walkers who smiled and sometimes even said hi to me. Good thing they didn't know who I was.

Finally, I saw Nikki's husband coming down the road. We went to the movies. I sat alone, but I went past them to one of the front rows, so they wouldn't pass me if they went for more popcorn or had to use the restroom. I listened to her whisper to her husbands and kids during the previews.

"That reminds me the summer we had in Colorado, at Estes Park," she told her husband. The pig didn't even answer her – maybe he nodded or something, I don't really know because I couldn't very well turn around and look. I listened to her giggle (it was a PG movie and didn't have any "R" language or anything – I respected the kind of mother I saw Nikki to be) and at the end I took a little bit of a chance. I heard her husband drag his fat ass out of his seat. I paused a moment, and snuck a peek over my shoulder as they headed up the aisle.

Several people, all with kids, got between us, but the dad took her son (not knowing his name yet was driving me nuts!), and Nikki walked up and out of the theater with her arm around Elisa. They walked down the strip center to an ice cream place. Ice cream was the best part of the day, I think, for us all. They were having fun and laughing (he didn't even sit next to her), and I sat in my car. There was a row of cars in front of me, but that only gave me perfect cover. I could even tell she was having vanilla, no sprinkles or anything (those binoculars from the thrift shop finally came in handy). I only left because some dildo guy with his girlfriend paused to stare at me as they were leaving. I waited until their headlights disappeared, and then I headed to work. That was our best day together so far, and I looked forward to another weekend.

Since things were progressing well in our relationship, I started to think about getting more brazen. I also knew, firsthand, that was the best way to get caught. But I had to be able to see her every day. So I took some pictures one day when she was picking up dry cleaning. The photos weren't that great – I had to take them from in my car, and the windshield didn't help much. But I did get a great photo of Elisa and Nikki walking one afternoon in the park. I had a great shot that I hung over my bed of Nikki getting ready to catch Elisa as her daughter hung upside down on the monkey bars. I had a list of things to tell Nikki when we were finally together, so I added "What do you think about Elisa taking gymnastic lessons?" to the list.

It turned out her son's name was Nick. Boy, Nick was some kind of soccer player. Sure he was smaller than all the other kids, but he was one smart kid on the field. He passed better than the other players, and set up half of his team's goals that year, at least from the games I saw, and I'm guessing I picked it up about halfway through the season. In his last game – I knew this from overhearing a conversation between mothers at the next-to-last game – Nick broke free and kicked the ball into the net! He jumped up and down. So did Nikki. Me too. Even Elisa, who I learned by that point didn't get excited about much, was jumping up and down, whooping and hollering. But the referee waved the goal off, claiming Nick was offside. That pissed me off. After the game ended and Nikki had the kids in the minivan, I went over to the referee.

“You missed that one, my friend,” I told him.

“What are you talking about?” the ref asked.

“That goal in that last game you called – you blew it,” I said.

“Well, I'm calling four games today so if I miss one call the whole day, I've done pretty darn good,” he said smugly.

I stepped toward him, my hands extended. I was going to strangle him.

“Think about it pal,” he said confidently. “I blow this whistle, and the cops haul your ass off to jail. ESPN shows tape of you throttling me, I sue you, and your kid still doesn't get the goal you claimed he scored. Besides, I'm sure on that one. My flagman even saw it from the sideline. He was maybe 5 feet offside.”

I stopped in my tracks. I didn't need to get arrested again, for any reason. Plus he knew that Nick was, basically, “my kid” and he didn't even know how in love I was with Nikki, and how in love with me she would be once she knew me and we got married. The truth is I did feel like Nick was my kid. I had a hard time feeling like Elisa's dad. But I figured that would come in time, once we got to know each other properly. For now, I was way too turned on when I saw Elisa, especially when she wore really short shorts and anything that showed her flat, little stomach.

On one of my days off, I followed her husband to work. He worked for the city. I never saw him leave again until 5:30 that day, so I guess he didn't work driving a truck around town to fix things or anything. They ate dinner at a Pizza Hut that weekend that was located right next to the bookstore. I didn't think I was risking it too bad, since I had

eaten there before work several times. But the waitress was a loud talker, and when she talked about always “seeing you in here” it drew Nikki’s attention. She looked over at me, looked a little puzzled, and then looked away. I didn’t look up again for what seemed like forever. When I did, both she and her husband were looking at me. I went to the bookstore and stayed in the back until it closed that night. I don’t know if the family came in, but I couldn’t take any chances.

I limited my visits to the school, spending several weeks waiting for her at Kennedy. I saw her twice, but was very careful to make sure she didn’t see me.

Then, it came apart, and it wasn’t even my fault. One of the guys in the room next to me had been dealing drugs. I knew it – everybody was buying drugs from the guy. I never bought drugs from him, but he did give me some for free to try to enlist me as a client when I got to town, and I used crystal meth a few times, but only to stay awake at work or when I spent the whole day waiting for Nikki on weekends. If I hadn’t made that mistake, Nikki and I would still be together today.

I should’ve moved out to a better place, maybe found a roommate or two and shared an apartment down the street about two blocks from Nikki’s, because I wanted to be closer to my girlfriend and her kids, anyway.

But when the cops raided for drugs, I wasn’t there, and they took a special interest in the 41 pictures tacked on my walls of Nikki, Nikki and her daughter, and one of her, her husband and the boy walking their dog . . . The drug dealer named me as a buyer. I took a drug test and failed, violating a term of my probation. The city prosecutor wasn’t thrilled with having me in his town. I hadn’t registered, as required, as a convicted sex offender, so I was headed back to jail. The police contacted Nikki and apparently her jerk husband went ballistic. They were sitting in court when I was brought in. She never even made eye contact with me. My public defender pleaded me down to the drug charge and “stalking” which was a joke. But that was also my “third strike” under a law the governor had ram-rodged through a few years back. I was sent up the river on a life sentence as a “repeat offender” with no chance for parole.

As I was led out of the courtroom, I tried to turn around to look at Nikki. The bailiffs wouldn’t let me, forcing my head down with their hands as they led me out of the front of the room, so I didn’t get to pass Nikki.

After all we'd been through, we never even got to say goodbye.

## **Mom Shot the Mistress**

"Twelve shots?"

"Twelve shell casings," the cop being interviewed on the evening news was saying.

I was sitting in front of the black and white TV, my hand on top of the warm box, as my mother's picture was shown on the local TV news. She was the lead story.

"She must've reloaded six times," a police officer was telling a reporter holding a microphone. "There's no doubt this was deliberate. Point-blank range. She didn't miss with one of them shots. Poor, Mary Ann."

Footsteps from the kitchen, it could only be my Aunt Judy.

"You turn that off right now!" she demanded. "This doesn't involve you. You don't need to know about this stuff. You're too young!"

Judy, my father's sister, didn't even know my mother that well. She didn't like the way – as I'd find out years later – my mother always seemed to have an opinion on everything. As a listener, well, my mom was a good talker. If she had something to say, you'd better listen. And if you had something to say, well, then you'd still better just listen. I was always close to my mother, probably too close. But ever since I almost drowned at the lake when I was 3 years old – I have no memory of it. I just remember my mother retelling the story through the years – my mother clung to me probably not unlike I did to her when I was a baby. She was "rather considerably overprotective" when it came to me, I heard my dad tell Aunt Judy one day.

The newscaster said "Mary Ann" just before my aunt hit the off button on the TV, and the picture faded into an ever-tightening circle of white light before disappearing.

"Mary Ann" was always the "bitch" when my mother referred to her. I thought that was her name until one day when my father and mother were arguing about her, my mother calling her a bad name, my father calling her "Mary Ann." I didn't know if I'd have liked Mary Ann or not. I mean, I knew Mary Ann made my father happy, and I liked it that my father could be happy – because he certainly never was at home. But Mary Ann caused my mother a lot of pain.

“Why couldn’t she have just filed for a divorce?” my Aunt Judy was asking someone on the phone after shutting off the news, putting a pot of cabbage stew on the table for me. “Taking that shotgun...they said she reloaded SIX times, for the sake of Baby Jesus...and I just know I will be the one to take her boy to see her in jail.”

Whatever my mother had done was bad. Bad enough that Aunt Judy, my father’s sister, thought my mom would be in jail.

Dad never called her his mistress – whatever that was. He just called her “Mary Ann” or when he was going to see her, referred to her as “his girl.”

He’d disappear for hours here and there during the week. Sometimes I’d go a whole week without seeing my Dad once at night. Weekends were for Mary Ann, though he did coach my little league team, my soccer team (until I broke my leg and gave up that sport not just for the rest of the season, but for good).

Though I enjoyed my time immensely with my father, I was more my mother’s son than I ever was my father’s. The truth is I loved my dad. He was a man of few words. He could sit for days without a word – maybe it was only really hours, as child time seemed to travel slower – that’s why Mary Ann was perfect for him.

My aunt, who was married to Dad’s brother until Uncle Pete was killed in the war, told me my father was “just reflective.” My parents rarely saw eye to eye on anything. So they didn’t see a lot of each other. Looking back, they were just two very different people. As far as being in love, well, they didn’t mind each other too much.

One night when I was seven years old, Dad was high on conversation, his spirits boosted by 11 empty beer cans and one half full in his hand. We were watching Gilligan’s Island. Dad was laughing harder than I’d ever seen him laugh when Gilligan screwed up the castaways’ best chance to be rescued. I laughed, too, though I didn’t think the show was that funny. But it was that funny to see my father laugh that hard. Ginger had on her best evening gown. Mary Ann opted for her familiar cutoff shorts.

“Mary Ann,” Dad said. “You know what boy? I’d have named you Mary Ann if you were a girl. I’d have named your sister that if your mom and I’d had a little girl after we had you.”

Mom had come in full stride from the kitchen.

“Don’t you be filling his head with the crap you do,” she said, slapping at his head but missing when he backed away. “You keep Mary Ann out of my son’s life.”

So the night that my mom went “over the edge” as Aunt Judy put it, I went to bed wondering if I’d ever see her again. I cried myself to sleep. My father came in the next morning.

“I don’t know how to explain this to you, son,” he said. “But Mom’s going to be gone for a while.”

He pulled me out of school, which was tough, because I had lots of friends there. We moved in with Judy across town, Dad sold our house, and we lived in her basement for the rest of the school year. I didn’t get to see my mom for five months, and I still had no idea what she’d done to Mary Ann, though I was thinking the worst, because of what I’d seen on the news. An eight-year-old mind can’t fill in the blanks, but the imagination can run wild, so I was thinking worst case scenario.

My mother was able to send me letters, asking how I was doing in school. I sent her back pictures and notes, telling her how much I missed her.

Aunt Judy was reading the paper one day, and she told me that I’d better start packing.

“Your mother’s getting out next Tuesday,” she said.

I just nodded. I didn’t know what that meant. My father sat me down and said that he was going to “make an honest attempt at making this thing work with your mother this time.” We bought a smaller house about a mile from Aunt Judy’s, which my dad told me meant I could stay at my “new” school, which was great because I liked it even better than my old one.

We got all moved in and everything. Dad was staying up late, fixing everything up. He bought a waterbed, something mom had always talked about wanting. He put a bouquet of flowers in the kitchen the day before we picked her up.

On the day she got out of jail – “She got 18 months, but only had to serve five” – he surprised me.

“I’d like to peek in on Mary Ann and see how she’s doing,” he said. “You’re coming.”

I didn't know Mary Ann so I couldn't say I didn't like her. But I hated that Mary Ann had been the cause of my mother being taken away from me.

We headed out of town to the lake. Outside a boathouse was a cool-looking, little boat, but it had lots and lots of holes all over. Dad introduced me to Larry. We walked around to the back of the boat, and in blue letters it said, "S.S. Mary Ann."

"Larry's making old Mary Ann right again," Dad said. "I didn't have the money to fix her until now. But once Larry makes her seaworthy, I'm going to sell her. I let her cause enough problems for you, your mother and me. Ain't gonna happen again."

He told me on the way to the jail that Mom wouldn't have even gone to jail, but she had taken a shot gun to Mary Ann in the evening, when there were still a lot of people out on the lake. She scared them all to death, and the "reckless endangerment" charge put her in the "county slam" he called it for the past five months.

"Crime of passion," Dad told me. "Can't say I blame her."

Mom came out looking very thin, but smiling ear to ear. She hugged me.

"I didn't want my baby seeing me in jail," she explained. "But your dad visited three times a week when you were at school. He's going to be right by me this time."

We went to our new house. When Gilligan's Island came on that night, Dad quickly shut off the TV. He never mentioned her again.

But I never forgot her.

## **The Muse**

The cursor blinks.

And blinks. Then blinks some more.

This is perpetual motion. That's the ticket! We could harness the power of the cursor with the wind and the sun, and reduce our dependence on foreign oil right away.

Eventually, we'll be self-sufficient, no toxic emissions, pollution in general all but wiped out, and no wars over gas.

That can only lead to world peace! I've saved the young parents of this country from being deployed overseas. I've saved the American family! Mom or Dad won't get killed in armed conflict over crude oil.

Of course, there will be a brain bug or two to work out. We'll have to get Detroit to buy into producing cars that don't run on gas. Exxon won't be crashing any more tanker ships in pristine Alaskan areas. Oh my god, I've also saved the environment!

The gig is up.

What I have to do is write a book. Just a book, that's all. I don't have to create world peace. I don't have to save our children. I don't have to protect the environment. I just have to write a fucking book! Type words that make sense, lined up correctly. Pretty easy.

But, I can't do it alone.

I need the Muse. Where is that bitch, anyway? She appears occasionally – okay, well, only three times so far. But, I need her. I don't need drugs. I don't want alcohol. Perhaps I will have to enlist the aide of vices to lure the Muse back into my life. When she manifests – apparently when she's not too busy and decides to grace me with her presence – I'm a writing machine! She's my goddess - a fountain of liquid gold, a mountain of thunder - striking a flurry of sizzling thoughts in my script, pouring priceless words through my fingers onto the screen.

Damn, it's a beautiful thing!

Immersed in the divine scrolls of the Muse, I create and explore new worlds, new words. She carries me into fields of magic and mystery, lets me play, stroke the last key. When the Muse vanishes after a night of writing, it's better than chocolate cheesecake, better than sex, better than winning the lottery!

Sometimes I put on music, seducing her to come out and play. I open a bottle of wine, inviting her to sip the sweet melody of grapes. I watch the cursor, sometimes for hours. It blinks, on and off, on and off. I waste time with stupid thoughts like how many times in the life of a computer the cursor can blink. It seems to blink about 70 times a minute. So, if the life of a computer is, oh, let's say a billion blinks of the cursor that means my computer will live for another 14,285,714 minutes, 238,095 hours, which comes out to 9,920 days or approximately 27 years.

Way too high. Maybe the cursor will only blink 200 million more times. That would mean my computer will last only...

Oh, forget it. Screw it! Waiting for the Muse isn't good for me or her, or anyone else.  
That bitch!

Yet, I'm hostage to the Muse. Only an 80,000-word manuscript will free me, free her. It's my ticket out of this penitentiary. My own pen. Who'd have thought that? I'd beg and plead for a book deal, offer my next born, my spleen, a liver, whatever.

Just let me write for a living.

And then it happened – my dreams came true!

Here's fifty-grand and a contract. Sign it and then we'll fork over a fat check, and *when* (not if) you make our deadline, there's more money. Then a promotional tour, signings, interviews with radio stations, newspaper and TV people. You'll be the toast of the town. A book tour - the dream of every person ever to write a letter, read a book. Think, do you have a soaring imagination? Is your life story worthy of a book? Well, my friend, we all think that. We all know that. That's the dream.

The reality is different. And, quite frankly sucks!

Great, I said. I brought my own pen, just show me where to sign. Signed, sealed and ... eventually, maybe, delivered. I was living my dream. The reality of this nightmare – the hit and miss of the Muse.

She's my heaven; she's my hell. I need some Calliope loving, fast!

*Why* won't she come?