

# **Crosses Aflame: 1940**

**A Jansen Family Mystery**

**Book Two**

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**Family of Man Press**

**ALERT**  
**Suggested age for readers**  
**is *fourteen and older*.**

There are scenes describing violence,  
and several discussions about good vs evil and right and wrong  
that may be troublesome for the younger  
reader. Those thirteen and under  
may want to read the book  
with a trusted adult.

## BACKGROUND

The Year Is 1940:  
United States of America:

*The books should be read in order.*

In *Book One* of this series – *Deep Cover: 1940*, the stars of the series, the grandfather (Oliver) and his two grandsons (Sammy, 15 and Tommy, 10) worked with Federal Agents to overthrow a subversive organization in Chicago, climaxing in a ninety-mile-an hour chase down the rails in a steam engine. On the run from the ‘bad guys’ they settled in the small town of *Ledger, Arkansas*, where Ollie purchased a small hotel. They took up residence in a five-room suite on the top – 5<sup>th</sup> – floor.

In *Book Two, Crosses Aflame: 1940*, the Feds once again called upon them for assistance – this time to root out the hate-based activities of the Ku Klux Klan in the mid-south. There had been a recent increase in Klan activity – burning crosses and burning cabins of the rural, black population. Secret codes abound as the boys face life and death situations at the hands of the KKK.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **The Flames of Hate**

It had been the Washington's, rural, four room cabin. Jeramiah, 13, had slept on the couch in the living room. His sister, Jasmine, 17, had the small room off the back porch. His parents had the bigger bedroom. That morning it was a smoldering heap of ash and rubble.

Soon after midnight the night before, three pickups carrying a dozen men with evil in their hearts, dressed in long white robes, hoods, and pointed hats had come and erected a tall wooden cross soaked in coal oil (kerosene) in the front yard. One of the men set a match to a torch and touched it to the cross. The flames climbed and spread its height and width.

He then moved to the cabin, by then also drenched in coal oil by others – walls, roof, porch, doors. The man made his way around the small structure, spreading the flame as he went. In the end, he tossed the torch onto the roof. The men stood back and jeered calling out the vilest strings of profanity and vulgarities as they watched, clapping, for some reason feeling important.

By the time the noise had alerted the family, the inside was already engulfed in flames. Jeramiah awakened coughing, the room filled with thick, black smoke. He struggled along the floor

trying to offer warnings, but by then, even the doors to the other rooms were aflame.

Terrified and understanding he could not save his family, he moved to save himself. In the floor, near the kitchen door, was a trapdoor leading to the root cellar – a cool place for vegetables and fruit saved for the winter and a safe place for the family during raging storms and fierce winds. He entered, crying and screaming for help into his empty world. He pulled the door down above him to wait out the fire. Life, as he had known it, had come to an end. For a black boy in north central Arkansas, there were almost no options.

\* \* \*

“Wake up, lazy head. It’s already six-thirty. Don’t make me drag you out of that bed.”

It had been ten-year-old Tommy addressing his older brother, Sammy, still asleep, or so he had wanted his brother to believe.

“Go away. It’s Saturday. I get to sleep in.”

“Not this Saturday. Remember. You and I and Curt and Wally are camping out this weekend. We’re to meet them out front in twenty minutes. I let you sleep in until the last minute. I got flapjacks and sausage ordered and, on their way, up to our suite from the kitchen. Do I have to come over there and roll you out onto the floor?”

“Try it and I’ll roll you . . . flat.”

At fifteen, Sammy usually had better comebacks than that one. He blamed it on the early hour. The fact it had been so poor irritated him into wakefulness. He turned onto his back and did the little boy, rub his eyes thing, with his closed fists. He stretched his big boy muscles.

Their grampa, who owned the small hotel where they lived, in the small town of Ledger, Arkansas, knocked on the open door and announced the food had arrived.

“May need your help prying him loose this morning, grampa. He’s claiming a Saturday morning exemption.”

“A little food down his hollow leg usually holds him in an upright position and improves his outlook markedly.”

The aroma clearly did just that.

They arrived on the front porch just as the other set of brothers turned onto Main Street and began approaching the hotel from the south. The two younger ones ran to meet each other. The fifteen-year-olds settled for a smile and a single, over the head, wave. Teen boys were the most effective conservers of energy in the known universe.

They were each carrying a knapsack [backpack] with a bedroll, blanket, and other essentials. Curt brought the pup tent, touted to easily sleep the four of them. The smell of musty canvas did not make the top ten of Tommy’s favorite aromas.

“Tent, or rifle and fishing poles,” Curt asked, meaning which part of his load was Sammy willing to take off his hands.

“I get the willies around firearms, so I guess I’ll take the tent. Our cook in the hotel kitchen packed sandwiches and fruit and cookies and who knows what else – just in case the fishing doesn’t pan out. She takes very good care of us. Tommy’s got that sack.”

Tommy pointed to the knapsack that was tugging hard at his young shoulders.

“Not sure where *Purdy Bluff* is,” Tommy said. “South and east, Wally told me?”

“About a mile as the crow flies – we’ll cover a mile and half gettin’ there. Sits along the first bend in *Blue Stone Creek*,” Curt said as he tightened and arranged the folded, green, tent on Sammy’s back. He found it surprisingly heavy. “There’s a cold-water spring, a cave, and the best swimmin’ hole in the area. Uncle Cliff said it was gonna hit the nineties today. A swim will feel pretty good about three, I’m thinkin’.”

Tommy turned back toward the hotel knowing grampa

would be watching through the window upstairs. He was. They exchanged a simple wave. Tommy trusted his older brother, but – at ten – in a pinch, grampa was still his go to guy. There was often some degree of unease as he transitioned from his relationship with him to his brother. That day with *two* big guys, he felt sure things would be fine.

Wally, also ten, had become his best friend since their move to *Ledger* several months before. At school – fifth grade – they vied for top scores. It was a friendly competition that seldom drew blood. That had been Tommy’s humorous take at some point. The two of them agreed it was hilarious.

Sammy and Curt both took their roles as older brothers seriously and had good relationships with the younger boys. They were in most of the same classes at high school over in *Wilson*, the school to which the youngsters from *Ledger* were bussed. Their interests diverged for the electives – Sammy was more into art and music and Curt, shop and what was then called the manual arts – mechanical things. His father owned one of the two gas stations and garages in *Ledger*. It was assumed Curt would someday take over.

They set out down the access road that ran alongside the railroad track. That brought back scary memories of their previous encounter with the German spies. [Book One - *Deep Cover: 1940*] Tommy’s version of that story had grown in all dimensions since that scary, if exciting, night. It remained private within the family, however. Spy’s didn’t out themselves. After ten minutes, they crossed the rails and headed due south.

By eight o’clock they had all shed their T-shirts and hung them from their belts. The young ones were soon out of their shoes and socks as well. It was a perfect early spring day for boys their ages.

“You can hear the creek straight ahead,” Curt said cupping a hand behind his ear as if to prove it. “Along in there it’s shallow



and wide and runs across a lay of good-sized rocks. Downstream – on east – it narrows and becomes deeper and quieter. That's where the swimmin' hole is. We'll soon be able to see the bluff off to the east."

Back in Chicago, where Sammy and Tommy had grown up, directions were always given as right or left. In rural Arkansas, it was north, south, east or west. It was taking some getting used to. Just in case, ever prepared, Tommy, carried a small compass clipped to his belt. Sammy just licked his index finger and stuck it up into the air. It never helped but usually got a laugh. That was all he wanted. He figured with helpful Ozarks natives close-by, he'd never really need to be directionally responsible, anyway. Tommy noted his brother shed responsibility like waxed paper shed water. He had entered that in his notebook of great phrases he hoped to someday work into the books he planned to write. That one about shedding blood was also in there.

"Me and my brother has a great place for the tent at the bottom of the bluff," Wally said. "How high's that bluff again, Curty?"

"Close to eighty feet and almost straight up and down. You'll see two caves in it. Only way to get to them is by repelling down from the top."

"I am eager to experience my initial observation of it," Tommy said, thinking a very tall ladder *would* be a legitimate alternative. In a rare moment of restraint, he didn't mention that.

Wally and Curt shared a grin – Tommy's way with words often provoked that response. Tommy understood. Tommy didn't care. Tommy hoped they learned and grew from the exposure to proper, mainstream, spoken, English. He had taken his grampa's admonition to heart and never made fun of the local, Ozarkian form of the English language. In fact, he had grown to like and occasionally even used the frequently heard, *y'all*, as in '*y'all come back now, ya hear!*'

The quiet trickling sounds grew into louder splashes and dashes as they approached the creek. Now, *that* was something they had never heard back in the big city. They were growing to enjoy the simple sounds of nature. That's not saying they didn't sometimes miss the more substantial noise of rushing traffic and horns and angry truckers – windows down – raising fists and swearing at their routine adversaries during the morning commute (and noon commute and evening commute). It was more a salute – an expression of comradery – than displeasure. They all knew that.

By nine o'clock, they had the tent set up near the circle of stones – the fire circle, a permanent feature of their campsite. They placed the supplies inside the tent, safe against squirrels and coons behind carefully secured canvas flaps. It all lay beneath the thick, strong, branches of a half dozen, decades old, Oak trees. The branches were just beginning to break out in the tiny green knobs that signaled they were making ready for another season of shade and another crop of acorns.

Only Tommy paused to consider such things. The rest were content to gather wood, make a fire, cut roasting sticks, and unwrap the hot dogs and buns that Curtis and Wally had brought. When they had a choice, boys at camp would opt for substantial hot dogs and buns over wimpy egg salad sandwiches cut in fourths as dainty dos for old ladies' teas. One might bet whether that assessment would change come the late afternoon rumblings of four empty bellies.

There was a steep trail that meandered to the top of the bluff. Nothing about the area up there – moderate slope to the edge of the cliff, slippery grass, rocks at the ready to trip those who trod the space – resembled anything other than potential disaster. The big boys held onto the little boys by the backs of their belts. The view went on for miles – Curt said thirty miles on a day without fog above the low, rolling hills. It was impressive. Tommy

felt sure grampa would enjoy painting it.

Satisfied with the view, Wally led them on a roundabout trail up and down the hill that lay behind the bluff. For Sammy and Tommy, it went off to the right. For Curtis and Wally, it went off toward the east. They had a good chuckle about that. Their differences were the stuff of shared interest and fascination – often humor – rather than the source for suspicion or ridicule.

Tommy had pointed out to his brother that using compass directions was far more accurate and dependable than their old right, left, front, back approach. Turn around and east remained east but turn around and left became right.

The heat arrived early; accordingly, so did the swim. They enjoyed the water for an hour or so, knowing it would be right there later if a repeat were desired. The creek was largely spring fed, which kept it running and cool even during the predictable summer dry spells – or so said Wally. Skin-and-bones, Tommy, found it a bit chilly, initially, but that boy's inclination to remain ever active seldom allowed shivering for long. He soon joined in: racing the length on the surface and underwater, diving for a large chunk of shale, doing flips off their big brother's shoulders and the really big one – seeing who could hold their breath the longest under water.

Afterwards, they lay back on the grassy bank watching the clouds and talking – Tommy and Wally about snakes and cicadas and the possibility coyotes roamed that area; Sammy and Curt about gentler things beginning with 'g-i' ending in 'l-s' and cuddling an 'r' in between. How normal could things be?

Sammy pointed into the distance, downstream. Someone was walking in their direction – short, slowly, aimlessly. A boy, younger than the big guys and probably older than the younger ones. They all took note. It was a black boy – not common in the lives of Curtis and Wally, but old hat for the boys from Chicago. Tommy stood, ready to welcome the lad to their gathering.

“What you doin’?” Wally asked clearly disturbed.

“Going to see if he’s hungry. Things don’t look right for him. We have plenty of food.”

“But he’s a darkie, and he’s wearin’ nothin’ but underpants.”

“I noticed both those things right off. I’m sure we will learn about his attire. The skin color you refer to has several advantages over ours. Skin *that* color doesn’t burn in the summer and in the cooler months, it more readily absorbs heat from the sun – like the perfect cooling/heating system for a human being.”

“But, he’s a *darkie!*”

The repeat had been intentionally ratcheted up with feeling.

“I don’t understand your point,” Tommy said.

Sammy sensed the problem and tried to handle it.

“Where we came from, people with dark skin like that were almost as numerous as folks with light skin like us. Our best friend was black. He couldn’t speak or hear so we spoke sign language with him. He was a great kid. Wish you could have known him.”

“You had a darkie for a *friend?*” Curtis asked, clearly amazed – sincerely dumbfounded.

“Yeah. Like I said,” Sammy came back, thinking what he had offered should have been sufficient.

“That sure wouldn’t work here,” Sammy. “We’re not allowed to walk the same street as one of them.”

With that, Tommy *had* to have a say.

“*Them* are officially called *Negros*. Like *we* are officially called *Caucasians*. If it makes you feel any better, the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet are usually white as yours and mine and their newborns often remain virtually white until they’re several days old.”

When the boy spotted them, he stopped, clearly hesitant to continue. He may, in fact, have backed up a step or two, perhaps thinking about retreating. Tommy took several steps in his direction and motioned him toward them. That clearly did not represent the majority opinion of his group, by then all standing.

Curtis put his hands on Wally's shoulders and drew him back from the encounter. Sammy moved up beside Tommy.

The stranger eased forward but executed a dead stop some fifteen feet away. Tommy moved toward him, hand out.

"I'm Tommy. This is my brother Sammy. The others are Curtis – the tall one – and his brother, Wally. What are you doing out here all alone?"

As he drew closer, Tommy could see the boy had been crying. It started again, with shallow, occasional sobs like gasping for breath. His arms hung limp at his sides, palms forward, the picture of despair.

"How about a name to begin with?"

He sniffled. Still not looking Tommy in his face.

"Jeremiah Washington."

"Something is plainly wrong, Jeremiah. What can we do to help?"

Jeremiah wanted to turn and run.

Jeremiah wanted to reach out and clasp the hand still being offered and never let go.

Tommy made it easy, slipping his hand around the boy's and patting it with clear compassion.

"No need to be afraid. We're all nice people, here."

Overtaken with discomfort, Curtis eased Wally backwards with him for a second time – just slightly, but it was apparent. The city boys noticed. They could not understand Curt's take on the situation any more than he could theirs. Curtis found himself in his own bind – introduced as a nice person and yet finding himself extremely uncomfortable in the presence of the new arrival. Those two things were at odds at the most basic level, stirring disagreeable, foreign feelings deep inside him.

Sammy decided to address the issue as he saw it. He moved up beside his brother, also offering his hand – more than that, he drew the clearly desperate lad into him, held him close,

patted his back, and spoke to him.

“Tommy and I have had black friends – we are from up north – so we are comfortable with you. We would never harm you. Our friends here have not had that opportunity, so they are not prepared to relate well to you just yet. I assure you, they will do you no harm. Now, what’s going on with you?”

He had provided his friends with what he hoped was a believable ‘out’ that legitimized their inaction – their initial standoffishness – their unpleasant feelings. The boy should understand the situation Sammy had described.

Jeramiah continued to stand there enfolded by Sammy’s strong arms. As much as Tommy wanted to draw the story out of him, he was wise enough to follow his brother’s lead and remain quiet.

Presently, without changing his position, the boy offered a few words.

“They come and burnt our house down last night –fired up a cross in our yard. They’re all dead. I’m scared. I don’t know what I’m gonna do. Got nobody. Got no place. Got nothin’.”

That opened things up for Tommy.

“Well, for one thing, you have *us* now. I know we’re poor substitutes, but we will see to things for you. Were you hurt in the fire?”

He shook his head against Sammy’s chest and stole his first, prolonged, face to face, glance at Tommy. They were about a match in size – Tommy tall for his age and Jeramiah short for his.

He released himself – gently but not risking full separation. He dabbed at his cheeks with the back of his hand.

Tommy continued.

“Who did that thing? Do you know?”

“The whities – robes and hoods. They always burns a cross. They always burns the house when they burns a cross. Two

neighbors had it done to ‘em last month. Daddy had shotguns. He said they’d keep ‘em away. He never got to the guns. He didn’t keep ‘em away.”

“How far back is – was – your house?”

“Don’t know. Been followin’ the creek since the middle a the night. Should a stayed, I’m thinkin’ now, but I just couldn’t. Didn’t want to see ‘em.”

Tommy did private calculations.

‘He had been walking very slowly. At one or two miles an hour for, say, six hours, that would be six or eight miles.’

Not accurate at best.

He turned to Wally and Curtis.

“I estimate about seven miles. What’s seven miles to the east?”

“Mostly farmland. A couple a tiny settlements back across the creek. Few roads and those are dirt. The access road continues along the track. It’s a really poor area. Mostly darkies – a few Indians maybe.”

Sammy thought it positive that Curtis was willing to extend the conversation beyond what had been required by Tommy’s question. He couldn’t blame his friend for his tough reaction – it was clearly how he had been raised. He would not push it with him or ask things of him relative to it. He hoped Tommy would follow his lead.

With that, Tommy took over the care and nurturing of Jeramiah Washington. They moved toward the tent.

“Hungry? We have food. Let’s get you out of those dirty pants and into something clean – I have some shorts that should fit you just fine.”

Fifteen minutes later, the newcomer had freshened up in the creek, donned the replacement walking shorts, and was working on an egg salad sandwich – its size and shape seemed just fine to *him*. He kept close watch on the others. It was the

closest and the longest he'd been with 'whities' in his entire life.

It was a tossup who was the most amazed and mystified by the activity – Jeramiah, or Curtis and Wally. The fact their friends hadn't picked up and left seemed like a good thing to Tommy. In a strange way, it also felt that way to Curtis and Wally. It was as difficult for Tommy to understand Wally's reaction as it was for Wally to understand Tommy's. Neither would write the other off because of it, but it added a new and mysterious layer to their relationship.

Curtis hitched his head at Sammy to follow him to a spot a few yards away for a conversation, private from the others.

"You got yourself into a awful pickle, here, Sammy. You all but promised the dark . . . the Jeramiah kid that you'd take care of him. You can't do that in this place. You just *can't*. You take him home with you and I'll guarantee that hotel'll be up in flames by this time tomorrow. It just ain't done regardless of how strong you feel about it – and I can see you feel strong about it. I can't even come close to understandin' it, but I can see it."

"I see. Thank you for that. I had no idea. I mean I understand there are feelings. I just didn't understand . . . well, what you've just indicated. And you're right, *not* understanding, any plans I would make could be disastrous. It *is* what I would have done – taken him home. That leaves me up a creek without a paddle."

"They say that in Chicago, too? *We* say that."

"Next question, then," Sammy said starting over. "Any place we can stash him for a while – until I can figure things out. My family believes he deserves protection and safety. Not going to try to explain that further or convert you here and now."

"First," Curtis began, "it ain't *we* whose doing' the stashin', it's *you*. My daddy keeps tellin' me I'm not too big to git a thrasin' and if he found out, I'd be spittin' blood and wouldn't be able to walk for a week – I mean it. Second, I might know a place."



“Thanks for not just abandoning us. You are one complex fella, Curtis. I’ll give you that.”

“I don’t understand what you mean, but that’s okay. Sometimes when I’m with Tommy, I don’t understand one thing he says. I mean I know the words – but the way he runs ‘em together and on and on like he goes, I don’t git it. Anyway, you got two choices: Here in the cave – you ain’t seen it yet – or the secret room at the hotel.”

“Secret room at the hotel? I guess I don’t know about that.”

“Don’t you suppose that’s why it’s *secret*? You know the loadin’ area beside the freight elevator on the top floor.”

“Sure. Just outside the door to our rooms.”

“There’s a secret panel on the wall to the north. It’s not generally known in town. When I was eight, I had a friend who lived there, his mom managed the place. Me and him found it one stormy day while we was explorin’. Later, he told me that the handyman told him it had been part of the underground railroad back before the Civil War. You know about that?”

Sammy nodded.

“A network of people moving negros out of slavery into the north and the freedom that gave them.”

Curtis nodded and continued.

“He died – the handyman – and the boy moved to New York so, I’m probably the only one in these parts that knows about it. Got a electric light in it and a hidden slit to look through out into the loadin’ area.”

Of the two places he had suggested that one certainly sounded like the better one. It would be handier and better in every way for the boy.

“Room’s small but it’s safe – maybe seven feet square. Maybe some bigger – been a long time ago.”

“We, I mean Tommy and I, need a place to keep him until I can figure how to get him up there. Even that’s just temporary. We

need to find him a family and a safe place to live.”

“No real safe place around here for a – what did you call him – a Nebo?”

“Close but no cigar. Negro.”

They shared a look and a nod.

“Anyway, they can’t be safe as long as the KKK is operatin’ and as long as there is *Negros* and hateful white men, there can’t be any long-term safety like you’re lookin’ for.”

“Let me get this straight. You don’t want to have anything to do with Jeramiah, but you don’t seem to hate him – like you said about the KKK men.”

“*He* never done nothin’ to me or my people. I don’t hate him. Don’t know him. May have reason to, though, if daddy finds out what I’m a doin’. You have to understand, darkies and whites just ain’t supposed to be nothin’ but separate. Around here, they’s more like animals than people. You touched him before. I shivered at it; I really did! If I did that, I’d feel dirty for a month. I would. That’s just how it is.”

Sammy had known Curt since they moved to Ledger that past November. It was March. He knew he was a good person and yet. There was a lot of sorting out to do. That was neither the time nor the place.

“So, a temporary place for him to stay?”

“The old Henry farm. Half mile from town. House burned when I was a tad. Barn’s still standin’. Nobody’s workin’ the place. That loft should be safe if he keeps out of sight.”

“You’re a good person, Curtis. I’m grateful you’re part of my life.”

“Thank you. Sorry we can’t understand each other on this.”

“Let’s promise to keep trying to do that. Alright?”

“Afraid it’s like mixin’ oil and water, Sammy, but I won’t say no. Just so you understand, though, I’m doin’ this for *you* not *him*.”

Sammy nodded. He wanted to shed a tear. He didn’t.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The New Burden

They returned to the three younger boys who, by then, had quite a chat going. Each had a stick poking the fire – it went with being that age, as they recalled.

Sammy explained about the short-term plan – the loft and then the secret room.

“I just knew there was a secret room in that old hotel,” Tommy said. “Where there’s one, there may be more. I’ll keep looking.”

Sammy continued, speaking to Jeramiah.

“In the long run, we want to help you get a really good family to live with. You got any relatives?”

He frowned. Curt interrupted.

“He means, Kin?”

He shrugged and shook his head, tentatively. Clearly, he really didn’t know. It soon became clear that he had no helpful information. Later, Sammy would engage Tommy’s head on the matter. It was the best resource he knew.

One of the next, crucial, questions would be: could that four-man pup tent sleep *five* in a pinch? Sammy had the distinct feeling that it really didn’t matter; Curt and Wally would probably be ruffing it in their sleeping bags, outside, under the stars if Curt

went with his feelings.

Jeramiah was one of the saddest boys, any of them had ever known – that much they *could* agree on. He sobbed periodically without crying. He had reason to be sad in the worst of all ways, of course. He had just lost his entire family – everything he had ever known was gone forever. Tommy thought if that weren't enough, there seemed to be nothing but unhappiness and fear and desperation for black people in that part of the world. That was so unfair and worse yet, he had not one idea about what he could do about it, and Tommy had a fix for all the World's ills.

Curtis and Sammy sat at the fire while the three younger boys moved inside the tent inventing a game using stones and sticks. Whatever it was, it seemed to involve a good deal of emotion.

“What a day, Sammy. I never did think there would be a time in my life when I'd be spendin' time like this with a boy like that. Now, I got two more things to say and they are both uncomfortable to say. First, I been brought up a Christian, so I know I need to believe that the kid's a alright kid like a real person. I'm sort of even feeling bad for him. I never ever thought I'd hear myself sayin' that. Then there's the thing I really wish wasn't so, but can you see he sleeps way on the other side of the tent. If I was to accidentally touch him during the night, I'd probably jump outta my skin and choke the life outta him. That scares me, you know? No, of course you don't.

“I hear how bad that sounds to you, Sammy, but I can't change that about me – not now, anyway. I seen Wally rub up against him a few minutes ago just like it was all normal. My inclination was to pull him outta there and leave for home. It made me sick to my stomach. I guess I'm a terrible person, but I don't have any way to change that. I can't understand how you just naturally treat him like he's a real person. I been told all my life –

well, let me just say it like it is. I been told all my life that darkies ain't human – they's like somewhere between dogs and humans, and, frankly, most a the white men in this part a the country, prefer the companionship of a good dog to one a them. When I was very young, my grandpappy told me if I touched one, the color would rub off on me and stay forever so everybody would know what I done.”

“You’ve been giving me things in twos, today, Curtis. Here are two for you. First, I don’t think you realize how courageous you are being – just opening up to consider the problem. From what I’ve learned from you, it sounds like most men around here could never allow themselves to do that. Second, you are in the midst of one of the most important lessons any human being can learn – that it’s mostly impossible to hate somebody that is different from you once you let yourself get to know him. It sounds like that lesson is impossible to learn around here because nobody allows white people and black people to rub shoulders. How can you learn about each other if you force the two groups to stay away from each other? It tells me ignorance is preferred to experience – to facts, I guess. How did people’s inquisitive nature become so totally stifled?”

“It?” he asked.

“Prejudice. Bigotry. Intolerance. Maybe even hate. Tommy calls it ‘irrational negative perception grown out of forbidden inclusion’.

Curtis made momentary eye contact and nodded. There was even a quick, weak smile. Whether that indicated he understood the idea, or just that it *did* sound like Tommy was not clear. He looked away. Sammy continued.

“I am sorry all this is so difficult for you. I have no way of imagining how it is to grow up being taught the things you have been taught, so I don’t know how to be sympathetic to your situation. I also understand that you can’t understand about my

upbringing. As you can see, I have to be judgmental about it; I believe you are wrong just as you have indicated you believe we are wrong.”

“This really ain’t so much about me as it is about you – a damn Yankee who’s turnin’ my world upside down and part a me really hates you for that.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Let me finish. You are the greatest kid I’ve ever knowed – Tommy, too. The both of you. All the kids – heck, everybody – in Ledger thinks you’re the greatest things God ever made. And now, here you are, that greatest kid, tellin’ me that me and my people’s been thinkin’ wrong about somethin’ all our lives – back generations. And worse than that, even if I want to change and think like you, I probably can’t, and even if I could, I wouldn’t dare ever show it. Somebody’d shoot me dead and cold, and I mean that for sure.

“There’s one more part to it, then I’ll need to stop talkin’ about it. I’ve gone to church every Sunday a my life – sick or not – and nobody’s ever seen you three in church even once, and it’s me and my family that’s actin’ so unchristian about it. I don’t want to talk about it. I hate being mixed up like this and I hate you for doin’ it to me. I’m sorry for that but being sorry don’t change it. It’s the first time I’ve ever liked and hated the same person at the same time. Damn you, Sammy.”

“Sounds like that may be the way you’re thinking toward yourself right now, too. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.”

There was a long silence. Eventually, Curtis spoke.

“You know how to stop hatin’ yourself, Sammy?”

“Not sure. Never been in that situation. I can tell you this. I’ll help anyway I can.”

Curtis swiveled where he was sitting, knees up, arms across his knees, chin on his arms. It was just enough so he was no longer facing Sammy. There were tears. Tears were the least

of their concerns at that moment. Sammy was relieved his friend didn't want to talk about it because he had no idea what to say – where to go with the conversation. He figured his friend's reaction – turning away – might have been as much about being ashamed and uncomfortable as it was about hating him. Maybe being confused rather than ashamed. Being ashamed about hating just might be the biggest thing a person ever had to face. To continue hating, you didn't dare be ashamed about it. And if you were ashamed about it, you were believing you had to give up a truth you had always known. That surely rocked the very foundation of one's life.

Sammy busied himself by arranging the fire for the night. He said that last one thing he thought might help.

“Seems like a great night to sleep outside, to me. How about you?”

Curt understood. They put the kids down for the night inside the tent – Tommy in the middle – and rolled out their sleeping bags. Sleep didn't come but neither spoke of it.

Sometime after midnight, they heard noises – something approaching their camp. Before they had time to react, two men entered the light of the campfire. Curtis knew them both. Sammy didn't.

“Boys,” one of them said – his full greeting as he looked around.

They were carrying shotguns. The second man had a coil of rope arranged on his shoulder.

“Lookin' for a darkie kid. Seen headin' this way. Has no business comin' over here.”

“Coming over here from where?” Sammy asked, slipping out of his sleeping bag and taking a position cross-legged on the ground.

“Over around Dexter – darkie town.”

“Can you describe him?”

“What’s wrong with you, kid. He’s a darkie – black as the ace of spades as ugly as a damn monkey.”

“Do you have a name, then?”

“*Darkie kid*. You got a mouth boy. You better watch it.”

By then, Curtis knew exactly what was going on – they had come to string him up. Sammy was getting the same message. He wondered if Curtis would hand him over to them. He wondered what *he* would do if Curtis went that route.

“Got a visitor, out here boys,” Sammy said, raising his voice to make sure Tommy got his message.

He hoped they would have time to hide Jeramiah – maybe send him out the rear flap.

The second man walked to the tent and moved aside the flap with the barrel of his shotgun. He bent down to get a better look inside. Sammy could feel his heart pounding against his ribs. He wondered how his friend was reacting. Curtis had, by then, also left his sleeping bag and was squatting between it and the fire chewing on a piece of grass. He remained quiet.

“Why ain’t you answered my question? You seen him or not.”

Sammy turned to Curtis and put it all on the line.

“I suppose they’re referring to the black kid we saw across the creek mid-afternoon. About twelve or so, wouldn’t you say?”

He had risked the boy’s life counting on Curtis to follow his lead. He had no assurance he would – go against long time family friends – fellow church members – probably shirttail relatives – everybody in Ledger seemed to be related in some way.

There was an awkward silence during which Tommy emerged from the tent nudging the barrel of the man’s shotgun away and toward the ground.

“What’s going on out here?”

He turned to the men as if it were the first time he had realized they were there.



“Oh. Hi. Late to be out walking the creek isn’t it? We have food if you’re hungry. Water if you’re thirsty. A fire if you’re chilly.”

He stepped closer and offered his hand.

The men ignored him. Sammy was afraid they might manhandle him. He unfolded his legs so he could sit back on them – a better position in case he had to take some sort of action.

“Who’s in there? Come out here, now!”

Wally crawled out and stood up.

“Mr. Ebsen. Mr. Egan. What brings you out so late?”

Lookin’ for a darkie kid. About your age, I suppose.”

“If you need one, you can find lots a them on over at Dexter, you know.”

Few had ever played dumb better than that.

Sammy began to take heart. At least one of their friends was playing along. He noted it was the one who knew Jeremiah the best.

The second man entered the tent on all fours. Sammy was afraid the end was near. He began poking at the supplies and knapsacks with the barrel of his gun. He turned to the blanket folded over supplies along the right side and pulled it away. Sammy was sure things had just gone from bad to worse to grave.

“He’s right here, Eb. They was hidin’ him on us.”

“Oughta whip the lot of you. Bring him out here. Lots a good hangin’ branches. Let’s get on with it.”

They stood their guns against a tree as they made preparations. The clear leader of the two, Eb, looped the rope over a branch – the noose had already been prepared. The second man held Jeremiah in front of him. The boy went limp in his arms. He had no struggle left in him. He had clearly given up.

Eb moved to him and snugged the noose around his neck while the second man lifted him shoulder high.

Neither Sammy nor Tommy could have predicted what unfolded next. Curtis stood, raising his rifle, which had been under

the edge of his sleeping bag. He walked to Eb and put the end of the barrel up against his temple.

“Either a you two make one more move to hurt that boy and I will blow Eb’s brains out.”

He looked at the second man.

“Lower the boy, gently.”

He turned to Sammy.

“I suppose if I put a hole in Eb, we’ll have to do the same with his partner, here, so he can’t say what he saw.”

“I think you’re right. Suppose either one really does have brains inside their head?”

“For one, I’m eager to find out. Sort a hope they *don’t* cooperate.”

They removed the noose and put the boy down. He moved quickly to Sammy who, again, opened his arms and held him close. Tommy and Wally collected the guns.

All Eb had left was a threat.

“Just wait ‘til your paw hears about this, Curtis. You will be hamburger.”

“That remains to be seen, I suppose. What we know right now is that we need to deal with you two, quickly.”

Tommy had to add his bit to the intimidation the others had already begun.

“I suppose they know how to dig graves. *You* suppose that, too, Sammy?”

“Don’t shoot us,” the second one pleaded, hands folded in front of him. We won’t tell. I promise on God we won’t.”

“You believe them, Sammy?” Curtis asked.

“Not at all.”

“So, then, got an idea?”

They both looked at Tommy. He stepped forward.

“We’ll unload the guns, Wally, and put them on the fire. The mahogany stocks should burn brightly.”

They took a moment to see to it.

Tommy went on.

“I wonder if leather boots burn, Wally?”

“I suppose so. Never seen it happen, I guess. Could be like a scientific experiment, I suppose.”

Tommy offered the order.

“You two lay on your bellies.”

Curtis and Sammy had made believers out of them. They followed instructions.

The boys removed their boots and tossed them onto the fire.

“What do you think about socks, Wally – burn or not?”

“Never know ‘til we try, I s’pose.”

They burned.

“Levi’s?” Tommy asked. “I’m pretty sure they’ll burn.”

They burned!

The shirts and vests and jackets burned.

The skivvies burned.

“I believe they are ready to be tied to the tree, Sammy,” Tommy said. “We’ll leave that up to you and Curtis. I wonder what the men in town will think when they learn these two were bested by a couple of kids. Lot’s a laughing and pointing, I’ll bet. Probably never live it down. May be best just to move away.”

Tommy relieved his brother of his clinging ward so he could help Curtis secure the men to a tree. Wally took charge of the rifle. No two men had ever been more securely tied in place – hugging the tree from opposite sides, their arms bound together where they met.

“Hadn’t planned on breaking camp so early, guys, but I suppose that’s best,” Sammy said. “What do you say?”

There were nods all around – except from Jeremiah, who, drained emotionally and physically, sat on the ground beside Tommy, unable to move and unwilling to speak. Tommy wrapped

an arm around him. Jeramiah leaned his head against his shoulder and sobbed.

The men ran their mouths trying to cut some kind of deal. Tommy had a streak of brilliance.

“Sammy, I think the men should be blindfolded while I get the camera from the tent.”

Sammy understood his brother was on a roll. Curtis frowned and looked at him. Sammy shrugged – and pointed at his head indicating his brother had some idea and he had no idea what it might be.

“We will untie their neckerchiefs and fold them into narrow blindfolds. We want to make sure everybody will recognize them when we show the pictures around.”

Sammy worked on Eb. Not understanding the first thing about what was really going on – well, understanding nobody had brought a camera – Curtis went along and worked on the other man.

The men continued offering money and possessions and lifetime monthly payments in an effort to work a deal.

Tommy took over.

“Smile, gentlemen. Make them big and broad so they will be easily seen in these full-length shots. The light from the fire illuminates everything just fine – and I do mean everything.”

Somehow, Tommy managed believable ‘camera click’ sounds with his mouth.

“We’ll get you for this,” Eb said.

“I doubt that. Just two or three more. Stand still. Say cheese if you’re of a mind to.”

More sounds, then he went on.

“There is one possible solution, but I doubt if you’ll go for it.”

“What? At least say it,” Eb came back, enraged but ready to listen.

“Okay. Here it is. You tell nobody about what went on here – ever – and we’ll not show the pictures. We’ll keep the pictures safely hidden – prints in several places in case you would go back on any agreement we may reach here, and we’ll make certain several people know where to look in case anything – that’s *anything* – ever happens to any of us.”

“Okay. We agree. We won’t tell nobody nothin’. Now untie us.”

“Nope. Not part of the deal. Here is something that is part of the deal, though. I took your wallets out of your pants before we added them to the fire. Found a total of nineteen dollars between them. Do I hear you asking that we please add that to Jeramiah’s relocation fund? Huh? Do I?”

“I guess.”

“I need more than *that* anemic response. I need a resounding, yes, please! Some enthusiasm.”

“Yes, then. Take the money.”

“We accept your generous offer in the name of our friend, here. He would thank you himself, except you have frightened most of the life out of him. You are truly despicable human beings – that means the most disgusting and baddest of the baddest.”

Sammy had one last question.

“Why didn’t you wear your hoods and robes tonight? What will your friends think if they see these pictures and you’re not wearing them – or anything else, come to think of it? Isn’t that against the rules or something.”

Tommy couldn’t resist offering an answer to the first question.

“I just imagine they sent them out to be washed clean of the kerosene smell and the smoke from the fire they set last night that killed this boy’s family.”

They knew they had done nothing to change the minds of the two men and, later, might even understand they had taken too

much pleasure in the acts of humiliation. They believed they could live with that.

By three o'clock, and still under a full moon, they had broke camp and were heading back to town by way of the old Henry barn loft. Curtis knew the farm and offered to go ahead and make sure there would be no unexpected surprises waiting there. Sometimes, teen couples used it as their private place.

He returned to say it was safe. He remained out front while the others took Jeramiah inside and up the ladder. They arranged what hay they found into a soft place for him to lay. They left a blanket, a canteen and a sack of food. Tommy emphasized that he was to remain there until he returned the following night to escort him to a better location and reminded him that if anybody approached, he should cover himself and his supplies in hay. They worked out a recognition signal – *'This is Tommy, Jeramiah'*. Tommy had gone for easy over clever. Jeramiah indicated he understood but was reluctant to let go of Tommy as the boys prepared to leave. They lingered for some time, hoping to help Jeramiah gain some sense of familiarity, if not comfort, with his new place.

He had no way of understanding about the white boys. Their actions represented everything he knew in his heart and mind could not be true, and yet it was all he had to hold on to. He had to leave his past and the love and stability and safe relationships it had provided – he had been given no choice. He had to embrace the present even though there was nothing about it that he could trust or understand. The greatest sadness was suddenly laced with his greatest fear – white people, always the source of his family's greatest fear and pain. The only people he had to trust were the people he had always been taught he must never trust. Fear – even terror – were faint descriptions of what he was experiencing.

The four entered Ledger as the rising sun began casting

them in tall, faint shadows on the ground out front. Curtis and Wally turned south on Main. Sammy and Tommy turned north. The separation was not unfriendly, but it was made mostly in silence. It had not been the Saturday any of them had anticipated. The sudden responsibility to the boy and to themselves felt heavy and unfamiliar.

Their grampa was surprised to see them – the boys, back from a carefree weekend, a full day early. He made ready to hear the story sensing it was, for some reason, going to be solemn.

“Do you want to clean up and then we can go down for breakfast?”

“Sounds good,” Sammy said.

Nothing about his tone or manner sounded, ‘good’.

They had not discussed how much or what to tell their grampa. It was a hurried planning session while they showered and changed.

“I’m not sure we should lay this responsibility on grampa,” Sammy said.

“My thought, too. The less he knows the less he can be held responsible for. Around here, it appears this kind of responsibility is downright dangerous.”

“So. Our story? You know he has already determined that things are not okay.”

“I’d go with a white lie – Wally got sick and we cut things short. Tired because we were up the night with him. We’re both disappointed in having to cut things short and concerned about his wellbeing.”

“I can live with that,” Sammy said.

“I hope that’s true – that we *can live* with it.”

Tommy put his hands to his throat in the universal sign for fear of death.

Twenty-five minutes later they smelled more like perfume than campfire. They had exchanged their long faces for smiles,

assumed an upbeat take on life, and were seated in the dining room downstairs – well before it was open to the guests.

The cook – Cookie – approached.

“I know we are early,” Ollie said, “but it is special circumstances. Just bring some of everything, I guess.”

Tommy thought it was humorous and sent the appropriate grin in his grampa’s direction. He began a monologue in which he related the good times – the hike, the swim, the fire, the tenting, the good conversation. Their grampa seemed interested and had appropriate ‘grampa’ questions here and there. He expressed condolences about Wally’s illness and offered words of optimism about future outings. The boys believed he bought it.

Sammy was glad he had Tommy. His ability to carry on about any topic, on any occasion, at any time, with anybody, relieved him of needing to disguise his new burden.

Speaking of burdens. Two men entered the room – two men *in black suits* entered the room – two men *in black suits carrying black attaché cases with dial locks* entered the room. What had Ollie said before: Federal Agents looked like Federal Agents – full stop.



### CHAPTER THREE

#### Away They Go, Again!

Ollie left with the men. The boys remained at the table. Sammy scraped what was left in the several serving dishes onto his plate. Tommy rescued one flapjack to butter, sugar, roll up, and eat like a piece of dessert bread. It was as much to assert his right to it as it was that he really wanted it.

“So, what you think, Tommy?”

“Not bad as cold flapjacks go. The sugar helps.”

“Not that, idiot. The men, the agents, showing up now?”

“I say let them find their own breakfast.”

“Be serious. What’s up? Something left over from last time – Chicago or Gilead?”

“Maybe the railroad has sent a bill for the use of their trains and the FBI thinks Ollie should chip in to pay it.”

“You are impossible.”

“I’m trying to say, I have no idea what’s going on.”

“It would be more helpful if you just said that.”

“Not as much fun, anyway, I just said that.”

“Sometimes . . .”

“I know. Sometimes you love me so much you can hardly contain yourself. You’re *usually* the patient one, Sammy. What’s

wrong with you?”

“This whole Jeramiah thing, I guess. It’s just sunk in what a big deal it is – men willing to kill other men – and kids – just because they were born with a different color skin and maybe, also, willing to kill those of us who try to help them. That’s terrifying and if you are not terrified there is something wrong with you.”

“Consider me properly terrified and my state of perfection continues. I’ve been working on the whole matter, and I think that little community of Dexter could be our solution.”

“What about Dexter? What solution?”

“We go there and see if we can’t run down some of Jeramiah’s relatives.”

“You just plan to waltz up to the city limits – probably stripped to the waist so there is no doubt you belong to the white race – and win them over with that adorable face. It works on old white women, but I doubt if it will have the same effect on the residents of Dexter. Even if they don’t shoot us when we get within fifty yards, I doubt if they will trust us enough to cooperate. Maybe we could just leave Jeramiah at the city limits sort of like Moses in his basket in the bulrushes and let them take care of him.”

“Be hard to find a reed basket that’s large enough,” Tommy said, extending the image.

“I was serious.”

Tommy offered a nod and presented his thoughts.

“You offered some good points. Here’s my sudden rethink. It is my worry that if KKK participants are brazen enough to burn houses of individual families, they may be getting bold enough to up their game and attack the entire community. I’m saying that, upon reflection, I don’t think putting him there would be safe. Even if those dastardly men leave the town alone, what kind of a future is there waiting for him there – poverty, sickness, ignorance, a life to be lived in fear? Something new is required – some bold, new plan.

Having allotted himself thirty seconds in which to formulate that bold, new plan, he continued.

“My revised plan comes in two parts, Sammy. First, and of immediate concern, we find out where and how to send Jeremiah to a place on north where he will be safe and that will guide him into a happy and productive adulthood. Then, second, we encourage the same thing for any others in that town that want to leave – one family at a time. I figure somebody in Dexter must have some sort of connection up north.”

“Like a twentieth century underground railroad!”

“Right. Like that.”

“You think the KKK will allow it?”

“Two possibilities. If they merely want to rid this area of Negroes, then it should work fine. But, if they really just get their kicks from terrifying and killing them, then probably not. For safety sake, it must be kept secret. I don’t think we should share it beyond our family.

“That means you and me,” Sammy said. “I think grampa just got busy with something else. Anyway, it seems clear that Curtis and Wally don’t want to kill them or let them be killed. He really came through for us back at the campsite.”

“Yeah, but Curt and Wally aren’t the KKK.”

“I wouldn’t doubt if their father was,” Sammy said. “I think our friends would be willing to just ignore them if they kept their distance.”

“Well, anyway, that’s still white men dictating the lives of the black people. I’m not willing to settle for something like that.”

The conversation fell silent.

Tommy munched his flapjack.

Sammy licked the platters clean – not literally. Tommy kept losing *that* bet.

They stacked the dishes and delivered them to the sink in the kitchen. It was too early for Jackson to be there. They left for

the lobby to wait for their grampa and find out what was what – Tommy’s words.

“They’ve been upstairs for a long time,” Sammy said, at last.

“Thirty-one minutes and twelve seconds,” Tommy came back, breathing on the crystal on his watch and polishing it on his shirt.

“Think things are okay? Maybe one of us should have been watching the back stairway.”

It had been Sammy, suddenly the Nervous Nelly – like Tommy said, a reversal of their typical roles.

“They were authentic agents, Sammy. The silent one was the one who came with Agent Harry the last time. Remember, he left out the front door before Harry and grampa came downstairs.”

“I guess I hadn’t paid attention to him. If you say so. You’re the one with the brain that takes pictures.”

At thirty-three minutes and three seconds, the three men stepped off the elevator. The trio of threes did not escape Tommy’s notice. Interesting but meaningless. The agents left. There were no handshakes. Ollie moved toward the boys who stood to greet him.

“Finish breakfast?”

“You probably just agreed to a plan with the FBI to put our lives in peril and all you have to say is, ‘Finish breakfast?’” Tommy said.

“He’ll tell us what he can, when he can,” Sammy said.

Some degree of normalcy seemed to have returned to the relationship.

“Nothing for you two to be concerned about. I will be honest and tell you there is something but in your best interests, the less you know the better.”

“Well, we have something also,” Tommy began clearly a bit miffed and rolling out his tit for tat.

Sammy jumped in to sidetrack the revelation.

“Yeah. We are working on rescheduling our camping trip with Curt and Wally. Probably in a couple of weeks – weather permitting.”

Tommy understood he had been told to shut up. He did not fully understand why. He shut! There *would* be an upcoming conference about it.

Their grampa also understood that Sammy had quieted his younger brother but wouldn't press it.

As Tommy would someday write, ‘The air grew thick with awkwardness’.

“What you up to today, grampa?” Sammy asked.

“I have several new paintings to prepare for hanging in the gallery. I must say they are selling much faster than I ever anticipated. Perhaps you two should take to the brushes and give me a hand.”

Smiles but no commitment.

“What will you two be up to today?”

“Maybe get a head start on homework for next week,” Tommy said.

It had been fully unconvincing.

“Can we talk, grampa?”

It had come from Sammy. Tommy was more perplexed than ever. First, *no* talk, then *yes* talk. He kept quiet to see what his brother had in mind. Typically, Sammy's motives were fairly transparent.

“Of course. We can always talk. Where – I mean public talk or private talk?”

“Private, I suppose. You and Tommy take the elevator and I'll run the stairs and see if I can beat you.”

It had become one of the important goals in the young man's life. Tommy was solving race relations in the state; Sammy was racing elevators in the hotel. Things *were* back to normal.

They settled into their usual spots in the living room, grampa in his comfortable, overstuffed chair, his feet resting on the matching ottoman, and the boys on the couch – one sitting back against an arm at each end – bare feet fighting over the ever-disputed territory in between.

“Daddy long legs!”

“Sister short legs!”

It was not stellar conversation. Shins were in pain but not bleeding. A typical happy family time. While the boys’ twenty toes reenacted the battle of Appomattox, Grampa lit his pipe and waited. That time, it was a draw.

“So, what’s what, as one of you has often remarked?”

Tommy smiled and remained quiet, more than a little intrigued about it. It wasn’t that Sammy never asked questions. He did. Some of them, Tommy would admit, were even good ones!

Sammy took over.

“We didn’t see it over in Gilead. We’ve just begun to see it here.”

“I’m going to need more, Sammy.”

“Prejudice. Me and Tommy just don’t get it, and since we figure it’s your fault that we don’t, we think we’d like to hear you talk about it.”

Tommy wasn’t sure if he should be pleased or distressed about how he had been included without consent or even inquiry, but he let that go – regardless of the awkwardness of his brother’s presentation. With the topic out in the open, he could understand his Sammy’s concern. He would keep his important questions until grampa had his initial say.

“I see – the strained black/white relationship so obvious in this part of the world. It was present in Chicago, too, remember, although, true, there was not the organized movement to kill off the race like we see here with the Ku Klux Klan. As you already understand, I’m sure, it is a left over from the days of slavery but

is fed by the insecurities and hopelessness felt by some white men here today. More on that dimension later.

Back then, slaves were understood to be inferior – fact. White people were superior – fact. Everything about the society of the day was set up to prove it – fact. The general, sincere, belief was that Negroes were of inferior intelligence and would never have been able to care for themselves without the benevolent assistance of their owners. The sanitized version of the day went like this: In return for work, the owners gave them a good home and cared for them. To this day in the movies and on the radio, black people are portrayed as fools.

“Unknown to run of the mill Americans was the fact that before they arrived here in this country, the cultures they had been plucked from in Africa had been highly complex and well-organized civilizations that had been functioning very well for centuries. Actually, few would have believed it even if that information had been made available. It would have threatened the foundation of their beliefs about their own ‘obvious’ superiority. For some it quelled the anguish they had to feel about the institution of slavery.

“Once black folks were set free around the time of the Civil War, and proved that when given a reasonable opportunity, they could take care of themselves, many white people took that as a belief-shattering put down. The idea a black man could prove himself to be as capable as a white man – the *fact* – went against long held beliefs – the *opinion*. One way to suppress that was to find ways of keeping the black people so poor and so oppressed that it was generally impossible for them to demonstrate their smarts and savvy and ability to succeed. Refusing them access to mainstream society where they could enter the give and take world of our free enterprise system, pretty well assured they had no chance at success. That, I might add, persists to this day in many parts of our country.

“Over the years, the fear that they might prove themselves the white man’s equal, turned to hate. In *fear* – a feeling – a person believes his own existence may be threatened by the other person. It remains internalized. In *hate* – an intention – a person’s sense of security has deteriorated to the place he believes he must destroy the other person to protect himself. Those are the extremes, of course, but I use them to make my point.

“There is another aspect to prejudice as well. Man has a keen survival instinct – above all else, he needs to stay alive. Only in extreme situations can that be turned off – like protecting one’s family and loved ones. It works like this: you can never be sure that somebody you don’t really know is safe – isn’t a threat to you. Without such verification, they automatically fall into the *treat as unsafe* category. Until the two groups get to know each other, that distrust must continue in the service of survival – man’s most basic need, you see.

“Without contact and mixing and the understanding such activities allow and promote, the groups must keep up the distrust – the fear. If even one instance of wrongdoing is committed against them by a member of the other group, it is easy to take that as proof they are *all* dangerous – at least they must all continue to be mistrusted.

“As the gulf between the groups fails to lessen, fear widens, and hate – ultimately, the desire to destroy – develops. It is a normal human reaction to avoid sources of fear. When the whole idea of seeking to understand another group is abandoned, hate often becomes the only alternative – the only thing that fosters a true sense of long-term safety.

“When the culture requires such separation between groups – for safety sake or any other reason – the likelihood that the groups will get to know each other well enough to eliminate the fear-gap is virtually nonexistent. Fear is based *inside* the person who is afraid and is therefore extremely uncomfortable –



‘that person brings out this bad feeling that I have to carry inside me’. When you can make that other person worthy of your hate, however, it seems to be based *in them* – ‘they deserve to be hated’ – and almost never, ‘I have a need to hate them’.

“Hate is the natural steppingstone to the annihilation of those who pose the threat. Get rid of them and I will be safe. We saw it in the Nazi philosophy a few months back and it continues in Europe to this very minute. Fear them, separate them, hate them, get rid of them – that is the progression wherever useful contact is forbidden or for some other reason is unobtainable. In caveman days it was the people in the cave on the other hill: they were *probably* different – they wore their hair differently and made different sounds; they *might* hurt us or take our possessions. Fear, based on opinion, not facts, kept the groups apart, being apart fostered ignorance of each other, it was one small step to hate and war – in the service of remaining alive and safe. Put another way, hate justifies killing without the need for logic or facts. Sadly, to this very day, young soldiers are being trained to blindly hate the enemy – that makes it easier for them to kill them with no guilt.

Some groups, of course, have to be feared because they are dangerous and ruthless with solid facts to back that up – the mob families in Chicago, for example. Fear based in facts is quite a different thing from fear based in unfounded opinion and ignorance and lore passed down from generation to generation – the kind we are experiencing, locally.

“A corollary of all this is the contention, ‘He will take what I need’, which threatens the most basic need, ‘I must remain alive’. If we believe some other group will take what we need, then, to assure our own survival, they must be eliminated from our life – forced away or killed.

“And finally, there is the generational aspect I just mentioned in passing. Children of prejudiced parents have that prejudice handed down to them. It is the most dangerous variety

of hate, I believe, because the child has no defense – no logic or way to question the ideas or verify the facts. He accepts what his parents tell him like they do Santa Clause and the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. After a few generations, the original reasons for the hate have become lost and all that's left is the fully irrational hate. There is no easy way to unscramble that level of prejudice, because the original reasons are no longer there to unravel – to show its fallacy with logic and facts. That is basically what we see here. It has become accepted, as deep-seated beliefs, that Negroes are an unwelcome sort of dangerous trash that needs to be at least hidden and separated, if not destroyed. For some folks, this aversion is slight and can be set aside given the proper setting and influences; for other folks, it is major and becomes a central, driving force in their lives.

“It can become the classic example of the well-established belief that, ‘I can raise myself up by putting somebody else down. It provides an excuse for not having to work to improve yourself.’ You can find discussions of it in most any Introduction to Sociology or Psychology textbook. We have seen how Hitler is using it in Europe – ‘Become a Nazi and you are immediately better than Jews or whomever the target of the moment is. It is terrifying because it works – in the minds of insecure and less capable men at least. When a man finds a target and defines it as inferior to him, he magically believes he is better than it – by definition.

“If I define myself as the greatest artist in the world, then all other artists are poorer than I. If I define my race or social group as the greatest in the world, then all others are poorer than mine. There is no easier method for rising to the top. No proof is ever required. “I’ve decided (opinion) I am better than they are, therefore, they are less worthy than I am. It gives me permission to do simply terrible things to them if I choose to.

“I have shared with you how deeply concerned I am that even subtle prejudice in our society can become a natural step

toward Nazism. All Hitler requires is that people consider the possibility that some group might be inferior or harmful. He can, in predictable steps, skillfully inflame that into full blown hate. America is probably in a more vulnerable position than Germany and Europe because of our history of enslaving men of a given color – of believing we had the right to do that.”

Tommy really wanted to tell his grampa that during that past weekend they had seen, in action, what he was talking about and prove his points for him. Sammy knew his brother’s mind and shook his head. They still hadn’t had that conference.

Sammy didn’t want to tell grampa what they had in mind, because he was concerned that he would caution them against such a dangerous undertaking – if not come right out and forbid it. Grampa was not one to forbid things unless he believed the boys’ safety was in jeopardy or they lacked the necessary knowledge or wisdom to deal with it. Sammy knew that what they were contemplating represented *all* those things. If a teen boy – generally the least sensibly, careful member of the human species – thought something was in jeopardy, it most certainly *was* in jeopardy.

Tommy tried to approach it from a different angle.

“You have always taught us that just because somebody else’s ways were different from ours, they weren’t necessarily wrong and ours weren’t necessarily right. What is the *marker* that says what you have taught us is not true? I mean, you have also taught us that prejudice for any reason is bad – inappropriate, at least. That seems to indicate that some beliefs are just *wrong*. Like those of the KKK, correct?”

“You present a good point. Here is how I make that judgment, Tommy. I believe other people have the right to believe what they want to believe as long as that belief does not hurt or harm anybody. Believing you have the right to beat your slave, was just not right according to my beliefs. Believing people of a

given color do not deserve adequate housing or protection or medical care or civil rights, is just not right according to my beliefs. Believing children of a given color should not have access to a good education is just not right according to my beliefs. Believing people of a certain color may not share restrooms and drinking fountains and bus seats, is just not right according to my beliefs. Certainly, proclaiming the right to burn people's homes and kill people of *any* description – because of *any* difference – is not right according to my beliefs.”

Tommy figured he had just received justification for the plan they were thinking about setting in motion – receiving his grampa's blessing of a sort without him knowing it. He also knew he was stretching the point – *really* stretching the point – while not going against the basic philosophy. He turned the obvious negative concepts, into their positive opposite: 'It is important to help those who are in danger of being unjustifiably hurt or harmed by somebody else's beliefs.' He could live with that and he was sure he could convince Sammy to live with it as well.

“Thanks, grampa,” Sammy said making ready to stand. “I'm sure we will have more questions, but you've answered the main ones. “That freedom of speech thing draws a fine line doesn't it. Maybe it needs to be restated: that speech can be free and unrestricted only as long as it doesn't *unjustly* hurt' anybody. We will need to discuss that some other time.”

There was a knock on the door. All three of them acted startled!

It was Cal with a package.

“This come in the mail for you yesterday, Sammy. Got stashed under the counter. Just found it. Sorry for the delay. Figured you might be wondering where it was, so I thought I'd bring it up. All the way from Chicago – that's up north in Illinois.”

“Thanks Cal. I owe you one.”

“Secrets, grampa. Secrets!” Tommy said after looking at

the return address.

The boys knew what it was. Ollie let them enjoy their mystery. They moved with it directly to their room.

Grampa's birthday was just days away. He remained a *shoe-shorned* old man in a place where all men and boys wore *boots*. They had taken a step to resolve that. While Tommy carefully unfolded the brown paper from one end of the box, Sammy tore it away from the other.

They set the lid aside. Tommy checked the size – perfect.

“Just like the picture in the catalog,” Tommy said, verifying what he believed needing verifying.

“It was sure worth the money to have them customized with that design Madge helped us with,” Sammy said. [Madge managed the hotel – book one.]

“The outer sides of each boot bore the impressed design of an artist's pallet with two brushes and a pot of paint. It had been hand-stained in bright colors. There had never been a set like them. The boys were pleased.”

“You know what he'll say right off,” Tommy said putting on a grampa voice.

“He'll say, ‘Too pretty to wear out in public, boys.’”

They had a chuckle.

“So, two questions:” Tommy began. “*First*, do we wait until Tuesday, his birthday, or give them to him, now, and, *second*, do we wrap them or just hand them to him?”

“A wrapped-up boot is going to look just like a wrapped boot – no surprise about it. I vote *not* to wrap and *not* to wait and just hand them to him – we walk up to him and each of us takes one out from behind our back and we say, “Happy birthday, grampa.”

“I can live with that,” Tommy said, even though he thought changing it to, ‘*happy bootday*’, would be simply hilarious.

“When?” Sammy asked.

Tommy became playfully dramatic.

“Five minutes from now, the building might have shaken itself into crumbles under the power of an earthquake, you know,” Tommy said. “I’d say we better hurry and get the deed done before it’s just *too* late.”

They shared grins as they put the boots in place behind their backs and left for the living room.

“What’s this – the procession of the armless monks?” grampa said, laying the paper aside and going along with whatever it might be.

They produced the boots and offered the wish. He was clearly taken by surprise and examined them carefully. He removed his shoes and slipped into them.

“My, my. These are just gorgeous. I’ll be the envy of the men down at the barbershop.” He paused and then continued. “Too pretty to wear out in public, boys.”

The two of them broke into fits of laughter – Tommy falling to the floor and rolling side to side – at ten, still not an unusual behavior for him.

“What?” Ollie said, smiling with them but clearly puzzled at the reaction.

“I said that’s exactly what you’d say,” Tommy said.

“Glad I am predictable, I guess. I don’t know how to thank you, boys. Clearly one of a kind. I have never before received a one of a kind gift – well, the two of you, of course.”

He stood, working the boots with his feet, like everybody does when trying on new footwear. He took several steps.

“Actually, quite comfortable. I was given to believe it would take some time to break boots in – to get used to them.”

Tommy had an observation.

“Actually, it is probably more breaking in the feet than breaking in the boot, but we can explore that at another time.”

“Be sure to wear socks,” Sammy offered apparently from firsthand experience. “In fact, wear two pair the first several times

you wear them to keep blisters from happening.”

“I will heed your suggestion. Thank you. I’ve seldom ever received a more thoughtful gift. That dolt that raised you must have done a pretty good job.”

It called for a family hug. Those had been more frequent when the boys were younger, but at that moment it felt natural and appropriate.

“This is really dumb, you know,” Sammy said. “Three grown guys with wet cheeks over nothing but a set of human horseshoes.”

“I call it appropriate and refreshing,” Tommy came back.

“I second Tommy’s response.”

“Okay, then, I third it, I guess, but what just happened here stays here, okay, *Tommy*.”

Grampa and Tommy shared a wink. Since big brother had turned fourteen, they had often shared winks at Sammy’s expense. He never caught them at it.

“You know, you two would probably lose your ability to wink entirely, if it weren’t for the practice you get from all the entertaining stuff I do for you.”

Okay, so he *had* caught them at it.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### Lamebrainediest?

After hearing that Ollie had college degrees (who might have let *that* slip, Tommy?) he had been asked to be on the board of Ledger's fledgling town library. He had accepted. That Sunday afternoon he and the other board members were visiting the long-established library in Wilson, the town where the Ledger children went to school. It was to include a meal along with the planning session. He didn't expect to be back until after nine o'clock. The grandsons would make good use of the time.

They were on the fifth floor of the hotel standing at the wall Curt had said contained the panel that opened into the secret room.

"So, I assume he told you how to open it," Tommy said sliding the palms of his hands across the surface of the wall. That was how it was always done in Abbot and Costello movies.

"I guess he didn't, come to think of it. Put your head to work on it. Why do you think I take such good care of you, little brother; to handle just these kinds of circumstances."

Tommy didn't respond. He was pleased that Sammy believed he was taking good care of him. He supposed that he was. He began talking things through to a solution.

"In all the secret panel books I've read, there is a latch of some sort within the framing or decorative work. Here, that is represented by the ornamental, wooden, one by fours, that define the edges of the wall, floor and ceiling, and the four uprights and the cross piece that divide the wall into five, 24 inch wide, floor to ceiling panels. Run your fingers along the narrow edges of all those pieces to see if there is something resembling a latch – something that pushes in or could be pulled out."

They worked for some time.

Sammy was squatting.

"Here's something," Sammy announced at last. "Like a slit right under the center cross piece. See!"

"Yeah. I can fit my fingernails into it. That must be the peep hole Curt mentioned. Well disguised, I'll say that much. It doesn't seem to be the latch, though."

"What's this?" Sammy asked.

He removed a slender slat of wood – six inches long, half an inch wide, and no more than a sixteenth of an inch deep. It was sunk into a slot on the lower edge of the crosspiece above the slit. Out of habit, he handed it to his brother for evaluation.

"It is certainly non-essential to the wall; therefore, its purpose has to be something else – something special. Good eyes, by the way."

"Fingertips, actually."

"I have long suspected you were meant to be a safecracker by trade."

It was worth a smile.

Tommy fiddled with the new stick, setting it one place and another against the wall in his attempt to make it somehow do something. It didn't. He got to his knees to continue that process

below the horizontal trim strip. It ran the width of the wall thirty inches above the floor.

“I will bet a huge amount of money on this next move, big brother.”

“Then count me in. I got maybe thirty-five cents left after buying grampa’s present.”

Tommy inserted the stick into the slit, narrow end first, and slid it from the left edge to the right.

‘CLICK!’

That section of the wall popped in along its right edge. He pushed it – gently. It opened back into darkness. A musty odor spilled out into the hall.

Sammy lit the area with his flashlight. It was not filthy – not clean – certainly better than the barn loft. It was empty and as advertised about seven feet deep and ten feet wide. They entered.

“A lightbulb hanging on a wire,” Tommy said moving his brother’s hand, so the beam from the flashlight illuminated it.”

He reached up and turned the switch. He would have lost that bet – it lit – unfrosted – delicate filaments, glowing orange, visible inside – 40 watt – many years old. It offered plenty of light for such a small space.

“Need to get one of the old mattresses we ran across stored up in the attic,” Tommy said. “Need some sort of water container – big enough to hold several days’ worth. Also, need to put in a supply of food that won’t go bad – I’m thinking ham sandwiches and bacon and jerky and apples and oranges.”

“We can get that from the kitchen,” Sammy said. “Probably should order it up just a few at a time so nobody gets suspicious.”

“We can borrow a four-gallon coffee urn for the water. Only used for parties so it won’t be missed.”

“Need a pillow and a couple of blankets,” Sammy added, and bucket for him to do his duty in. Not very elegant but probably as good as he’s used to.”

An hour later the room was outfitted. Tommy added an extra light bulb in case the old one burned out.

“That was good thinking, little brother. Nobody else in the whole world would have thought to do that.”

Tommy always felt warm inside when he received a compliment from Sammy. They usually came in the form of quick, deliberate nods and knowing eye contact. To have one stated outright was extra special.

“All we need to complete the setting is Jeramiah,” Sammy said looking around. “When do you think we should bring him in?”

“Before grampa gets home. Jeramiah is expecting us this evening. Take, what, half an hour out and back?”

“That should be plenty of time. The barn can’t be ten minutes away, you think?”

“Closer than Curt thought. A little extra to allow for the unexpected won’t hurt,” Tommy added.

“Need to leave here by eight, I’d say, if grampa is due home at nine or so. His ‘or so’ is usually on the late side rather than the early side.”

They turned off the light and pulled the panel closed behind them. They replaced the stick that worked like the key – a knife blade should also work just fine, they decided.

“All we’ve really done so far is get ourselves into a pickle, Tommy. We’re going to have a kid in the room and nowhere to take him. And, we made him a promise. I can see us still feeding him when he’s thirty.”

It was worth smiles but underscored the real problem. Tommy had a suggestion.

“Let’s go talk with Doc Sounder. I’ll bet he’s not with the KKK. He seems like a kind soul and may know something that will be helpful.”

They stopped by the kitchen and picked up a few more sandwiches than seemed reasonable to the cook, but she didn’t

out and out question it. They stashed half in their room and took one apiece for an early supper. Each was managing the last few bites as they entered the doctor's office. It was in his home – a waiting area just inside the front door and his office and examination room behind that. They rang the bell on the wall.

Sammy took a seat. Tommy roamed the room looking at diplomas and such that hung on the walls. Presently, Dr. Sounder entered from his office door.

“Well, well, if it isn't the *Daredevil Duo* back from their railroading days. You've both healed up well, I see. What's next. Broken arms?” [References from book one.]

He smiled and offered his hand for a shake.

“Just came to chat if you have a few minutes.”

“Delivered Mrs. Harter's baby at five this morning – six pounds seven ounces. Other than that, things have been pretty slow. Come on into my office.”

“Now, what's on your mind – I guess that would be minds.”

He motioned for them to sit, closed the door, and made himself comfortable at his desk.

“We got a sticky problem on our hands, Doc. I'll let Tommy explain.”

It was not how Tommy would have begun the conversation, but he'd go from where it had been dropped in his lap.

“As you know, we're not only relatively new to Ledger, but we come from a fairly different culture – South Chicago. Up their folks mostly worked to get along – regardless of differences – and there are lots of them. I mean on our block there were at least four different languages spoken. Everybody just normally translated for anybody needing it. There were a half dozen skin tones. Genetic temperament ranged from calm to volatile. Most of us didn't let any of that build walls between us. If we disliked somebody it was because he was a lousy human being, not because of his ancestry.”

“And here, you find it different, is that it?” doc said more than asked.

“Partly, yes – the white/black thing. It’s pretty hard for us to understand. You have any words of wisdom?”

Sammy began to understand. He was feeling doc out for his loyalties – KKK or not KKK – before revealing their situation. Leave it to that kid to pave the way carefully.

“It is a generations old divide that defies logic or discussion, boys. One finds a way to live with it because to try and change it – well, first it would never work and second he’d likely find himself in a world of hurt – you understand my term?”

The boys nodded. So far, the man seemed to be leaning solidly in their direction. They’d listen a while longer before revealing the actual purpose of the visit.

“If the good people in this community – and in virtually every way they *are* good people – discovered I had treated a black person, my work here would be over – nobody would dare come to me anymore. Some, because they would disapprove of me. Some because if they did, they knew they would be ostracized – you know that word, *shunned* – of course you do. So, if I am to continue as the physician to this community, I must keep my distance. I hate that, but it is how it is.”

He looked from one to the other and paused before continuing through a smile.

“So, did I pass your test?”

“What?” Sammy asked.

“He has our number, big brother. I guess I wasn’t as sly as I thought I was. And, yes, I think you passed our test.”

“Now, about that sticky problem Sammy mentioned up front?”

“Forgive me if I continue in a cautious manner, Sir. Let me propose a hypothetical. What if, two white boys, found themselves in the position of needing to move a young black boy north to

safety because some despicable white men were determined to finish him off because he escaped death when they burned his family's cabin earlier in the week?

"What if they needed to find a good family for him to live with way out of his current home territory? Would there be somebody those boys could turn to in this community in order to find the help and guidance they required?"

"You pose difficult and complex hypotheticals, son. If those boys are caught with the black boy, their lives will be worth no more than his and let me be clear here, his is worth absolutely nothing to many of our residents."

"We understand that, Sir. We've had a run-in that fortunately we were able to turn on the two bad guys."

"Ah! The pants-less wonders of a few days ago. It was you two who were responsible. I should have known. They dropped by for assistance. I didn't ask. They didn't say. I'm pleased they thought they could trust me. Although every fiber of my being wants to know, I will never ask."

"Once things fall safely into place, we just might have another hypothetical to share with you relative to that. 'Til then, it's really best you don't know. Before you ask, no, our grampa doesn't know about it. He is currently very busy with some other important task. We don't want to bother him."

"Another way of saying he'd not approve, and you'd rather spare him and you such a confrontation."

"And he's not only a physician but also a mind reader, big brother."

"It often helps if a doc has that skill, boys."

They nodded, Tommy thoughtfully and Sammy to be polite.

"Let me offer you my own hypothetical. If such a contact were possible, would you think that hypothetical black boy could be ready to travel by tomorrow at say midnight?"

"Hypothetically, I am quite sure he hypothetically could –

be ready to travel, that is. He would be frightened, of course, and would have major reservations about trusting still another white person.”

“The trunk of my car. Between 11:45 and midnight. I will be called to a rural home north of town. Let’s make it appendicitis so it will be expected to take some time. I should return by five a.m. If the dome light in my car is on, success. If it is off, my trunk will still contain its package, and it will need to be unloaded before dawn.”

“Got it. My, my!” Tommy said. “I won’t ask any of the questions I have.”

“Perhaps, after all this is settled, another hypothetical can be considered.”

“One more thing,” Tommy said. “The pants-less wonders, as you dubbed them, generously put up nineteen dollars to help support the effort to resettle the boy.”

He removed the tightly folded bills from his pocket and placed them on the desk. Nothing else was said about it.

The boys stood. They shared smiles and shook hands.

“Before you leave, Sammy, I think your left hand needs to be rewrapped. I’d hate for anybody to have seen you two visit here and not get treated.” [Tommy’s hand had been hurt in the last story.]

“Oh, the pain, doc! Please do something!”

They left. Sammy made sure he waved at several folks – with his left hand, of course.

“Wow. That went better than I figured,” Sammy said.

“It did if he is what he claims to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Cleverly, he could have played our game with the full intention of delivering Jeremiah to his KKK buddies.”

“Didn’t enter my head. Do we go through with it?”

“Pretty much have to – with just one twist.”

Sammy always shuddered when his brother suggested,



*just one twist.*

\* \* \*

They managed Jeramiah into the secret room safely before their grampa returned. The lad trembled the entire trip. Later that evening, in their suite with Ollie, Tommy and Sammy made popcorn and hot chocolate and listened to their grampa relate the events of his afternoon and evening. It had been a fruitful time. The boys agreed to help organize a fundraiser so the local library could expand its facility and its offerings. Until a part-time librarian could be afforded, Sammy offered to recruit several high school students to man – or, more likely, *girl* – the library during evenings and on Saturday morning. It was a good feeling to be part of something positive where they weren't risking their lives. Tommy did mention that paper cuts could become infected. He would assemble a small first aid kit for the check-out desk – gauze, mercurochrome, tape, small pair of scissors – just the essentials. Sammy had, long before, stopped trying to discourage such things.

\* \* \*

The following evening at the appointed time, the boys left the hotel with Jeramiah, following the shadows of the alleys to Doc's place. It was immediately clear to all of them that he was much easier to hide in the darkness than either of the others. Tommy would add that to his speech about the advantages of dark skin. Earlier, Tommy had spent time going over the plan with him and handling his questions – as best he could. There were lots he couldn't, but he did promise the boy an improved life among good people he could trust. All that came on faith and he certainly hoped it would pan out for him.

At 11:50, Jeramiah entered the trunk. There were blankets and a pillow waiting – Tommy was disappointed in himself for not having thought of such things. He had to wonder if Doc had done all that before – it seemed to be too well organized for a first

outing. Perhaps the ‘new’ underground railroad was already in operation.

There were hugs, the lid was lowered, and the handle clicked into place.

“Now, Sammy, you go back to the hotel. If grampa misses me, you have to make up some story – I couldn’t sleep so went for a walk – something. I am going along on the floor of the back seat under a blanket to make sure things stay on the up and up.”

“That is crazy. I won’t let you do it.”

“Of course, you will. Should things go bad, I know I can’t stop them but at least, we’ll know what happened. I don’t plan on revealing myself. Now git!”

Tommy entered the back seat and disappeared. Sammy moved back into the shadows to think and wait for the departure. He knew what he *should* do – drag his brother out of the car and back to the hotel. On the other hand, the long-term plan of helping others leave was dependent on the success of what happened with Jeremiah.

The decision was made for him. Doc appeared with his bag. He set it on the seat beside him, started the engine, turned on the lights, and moved slowly north along Main Street. The car was soon out of sight and out of town.

“I should have *stopped* him. I *should* have stopped him. I *know* I *should* have *stopped* him.”

But, he hadn’t, so Sammy returned to the hotel. He set his alarm clock and placed it under his pillow. He would hear it. His grampa would not. It was not his plan to go to sleep anyway.

At 4:30 the alarm woke him. He had remained dressed except for his boots. He carried them with him down the back stairs where he slipped them on. He had foresight enough to leave a note on his pillow saying he and Tommy were going for an early morning run – meeting Curt and Wally at the creek. They would be home by seven or so.

There was a long, dark, three-foot open space that separated the hardware store and Hank's Grocery, which provided the ideal place for him to observe Doc's car as it re-entered town from the north. He would be able to observe the dome light – on or off. What was it again – *On*, if things had gone well. *Off*, if things had not gone well, and Jeramiah would need to be dealt with – removed from the car and moved back into the secret room. He would be relieved to see Tommy back safe and sound.

He thought back to his life in Chicago. At that time, in his wildest imagination, he never would have dreamed he'd be involved in such activities – first, combating German spies and then, establishing a modern-day underground railroad as a part of his war against the KKK. He wondered what his friend Derrick would think about such a turn in his life. The most dangerous thing he had done back there was placing a penny on a rail and letting a train run over it, flattening it into a long, thin, copper strip. Bent properly, after that, it made a fine ring. Use a nickel and you'd have a Tommy-sized bracelet.

Presently, headlights appeared out of the north. It was the moment of truth. Sammy felt anxious. He used Tommy's deep breathing technique, hoping it would settle him down. He didn't have time to determine its effect.

The headlights drew nearer through the blackness of the early morning hours. Then, there it was – the car – a tan, 1938 Packard. It moved slowly, which was how Doc always drove. Sammy strained his eyes – knowing Tommy would tell him *that* wasn't possible – looking for the first indication of the light inside the car.

It slowed making ready to turn into Doc's driveway. The light was off. What a disappointment. Wait. It came on as Doc left the car and went inside. Sammy moved cautiously to the car, which was parked in the shadows. He opened the back door. He

pulled up the blanket. There was *no* Tommy.

As it is often said, Sammy's heart stopped. What had he done, letting the kid talk him into such an insane undertaking?

"Boo!"

It had been a soprano ghost and had come from out of the darkness behind him. Sammy turned.

"Tommy! What the heck?" he whispered.

"When Doc removed Jeramiah from the trunk, he had to walk him half a block to meet the people. I observed what I needed to and then got into the trunk thinking, I was less likely to be discovered there. His trunk has one of those new inside latches, so inquisitive little kids don't get trapped inside. Next time we must point that out to the passenger."

Sammy let the whole idea of 'next time' go.

"So, the exchange seemed to go okay?"

"Yes. There were six black people. The only woman immediately drew him to her, and they just stood there for some time hugging and talking. Then, they walked into the night and I am assuming by now much of his terror has dissipated – that means . . .

"I know what dissipated means – dispersed, dispelled, dissolved, scattered. I have been so worried about you. Of all the lamebrained things you have ever done, that had to be the lamebrainediest of them all."

"As I recall, that's what you said when I saved your tail by head-butting that engineer out of the cab of the train engine a month or so ago."

"So, two of them! I'm glad you are alright. I've never been this worried about you and I've been worried about you lots of times."

"Really? How nice. Me too, of you, of course. Did that make sense?"

They turned off the dome light, quietly closed the car door,

and followed the shadows back to the hotel. The note was still in place. They were both ready for sleep.

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## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **One Tin Syrup Container at a Time!**

Several weeks passed. The weekend arrived and the boys set out for their long-delayed weekend of camping. Like before, they made camp at the base of the cliff, swam, and had hotdogs at the campfire. Curtis seemed uneasy. Both Tommy and Sammy noticed but hadn't said anything.

After lunch, Tommy opened the subject.

"Something wrong, Curt? You seem to be preoccupied – your head seems to be somewhere else."

"I need to talk with Sammy alone. You two git for a half hour or so. Be careful."

Tommy hated to miss any good stuff, but he felt a bit smug about pushing Curt to spill the beans – whatever those beans might be. He knew he'd learn about it later. He and Wally grabbed poles and went to the creek with visions of a half dozen fish for supper. Their visions tended to be over the top. There in the Ozarks, what had been dinner in Chicago – the evening meal – was supper. Dinner was a fancy lunch, like on Sunday or some

special occasion. It was one of the easier of the several cultural differences to which they were adjusting.

“So, spill it,” Sammy said.

“Not easy. Shouldn’t tell you. Need to tell you. I’m mixed up and that’s thanks to you and Tommy. I hate it – being mixed up.”

Sammy noted that the hate was directed at the situation and not at him that time. He took that as a good thing both in terms of the relationship and how the boy was coming to grips with his feelings. Curtis was not given to well-founded insight.

“Sounds serious. If you really think you shouldn’t tell me then probably you shouldn’t.”

They sat in silence for a while. Sammy’s willingness *not* to hear it, seemed to make it all the more important that he did tell him. Most guys would have goaded him into telling them. The Jansen boys were different from most any Curt had ever known. Maybe it was their intelligence. Maybe it was their common sense. It was more than either of those things. Values and beliefs, maybe. He figured Oliver was their secret weapon in it all. Someday he would open that up for discussion. Clearly, it should have already taken place.

“Here it is. If I ask you not to reveal the source, it would be like I’m a coward, so I won’t do that.”

Up to then, all Sammy understood was that his friend was very confused about something, that it was very important, and that revealing it to him was apparently necessary. Also, he believed it was in some way wrong or disloyal to do what he needed to do. Sammy understood it had become some sort of huge dilemma for him. Still, he sat patiently, letting Curt set his own pace.

“Okay. Here it is. Those men are out to burn another cross tonight.”

He stopped as if that might be all there was, or perhaps from that point on it was Sammy’s function to discover the rest.



Sammy tried to get something more specific.

“By men you mean the KKK members.”

Curtis nodded but kept a steady gaze into the flames.

“And by cross you also mean a house as well.”

He nodded again.

“I assume you know which house.”

Another silent nod. That effectively put the conversation back in Curt’s court. Sammy waited.

“I don’t know the family name. I’d have to take you there. The men like an early morning hour – one or two. By then most of them are soused – drunk if you’re not familiar with the term.”

Sammy nodded. He knew it but speaking one way or the other about it seemed unnecessary.

“So?” Sammy asked making it open ended in every way.

“So, it would be the most dangerous thing I ever done. If they found out . . .”

Sammy understood and didn’t press. He nodded and offered a gentle suggestion.

“Perhaps, you could provide directions and not have to make the trek with us.”

“Wouldn’t that make me a coward?”

“In my eyes, you have already made yourself a bona fide hero. I don’t see how going there will add anything besides endangering you and I would never want my best friend to put himself in unnecessary danger.”

That drew a quick turn of the head and eye to eye from Curtis.

“But *you* will go. I know you will – to warn them – won’t you?”

“Yes. I will have to speak with Tommy about it. He has the better head between the two of us. I listen to him. I watch out for him – the ten-year-old kid – but I listen to him – the really smart person.”

Curt nodded.

“Need to go just after sundown so you can be gone by the time the men get there.”

“I understand. Will you and Wally wait here for us to return?”

“We can do that. It’s a half hour walk – ten-minute trot – through a woods. That’s far enough away from here so we won’t be suspected in it. Our dad will likely be there.”

“Likely? You don’t know?”

“Nobody knows for sure. No names used. Word is spread. They assemble dressed – faces covered. Like insurance, so if any are caught by authorities, they can’t swear who they saw there. Like a way of tricking God – can’t swear to what you haven’t seen. They usually take three pickups. First come, first served. Once the trucks are full, the others go home.”

Sammy wondered how they’d trick God if asked directly, ‘were *you* there’? He didn’t bring it up. Curt was upset enough. Anyway, from what he had learned, those men were never caught and brought to trial – the police and judges were likely members of the group – *mob*, more like it. It made Sammy sick. More than that, the whole KKK culture continued to baffle him.

Curt gave detailed directions and a good description of the house. How he knew that – if he didn’t have any association with them – Sammy couldn’t figure, but, again, didn’t press. Could it be that he had done his homework, earlier, so he would have the information he knew Sammy would require? It certainly seemed like that.

Sammy finger whistled – his long-time signal for Tommy. The boys returned with six good sized fish. The best outing either of the Jansen boys had ever had. It was a double thumbs up greeting from the big brothers.

“I will need help cleaning them,” Tommy said. “I have watched the process and imagine I could manage, but a step-by-

step talk-through would be good.”

“You still talk funny sometimes,” Wally noted. “Thought we had that pretty well trained outa you.”

The others shared smiles. Wally had been serious. It had clearly been something he believed *should* be accomplished – the training out, part.

Wally attended to the instruction. The older boys arranged sticks on which to skewer the fish, then planted the thicker end in the ground, arranged so supper would be well done after just a few minutes over the fire. Supper, an hour after lunch? Why not?

Curt had brought a bow and, later, instructed Sammy in its use. He was surprisingly good – surprisingly from Curt’s point of view, not from Sammy’s. He was clever about such things even though his interests were less physical and more cerebral.

The younger boys developed a game of tossing knives at a tree – apparently the one closest to the recently shed katydid skin, got a point or something each time. The rules were not apparent to anyone but them and it appeared even they had to modify them to meet unexpected doings. They enjoyed the afternoon together. Curt suggested they put off exploring the cave until Sunday morning. Sammy was impressed that his friend’s parents had granted them a reprieve from going to church and asked about it. Curt’s answer was short and to the point.

“Because we’re with you two. The grownups take it as some sort of privilege for their kids to be with you.”

“Really? We had no idea. Why in the world?”

It was met with a shrug. Sammy wasn’t sure what that meant, but he let it go. It seemed being a Jansen boy was beginning to take on unrequested responsibility. He didn’t like that. There would be a brothers’ conference about it later. (Those uncalled conferences were beginning to stack up!)

In private, Sammy told Tommy about the upcoming, night-time hike. They understood the danger involved but didn’t speak

of it. Sunset arrived just in time for sunset (Tommy's take on it. He giggled himself silly!). They left camp. Curt told his brother that their friends just wanted to spend some night-time together alone in the woods – like a rite of passage thing. Wally bought it. Like most younger brothers, he treasured time alone with his big brother.

After nearly forty minutes of following Curt's directions, they came upon the clearing with the cabin. It was after nine o'clock. Sammy was beginning to think they had missed it, although the landmarks kept appearing in the proper order.

"The house is dark. We are likely to get our heads blown off if we approach it. What do you say, little brother?"

"Not sure. We could wait until one of them makes a trip to the outhouse and try to talk to him or her. I doubt if they'd carry a gun on such a jaunt."

"How about trying to look in a window?" Sammy asked.

"A possibility. I suggest on the rear. The moon is brightest to the front. Less possibility of being seen back there."

Cautiously, they moved to positions up against the rear of the cabin. They kept their talk to whispers. Each took one of the two windows.

"Looks like three rooms," Tommy said. The main room across the front and two bedrooms across the back. The door into the front room is open from this bedroom I'm viewing. What about yours?"

"Same. Too dark to make out anything inside the room. If it weren't for the moonlight coming in through the front windows, I couldn't even see that the door is open."

"Yeah. All that here, too. I don't see anybody. Doesn't mean they may not be in bed. Can't see to tell."

"Me either."

Sammy stood up straight.

"What's that sound?"

“A vehicle or vehicles, I’m thinking. Do you suppose the men came early tonight?”

“Could be. Or maybe the family is returning home from somewhere. Either way, we need to get back into the woods in a hurry.”

“Your room has a back door, Sammy. Pound the heck out of it before we leave – to make sure they are awake if anybody *is* in there. That’s their only chance for survival – being awake and armed.”

Sammy did just that then made a mad dash after Tommy into the stand of trees to the west – the way from which they had come.

From there they could keep an eye on the clearing but made sure they couldn’t be seen. A pickup pulled to a stop some twenty yards in front of the cabin. Presently, two more arrived. Unless it was one huge family living in that little cabin, it was the men. In the moonlight, it soon became clear that each truck carried a half dozen or so men in back in addition to the driver up front. Curt had been right about two things; only three trucks and the men were dressed in Klan garb. They were outfitted head to toe in white. Nothing but their boots showed below their robes.

The boys found they could get considerably closer to the men if they moved five yards to the south, nearer the trucks where a dense growth of brush continued. At that point, they were within ten yards of the closest truck. Still, Tommy used his binoculars to scan the area.

The second truck brought the cross. The men in the first truck quickly set to digging a deep, narrow, hole. They slipped the base of the cross into it and packed dirt around it. It didn’t stand straight but that seemed to be of no concern. One man lit a torch and held it high – some sort of expected signal or ritual, they suspected. From it, several more were lit. When touched with the flame, the cross was immediately consumed in flame – it had been

soaked in gasoline or coal oil before it arrived.

The heavy, black smoke smelled foul and sank, hugging the ground in the clearing. Two men from the third truck doused the house with coal oil – making sure the doors got a double dose so they could not be used as exits. Then, the men with the torches worked their ways around the cabin leaving the outside aflame – ground to eaves. In the end, they tossed the torches onto the roof. The wooden shingles were tinder dry and were soon on fire. Tommy noted it resembled a blackened marshmallow held too long in the campfire, so it burst into flame. It spread rapidly upward toward the peak. It had been a well-organized effort – most likely not their first.

Tommy had to wonder why so many men when only a half dozen actually took part. Cheerleaders or perverted onlookers, perhaps. Maybe the mob mentality in numbers thing imbued them with feelings of confidence or accomplishment. What kind of human being would come to take delight in watching a family burn inside their cabin?

“Nobody is trying to escape the building,” Tommy noted.

“That doesn’t make sense. What do you think?”

“I think something is way out of whack, big brother, and *here* is one *really big* out of whack. See where I’m looking with the glasses?”

“Yeah, at some guy’s feet.”

“Here, you look.”

“Oh, my gosh. Those are grampa’s new boots. What in the gehosophats is going on? Grampa with the KKK?”

“I’m thinking it is actually *Secret Agent Jansen*, undercover with the KKK.”

“He wouldn’t be a party to murder, Tommy.”

“No, he wouldn’t. I’m thinking he is behind all the ‘out of whacks’ we’ve discovered. It seems safe to assume that he has infiltrated the local Klan for the Feds, found out about the burning,

passed it on to the FBI, they removed the family and now just the empty house is burning.”

Sammy put it together for himself:

“The house aflame and the cross aflame but the residents are safe. We can hope. Do we call grampa out on this – ask for an explanation?”

“I vote no. If he knew that we knew, he’d prohibit us from participating – helping out. If he doesn’t *know* that, we know he can’t *do* it.”

“Sneaky!”

“Of course. Isn’t that why you keep me around?”

“I suppose there are several reasons – that probably being one. I think we should leave. It was a plan like you’d come up with – grampa’s, I mean. The men will probably never know they didn’t burn up the family.”

“I would think another success like this would just embolden them – give them the collective guts to do others and maybe more frequently.”

“Maybe embolden them enough to attack Dexter?”

Hearing his brother use the word, ‘embolden’, was humorous, but Tommy didn’t react out loud.

“What an interesting take, Sammy. You were way ahead of me on that one. I agree. We need to skedaddle.”

Once quietly clear of the immediate area, they broke into a trot. Sammy urged his brother into the lead – to set a pace he could easily manage.

Tommy wondered why the FBI would allow the home to be burned – shouldn’t they have saved it? Shouldn’t they have arrested the Klan members? Maybe without an actual crime, no charges could be pressed. Maybe they offered to pay the family for it or resettle them in a new cabin. He’d not dwell on it, since he couldn’t know, just then.

They were soon back at camp. They had discussed the

message they would give Curt.

He was sitting up beside a substantial fire, the rifle lay within easy reach. Their friend just might have been a bit uneasy there alone – with known, drunken, bad guys roaming the area. Wally was asleep in the tent. When Curt heard them approaching, he reached toward the rifle but then drew back as they entered the light.

“You are back early. I don’t want to hear about it. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Lesson One in how to flush one very good yarn down the drain. Tommy would fret over that. He hated having any of his well laid plans or, well-rehearsed explanations, stifled before they could be launched.

“Probably time to hit the sack, then,” Curt said.

Like before, the older boys used their sleeping bags outside. Tommy joined Wally in the tent.

Once settled in for the night, Sammy spoke, straight up toward the stars.

“I am going to say one thing because I believe you need to hear it. We saved three, maybe four, lives tonight. Thank you.”

Curt rolled over, his back toward Sammy. The significance of the move was not obvious. Regardless, Sammy had said what he believed needed to be said – what Curt needed to hear. Surely, his friend would see saving four lives as a good thing.

He saw the fallacy in that immediately. If a person hated ‘darkies’, saving them would *not* be a good thing. The Klansmen would be greatly disappointed had *they* known the truth. Curt had plainly broken with them – as agonizing as it seemed to be for him. Sammy believed that the news he had just offered had to have created a good feeling somewhere inside his friend. There are few harsher dilemmas than possessing a good feeling you believed you should not have.

By noon Sunday, it was clear they were ready to return to



town. They finished the food they had brought along and found themselves parting at Main Street at straight up one o'clock.

Grampa was just leaving the dining room as they entered the lobby.

"Didn't expect to see you back so soon or I'd have waited to eat."

"Fish took a holiday. Curt had homework due tomorrow."

Those had been Tommy's offerings. He figured they were the whitest of white fibs and they worked as a good transition back into family life at the hotel.

"Have you eaten?" Ollie asked.

"Not dessert," Sammy came back.

"More of that double crust peach pie, today," Ollie said. "I was saving mine for dinner/supper, later, but I have no scruples against getting a head start."

They entered the dining room. Tommy hoped the relationship would not seem strained. He understood he was prone to work too hard at making things seem normal in such situations – big brother had called him on it more than once. He tried to just relax and relate the things that he had enjoyed while away. It seemed to work. Sammy ate.

Tommy did check to make sure his grampa was wearing the new boots, thinking there might be a one in a billion chance he had loaned them to somebody else who had then appeared at the burning. Apparently, he hadn't. What were the odds – well, one in a billion, perhaps?

\* \* \*

Sammy usually sat with Curt on the school bus. That next Monday, he was already sitting with another boy by the time Sammy and Tommy arrived. It appeared to be the school bus equivalent of the sleeping bag move several nights before – a gentle shun. Sammy greeted him but slipped into another seat without drawing it out. Curtis busied himself looking out the

window. Sammy was initially puzzled about it but figured the inner workings of his friend's mind should be left to his friend. Obviously, Curt was taking steps to make sure the incident couldn't become a topic of discussion.

It did underscore, for Sammy, that because of the way he had meddled in Curt's belief system, he had forced a dilemma on him he had not intended. He could take responsibility by blaming it on his own ignorance and thoughtlessness, but that did nothing to help his friend get things back in whack – Tommy's well-taken concept. He had not understood well enough what a huge gulf there was between their beliefs and how that intertwined with Curt's self-image and system of loyalties and even, perhaps, his religion.

Tommy took advantage of Sammy's bus seat situation and sat with him the rest of the week. On Friday morning, Curt arrived late and moved directly to Sammy, hitching his head at Tommy, indicating he needed to give up the seat. He sat without a word placing a small folded scrap of paper on the seat between them. Sammy's first instinct was to hand it back, thinking he had misplaced it. He had second thoughts and palmed it, eventually moving it to his shirt pocket. Curt offered an ever so slight nod, apparently acknowledging it had been the proper move.

He initiated small talk. Curt took it up. Nothing serious or even really meaningful. The ride took fifteen minutes. Curt hurried off the bus first. Tommy was waiting outside when Sammy stepped down.

"What was that about?"

"Not sure. He handed me a note – well, sort of handed it to me. We have twenty minutes before last bell. Over there under that Elm. On the ground."

Sammy removed the paper and unfolded it so Tommy could also see it.

"Gibberish, I'd say," Sammy said after reading it to himself.

He handed it to Tommy.

“Probably not gibberish. More like a code. Let’s see, here. *‘Hot tea to be delivered Saturday morning syrup house at water overpass three measures east of tall, sheer, hill.’*”

“Well, I’ll be. I do believe old Curt came through on the side of goodness once again. His spleen must be killing him.”

It had been Tommy’s reference to the boy’s inner dilemma.

“I don’t get it, Tommy.”

“See if my translation makes any sense to you. Tea – or the letter T – represents a cross. Hot means burning. Delivered is obvious. Friday morning is obvious – time for the burning. I love this next part – syrup house – remember the Log Cabin Syrup tins made in the shape and design of cabins. A water overpass is a bridge. The location of the bridge is three miles – measures – east of our camp site. Clever, yet not too complicated unless you didn’t understand the context in which it was being offered.”

“That means tonight – early morning Saturday,” Sammy said. “I can’t believe he came through, again. I know how much he is hurting over it – disloyalty to all he’s ever known in order to serve some greater good he is struggling to evaluate – embrace even, it seems.”

“Did you just say that? It may have been the best said anything I’ve ever heard you say.”

“I have my moments. I got an ‘A’ on that essay in history I’ve been working on – I compared the forces underlying the rise of Nazism in Europe with the forces allowing the Klan’s mentality to catch on here in America. I owe thanks to grampa and to the questions you keep bringing up about it. You can read it if you want. It’s nowhere near as good as it would be if you had written it, but I am proud of it. Mr. Marks wanted to keep it for a few days, but I have the final draft at home.”

Somewhat humorously, Tommy put his hand against Sammy’s forehead as if taking his temperature.

“Temp normal. Just to satisfy me that you *are* my brother, however, I will need to see that little birthmark on your left butt cheek.”

“You insist on being the eternal Imp, don’t you? Regarding the mark, you will have to catch as catch can – there will no specific public viewing.”

Tommy could smile about it. Sammy continued.

“We will be busy after school. You need to think us up a good excuse for why we need to be away tonight.”

“Or we just sneak out after grampa has turned in. Maybe he won’t be home – if he’s involved in it again.”

“I guess we play it by ear. Can’t hurt to have an excuse prepared just in case.”

Tommy became quiet.

“What, little brother?”

“This ‘one syrup container at a time’ approach just isn’t addressing the big picture. We need a bold new methodology. It may be time to come clean to grampa. We seem to be working toward the same goal, separately. Think it’s time to join forces?”

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **The ‘Syrup Tin’ Memorandum**

The note on the ride to school that morning kept the boys wondering throughout the day about why Curt felt the need to use a code. Perhaps it somehow felt less like a direct betrayal because he hadn't just said it outright. Once they decoded it, maybe he believed it had become their responsibility. Perhaps he had reason to believe there was a chance it would fall into the wrong hands – likely, his father's. Wondering would neither answer the question nor help deal with the real problem.

To their surprise, that afternoon, while waiting to board the bus for home, Billy Winston, the Banker's son, approached Sammy and rather awkwardly slipped a folded piece of paper into his shirt pocket, patting it in place.

“Liked your essay, Sammy. Spoke loads to a lot of us. Have a great weekend.”

He moved away to be with his usual group of friends.

Tommy had seen it happen. He looked up into his brother's face and spoke.

“Something's going on. I suggest we wait to look at it until

we get home. We should not risk exposing him if it is a Curt-like piece of information.”

“I agree.”

They sat together on the bus then trotted from the bus stop to the hotel. Tommy used the elevator. Sammy used the stairs. It was nearly a tie – Tommy by three seconds.

They chatted briefly with their grampa who was painting, then went to their room and changed from their school clothes. They sat beside each other on the edge of Sammy’s bed as he unfolded the slip of paper.

“It seems to be, ‘Break the Code Week’, at Wilson-Ledger Public Schools,” Tommy noted, both intrigued and excited.

The message was short but not immediately helpful. Tommy loved it – a challenge. Sammy was not so sure – he was growing weary of such challenges.

*Th + i + ink > \$\$/K<sup>3</sup>*

Sammy held it so they could both see to work on it. Tommy talked through his initial take on it.

“Let’s say the left string is what seems obvious – the word think – like saying there is more to what follows than may meet the eye. Let’s say the symbol in the middle is a pointer – what we are supposed to think about. Then the hard part. A slash can mean so many things. Since it is in the form of a quasi-formula – ‘quasi’ meaning, ‘sort of like a’, in this instance – let’s assume the dollar signs are on top and the K<sup>3</sup> is on the bottom – dollars over K<sup>3</sup>, like 50% could also be written one over two, or ½.”

“Okay. Shall we assume the dollar signs represent money?” Sammy asked.

“I’d say so. But then it makes no sense – an undisclosed number of dollars divided by K<sup>3</sup> when we don’t know the value of K<sup>3</sup> either. Hmm. Unknown dollars over an unknown something-or-other.”

“Here’s maybe a way-out meaning for the denominator,”

Sammy said. “K<sup>3</sup> – 3K’s – KKK?”

“Very nice, big bro. But still, dollars divided by the Ku Klux Klan?”

“Going off topic for a minute, here, Tommy, but since I have a living breathing encyclopedia sitting alongside me, I’ve been wondering; where does the name, Ku Klux Klan, come from? Does it have some literal translation?”

“It does. It’s an illiterate combination of Greek and Scottish from somebody who thought he was a whole lot smarter than he really was. Originally, it was intended to mean *Family Circle*. It was coined by the founder of the hate group back in 1886, Nathan Forrest, over in Pulaski, Tennessee. I have more if you want it.”

“That’s enough. Thanks. You do amaze me, you know. I probably don’t tell you that often enough. Anyway, I had no idea about any of that. So back at it here – dollars over KKK.”

“Hey. You may have just translated it. Dollars *over* KKK. Let’s see, *over* could mean, more than, or more important than, or exceeding, or on top of. Hmm. Let’s try to figure into what context we must fit that?”

“Our only context has been somehow getting the best of the KKK – the burnings and killings,” Sammy said, trying to find that context.

“That’s right. But the formula requires us to put dollars *over* that. Ah ha! It may be an attempt to add a whole new dimension to all this. We’ve been looking solely at it all as KKK hate crimes. This may be saying there is another aspect that is ‘over that’ – more important than that – *money*.”

“How could that be? The folks who were burned out and killed had no money to offer anybody.”

“No, but what did they have? I’ll answer that. They had the land on which their cabins stood – or had stood.”

“So, the question may really be, who stands to gain

financially from the property now that it has been made available, so to speak?”

“Very good, Sammy. Well put. You are doing a lot of that recently. It is forcing me to look at you differently.”

“Of course, I have no idea what you’re getting at.”

“There you go. That’s back to your old familiar self.”

They exchanged grins. Sammy shrugged and spoke.

“So, you think we have it?”

“The decoding, yes. Its broader and more meaningful message, not yet. It is that last question of yours that we need to explore – who stands to profit from it. Ingenious, really. Let the KKK do their deplorable thing and then somebody else moves in and profits from it with the bad guys none the wiser. No collusion just a fortuitous juxtaposition.”

“A little help on *that*, Tom boy.”

“*Fortuitous*, unplanned like a coincidence. *Juxtaposition*, superimposed or coming together or on top of each other. Two events that just happen to occur together without any intentional planning. Unless, of course, somebody *is* urging the direction – the specific targets – of the recent KKK activity to promote his own selfish interests. That would represent the *real* reason – the dollar reason – behind why those specific pieces of property were targeted.”

“Wow. The *thickens* suddenly *plottens*, as grampa would say.”

“I’ll say, *and* I just did, I believe.”

“One more thing before I return to being my apparent former bumpkin, little brother, does the fact this money aspect came from the banker’s son have any significance?”

“Interesting point. That ‘unbumps’ you by several points on my Bumpkin to Brain Scale.”

Grins.

“What’s the kid’s name?”



“Billy Winston. My class. One of the sharper kids in high school, I’d say, *and* I just did,” – a small play at his brother’s recent similar comment.

“Why us, Sammy?”

“Why us, what, Tommy?”

“I understand, sort of, why Curt is providing information to us – you and he are friends and the incident with Jeremiah, and him needing to rethink a lot of things, and all, but Billy? How could he possibly know about our involvement?”

“Only two sources that I see: Curt and doc.”

“Interesting. Those *are* the only possible sources. I’d say not doc. There might be one other possibility. He mentioned your essay. It could be *that* was his motivation to select you and it had nothing to do with Curt at all. The idea falls apart rapidly after that. Back to the *not doc* thing.

“I agree – *not doc*. It’s sort of dangerous for us, though, if Curt sold us out like that – making it known what we are doing.”

“He thinks of you as a best friend – like he does Billy. They’ve been friends since the days they were born. I just don’t believe he would put you in jeopardy. If *he* believes Billy is a trustworthy confidant, then I think *we* need to believe that.”

“Makes sense. It becomes an odd arrangement, though. Apparently four of us working together but only you and me talking with each other about it.”

“I know. The stuff a good spy novel is made of.”

“Another fortuitous juxtaposition?”

“What?” Tommy asked, surprised and puzzled.

“Our current undertaking and your ambition to become a writer.”

“I see. Sort of. Yes. I get the connection, however remote.”

“You know how to hurt a guy.”

“In the long term, the truth heals not hurts.”

“Tell that to my bruised self-concept.”

“Ego is the modern term, remember – Dr. Freud?”

Sammy was done with that conversation and drew it to a swift conclusion with a well-timed, perfectly proportioned, shrug.

“Two important things on our agenda, then,” Tommy went on. “First, to alert the people at the new target cabin and second, to find some way to investigate Billy’s lead referencing the possible financial side to it all.”

“First things, first. We have to get ourselves out of here soon after supper.”

“Let’s go see what’s what with grampa. That may give us a clue as to how to go about things.”

“If both of us go to him, it will seem suspicious. How about just you go? See if you can convince him we should go eat. Meals always make for easy conversation times and a less suspicious method of getting to him.”

By five they were together in the dining room. Sammy was correct. Mealtimes had always been their most natural talk times. Their task was far easier than they expected.

“I have to be away this evening, boys. May not be back until after you are in bed.”

He offered no more, and they didn’t ask. Tommy turned the conversation to school and such.

“Sammy’s trying to get up the courage to ask Ruby to sit with him on the bus. (And there came the ‘and such’ for *that* meal.)

Tommy’s philosophy of sibling relations was based on the premise: never leave one’s big brother unembarrassed for any longer than necessary. Perhaps, even less than that if he could just get his Time Machine up and running.

Without thinking, Sammy commented on his grandfather’s appearance. It had reflected genuine concern.

“You’ve seemed to be tired lately. Are you feeling alright?”

“I’m fine. Some late hours getting the library reorganized.”

Tommy put an end to that topic by discussing the pros and

cons of each possible dessert with or without ice cream – by flavor. The others settled for cobbler – with – vanilla. Tommy changed the topic.

“We know the Ku Klux Klan is active in this area, grampa. We hear the kids talking at school. You’ve explained a lot about them/it, and we find it terrifying and unfathomable. Do you think it’s mostly just poor men?”

“Primarily, perhaps, but it’s a mix. Prejudice is born of no single class and requires only one bond – hatred. Now, the reason behind the hatred may vary some, but that doesn’t matter. It only takes the hate to do hateful things. There have been several home burnings of black families in the past two months. I’m told that is suddenly on the rise.”

“Do you think greed is ever a motivation for hate like that?”

“I had never considered it. Why do you ask?”

“We were just thinking if somebody wanted to grab a big plot of land on the cheap, burning out the homes on it would be one way to do it – especially homes of really poor people who could never afford to rebuild – if they even lived to see that option.”

“A fascinating, if horrendous, possibility for sure. I doubt if that kind of greed is motivated by hatred, however. It might use the hatred of others to achieve its goal, though. You two know something you’re not sharing.”

It was Sammy to the rescue.

“You know Tommy’s brain, grampa. Give it a simple, ‘what if’, and it tears off in a dozen directions. I once asked him to help me remove a splinter from the ball of my hand and before the night was over, he knew everything there was to know about how to amputate an arm at the shoulder.”

He got the laugh and the distraction he had hoped for. That over, Tommy had a follow-up question.

“I really don’t understand the basis for greed, grampa. Why want more than you can possibly use?”

“Well, I know a few theories. Let’s see what I can share. Some of it may be repeats, probably necessary to maintain the logic of the presentation. I do still sound like a professor, don’t I? There is a saying about not being able to teach old dogs new tricks. Anyway, and moving on, *without* your canine comparisons, please, Tommy.

Smiles.

“We have spoken of man’s most basic need – to stay alive. That has two main components: First, to stay safe from threats to one’s survival that come from *outside* forces – like being bonked on the head – and, second, to supply oneself with sufficient nourishment to support life from *within*.

Most basically, greed is just an extension of the second of those; to have enough to keep on living – to surround oneself with a sufficient supply of those things which are necessary – food, shelter and so on, including the means to assure you have it – money. Couple all that with an insecure personality, and *just enough* is *never* enough. It might run out. It might get destroyed. It might get stolen. It might spoil – you see my point. That sort of person can dwell on dozens of ways he might lose what he has, and if he lost what he has he would die. If twice as much as what he probably needs makes him feel more secure, four times or ten times or a thousand time makes him feel just that much *more* secure. I believe that initially at least, Greed is typically a search for security, that often becomes ballooned to a really irrational level.

“I suppose for some, it becomes a game – ‘just how much can I accumulate’ or ‘if I accumulate more than anybody else, I win’.

“Let me point out that some wealthy people who are reluctant to share are not basically greedy – they just came by lots of money and they choose to use it for themselves. That makes them just plain out and out selfish – not necessarily greedy. It is

not based on the same sort of sick personality.

“Greed isn’t like a cold that you can get over. It proves its worth over and over again. Have I accumulated lots of stuff? Yes. Have I always had everything I needed? Yes. Case proved. Once greed has its clutches in a person and calms some of his insecurity about making sure his needs are covered, it tends to spread to every aspect of his life. If one car is good, two must be better. If one house is good, then two must be better. If a thousand dollars is good, then ten thousand or a hundred thousand or a million is bound to be better.

“A greedy person is not just a hoarder who finds it difficult to let go of what he already has. The greedy person has to go out and find more things to hoard.

“A typical, eventual, component of greed is lessening one’s concerns about the basic needs of other people. That comes with all sorts of justifications for why he should have lots and they should not – or, in the least, why he need not be concerned over necessities they don’t have. He worked hard for what he has. Poor people are lazy, unintelligent, poorly organized – undeserving in a thousand ways. His rationalizations protect him from guilt, which a greedy person virtually never experiences. Eventually, many give up the false justification and just understand they have lots and other people don’t – period, the end, nothing further to consider. Pursuing the moral or ethical aspects would just lead to discomfort so they don’t.

“You boys know I have always contributed to charities. My belief is that when I have more than I need, it is my great privilege to share the excess with those who don’t have enough. That ignites a truly wonderful feeling for me. I believe it is the necessary basis for the survival for the human species – we all have to take very good care of each other. Of course, if the survival of the species is not important to somebody, then . . .

“I hope that ‘lecture’ provides food for thought. Sorry if I

came off like I was back standing in front of a class. I relish times I get to share possibilities with you. Every time, I learn new things myself – I see connections or disconnections I have not seen before or discover similarities with other aspects of life and living it. It is the most spectacular of the many wonderful things about being a teacher. Great teachers constantly grow from their student’s questions and responses.”

“Well, then, your grandsons are pleased they can afford you those personally meaningful opportunities, aren’t they/we, Sammy.”

Tommy didn’t receive the five-star ‘amen’ he was going for but did get a decided nod with some thought and force behind it.

They went their separate ways, grampa to his room and the boys to theirs.

“He does look tired,” Tommy said. “I’m more worried about his safety, though. Klansmen are really dangerous people. Like grampa has told us, people who believe without any doubt they know what is right – what is the truth – are the most dangerous folks out there. On that basis they can justify simply atrocious acts. We have seen it in the Nazis, and we are now seeing it in the Klansmen. We haven’t seen any more agents. I wonder if that’s good or bad.”

“Neutral, I think,” Sammy said. “The old, ‘no news is good news’, thing. Apparently, things are running along okay. I will be eager to hear his story after all this is over. I worry about his safety, too, though. We know there are plain clothes guys all over the place. He may have contact with some of them. It seems to me we have been cut out of the operation on purpose this time.”

“Unlike last time, you mean, when we had to get kidnapped before we got *cut in* – your words, almost.”

“We have cut ourselves in this time,” Sammy said. “I hope we are not just being arrogant – thinking we can do things we can’t. I read psychologists say that’s the most dangerous thing

about being a teenage boy, the inability to know his own limitations. It's why teens need to have trusted adults to run things by first. We're lucky to have grampa."

"You said, 'after all this is over', Sammy. What makes you think all this will *ever* be over? If the past few months have taught me anything, it's that the world is filled with evil people and that evil itself can never be fully contained. It only takes one evil person to hurt a thousand, or even a million, good people. That's not a ratio that favors those of us who try to do right."

"Hmm. I hadn't looked at it that way. Hope it doesn't mean we have to move again. If it takes that to ensure grampa's safety, of course, that's what we will need to do."

"I have the idea grampa had an endgame in mind before he agreed to it. Remember, with the Nazis, he only agreed to a two-year stint."

"And yet, here we are in hiding for who knows how long."

"You are a bumner, big brother. Let's make plans for tonight. I assume they are simple: go to the cabin, warn the people to leave, and then watch their home burn to the ground. Not much of a plan, really. It's back to that 'get us nowhere' idea of sacrificing one syrup can after another with no way to stop it from continuing."

"Until we establish a better, long-term plan, at least we have the 'can to can' thing – save one family at a time. That has to be worth something and you know it."

"It looks like the feds are ahead of us on the short-term stuff, the way they clearly warned the last family before we could."

"The feds or grampa. We have no idea how active they are in this – it may just be grampa doing what he can by himself."

"I doubt that. Remember the visit from the men in black with a matching set of black attaché cases. But I must admit that I have no insight at all about the big picture as they see it. Sundown in ninety minutes. We should get our homework out of the way, don't you suppose?"

“Now who’s the bumner. You’re right, I guess.”

Seven-thirty found their grampa gone and them into their hooded sweatshirts and down the back stairs, heading east to follow the creek. Sammy had a wonder.

“I wonder why all this action is east of town. The way I understand it, there are Negroes living all across the rural area in this county.”

“I’m glad you brought that up,” Tommy said. “There is something we need to give more thought to. If some greedy person is having the cabins burned so he can buy up the land at a few cents on the dollar – for back taxes, probably – and if he is orchestrating all of it within *one* relatively constrained area, don’t you think he has some need for a single, large stretch of land for some purpose? Of course, he does. That’s what we need to be figuring out – what that need is and maybe, also, why east of town.”

“Good putting things together. So, the burnings aren’t really random KKK acts.”

“From what I’ve been able to patch together,” Tommy went on, “the past five have all been within a two-mile section along the creek, on back east from where that last one burned. There aren’t any more cabins like that between it and town. The one set for tonight seems to set the far eastern edge of the area – the furthest from town so far.”

“Interesting. More support for your theory. I wonder if Billy hadn’t fed us his information if we’d have put it all together.”

“Doubt it. Not yet anyway. I have to wonder what his motivation is.”

“I hope it’s more than him being mad at his dad because he cut his allowance or something,” Sammy said. “It needs to be long range to really become useful.”

Tommy nodded. He slipped out of his sweatshirt and tied the arms around his waist. The evening continued to be very



warm.

Sammy continued.

“It looks like we have two insiders – kids – working with us like we said. Do you suppose there may be more – eventually, I mean?”

“Interesting, Sammy. No way to know until it either happens or doesn’t happen. We need to think about how, say, a dozen of them could affect all this.”

Lot’s more information, for us to use, for one thing, I suppose,” Sammy said. “Kids can know just about anything they want to know about what’s what within their family. I’m with you, though, in wondering what their motivation is. It has to be more than my essay, don’t you think?”

“Maybe. Don’t discount it. It is a real masterpiece, down to earth, shows the practical, inevitable, downside of the KKK philosophy and activity. It projects the results out into the future. These kids are different in lots of ways, but they aren’t dumb – especially where their futures are concerned. They’re just like us when it comes to wanting to assure a good life for themselves and their families on down the road.”

They came upon the cabin, which matched the description they had received in Curt’s syrup tin memorandum. Darkness had closed in on a family that was sitting around a fire in the back yard – father, mother, and five children ranging from a toddler to a near man. The air was filled with laughter and conversation.

“Clearly the feds haven’t notified them. Maybe grampa *really is* off doing library stuff tonight, Tommy.”

“Maybe. How do we go about this?”

“I suggest you go in all nonchalant-like, as if you ran upon them by accident – *fortuitously!*”

Smiles – faint and short lived.

“You chat them up – one of your specialties – and suggest there is a problem. Then bring me in and we’ll go from there.”

“Risk the kid first until you can see what way the wind is blowing?”

“Yes. You got it. You have better?”

“No. In fact, I like it. Let me slip back into my sweatshirt. It’s dark blue and might delay them from making out that I’m white until I get close enough to begin talking.”

“Good idea. You can count on them knowing you’re white the second you start talking. I don’t see a gun, but its dark.”

“So, here I go, juxtaposing myself with the black family.”

Although acknowledged with a weak smile, those chuckles remained silent. Suddenly, it was get-dead-serious time.

Tommy put on a whistle and informal gait as he ambled toward the yard. The father and the oldest boy stood and took several steps in Tommy’s direction, clearly ready to defend the others.

“Ah! Just a tyke,” the man said offering a broad smile. “What you doin’ way out here at this time a night, son?”

“I am here to save your lives, Sir. Seriously! The Klan is on its way to burn you out. You need to get your family into the woods and to safety – NOW. They will probably be coming up the road that follows the creek – from the east. My older brother is with me and he can be of more help if you need to get things together.”

“Why you tellin’ us this?”

The man was plainly skeptical.

Sammy came on the scene, his arms held out to his sides as if to show he carried no weapon. He’d seen it done in movies and figured, ‘why not?’ The guy doing it seldom got shot. He heard the question.

“Look at it this way, Sir. What harm can it do to leave for the night. If we are wrong, you just come back in the morning. You know it isn’t sensible to risk your lives when the Klan’s involved.”

He nodded repeatedly while thinking.

“Okay.”

He turned to his family.

“A set a clothes and a blanket each; girls, all the food in gunny sacks; Georgie, the rifles and bullets: Arthur, fill the canteens. Mother, get the money box. I’ll get the mules.”

“There is some urgency, Sir. That is, you *really* need to hurry.”

“Hear that? Outta here in five minutes.”

They made it in four. The boys had to wonder if they had practiced. The scrawny, swishing, tails of the black mules were the last things to be seen as they disappeared moving north east into the trees.

“Leave the fire burning back here or not?” Sammy asked.

“I say put it out. The fire would raise the suspicion somebody might be out here, and they might think they’d need to search the area to find them – not a good thing for us.”

Sammy agreed with a nod and in no time, he had kicked the kindling apart and stomped out the last sparks. It hadn’t been huge to begin with. More like what Curt called a skeeter fire – just enough smoke to discourage the mosquitoes. What smoke continued, rose unseen into the night sky. Their plan was to return to a place in the trees where they would feel safe and could again watch the proceedings. Why they felt the need to stay, they were not certain. They had fulfilled the mission they had assigned themselves. Common sense said to leave.

As they were walking west across the lawn toward the woods, they suddenly found themselves bathed in the beam of a set of bright headlights. It originated thirty yards away from near the creek. The boys froze, blinded, uncertain what to do. Their thoughts were identical – run and risk getting shot or remain and get who knew what – hanged, most likely.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Not a Good Turn of Events!

A voice rang out.

“What in the name of Maximillian Gehosopaths are you two doing out at this time of night – *and*, doing it here?”

The strong, steady voice was familiar. That was a good news/bad news thing. Good, in that it wasn't the KKK – no bullets, no noose. Bad, in that it would require an explanation that even Tommy's dependably creative footwork had no chance of covering – unless they chose to tell the truth – a novel approach that Tommy thought might even be worth considering.

“Grampa! Imagine meeting you in a soon to be devastated place like this. Nice moon tonight, don't you think? Should make those soon to arrive white robes sparkle.”

His attempt at prolonging the inevitable came out of habit and was accompanied by no real expectation of success.

They moved toward each other across the tall grass – Ollie's fuzzy form silhouetted against the lights. As they closed at five feet, it was Tommy, again.

“It seems we *both* have some explanations to offer.”

“At this minute, *yours* is the only one that counts. Heaven only knows how you managed to get yourselves mixed up in this

thing.”

“Even though Tommy and I apparently did your work for you and bought you a few extra hours, grampa, may I suggest we all three skedaddle in case the bad guys come early, again.”

“Again?”

“Did I say again?”

“A long talk in our future, boys. Do I understand that you have moved the Franklins out of their cabin?”

“If it is the Franklins who live here, yes – on foot, northeast, through the woods – all seven of them plus two mules and minimal provisions. We didn’t catch the *mules*’ names, either.”

“You two get yourselves home then. I understand I do owe you an explanation as well.”

“Somebody’s with you, I assume,” Tommy added shielding his eyes in the hope of seeing beyond the headlights. Those can’t be the lights on our old truck.”

Needing to assume his portion of the blame, Sammy jumped into the fray.

“We can go into where *you* keep your *whites* later. And with that, I’ve undoubtedly said too much.”

“My hope has been to keep you two safe through all of this. I should know by now that is not how you operate. Why do I even try?”

Ignoring the clearly rhetorical nature of the query, Tommy felt moved to offer the answer.

“Because you love us. Why did you even have to ask? Like you said – a long talk in the near future.”

“So, do we shake before we skedaddle or just do the daddle thing?” Sammy asked, mostly serious.”

“Go!”

It came with a dramatic gesture toward town. He had not revealed who was with him.

Ollie turned and disappeared behind the headlights. How

much of his ire was real and how much for effect, they really were not certain. He almost never allowed his feelings to fire an emotional rant. Therefore, Tommy figured it had been for effect and that by the time the talk took place, things would be good.

\* \* \*

Back in their room, Tommy spoke first.

“Well, that didn’t go completely as planned.”

“We did get the family out of harm’s way,” Sammy said as if it really needed to be said. “That was our plan. I’m thinking we can take credit for it.”

“And, as long as we’re justifying our action, we had no assurance that grampa or the feds knew about the burning planned for tonight.”

“Right. If they hadn’t, and if we hadn’t acted, there would be another tragedy like the one that happened to Jeramiah’s family.”

“And beyond that,” Tommy went on, as if needing to build their case further, “since he has not been forthcoming with us, we would have had no way of knowing that we could have just shared our information with grampa and he was in a position to take care of things.”

“Whatever else grampa has to say, he can’t take that away from us – that what we did saved seven lives.”

“He has to accept the fact that the Jansen family is a team – a detective team. We need to say that, I think.”

“Do we go to bed or wait up?” Sammy asked.

“Still five hours before they do the deed if the bad guys wait until their usual time – 2:00 a.m. I vote sleep if we can. We can leave our bedroom door open like an invitation for grampa to come in when he gets back.”

And he did. Three a.m. A knock on the open door.

“If that’s not you, grampa, I think the Jansen brothers are in really big trouble.”

“They may be either way.”

Tommy was awake and sat up. He turned on the lamp on the nightstand that sat at the head of and between, their beds. He had been unable to turn off his head.

Sammy, on the other hand . . .

Tommy reached over and shook his brother’s shoulder.

“Wake up, Bro. It’s show time.”

Sammy was soon also sitting up, back against his headboard. Tommy had confidence his brother would resume his acquaintance with consciousness at any moment. He didn’t share that but allowed a quick smile. My how he loved words! Grampa took a seat on the edge of Tommy’s bed, facing Sammy’s – there long-time tradition for bedroom talks.

“If I seemed overly harsh out there tonight, it was out of my concern for your safety – and my utter surprise at your presence. I have no doubt you understand that, but I needed to say it.”

He reached out and patted Tommy’s leg. Then continued.

“Now, may I ask what you know?”

Tommy took it up.

“*One*, that you are involved with the Federal Agents again, this time with the KKK as your target. *Two*, that you have managed to gain the Klan’s trust and they believe you are one of them – even attending burnings – we saw you at the last one – your boots.”

“You were there, *too*?”

“It now seems you guys beat us to the punch – to move that family out ahead of time.”

“I see. Anything else?”

The boys looked at each other and Sammy spoke.

“That seems to sum it up to this point. Now, I suppose you want to know about *our* involvement.”

“Yes. First, let me get a good hold on the bed; I assume this will be a rocky ride.”



There were grins all around. The air had been cleared.

“Go, Tommy.”

That had been Sammy as if sicking his brother on the Universe. (The Universe trembled!)

He summarized their involvement beginning with Jeramiah on the trail, Jeramiah in the loft, Jeramiah in the secret room and Jeramiah into Doc’s trunk and his trip to a destination of safety unknown to them.

Then, Sammy added about the effect it had on Curt and the developing odd relationship, including the Syrup note and the Winston boy’s involvement.

Tommy made reference to Sammy’s essay and offered it up for their grampa to read.

He did, right then and there – all four pages.

“What a well-written and wonderfully touching piece, Sammy. I am not surprised at your skill. I am pleased that you were willing to apply yourself and use your talents to such an end. I also commend your much-improved handwriting.”

“My talents, as you called them, are largely just remembering and applying things you have told us, but thanks. It seems to have shouldered me with responsibility among the kids that I neither expected nor wanted.”

“One always has the option of refusing to take a responsibility, you understand. It may not be moral, but it *is* an option.”

“Hardly an option for a Janson, I’m thinking,” Sammy came back.

“Yes. Hardly. I’m proud of you.”

It called for a set of significant nods between Sammy and his grandfather. They probably even defined the beginning of a new aspect of their relationship.

Ollie spoke.

“I sense your big question, boys.”

They looked at each other, not at all certain what he meant. He explained with an assumed paraphrase.

*“When is that old geezer going to figure out that we are a team – the Jansen family detectives?”*

The boys smiled. He had pretty well quoted the essence of Tommy’s earlier statement. Tommy responded.

“Grampa. We would never refer to you as *old*.”

“Ah. *Old*, no. *Geezer*, yes?”

It sent the youngest into hysterics, as he slipped, uncontrollably as a limp blob, off the bed and onto the floor. The others waited. They had lots of practice. It was one of the things Sammy knew he would miss when his brother moved beyond that stage.

Sammy figured the talk had gone far better than he had anticipated. He kept that to himself and would compare notes with his brother later.

Grampa stood and moved toward the door, where he paused, turned back, looked directly at Sammy, and said: “Folded neatly inside the second pillow on my bed.”

He smiled, left, and closed the door behind him.

“What did he mean by that?” Sammy asked.

“He answered your question about where he kept something.”

“Oh! The whites. Never would have thought to look there.”

“Why did you call them that – the whites.”

“I heard a couple of boys use the term at school. They were talking about being eager to get their own sets of ‘whites’. I shudder every time I remember about it. They were eager to get to go ruin people’s lives – kill them even. Makes me sick to my stomach.”

“It provides a good caution for us. Not all the kids are going to be Curts and Billys. We have to be really careful.”

“Glad you pointed that out. Not sure how to use it, though.”

“I think it says we wait for others to come to us instead of going looking for like-minded kids.”

“Gotcha. A good rule. Have I ever told you I’m really glad you’re my brother?”

“A few times in words. Lots of times in other ways.”

“I’m going back to sleep, now.”

‘So much for the love fest,’ Tommy thought to himself. He turned off the light. It was worth a long smile into the darkness. He worked himself back down between his sheets – his set of whites – he shivered, smiled, and was finally able to sleep.

They needed a strategy session with their grampa – not only continuing to save the people as they seemed to be doing regularly at that point – but also saving the property. Those people were losing absolutely everything they had. That, of course, would require diverting the KKK from what had become its major goal in the area – intimidate with flaming crosses, burn the house, and kill the black residents.

The conversation continued with their grampa at breakfast Saturday morning.

“I see a possible problem,” Sammy said. “It works two ways. If the Klan finds out Tommy and I are working against them, they may question *your* loyalty to them, grampa, and if the kids find out you are with the Klan, they will stop trusting us – and our grassroot sources of reliable information will dry up.”

“Good points,” Tommy said. “Of course, if the Klan finds out grampa’s loyalty is not really with it, his life won’t be worth anything. Maybe that works for us, too. I can’t believe there is so much hatred in the World and that the lives of black humans hold absolutely no value for these people. Back before the Nazi’s entered our lives, we were pretty sheltered from all the bad stuff out there. It made our lives easier for sure but didn’t really prepare us for how things were – are – out here in the real world. Not assigning blame, grampa, just thinking it all through. You’ve been

the greatest parent any kid could ever have.”

Ollie acknowledged the double-sided message with a nod. Sammy, in a rare, if recently more frequent, bit of insight, added: “Grampa sheltered us back before we were able to comprehend stuff, Tommy – me with my four-cylinder brain and even you with your eight-cylinder brain. By the time the Nazis entered our lives, I think we were finally ready to cope with it – not entirely understand it, maybe, but cope with it. You see what I’m saying?”

“I do, and it was a point well taken. Thank you for that perspective.”

Grampa smiled at the boys’ studious exchange, pleased with the insight, which mirrored his intentions exactly.

Much to the boys’ surprise, Curt and Billy entered the dining room and came directly to their table.

“Hey,” Sammy said. “Pull up chairs and sit. Order if you want to. On me – this once.”

“Good morning, Mr. Jansen, or Professor Jansen or Dr. Jansen – whichever you prefer,” Billy offered.

“I prefer, *Ollie*, if you can manage that.”

“As close as we, as Ledger kids, should come to that is, Mr. Okay?”

“*Mr. Ollie*. I love it.”

The new arrivals met it with a smile and seemed to relax a bit. Curt got down to business, addressing Sammy – face to face.

“Okay to talk stuff, here.”

He hitched his head toward Mr. Ollie. Not really a subtle move but it turned out fine.

“Sure. We don’t have secrets from grampa – anymore.”

“Billy overheard his father talking business with somebody on the phone at home. Tell them what you heard.”

“Dad was talking with somebody about the burned-out properties. He said his bank had taken steps to secure them for him – for *him*, the guy at the other end of the line. No idea who

that was. It's what my message was about yesterday morning. I suppose you figured it out."

"We did."

"And mine," Curt said. "You understood?"

"We did. Kudos to you for creativity, by the way. I've been craving pancakes ever since."

More smiles.

Humorously, the waitress arrived with Sammy's breakfast – six, plate-filling, pancakes and a new bottle of Log Cabin Syrup.

"We heard the Franklin's got burned out last night," Curtis said.

"Just the house. The family was warned and saved, thanks to you."

"That's good. Mostly, we came to ask how we can help. We feel helpless. Curt and I have talked, and we know what's right in it all. Hard to shake fifteen years of training to the contrary, you have to understand. It will take our guts time to catch up with our hearts."

"We can only imagine. We've been giving you both lots of credit for your courage even though we can't fully understand your struggles."

"Mr. Marks had the girls in typing class make copies of your essay. He put them on his desk. With the word out, they are disappearing fast. He looks the other way. We assume the Klan has a copy by now and that isn't exactly good for you, Sammy."

"We've talked about it," Sammy said. "What is, is, I guess. Not sure what else to say or do short of pulling up stakes and leaving Ledger."

"Oh, no. Don't do that. Not yet, anyway. We have some ideas. How would you feel if a couple of us stuck with you and Tommy during the days – before and after school – weekends – like to make it difficult for them to do anything to you – witnesses always at your sides, you see?"

Sammy turned to his grampa, for his thoughtful response, thinking the answer to that one was well above his pay grade.

“Understand, those of you who accompany them may be putting yourselves in jeopardy, as well. I think it is a dangerous undertaking that none of your parents would approve of. Your offer is appreciated, but we would not feel right endangering you.”

“So, you are prohibiting us from doing it?” Billy asked, pointedly putting Ollie on the spot.

“I have no authority to do that, Billy.”

“Okay, then. Thank you for your time this morning. We’ll take a rain check on the breakfast. Never seen such huge pancakes, by the way. Your stomach really hold all that?”

Sammy shrugged.

Tommy decided to withhold his comments, as delightfully humorous as they would have been. His shoulder was still sore from the previous weekend.

The boys turned and left.

The Jansens understood what had just taken place. They would wait and see how it played out.

“Pretty nice of your friends to care that much about you two.”

“Curt says all the parents love us. We assign most of the credit for that to you – apparently, you raised two pretty great kids!”

It had been Tommy. His grin almost broke his cheeks.

“Curt did say that,” Sammy added as if it were needed to back up his brother’s claim. There may have been a question in it somewhere. Neither pursued that.”

“That pleases me, of course. More than that, it shows how perceptive the people of this town are. You *are* both great people.”

It became a group hug without anybody actually touching anybody else. They had those, sometimes.

“So, how do we find this guy the bank’s working for?” Sammy asked.

“Let me pass the word on to the Agents. They have the authority and resources to pursue it. We don’t. I’m quite sure they have not been thinking along those lines. One thing. There will be NO breaking into the bank, understood?”

The boy’s understood the words. They hadn’t, however, heard him say they could not investigate it.

They needed thinking time. It was a pleasant Saturday morning. They headed out to the wide front porch to find chairs in the sun and sit and talk. What they found were several high school boys playing catch on the sidewalk – probably a first in the history of the universe. Clearly, not really prohibited, ‘*Operation protect the Jansen boys*’, was already under way.

Sammy acknowledged them with a raised hand but no words. He and Tommy headed across the porch to a spot away from the area of chairs occupied by hotel guests, hoping for some privacy. Nobody intruded on them. They were relieved. They were not used to being under such close scrutiny. Well, there had been Frog Girl back in Gilead, but that was part of the first story.

“So,” Sammy said, once they had positioned the chairs for as much privacy as was reasonable to expect sitting there in public.

“I believe real estate sales and such are required by law to be posted in the newspaper? You know about that?” Tommy said, thinking out loud.

“You know that I have no idea, but I’ll go with your hunch on it. You are suggesting we amble over to the *Daily Record* and have a look?”

“You read my mind, big brother. It will be interesting to see if the ball game shadows us – that means moves with us in detective talk. You really think, ‘ambling’, is better than, ‘sauntering’, by the way?”

Chuckles.

They stood and moved down the steps to the sidewalk and

began the short trek down Main to the newspaper. Two men approached them – locals from the way they were dressed. Tommy offered a friendly greeting. Their coveralls suggested they were farmers rather than town's people and acknowledged the greeting with, 'mornin's'. They seemed somehow out of place and moved in too closely – one on each side. Tommy had previously discovered that folks from the rural culture often intruded uncomfortably on another's personal space. He had not yet studied it.

"Heads up, Sammy," one of the ball players called.

The ball arrived and Sammy caught it – one hand – high and outside. He looked it over and tossed it back. Two of the four boys approached them as if to walk along. Tommy started a conversation as they moved down the block. The men left without another word.

"You know who those two were?" Sammy asked.

"Billingsly and Bosley – have small farms to the west of town. Don't know much about them. You know Jimmy Bosley – Sophomore, big mouth – it's his dad."

"We are on our way to the newspaper office this morning," Tommy said, moving on.

The boys took their game on ahead of them, more in the street than the sidewalk. It took up again in front of the 'Record' as the paper was known locally. Tommy and Sammy entered.

"Hey, Mr. Richards," Tommy began. "Can we look through your archived papers for the past couple of months?"

"Certainly. You know where they are."

He pointed to a set of shelves near his long, mahogany, reading table.

Tommy had previously used them for research projects.

"This is my brother, Sammy. I figure it's time he learned to read, so that's what I'm here to do this morning."

The man shook his head and smiled. It was clear that he



and Tommy had some sort of history. They picked up several copies, took seats at the table, and began going through them.

“Not sure where to look,” Sammy said, pretending to be interested in an article inside as he spoke under his breath.

“Legal Notices. Page two.”

“How will we know when we find something?”

“Not entirely sure. Look for transfer of ownership to the local bank, I imagine. Not sure how that will be worded.”

They examined the copes using them as practice pieces. Sammy pointed out the one transfer notice in his paper. It didn't apply, but they had learned some things about procedure and form. Tommy returned the two copies they had begun with and came back with six more, splitting the pile between them. Although called the Daily Record, it was a weekly paper so he figured that should cover the time period in question.

After a few minutes, they had found six transfers to the bank – all through the court for payment of back taxes. Two had street addresses there in town. *They* would not be of interest. Four had rural designations. All those included NE in the description of the land – a reference to the quadrant of the county – that much Tommy was sure of.

“North East is certainly the part of the county in which the burned-out cabins sat,” Tommy said. “Let me copy down those exact land descriptions and we will need to figure out where they are. Don't want anybody to know we are looking for them. Not sure how to go about that. These should be enough to give us a good start, though, once we get that figured out.”

One of the two men from the street entered and approached them at the table. Sammy squirmed, clearly disturbed by his presence. His escape plan involved ducking under the table and heading for the back door. Just as Tommy was about to speak, the man spoke, just above a whisper.

“Come with me. Something important.”

He motioned toward the back door.

The front door opened and three of the boys entered. Tommy suspected the fourth was stationed in back.

“There you are, Sammy. Didn’t know what happened to you. Your grampa is looking for you. We’ll walk you back to the hotel.”

They returned the papers to the shelf and left with their friends. The man had left ahead of them. It made no sense to Tommy. If it had been the men’s intention to abduct them, why would they let themselves be seen doing it? Could they be that stupid? Perhaps, they were only there to make some sort of threat and preferred to do it in private. He could think of no threat that made sense. ‘Don’t keep warning the darkies the Klan is on its way to kill them, or else.’ ‘Stop doing what you are doing, or else.’ It just made no sense.

They were both appreciative of their friends’ presence, but nothing passed between them about it. Sammy came close, perhaps.

“Really good to have seen y’all this morning.”

Tommy tried to cover for any prying ears.

“Yeah. I’ll do what I can to talk my brother into trying out for the team.”

Once back at the hotel, they headed down the back stairs to Cal’s place – the handyman’s shop and such. Tommy had learned that Cal had a broad and varied background so knew lots of things. He felt sure he was trustworthy. Sammy took his word for that; he hadn’t spent enough time with him to have formed an opinion.

“Got a question if you got a minute, Cal.”

“Always time for my two favorite grandsons of my current employer.”

He chuckled at what he figured had been a humorous response. It garnered smiles.

“This is just between us. Okay.”

“Sure, if it don’t include plotting to rob the bank or pants the principal, and I might make an exception for that second one.”

Another chuckle. He figured he was on a roll.

“Where can we put our hands on a plat map of the county – one that shows the identifying designations of the rural area east of town. Doing a history project and need to get specific about a couple of historic spots.”

“Your best bet would be city hall. They keep things like that in a room in the basement. Lawyers, realtors and contractors use it mostly. There are tables to spread out the sheets on. Probably, six dozen sheets to cover the whole county. Each sheet is coded to a master map that shows reference numbers across the whole area. For example, sheet one will have a number at the top and you can find it on the map or the other way around depending on the direction you’re going with it. There’s a more detailed set over at the courthouse in the county seat.”

“And you know that how?” Tommy asked.

“Did some contracting as a younger man – built the house doc has now, in fact. Double walls for sound and privacy. One of the best constructed in town if I do say so myself and I guess I just did. Hardly any better recommendation than that, I suppose.”

More chuckles. He went on.

“They aren’t open today – the city building I mean, not doc’s place. That man’s open twenty-four hours every day of the week. Don’t see how he does it.”

“Thanks. Like usual, you’ve been a big help.”

They left up the stairs – Sammy two at a time and Tommy, double-timing.

“Guess that’s it for today, since they are closed,” Sammy said.

“Sammy, Sammy, Sammy. When did a little thing like being closed for the day stop me from getting into any place I wanted to

get into?”

“Not a good idea, I’m thinking. Breaking and entering into the City Building is probably serious.”

“Only if we are caught. Later, when we are being lauded for our outstanding work with the FBI, we can admit to it if that will make you feel better.”

“Right now, I’d feel better if I was back at the Mill in Gilead and you were in Chicago.”

“I’ll go by myself, then.”

“Of course, you *won’t* go by yourself, *then*. How many times have you forced me to go along with you by using that word – *then?*”

“Let’s leave by the back door and lose the guys who are tailing us. This will be a pretty straight forward operation. We’ll follow the alley all the way to the City Building.”

Sammy offered no objection. Years of experience had proved it would be of no value.

Tommy loaded his smallest knapsack with paper, pencils, a set of master keys, his camera and telescopic lens, grabbing four sandwiches as they passed through the kitchen – just the usual necessities for a Saturday morning stroll with his brother.

Seven minutes later, they were in the alley behind the City Building. At eight minutes Tommy had found an unlocked window in a basement room. After nine minutes they had let themselves down into the room.

“See, piece of cake, Big Brother. I even believe this may be the right room. See the cards on those sets of narrow drawers – Plat such and such. Let’s find that key map then we can home in on the exact places that were burned and compare those with the land descriptions we found in the paper.”

“So far, so good, I suppose,” Sammy said looking around the room and beginning to relax about it.

Just maybe that had come too soon. A man appeared at

the window. He bent down and slid it open. It was one of the mysterious men from earlier. Sammy pointed toward the interior door and motioned his brother toward it, hoping it led to a hall. He tried turning the knob. It would not turn. The door was locked from the outside.

Suddenly, the knob began turning on its own. Somebody was in the hall. The other man, perhaps/likely/most certainly?

*Not a good turn of events!*

/

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Old Ninety-Five

The man from the window crossed the room toward them. He seemed upset – agitated better described it. With him between them and the outside and an unknown person on the other side of the inside door, things were looking bleak.

The door behind them opened – slowly, cautiously. Sammy tried to block its path by holding his foot against it. Whoever it was kept coming. The face that eventually peeked through the narrow opening was Billy, followed by Jack Witherspoon, the mayor’s son, another of the early morning ball players. Billy quickly sized up the situation and spoke.

“Sammy. Tommy. Sorry we are late to work on the history project. Jackie forgot the key. Glad you found a way inside.”

With the door fully open, Jack walked to the man.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Bosley? Unless you’re here to help Sammy and Tommy, I doubt if my dad is going to like this.”

Bosley didn’t speak but shoved his way past them into the hall and left.

“Front door’s locked,” Billy whispered. “Will be interesting to see how Bosley makes his way outside. When we saw what

was going on with you two out back, and then Bosley entering after you, it seemed you might be heading for trouble. Jack said he knew a way in through the north side of the building. And, here we are. You seem to be alright.”

“Yeah. Thanks to you,” Sammy said.

Jack offered his hand to Sammy.

“Guess we never met officially. I’m a senior. Our paths haven’t really crossed. I’m Jack, but you knew that and you’re Sammy, but you knew that, too.”

For some reason he was plainly uneasy being there in Sammy’s presence. Like the coachman being summoned to the king.

Tommy was in his element seeing an older boy making a fool of himself and was moved to comment.

“In my experience, teen boys spend a good deal of time making futile efforts like this. Most grow up and function quite well. It’s all good, you see.”

Staring daggers at his younger brother, Sammy redirected the conversation.

“I’ll let Tommy explain what we are doing in here. Pardon us for helping ourselves in through the window.”

Jack shrugged. It really wasn’t his jurisdiction. They turned their attention to Tommy who made the explanation, then added: “Do either of you know how to use these plat maps? That could save us a number of minutes.”

Jack responded clearly happy to have a chance to redeem himself from his earlier round of gibberish.

“Studied them in Civics Class last semester. Let me at them. I assume you have some addresses you need to look up?”

Tommy nodded and handed him the notes he had taken at the newspaper office.

Jack opened and closed drawers, removing sheets and arranging them on a table. He made references back and forth



among them and the main, county, map, for some minutes.

“Pencil?” he asked.

Tommy produced one along with his small edition, spiral pad opened to a blank page. Jack made several entries and then commented showing his surprise.

“These are the cabin sites that have been burned recently. You two seem to know something. I won’t ask for obvious reasons, but good going. I hope it means some good leads.”

Tommy responded.

“Like usual, good for the good guys; bad for the bad guys.”

The other boys didn’t press. Jack turned to Sammy.

“When you going to hit us with another essay. That was great stuff in the first one. I was amazed how you told us all to go to Hell in such a way we are thanking you for it. You’ve got a great life ahead as a writer, that’s for sure. We are hoping for more, though. I’m serious.”

The Jansen boys shared a look and a shrug. That was *not* the path down which their lives had been planned. Tommy figured it could be possible to have *two* great writers in the same family. That would take nothing away from *him*.

Jack and Billy followed them out the window and then kept their distance as they moved around the building and followed Main back to the hotel.

“So, that’s four,” Tommy said as they climbed the front steps.

“Four steps?”

“Four snitches. Four protectors. Four changed hearts.”

“That would make twelve, you realize.”

Uncharacteristically, and most certainly without thinking, Tommy offered his knuckles into his big brother’s shoulder, immediately realizing what an absolutely terrible decision that had been. He ran ahead through the lobby weaving himself in and out among the people. He momentarily felt safe as the elevator door

closed offering at least a short reprieve. He poked the 'down' button and was soon in the basement.

He had visions of his brother puffing himself up four flights of stairs only to find nothing awaiting him. It was worth a grin. Actually, a rather sustained grin.

"Just passing through, Cal – out the rear door. If Sammy comes looking you haven't seen me, okay?"

"Haven't seen a thing. Who are you, by the way?"

Tommy was gone. Cal wouldn't have seen his grin. Tommy knew he would have to face the music eventually – probably sooner rather than later – but he believed every hue of black, purple and blue would be worth it. At that moment, it dawned on him for the first time; sometime during the next few years he was going to be as big and strong as Sammy. My, my! What a fascinating revelation! Plans definitely needed to be set in motion. He would buy a separate spiral just for that. He might put a title on the front – something like, *'Revenge of the Overly Knuckled'*.

There was a tall, ancient Oak Tree just down the gentle, grassy, slope from the rear of the hotel. He headed for it and had soon managed himself two thirds of the way to the top. There he found the remains of somebody's treehouse. Earlier, he had suspected as much when he was surveying the area with his binoculars from a fifth-floor window. It was mostly just the floor that remained, but that worked fine.

He removed his knapsack and sat cross-legged, positioned so he could easily keep watch on the hotel to his right, and to his left enjoy the view out toward the creek and beyond. He took out the binoculars to investigate the brand-new panorama available from up there. He could see a large part of the town to his right beyond the hotel and in front of him down the length of Main Street to the train depot.

Suddenly, in addition to the Klan, he had three adversaries: the two men, whose mission had not really been clearly defined,

and that set of knuckles attached to his brother's strong arm. Given a choice, he'd take the knuckles. There were times when the known, regardless of its nature, seemed better than the unknown. It didn't escape him that his grampa had pointed that out about people in general.

'Ah ha. Just like grampa said – safety, survival, fear, hate.'

Well, *his* would not rise to the level of hate.

Just as he was settling in and deciding he had found his new place to be alone and to think and plan and spin wonderful fantasies, the back door to Cal's area in the basement opened and Cal appeared. He crossed the lawn to his pickup and left. Nothing unusual, for sure.

Tommy had failed to bring the large writing pad on which he had begun a new story, so, after a few minutes getting comfortable at his new spot, he decided to return inside and face the consequences. He slipped into his knapsack, left his perch, and climbed down to the ground ending up on the side of the tree away from the hotel. As he prepared to round it and head across the lawn to the door, it opened again. He stopped, still mostly behind the tree. He stood motionless waiting to see what was what. It seemed strange because hardly anybody other than he and Cal used that entrance and Cal was gone. *Strange* soon changed to *frightening* – two men, who Tommy didn't recognize, appeared holding Sammy in between them. He knew it was Sammy, even though he had a gunny sack over his head and shoulders. His wrists were tied behind him. Tommy leaned in closer, flattening himself against the trunk hoping to keep out of sight.

A pickup backed in from the alley. He figured it had to do with Sammy, so he ducked low behind the hedge which marked the rear edge of the back yard. He made his way forward to where the truck had stopped. He figured he could see the whole show from there. The two men walked Sammy to the rear of the truck

and lowered the tailgate.

“They plan to take him away in the truck,” Tommy whispered to himself.

He couldn't stop them. Show himself and they'd likely take him along. There was something he could do, however. He watched them as they maneuvered Sammy flat onto the bed and closed the tail gate. The driver joined them, and a conversation began. There were hand motions as if giving and taking directions. While their attention was back there, Tommy slipped through the hedge, elbow crawled under the front of the truck, flipped onto his back and opened his pocketknife. He stuck the blade into the lower edge of the front of the radiator and gave it a quick twist. Just enough to allow a trickle. He returned to his spot behind the hedge.

One of the men climbed into the back and took a seat, his back against the rear of the cab. Once there, he picked up a waiting rifle, and stood it up beside him – not an unusual sight in that part of the country. Rifles and shotguns were everywhere. Most pickups had two, held in a rack across the rear window of their truck.

The driver and the second man entered the cab, and the truck was soon on its way – east, out of town. From the beginning, Tommy knew he would never be able to keep up with a truck but figured he could track it by following the liquid left on the ground from the leak. He was determined to orchestrate the safe return of his brother. With grampa and Cal gone, he was on his own. He had the kernel of an idea.

He waited until it turned onto the access road that paralleled the railroad, then began to track it on the trot. He wished those ball playing high schoolers were around. He didn't see any, so went about his business alone.

For as slight as he was built at seventy pounds, even Sammy agreed, he had tremendous endurance. He could run

forever. Back at the YMCA in Chicago he could swim laps for hours at a time – Sammy took bets and always won. Who'd have suspected; they were already seasoned conmen at ten and fifteen.

If they had a long way to go, the motor would overheat before the men got there. Tommy set his head to making a plan for that event – a way to rescue Sammy from the stalled truck. If they were only going a short distance, that plan would probably not be needed.

He had not had visual contact with it from the moment it turned east. That, also, meant, they were not aware of him. There were trees and lots of underbrush along the road, which, although it did generally run parallel to the rails, was by no means straight. It was an Arkansas road, after all!

Suddenly realizing it was a very warm day, and that radiator liquid – mostly water at that season – evaporated quickly on very warm days, he picked up his pace. After fifteen minutes, the trail did begin to dry up. He pushed himself even harder. It was a dirt road. Although the two tire tracks were hardpacked from years of use, the area in between was mostly loose, dusty soil. So, even though there were no longer actual wet spots to follow, the pattern they had made in the dust when the liquid dripped from the radiator remained. It was like tracking the prints of an animal or so he assumed – having never tracked one. He really needed to do that but didn't take time to add it to his to-do list.

A half hour into his trek, the drip pattern abruptly curved to the left. The truck had left the road and entered the woods. There was grass, however, and some of it was still matted down from the tires. He moved on more cautiously, thinking that leaving the main road probably signified they were approaching their destination.

He was right. Tommy was usually right. Sometimes, just knowing that made him careless. He was aware of that tendency

and since his brother's welfare was clearly at risk, he remained vigilant.

He heard men's voices well before he could see 'what was what'. With great care, he circled to his left, behind a thick stand of underbrush. That put him to the west of a small clearing. It housed a small barn and there was a dug well – covered with a small roof supported on posts. The problem at hand, however, was *not* small.

He worked his way to a spot where he could watch and hear what was going on. He took care to make sure he could not be seen.

'Let's not sneeze or cough or pass gas now,' he told himself. Tommy did think such things. The gas thing was probably over-kill.

The truck was there, its hood open, its radiator steaming, its driver cursing. He seemed to be blaming it on a rock. That was good – a natural rather than a Tommy-made occurrence. It gave them no reason to believe they had been followed.

There were three other men waiting. He supposed since Sammy could not see, they felt safe not hiding their identities. He assumed that back at the hotel, the actual abductors had not exposed their faces to him either. None of them were the two men that had been present earlier in the day – Bosley and the other one. Neither of *them* had actually broken any laws, so he figured they were in the clear. Still, he wondered what they had been up to – not as much, however, as what was unfolding there in front of him.

Tommy didn't recognize any of the men in the clearing. That suggested they were either from the rural areas surrounding Ledger, or from out of the area entirely. His brain that took pictures would never forget their faces. He noted the license plate was not from that county. That added to his understanding of the situation. He would remember the number – ironically, mostly letters.

Tommy noted and considered things like that.

The idea of a brain that took pictures inspired him. He removed the camera from his knapsack and, using the special lens, got closeups of all the men's faces. He set it aside.

He wondered why they had selected that specific spot. Undoubtedly, because it would provide some function they were anticipating, maybe as simple as being a convenient rendezvous point to meet up with somebody else.

The driver lowered the tail gate and he got up into the bed. He and the man who had ridden in the back, pulled Sammy into a standing position. Oddly – really oddly – Tommy thought, they removed the sack from his head as he stood there in the back of the truck. That meant he could see them; he could identify them. *That was the worst sort of news.* It could mean just one thing and it only took a minute for them to verify it.

One of the men went to the barn and returned with a coil of rope – a rope with a noose already tied at one end. They were planning on hanging Sammy. Tommy had never felt so helpless in his life. All quite randomly, he took stock of what he knew for sure.

First, he – Tommy – had nothing at his disposal with which to stop the men. Second, he *had* to stop the men. Third, he could not just stand by and let it happen. Fourth, if he tried to intervene, they would hang him as well. Fifth, they might as well hang him, too, because he would never be able to live with himself if he didn't at least try to do something. Sixth, he could probably take out at least one of them with his pocketknife. That would still leave five. Might as well have been five hundred.

At some point, tears had begun to flow. He made no attempt at wiping them away. His mind raced, searching for a plan. He would give himself thinking time right up to the last possible second before mounting the knife attack on the nearest of the men. He'd stab the man and run off into the trees hoping that

would buy some time, forcing them to go after him – distract the rest of them causing a delay.

The truck was perfectly positioned below a sturdy limb some fifteen feet off the ground. The man with the rope held the noose in one hand as he threw the coil up over the branch. Perfect the first try. Tommy wondered how much practice he must have had.

The next move puzzled Tommy for only a moment. The men with Sammy in the truck, forced him to stand on top of the cab. They accompanied him and held him. Tommy understood. That would make a longer drop once the truck was driven out from under him. Sammy began struggling. A third man mounted the truck and helped hold him still. He tied a short length of rope around his ankles rendering his legs and feet useless as weapons.

The man with the noose, handed it up to one of the men who arranged it around Sammy's neck, snugging it tight. Sammy resisted. The man repeatedly slapped his face. He could have knocked him out but clearly, they wanted him conscious while he stood there facing death.

The man on the ground pulled the rope taut and secured the other end to one of the roof-supports at the well. Tommy opened his knife – the long blade locked in place. He would attack the man who was responsible for the rope. *He* stood not ten feet away with his back toward him.

The men holding Sammy climbed down. One warned Sammy not to move or he might slip, fall, and hang himself before his time was supposed to be up. Sammy stopped struggling.

The driver entered the cab and started the engine.

That would have just about sounded the end of things for Sammy had it not been for *other* things – puzzling things – fully unexplainable things – not bad things – which occurred in quick succession.

A shot was fired from somewhere behind Tommy – a rifle



shot. The rope dropped from the limb, severed. There were many more shots from several angles – four tires were flat. Bullets hit the ground in front of the men as they moved toward their own rifles. That stopped them in their tracks. They raised their hands without being told – as if they had been in similar situations before.

Not truly understanding, Tommy still moved into the clearing and took charge – that was what Tommy typically did – take charge.

“Everybody on the ground face down – now!”

None of the men followed his direction. A volley of shots rang out over their heads. Leaves fell. The men hurried onto the ground. Tommy ran toward Sammy who, by then, was down onto the truck bed and soon on the ground, tugging at the rope around his neck. Tommy loosened it and Sammy ducked out of it.

The four ball players entered the clearing, each carrying a rifle. They set to cutting lengths of rope and tied the men’s hands and ankles.’

“You know these men,” Tommy asked Curt even before thanking them for their help.

“Never seen any of them. It is rumored the Klan has squads that move in and do things just like this. I’ve heard them referred to as ‘rope and torch’ squads.”

“Tommy put his hands to his throat.”

Billy approached Sammy.

“Take whatever time you want to kick a few heads in – rifle butts may be more effective. Kidney punches really hurt I’m told. Who knows, a rifle might get jarred and go off, accidentally hitting one of them? So many possibilities. We’ll all just turn our backs for a few minutes.”

The words had been more for the men’s benefit than for Sammy. Sammy understood. The men soon displayed their true cowardly nature and began pleading for their lives, apparently ready to give up names and ranks right down to their mother’s

maiden names and shoe sizes if any of that would keep them alive.

“Hurting them would make me no better than they are,” Sammy said. “We need to find a way to get them to the federal authorities.”

“There’s a jail back in Ledger,” Billy pointed out.

“Sorry, Billy, but I don’t trust our law enforcement to move against the Klan, even if they aren’t involved personally.”

“Gottcha. Understand. I’m with you. So, how do we handle this, then?”

Tommy had visions of a chain gang of sorts, moving the group, barefoot, clad only in rags, to town, each slumped forward, required to carry a huge stone, just to keep them occupied, the sound of a dirge [sad song] descending from the heavens. It would be a technicolor, Cecil B. DeMille production [a great movie director].

He would not have an opportunity to see that plan in action.

Two black vans pulled into the clearing. The boys who were armed put their guns at the ready. The passenger side window of the front vehicle rolled down. Ollie stuck out his head.

“I assure you we come in peace. Please lower those guns.”

Five agents exited the vehicles, all armed themselves, of course – two with tommy guns. Ollie and the chief agent approached the boys. One of the agents put in a radio call for transportation. Apparently, they had a field office set up in a railroad car on a siding not five minutes away.

So, what’s going on here?” the agent asked.

Tommy filled him in – no detail omitted.

“And, I have pictures of all of it here in my camera. Let me roll up the film and you may have it. These young gentlemen just saved our lives. If medals are given, they deserve them.”

Two additional vans arrived, and prisoners were soon in transit to wherever federal agents took their bad guys.

The agents collected names and addresses of the boys.

The chief agent offered his admiration for their sensible and restrained action – meaning no casualties and plainly no intent to cause any.

Tommy couldn't bring himself to let go of Sammy's waist, and grampa kept arm around his shoulders. The chief agent spoke.

"It will be difficult for us to transport you three back to town until you agree to separate, gentlemen."

Even grampa offered a sheepish shrug.

Tommy had a final, fully irrelevant observation. He looked up at the sun's rays as they shown through the branches.

"You know, looking at the sun through tear filled eyes presents a virtual kaleidoscope of intertwining, beautiful, colors and shapes. I recommend it. For those who are not given to ready emotions, I recommend eyedrops."

The chief agent spoke.

"You just have to be Tommy. We've all heard about you. At the local field office you are known as *Old Ninety-Five* – a reference, I am told, to the speed at which you were purportedly pushing that old steam locomotive down the rails when you two and your grandfather sent the Nazi's scurrying a few months back."

"*Old Ninety-Five*. I like it. Don't ever want to repeat such an experience, but I do like the moniker. Perhaps I will put it on sweatshirts just below my adorable face and sell them at the county fair."

"He really *is* that way, isn't he? We all figured you were pulling our legs, Oliver."

Sammy offered his hand to the agent.

"I suspect I am the one the Field Office characterizes as *Old Quivering Jell-0* – Tommy's partner in crime."

The agent accepted his hand with a broad smile.

Sammy lifted his brother up onto his shoulders and they

moved toward the waiting vans.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **Newspapers Often Contain News**

“So, how did you find us, grampa?” Tommy asked on the ride back to town.

“An unbelievable combination of coincidences properly assembled by Cal, actually.”

“Oh, you mean a fortuitous juxtaposition of events,” Sammy said.

Everybody in the vehicle turned to look at him. He and Tommy shared a grin.

“Well, yes, something like that for sure. It seems that Cal left the hotel just before Sammy was abducted. By the way, Sammy, did they let you see their faces at that time?”

Yeah. They knocked and when I answered the door, I just figured they were hotel guests who had lost their way. I soon figured out the danger I was in. They never offered a reason or asked any questions.”

Ollie continued.

Anyway, Cal was off to search for mushrooms along the railroad track. He noticed several things, which by themselves, seemed inconsequential, but when put in context made him

uneasy. He saw an unfamiliar pickup with an out of county license plate traveling the access road along the track. He wondered why a truck that was not local would be following that seldom used road. Shortly after that, he saw Tommy trotting that same road wearing a knapsack. Not long after that, four high school boys from town, armed with rifles, came on the scene, hurrying east along that same road. He figured if they were just going hunting, they wouldn't be in such a hurry. Teen boys talked and sat – they didn't rush.

“Cal got to a telephone and left a message for me at the desk. I happened to enter the lobby a few minutes later. I contacted the chief agent, here. He picked me up and as we traveled that road east, he spoke to his field office by radio. They had previously noted some unusual activity at the old Butterfield barn and provided us directions. From there, things just played out according to the story Tommy related.

“And you guys?” Sammy asked addressing his friends.

Curt spoke.

“Me and Billy had been watching the hotel.”

He flashed a sheepish look at Ollie.

“We saw what Tommy saw – Sammy leaving with a gunny over his head. We used doc's phone and called Matt and Jack to meet us with rifles for the four of us. It took them five minutes to meet up. We took off after Tommy and arrived in the woods behind him right when the men were standing you up on top of the cab. We saw they were not covering their faces and understood how serious things had got. We could see Tommy and waited to see how things would play out – figuring he had a plan of some sort.”

He paused and turned to the chief agent.

“Tommy always has a plan. We hatched our own in case we needed to hop in and put things right.”

“I can't thank you enough, guys, well, all of you, of course.”

“Me too,” Tommy said. “I was one breath away from making

my move to perform my first splenectomy on Noose Man and that would have guaranteed my own demise.”

“Stupid jerk,” Sammy said, delivered with a good deal of emotion. “Getting yourself hung, too, wouldn’t have helped anything. Poor grampa!”

“I must admit I had not considered grampa. Sorry.”

“Fortunately, most of those dreadful things that could have taken place did not take place,” Ollie said.

The Chief Agent offered a final caution to Ollie.

“Don’t think you are out of the woods yet, Ollie. Your grandsons bettered the Klan’s best, but they got more and there are few things more dangerous than humiliated Klansmen.”

That sent the rest of the ride into silence.

They were soon back at the hotel all of them agreeing to keep their parts in the activity quiet for the time being, at least. Ollie and his boys returned to their suite.

The other boys just blended into the fabric of the town. Ollie was certainly pleased they had not adhered to his advice about not meddling. He couldn’t bear to even think about that possible alternative ending to the morning.

Sammy was hungry. The three of them roared the elevator down to the lobby and crossed to the dining room. They all agreed having a place like that right in their ‘house’ was a real advantage over the way things had always been in their lives. The boys characterized it as ‘free’. Ollie understood it was really just additional overhead. Either way, they agreed it was better than before.

Their preferred table had become the one on the east side of the room beside a large window that overlooked that back yard that had played a part in the recent incident. They placed their orders – and settled in to replay the adventure just past. A boy entered and stood just inside the door looking about. Sammy raised his hand and motioned him to their table. There were smiles

across the room.

“Hey. What’s up, Matt? Lose your rifle?”

Matt, one of the four riflemen, turned out to be the nephew of Mr. Richards, the editor and owner of the *Daily Record* newspaper. Tommy pointed out that it had never actually been a *daily* paper but that the stories were organized by days of the week within the middle four pages – thus its name. Matt worked for his uncle Saturday afternoons and after school several days a week. Neither Sammy nor Tommy knew him very well.

Ever-accommodating Tommy addressed him.

“What brings you to our humble abode, Matt? Pull up a chair. We are great maker roomers.”

It garnered a quick smile, but he declined, gesturing the offer off with his hands.

“Found a sealed envelope leaned up against the front door of the *Record*. Has your name on it, Sammy. Just wanted to get it to you. I need to get back. Have to get ads set for next week’s edition.”

“Thanks, Matt. I appreciate that. See you later, then.”

“Yeah,” Tommy added. “Keep your powder dry.”

The young man offered a quick smile to Tommy and tipped his hat to Ollie. He turned and left.

“Odd/strange/unusual/out of the ordinary,” Tommy offered.

“I thought it was a nice gesture – bringing me something that was clearly intended for me. See my name?”

“I do. Written in blue pencil like printers use to mark-up copy. I’m sure you noticed the blue pencil in his shirt pocket.”

Sammy shrugged, tore open the envelope, and unfolded a small piece of paper. The message was short and to the point – whatever the point was.

‘*D.R. 8-27-39. Pg VI. Col 5. Ban 3.*’

“More code the way it looks,” Tommy said. “This is so great? Let’s see now.”



Silence. Sammy and their grampa enjoyed watching Tommy's mind at work and his effervescent enthusiasm for challenges. Tommy talked his way through the code.

"D.R. probably does not refer to doctor – the placement of the periods. Might be somebody's initials. Leave it for the moment. The next three numbers look to be a date: August twenty-seventh, nineteen thirty-nine – last year. Let's assume that for the moment. That doesn't seem to help any to clarify the D.R. Pg is the usual abbreviation for the word 'page' – could be something else, of course. VI may be the Roman numeral six. That adds credence to the idea Pg equals page – page six in something – in the D.R. something.

"Ah. Now we're cookin'. Page six, column five. What has pages and columns?"

"A newspaper?" Sammy guessed, understanding that was what had been expected of him.

"Right, the D.R. newspaper meaning the what?"

"The Daily Record?"

Tommy was holding school.

"I'll bet on that. Now the final segment – Ban 3. One might think with all that came before it, the next logical entry would be the designation for the story or news item, or content, but Ban 3?"

Sammy offered an unsolicited suggestion.

"Haven't I heard reporters in movies refer to newspaper headlines sometimes as banners – the Ban, maybe?"

Tommy turned to his grandfather.

"Glad you didn't through him back as a minnow, grampa. More and more he is proving his worth around here – swimmingly, one might say."

Groans!

Sammy stood halfway and took a bow as Tommy continued.

"Newspaper men, like Matt and his uncle, prefer that term

– banner. So, here’s what we have, then. A reference to a news item or story in the August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1939 edition of the Daily Record, which will be found in the 5<sup>th</sup> column – that will be the far right – of page six – the back page. It will be the third story down that column.”

“If, as you suspect, Tommy, it *is* from Matt, why all the mystery – another code? Why not just tell us?”

“Safety, I’m thinking. The kids in this town understood, long before we did, that where the Klan is concerned, nobody in town is to be trusted – perhaps not even Matt’s uncle. How terribly sad would that be?”

Sammy spoke, again.

“There is one really strange thing about *all* this – the codes. You can’t tell me three kids, on their own, each decided to contact us using codes. There has to be some sort of communication about it – like organization or something.”

Ollie responded.

“What you say makes sense, Sammy. I have been sitting here wondering that very same thing. It is probably not crucial to know any more about it at this point, however. And at breakfast, Billy as much as admitted some of them, at least, actually *were* loosely organized – the protection squad. I suppose the rescue effort they launched earlier, supports that.”

“Here’s an interesting, possibility,” Sammy said. “What if they are all using codes to let us know just that – that they *are* organized – like the *Code Gang*?”

“Fascinating?” Tommy said.

He turned toward his grandfather and continued.

“See. That minnow thing. *Nice* save, grampa.”

Smiles.

The food arrived. It was a wonder to the others how Tommy ever finished the food on his plate the way he kept up a constant line of chatter throughout the meal. Sammy’s theory: he was a

Martian in disguise, and he teleported the nutrients directly into his blood stream. Grampa's theory: Like the ancient Demosthenes, he had mastered the art of speaking distinctly with his mouth full – he really liked Sammy's take better, however, but didn't Martians have *green* blood?

\* \* \*

One o'clock found the boys approaching the D.R. – Daily Record in a new version of Tommy-speak, which also included, 'Big H' (hotel), 'WLS' (Wilson/Ledger School), and SCPSFFC (Sammy's Continuing Pathetic Search For Female Companionship).

He began speaking as they entered the Newspaper building.

"Hey, Mr. Richards. The pests are back. In need of last year's papers – August issues to be precise."

"Certainly. Upstairs in cardboard boxes. Labels – dates – on the sides facing out from the shelves. August of '39 should be just to the right at the top of the stairs – a mostly empty set of shelves. Light switch at the top of the steps on the wall just to the left. Please turn them off when you finish up there."

Sammy let the organized one perform the search – forty-two seconds. He smiled as *he* was assigned to carry the box to the table, which sat directly under a light in a green reflector on a cord dangling from the ceiling. There were chairs, but they chose to stand.

Tommy quickly located the copy they needed. He opened it and unfolded it on the table so they could both see it. He read aloud the main headline on the front page; *Hitler Poised to Invade Poland*. He shuddered. It had been spot on: September first German tanks had rolled into Poland.

Tommy spoke aloud, guiding their search with his index finger.

"Page six, left column, banner one, banner two, banner

three, the very last item in the edition: *Bauxite Deposit Likely Locally.*”

“Bauxite?”

“The ore from which aluminum is made. With the war, a few folks will get rich from bauxite. It’s the main metal in modern airplanes – strong and lightweight. Arkansas has a rich, far reaching, deposit in the southern part of the state. Mostly a strip-mining process down there. Laying bare thousands of square acres of land. Devastating to the flora and fauna. Never heard of it this far north. Makes *very* little sense. Two entirely different geological underbases.”

“Does it say where, specifically – the local find?”

“Well, get this, Sammy boy: ‘West of the old Butterfield farm east of Ledger.’”

“Anything else?”

“Nada. No details whatsoever. We need to look through the next several weeks of the paper to determine if anything else shows up – any follow-up articles.”

“Or, we could just ask Matt’s uncle,” Sammy said.

“Probably best not to raise suspicion about what we are up to – and don’t give me that preposition at the end of the sentence thing. Think about it – *suspicion up about to which we are?* I don’t think so.”

Sammy smiled. He silently appreciated the mere fact his brother would give him credit for catching it. He hadn’t, but still.

Tommy dug down and removed the next dozen papers from the box and divided them between him and Sammy – eight for him and four for his brother. Tommy read at a ridiculously rapid rate. Sammy understood.

Nearly a half hour passed. Reading a six-page paper beginning to end was no easy matter, even when merely scanning headlines.

“I got nothing here,” Sammy said.

“Me either. Must not have panned out, although, I’d have thought *that*, by itself, would have been newsworthy.”

“Why is it that Matt thought it would be of interest to us in the first place?” Sammy asked arranging his stack back with Tommy’s.

“The financial side of things. Remember, ‘Dollars more important than the Klan in the burnings’. A bauxite find would be huge money for somebody – metal for thousands of airplanes.”

“Got ya. Makes sense. Now what, though?”

“Not sure. Several interesting facets come to mind. I would think that a find with that huge a financial possibility would have rated the main banner on the front page had Mr. Richards thought it was credible. Instead it got minimal mention back at the bottom of page six between an ad for the Filmore Funeral Home and Sam’s Septic Tank Service.

“Here’s an interesting possibility; somebody could have intentionally killed any follow-up story – wanting to keep the information to themselves. That could have been whomever the original source of the information was, or, even Mr. Richards himself, if he had been offered some remuneration for doing so. Remuneration means payment – bribe, in this case.”

Sammy nodded and asked one of his often, think as he spoke, roundabout, questions.

“So, putting it together with your theory from before about financial gain being the most important reason behind burning the cabins and then buying up the land, it could all be related to a valuable ore field underlying that area to the east of town. Do I have that right?”

“It seems right to me, but like you asked, where do we go with it?”

“Don’t claims have to be registered or something? They’re always being registered in the western movies – guys shooting each other in order to get to the land office first.”

“Interesting point. In this day and age, though, I’m thinking they couldn’t be filed until the person had title to the land. It appears somebody is still working toward that, doesn’t it?”

“If the theory holds up.”

“We need to go back to the property transfer notices and see if the bank has filed any and to whom, if they have. That will be in the most recent papers – downstairs. If you will, put this box away, please; we can snoop down there.”

“Let’s make sure I got this,” Sammy said as he replaced the box on the shelf. “We know the bank has bought the properties of the destroyed cabins, so *it* holds the titles. What you’re saying is, if the bank had bought them with an arrangement to sell them to somebody else – which seems to be the case according to Billy – the bank would have to publish another transfer notice naming that person at the time of the sale to him.”

“That’s *technically* correct. That ‘person’, however, might be a company so no names of people would appear in the notices. Let’s see if we can find anything along those lines before we get too excited about the possibility.”

“Is that a dead end then, if they do it that way – as a company?”

“Oh, no. Just adds a layer of complexity. Companies have to file their status with the state, and such a filing has to include names and addresses of the owner or partners.”

“Have I told you how much you amaze me? You have the same size brain as the rest of us and yet you can pack so much more into it than we can. Amazing, really.”

“I take no credit for the brain – it came as original equipment. I do take credit for how I use it, and it is my goal to use it well.”

“And I have heard you explain that before. It is to your credit.”

“Probably grampa’s, really, but, in his absence, I’ll take

credit for it.”

Downstairs, they thanked Mr. Richards for the access and moved to the cabinet which held the recent copies. Tommy picked up the most recent edition.

“Bingo, Sammy. Look here. Four property transfers from the bank to a company called, BXT Incorporated.”

“BXT as in bauxite, you think, Tommy.”

“My amazing brain had not yet gone there. Never discount the one you have, big brother. Together, you and I just may own this state someday.”

“No thanks. I have no interest in owning any part of anything that has such a large component of hate at its core.”

Tommy nodded. His brother, although he had taken the example too literally, did make an interesting point. Tommy wanted to remind him about all the wonderful people they had met in the state but didn’t take time.

“Next, I suppose, we somehow discover who owns BXT.”

It had been Sammy extending his idea.

“I think it’s time to share what we have with grampa. What do you say, Big Bro?”

“I agreed with that a week ago, remember? Sure. While we’re at it, do you think he’ll share about his work inside the Klan? I guess I’m not even sure if I want to know. More and more, I’m thinking once these immediate crises are over, we’re going to have to move again. It’s a cinch the Klan isn’t going to move, and they’ve already shown us that our lives aren’t going to be worth squat diddly. I hate that – having to move – and likely far away out of Klan territory.”

Tommy offered a shrug. It had been his concern as well. He understood it had become a major concern for his brother, as well it should have considering the recent events. If, as one of the boys had indicated, that had been pulled off by some outside, specialized, group of the KKK, it might not be general knowledge

among the local Klansmen. They would wait and see.

They returned the papers to the shelf.

“Thanks, Mr. Richards. Big help with our projects. We thought Matt was going to be here this afternoon.”

“He is. Back room where the pages get set. Matt is quite artistic, and I give him a free hand at creating the block advertising frames. The businesses really like his work. Through that door if you want to say, hi. I wasn’t even aware you were friends.”

“Let’s just say we have recently discovered we share some interests. He’s a good kid.”

“Yes, he is. Glad to know that you are friends.”

We won’t interrupt his creative juices if he’s busy.

They returned to the hotel and found their grampa adding and rearranging paintings in the gallery just as if the world weren’t falling apart around them.

“What you up to, grampa?” Tommy asked.

He understood the question really should have been, ‘How have you arrived at the point you believe you need to reconstitute the configuration of your paintings in the gallery,’ but he figured he’d go with the more common, truncated version.

“I am *up to* about five eleven. As a young man I hit six feet, but the past decade I’ve shrunk a bit – pads between one’s vertebra tend to compress or disintegrate in old age, I’m told. And I am sure that is far more than you intended when you formulated your question.”

Smiles.

“Actually, I didn’t know men did that – shrunk,” Sammy said. “Good to know. When I choose my bride, I will take that into consideration.”

Neither Ollie nor Tommy had *any* idea what that meant, and neither chose to pursue it. Tommy continued.

“We got stuff we are ready to share with you if you are willing to listen.”



“Always.”

“Well, it’s about what’s been going on here – the Klan and such. Didn’t know how open you could be in that area since you are – you know.”

“I see. Fully open I’d say. Here or upstairs.”

“I vote for upstairs over dessert,” Sammy said.

“Upstairs over dessert it shall be, then. Why don’t you two arrange for the goodies and I’ll put things in order here – need five more minutes.”

“Got a choice?” Sammy asked – “I mean for dessert not a painting.”

“I will bow to your culinary cravings. Just make sure it goes well with black coffee – and that there *is* black coffee.”

Tommy ushered his brother out of the room before he asked how he should know that.

“Anything goes well with coffee for grampa.”

Sammy nodded and commented, “Except cream, I take it.”

He opted for a double crust banana-strawberry pie – a whole one – and plates and a pot of coffee and a quart of milk. The cook offered a room-service cart and added utensils and napkins. The cook – everybody called her *Cookie* – plainly enjoyed having a family in ‘her’ hotel.

Tommy stayed out of it, always amazed, himself, at his brother’s obsession with food – sweet food, sour food, bland food, spicy food, good food, bad food, heavy food, light food, domestic food, foreign food, and in a pinch, most likely, dog food. He would not clutter his mind with such trivia but did wonder if he had similar classifications for the girls in his fantasies.

Up in their suite, Tommy deferred to Sammy to lay out what they knew. He carried on for several minutes. Ollie was clearly fascinated.

“Very well done, Big Brother. It leaves us at the point of identifying the principals in BXT and figure the Feds would find it

easier to come by that information than us.”

“About that,” Ollie said, “I’m sure you are correct. You understand, even with the names, you still have to prove criminal intent – intent to obtain the properties through illegal means – not an easy thing to do in this situation, where it seems they just sat back and took advantage of the Klan’s hatred for the black land owners.”

“Point well-taken,” Tommy said. “We will need to create a list of behaviors and connections that will, in fact, prove or at least suggest that sort of motivation. Do you think Judge Reynolds would be of help in suggesting what sorts of things we will need to provide in order to give our theory standing?”

Grampa hesitated to offer a response, displaying more than a little discomfort. Tommy sensed the problem and moved away from his question.

“I suppose a judge should not get involved ahead of time. We can look elsewhere for precedents and such.”

Ollie nodded, understanding that Tommy sensed the problem – the judge was a Klansman and he was not yet ready to out him to the boys. Sammy sensed it was time for his second piece of pie. He had the cook cut the pie into fourths. That meant one fourth for Tommy, one fourth for him, one fourth for grampa and one fourth for him. It worked out perfectly. They all understood. Tommy poured more coffee for Grampa and finished the milk in his mug. Sammy drank from the bottle.

Quite unexpectedly, there was a knock on the door – tentative – not a commanding knock like room service or a maid. Still, it had startled all three. It was unusual, because visitors always checked in at the desk and the clerk called to alert them and make certain it was appropriate to send them up.

The three traded looks. Even during the week just past, such a thing would not have stirred such feelings of uneasiness. Recent events had certainly mucked up their lives.

Sammy took hold of a dining room chair on the off chance he might need a weapon. Grampa moved to the door and opened it. There stood the two men from earlier: Bosley and Billingsly.

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## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **A Town's Ugly Truths**

Tommy stood and hurried to Sammy putting his arm around his waist. Sammy moved him around to his other side – the side furthest from the door. Ollie spoke to the two men.

“Mr. Bosley and Mr. Billingsly, I believe. How may I be of assistance?”

“The shorter of the two – Bosley – spoke.”

“We have been trying to reach you and your boys to deliver a warning – in private.”

Had they just incriminated themselves? Sammy continued to hold onto the back of the chair repositioning his hands for a grip with more leverage. He moved Tommy behind him.

“I am aware you have attempted to insert yourselves into our lives.”

“What?”

“You’ve tried to contact us. I must tell you it has seemed a threatening gesture to us. Please state your business and don’t try to enter our suite.”

“We’re sorry we have upset you. A few days ago, we learned the local leader of the Klan – he calls himself the Wizard – has put a price on your head and your boys. We have just been

trying to find a private place to pass that on to you. It would not do to have certain people overhear what we are up to.”

“Ah. I see. Not at all how we have been looking at it. Do you have more to say or will you leave now?”

“We have a member list. If most any man in this town knowed we give it to you, we’d be swigin’ before sunset. Can we count on your good faith about that?”

“If you mean will we keep quiet about any list we receive from you and what you are up to, most certainly.”

Bosley elbowed Billingsly and he removed a long-sized, white, envelope from his pocket and handed it to Bosley who, in turn, handed it to Ollie.

“Thank you, gentlemen. Take the back stairs if you’d feel more comfortable.”

“That’s how we come up here. Please don’t never try and contact us. Please.”

“Of course, and thank you, I guess.”

Offering them a ‘thank you’ after the discomfort they had caused felt more than a little out of place.

The men turned and headed toward the stairs. Ollie closed and locked the door. He returned to the table. Sammy slumped onto the couch. Tommy paced.

“Well, that was an odd turn of events – a good one, but odd,” Sammy said.

“Perhaps a good lesson in passing judgment prior to having the facts,” Ollie suggested. (You know teachers – they try to turn everything into some sort of ‘lesson’.)

“Do we need to call the Feds?” Tommy asked.

“Let us first examine whatever is sealed inside this envelope. The bulk suggests several sheets of paper.”

Tommy offered his pocketknife to use as a letter opener. Ollie slit it along the top and handed the knife back. He removed the contents – four, letter size sheets, folded into thirds, each

containing a handwritten list of full names. There was not a title on the page, but the message had been they were Klan members – local Klan members.

“Come. See if you recognize names from the list?”

The boys joined him each perching on one arm of his big chair. They bent in and began reading down the listing. They began nodding.

“Looks like maybe fifteen or twenty percent of the men in town and surrounding rural area,” Tommy said after a quick calculation. Everybody from a minister to the undertaker. Doc’s name isn’t here. Neither is Matt’s uncle, Mr. Richards, at the newspaper. I’m relieved about that.”

“And, none of our male employees here at the hotel,” Ollie said, also with a sense of relief.

“A not so good a thing,” Sammy noted and then explained. “The fathers of two of our four riflemen are on the list. I figured Curt’s would be, just from comments he’s made. Billy’s dad is not. He’s the banker and he’s the one Billy overheard speaking to somebody on the phone about buying up the property. Even the mayor’s on it. What a mess. I had no idea this thing was so widespread. Seventy-five or so hate-filled Klansmen going about their lives every day, right here in Ledger.”

“Interesting to me, Bosley and Billingsly both appear on the list,” Ollie noted. “They included themselves in their own handwriting. Me thinks there is rebellion afoot.”

“No wonder they were able to get the data – compile such a list,” Tommy said. “It is possible, of course, that like you, grampa, those two only joined to obtain this sort of information.”

“Another good thing,” Sammy said. “*Your* name isn’t on the list, grampa.”

Ollie nodded, not sure if that really were good, since his goal was to win the trust of the local Klansmen. He didn’t mention it.

“A question I keep coming back to is how did the boys who alerted us to the planned burnings, learn about them,” Sammy said.

“Kids know things about their families. I think you recently said that, Sammy. I think it would be a really big deal to turn against your father. Those boys must be going through terrible times.”

“We know that’s true for Curt, Tommy. He’s come right out and talked about it. They are not only turning against their parents, they are turning against something that has been engrained in them since the day they were born – black people are bad people – dangerous people – people who use up what white folks need – they shouldn’t be around. They are not really human like white folks – they are something less and that makes it alright to treat them badly, worse, in fact than most white people treat their pets. It makes me so angry. I suppose there are few things as hurtful in the world as people who hate based on some combination of fear and ignorance. And from what I’ve read in the history books, mankind has never found a way to combat it. *Never!* It just goes on generation after generation like it’s inborn – passed along through the genes. Ah. To some extent it is, isn’t it – that ‘I have to keep myself alive’ thing.”

“Remember,” Ollie said, “we Jansens also have that basic need and we choose *not* to burn cabins and kill people of a different skin color. It is a good deal more than that.”

“There’s your next essay, big brother. Get on it so it doesn’t slip away. Grampa, did you know the kids have asked Sammy to keep writing his essays? They trust him and want to hear what he thinks. That is just about the greatest reward any author could ever receive, don’t you think?”

“I do indeed. One of the things that makes it work for him is that, he uses the language of the everyday person – words they understand and don’t have to think about or look up. It is a rare



talent to be able to speak to people meaningfully at their own level. I applaud you, Sammy, and I agree with your brother – you have the kernel for your next essay in what you just said, well laid out in a convincing manner.”

“Again, I have to say it is mostly just parroting things I’ve heard you say.”

“Those books you mentioned, I didn’t write. The way it seems, you’ve been doing research without even knowing it.”

Sammy smiled at Tommy.

“I have to admit, if the little guy here didn’t keep pestering me to read things that he thinks I need to read, I probably wouldn’t have read most of them.”

“Good for little guy, then,” Ollie said. “Sometimes great teams don’t even know they are great teams.”

Sammy still had things to think about out loud.

“We have talked about how ignorance is at the base of so much with what’s wrong with the world. Sometimes I think it must provide a wonderful feeling – that total lack of responsibility. Hard to be held responsible for things you don’t know. On the other hand, I wish everybody had a little guy to push them to learn. Maybe that is the solution to some of the problems – find ways that force people to cleanse themselves of their ignorance.”

“Like required school attendance?” Ollie offered.

Sammy shrugged a bit sheepishly.

Tommy tried to further encourage his brother.

“I think that’s your third essay. Go to your room this instant and start writing – that was me trying to force you to – well, I guess that’s where it breaks down. Anyway. Hop to it. You got kids waiting.”

He hadn’t shared it, but Sammy was concerned – frightened even. He was pleased the kids found what he had to say helpful and that they believed he had more to say that they needed to hear. Most of him was prepared to go ahead and do

that. Part of him, however, continued to believe that his speaking out that way was most likely the underlying factor in that group of men trying to lynch him. Grampa had talked about it – doing the right and moral thing rather than hiding behind the selfish thing.

At any rate, Sammy's 'hopping to it' would have to wait. There was another knock at the door – even weaker than the earlier one. They exchanged puzzled glances.

Ollie opened the door. A young man fell inside onto the floor.

"Curt," Sammy said rushing to him and kneeling. "What in blue blazes happened to you."

His face was bleeding. It was puffy and black and blue. He was bleeding from his nose and mouth. His eyes were swollen, almost closed. Tommy understood what had happened.

"Your father did this to you, didn't he?"

Curt nodded. Ollie and Sammy picked him up ever so carefully and eased him into Ollie's big chair.

Tommy explained to his grandfather while Sammy wet washrags and began working on Curt's face and neck.

"Curt said if his father ever found out that he was helping protect Negroes – they refer to them as darkies – he would do just what we see he did. Beat him till he couldn't stand. Somehow, he managed himself here. That's hard to believe. Look at him."

Tommy pulled up Curt's sweatshirt just enough to inspect the damage. His chest and stomach and back were every bit as bad as his face.

"Help me get him out of his shirt, Sammy," Tommy said."

That done, Ollie spoke to Tommy.

"You need to get Doc up here PDQ. He needs to use the freight elevator, so he doesn't raise any sort of suspicion. We certainly don't want this boy's father to suspect he is here, at least until we can get a better handle on things – put together some sort of plan. Give doc enough details so he comes equipped to treat

what we have here.”

Tommy nodded and left, using the back stairs and making as sure as a ten-year-old could be sure that he did nothing to raise suspicion.

“What can we do about his dad?” Sammy asked.

“Very little, actually. Probably nothing, legally. Many states, especially southern states, typically give parents virtually complete control where it comes to disciplining their children. Maybe doctor Sounder will have a suggestion. I have to think this won’t be his first experience with this sort of thing.”

Sammy began dabbing the blood from his friend’s chest. Curt cried out in pain.

“I think there is a broken rib,” Sammy said.

Curt began breathing in rapid, shallow breaths, he looked up at Sammy, his eyes rolled back inside his head and he passed out.

“While he is mostly unaware of his pain, let’s move him into your bed. Pull the covers off so we can place him on the sheet.”

With that seen to, Sammy returned. They draped Curt’s arms over their shoulders and soon had eased him onto the bed.

“Doc will want to examine his legs as well. Let’s slip his pants off – boots first. If there has been damage to his legs, just uncovering them should help relieve some of the pain.”

“It is a good time to finish sponging him off – while he is passed out,” Ollie said.

He pointed to the boy’s left side.

“That’s a broken rib – maybe two – and I mean really broken, pushing his skin out that way. The poor child. Do you know his father?”

“Never met him. From the little Curt has told me about him, I don’t like him. Dropped out of school in third grade and Curt has to fight every September to be allowed to return to school. The one quote Curt offered from him was something like: ‘Too much

schoolin' attacks a man's faith'."

Ollie winced. He didn't offer his contention that probably said more about the value of the faith than of the education.

"He has a little brother, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. Wally. One of Tommy's best friends. He took up with Jeremiah rather easily. The age, maybe."

They heard the doors of the freight elevator open. Ollie went to meet them. Doc was toting two bags and Tommy one so large he had to carry it in front, against his stomach, wrapped by both arms.

Ollie went to the boys' bedroom without words and the others followed.

Doc reacted in a rather undocor like fashion.

"My God! Tommy said his father did this. I've seen bad, but this is the worst."

Sammy pointed to the rib as his contribution. The doctor nodded. Ollie motioned the boys back toward the door.

"Tell us how we can help, Doc. Otherwise, we'll just keep out of your way."

He didn't respond, as he went through the doctor routine – lifting his eyelids, pulse, heart, blood pressure.

"You have done a good job cleaning him up. While he is still unconscious, I need to bathe him in alcohol. Even cleaned wounds will harbor germs. He could be in for massive infection. He doesn't need that in addition to everything else we see here."

Tommy opened one of the bags and handed him the bottle and a spool of gauze. He waited with the scissors, ready to cut it at the doctor's indication. If one had drawn a patchwork of four-inch squares everywhere on his body, each of them would have contained something that required attention.

Doc stood and removed his suitcoat. He loosened his collar and rolled up his sleeves – his eyes never leaving his patient. He turned to Ollie.

“His father will come after him as soon as he realizes he’s missing – probably my office first and then make the rounds of his son’s friends. They need to be warned. Curtis senior has a temper like you can’t imagine. Eventually, I assume he’ll come here.”

“I know his friends, and I can do that,” Sammy said. “Shall I make calls?”

“In a case like this, I don’t trust the central switch board. Do it in person. Be so careful. Don’t let that man get you in his clutches. He may be armed.”

“Oh, you can count on him being armed,” doc said. “This is a half-dozen-guns-for-every-household county.”

Sammy looked at his grampa for permission and received it. He left on the trot, again down and out the back.

Tommy continued to assist the doctor, able to anticipate most of his requests before they were made. At eight, he had memorized the *Manual of Nursing Practice* – ‘just in case’. Apparently, ‘just in case’, had arrived.

The phone in the living room rang. Ollie went to answer it. He returned almost immediately.

That was the desk downstairs. A couple of boys down there saying Curt’s father is on his way to the hotel, mad as a kitten dunked in coal oil – Ginny’s saying, not mine.

“Here’s what we do,” Tommy said. “There is a secret room not ten feet from our door. I will go open it and make it ready while you two bring Curt. Then I’ll come back and get the supplies. There is lots of water in there. I have also installed an extension phone for emergencies – I believe this constitutes an emergency. Down at the switchboard, it appears to be a regular call from the phone in our suite. I replaced the bell with a flashing light to eliminate the noise.”

He took two fresh sheets from the lower drawer of his dresser and left. With no more words, the plan was set in motion and less than five minutes later, Tommy, the doctor and Curt were

safely sealed out of harm's way. Tommy had pulled the mattress to a place directly under the light and had replaced the small wattage bulb with a one hundred. Ollie moved back toward the suite, his head still swimming at the several new revelations – the room and the extension phone topping the list – and, of course, the damaged boy.

There is a saying about completing things 'just in the Nick of time'. Before Ollie had the door to their suite closed behind him, a man – more like a raging lunatic – left the elevator and headed up the hall toward him. Ollie understood he had to be dealt with right there and then, so he made no attempt to evade him.

"You got my son here?"

"You will have to be more specific. I don't understand."

"My Curtis. A friend of your boy's. I know he's here somewhere."

"Are you saying he ran away? You have my sympathy."

"None a your business, *why*. I want him, now."

"You are welcome to look around. Search the whole hotel if you want to. I assure you that you won't find him here. Come into my suite and begin in there, if you like."

The man pushed on the door and barged in ahead of Ollie. He carried a double-barreled shotgun. He stood, looking around. He moved into Ollie's bedroom and did the same. There, he opened the closet. Back in the hall, which connected the rooms within the suite, Ollie pointed to the door of his studio.

"I am a painter. That is my studio."

The man entered. Ollie ducked into the boys' room. He remembered Curt's clothes were on the floor between the beds. He managed to arrive a few seconds ahead of the man and moved them under Tommy's bed with his feet. That bed had a quilt that hung nearly to the floor.

Again, the man opened the closet door. Ollie hoped he didn't look under the beds, which would have been a logical thing

to do. He didn't. Clearly, he wasn't functioning at a logical level.

"Like I said, if you feel the need, search the hotel. All the rooms are empty just now. Check out time is noon. Check in isn't until four."

Back in the hotel hall, near the elevator, the man threw up his hands and screamed. He was out of his head. Ollie had no idea whether that was a continuation of his anger at his son, or his reaction to having been unable to find him and shield his son's condition from others. It might well be nobody would express their displeasure at him for what he had done – the parental rights thing – but knowing he had done it, the majority of the town's folk would certainly shun him and probably boycott his filling station and garage.

He poked the elevator button repeatedly, but his impatience sent him clamoring down the front stairs instead.

Three boys emerged from the back stairway and approached Ollie.

"We know Curt's here. Just checking to make sure he's okay. We found him in the alley behind the filling station. He'd run away after the beating and collapsed. We brought him up the freight elevator and left him at your door. His dad didn't find him, did he?"

"He didn't. One of those close but no cigar things. Doc is taking care of him. All of those things must remain private among the four of us, agreed?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Absolutely."

"Of course."

"How bad is he?" Billy asked, adding his agreement with three, short nods.

"Extremely bad. Doc says he's never seen such a thing."

Clearly saddened, they left the way they had arrived.

Ollie waited to make sure Senior was not coming back.

Sammy returned.

“Most of the boys weren’t home, but I spoke to several who are going to go find them and spread the word. How’s Curt?”

He entered his room.

“*Where’s* Curt?”

“Something about a secret room?”

“That’s great. I’d have never thought of that. Can we go see how it’s going?”

Ollie momentarily wondered if everybody in the world knew about the *secret* room but him. He responded to Sammy.

“Let me knock on the wall and let them know that things are back to normal out here.”

The panel opened a crack and Tommy peeked out.

“Doc has things under control in here. I suggest you bring in a small table and a couple of chairs and we make this the sick room while Curt recovers. Doc says he is certain there is lots of internal damage – stomach and other organs. Healing will just be a matter of time – a long time. He’s still bleeding from the mouth – loose teeth and torn tongue and gums, Doc says. He’ll be on a liquid diet for a week while he starts the recovery process. How did it go notifying his friends?”

“I think I managed to get all of them alerted. As I returned, just now, I saw them gathered at the other end of Main Street – well, them and others. The crowd seemed to be growing down by the gas station. This is hard on them, too, I’m sure. I’m glad they have each other. Good to see some adults with them. I hope they can get it talked out.”

“What happened to his dad?”

“He left here in a rage,” Ollie said. “I assume he is continuing his rant and search, elsewhere. Can we get you and Doc something to eat or drink?”

Sammy took the orders and would see to it. The phone rang.



“Let me take that back in the living room. Keep this panel closed.”

It was the Chief Agent – McGuire, by name. He had heard things and wanted firsthand information. Ollie filled him in, assuring him it was a local matter, even though he had no idea how to begin dealing with it. The conversation ended.

Ollie addressed Sammy there in the living room. They were sitting across from each other in their usual spots.

“Any idea where our much-touted police force has been these past several hours?”

“I didn’t catch sight of them. The police car is gone from where it’s usually parked beside the jail. You think they cut out so they wouldn’t have to get involved?”

“An astute observation, I imagine. From what I gather, child rearing is a complex undertaking in these parts. Most parents treat their children with love and respect, but they never intervene when another parent breaks with that. Each to their own seems to be the rule. Maybe this time, *that* will change.”

“*Change*, in Ledger, grampa? Not a chance. All that many of these people have is their traditions that define right and wrong and every sort of expectation. Good or bad they cling to them. It’s like their only source of security. Mr. Richards once told Tommy he figured the average educational level for men in this town – leaving himself, Doc, the judge, and the lawyer out of it – was third grade. He said he had to write the newspaper at the fourth-grade level, or he’d never sell any. The women come in even below that. How can people be so stupid as to not see that education is the key to an improved future, *not* their tired traditions? I guess I can answer my own question: those who are uneducated have no way of understanding the value of an education.”

“Essay number four, Sammy. I’m not saying I didn’t know you had it in you, but since we arrived in this town, you have blossomed – mentally – your working social conscious, perhaps

better describes it.”

“Don’t take this wrong, grampa, but back in the old days up north I never had anything much to challenge my – what? Values, and beliefs, I guess. I suppose I couldn’t have even stated them. Here, there seems to be a challenge on every corner every day. I mean, the whole Nazi experience was disgusting and frightening, but it was pretty much still contained to the Nazis. Here, though, it involves every last citizen. Talk about frightening. Geeze! What chance do any of the kids have? It’s not a place I could raise my family. Maybe having to move on wouldn’t be such a bad thing after all.”

The phone rang. It sat on the end table beside Ollie’s big chair. He picked up. He listened for some time offering nothing in return. He hung up. His face was flushed.

Sammy sat up and turned toward him sensing something important.

“What?”

“The police just found Curt’s father tied to the gas pump at his filling station, the life just about beaten out of him. They called here searching for doc. They are arranging transportation to the hospital in Wilson and need doc to ride along. My how I hope that wasn’t the boys’ doing. Good people can never win if they slip and lower themselves to use the same tactics they purport to condemn and reject. What a terribly sad day for Ledger, Arkansas.”

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **The Coincidence of the Missing Five inches**

Having instructed Tommy and Ollie in the care of Curt until he could return, Dr. Sounder hurried off to attend to Curt's father. A physician had but *one* side in those days: that of the patient. Sammy accompanied him, carrying bags.

Matt arrived at the hotel to see how he might be of assistance.

"Curt's mother needs to be made aware of her son's condition, his presence here, and that he is holding his own. That needs to be done in person. I assume she will accompany her husband to the hospital. We need to find a place for Wally to stay. We are going to be too busy here."

"No problem, Sir. Wally can stay with my family. He's mostly like family anyway. In and out with Curt daily."

"Fine. I will leave all that with you, trusting you can handle it."

"If I can't, I got lots a good help available."

He left using the back stairs.

Upon Sammy's return to the suite, he collapsed onto the

sofa and offered his impression of what he had witnessed to his grampa.

“I had to throw up right there on Main Street. I’ve listened to the news reports describing the horrors of war and have seen some of it in newsreels, but none of that could have been much worse than what I just saw – Curt’s father, his body slumped forward against the ropes that held him upright against that gas pump, covered in blood from his matted hair to his bare feet.

“As soon as we got there, I helped Doc cut him down. Each time he stirred back from unconsciousness he would scream until he passed out again. While conscious, he fought for every breath. While unconscious, his breathing was shallow, slow and irregular. I don’t see how a human body can come back from something like that.

“Doc even turned white. He said there were multiple broken bones and that he had probably lost vision in his left eye. One of his lungs was punctured by a broken rib for sure. May be more. He had me help him insert a drainage tube in his chest. I don’t know how I managed to hold it together. The smell was like that when you slit a rabbit’s belly to gut it. None of the bystanders had made any effort to cut him free and lay him down. A few even spat on him.

“Billy was there. I looked him squarely in his eyes, face to face. He knew my question without me having to state it. He said, “In Ledger, one generally gets what one deserves – good or bad.” Without admitting to anything, he offered no denial that he had been a part of it and indicated no remorse for the act whether or not he had been a party to it. He volunteered one comment.

“Mark this day on your calendar, Sammy: going forward, fathers will think twice about how to handle their sons here in Ledger. The old way is gone, and I am proud of that.”

If that was the old way, Sammy had to agree it needed to be gone. It returned people to the age of savagery. It denied the

grand human potential represented by words and speech. Perhaps Billy was indicating that the eye for an eye admonition of the Old Testament was to be replaced by a New Testament philosophy of love and compassion. Nothing about that gruesome, bloody scene, however, seemed to indicate it, that afternoon there on South Main Street, Ledger, Arkansas, U.S.A. Planet Earth.

Sammy stood and spread his arms displaying his own bloody clothing. It supported the fact he had been deeply involved in assisting the doctor.

“I need to take a shower and wash this filth away.”

“Yes,” Ollie said, clearly hurting for his grandson. “Take whatever time you need. Throw the clothes away, if you want. One thing first, we will not mention any part of this to Curt. He has enough to cope with right now.”

He turned to Tommy who had come to hear his brother’s report. He was standing in the doorway. Ollie spoke to him.

“Do you need me to spell you in there with Curt? Doc said not to leave him unattended, remember.”

It was only then he noticed the boy was crying.

He went to Tommy and pulled him close, making circles on the boy’s back with his big hand like he had done so many times before. This, however, was not a skinned knee or a hateful ‘egghead’ remark from another youngster. They both understood that big hand by itself was no longer up to such challenges. It was all they had. They’d take it.

Tommy released himself and managed a response to his grampa’s question.

“I’m okay for a while. Check in an hour, and we’ll set up a schedule – rotating among the three of us. Doc said to have ice chips for Curt to suck on when he woke up and got thirsty. He is not allowed water – something about the internal belly wounds we can’t see.”

He left for the sick room with a world class sigh. Sammy left

for the bathroom. Ollie gave himself five minutes and sat down, limp, trembling, sinking into the depths of his large, old, chair. Where was the comfort and reassurance it usually brought him?

He allowed a few tears, himself, wondering how the world he had worked seventy years to preserve and improve had come to something like that – hatred, burnings, beatings, and war – he dared not omit the worst of it, *war*, and yet at that moment, in that tiny village, war was the least of human concerns. Fathers and sons had turned against each other. How had his generation so clearly failed the younger one?

He would do his best not to indicate his despair to his boys. He would assemble and execute a reassuring face – sober, allowing just the hint of pain, perhaps. It should imply some hope even though he felt none. He would maintain a steady voice. He would search for the right words – there would be none, of course.

He took the elevator to the lobby in search of ice.

Hours later, word arrived that Curt's father would live – probably as a cripple unable to support his family. Those who chose to punish him had been shortsighted – in the long run what they had done was punish his innocent wife and children. Impulsive behaviors motivated by hate were always implemented by way of tunnel vision and never considered the long haul or the wider picture.

The most devastating brand of hate is blind hate – hate long detached from what caused it in the first place. It always makes a person an easy patsy for those planning to carry out their own evil purposes. That reinforced Tommy's and Sammy's conclusions about the monetary gain somebody was trying to achieve, while using the willing, hate-filled hearts of the Klan to support it.

Tommy was catching an hour of sleep and Curt had still not awakened. The lot of them was exhausted. Ollie was with him. They had moved grampa's chair into the sick room. He napped off

and on, rousing frequently to keep informed about the young man's condition. Doc had checked in by phone earlier. He had called a prescription into the pharmacy and arranged for it to be delivered.

A boy – Tommy's age – arrived with it. Sammy answered the door to accept it.

"Sorry, I don't have any change to give you."

"Wouldn't take it anyway. This is for Curt, you know. The whole town is for Curt. How is he?"

"Doc says he's holding his own. Thanks for your help and for your concern."

The boy pointed out a phone number on the label.

"Dad says to call him at the second number any time of day or night if you need anything for Curt."

He offered a quick grin, nodded, and left.

Tommy had been awakened by the knock on the door and arrived to take charge of the medicine bottle.

"One tablespoon every hour for pain for up to twenty-four hours. I wondered what kind of medicine came by the pint. I figured he'd need something else once the shot wore off."

He got a spoon and took it into the sick room. Sammy followed for an update.

Curt had just awakened and struggled to open his eyes. It was a first since he had collapsed at the door. Ollie made the explanation to him, so he didn't have to ask. Curt turned his head to look around and smiled up at Sammy.

"Told you there was a secret room up here."

Ollie managed the medicine into his mouth. He swallowed then closed his eyes and was back asleep.

Tommy had a commentary.

"He didn't seem to remember helping us bring Jeramiah here. May indicate a concussion. Didn't mention pain. Grampa, you look exhausted. I have a second wind. Let me spell you, while

you get some zzzs in a real bed. We forgot to eat supper so I imagine Sammy will soon start eyeing erasers and paste. How about we gather here at six o'clock and arrange for breakfast?"

Sammy and Ollie nodded. Sammy helped his grampa up out of the chair. He had never done that before – helped or offered. It had never been called for. A glance passed between them – and simple nods. No words. There would probably be a short discussion later renewing their grampa's early statement that as long as he was capable of doing a task, he didn't want it done for him. It remained to be seen if the chair thing was a momentary need based in exhaustion or the prelude to something new in their relationship.

Tommy loved to sit in the big chair, partly because of the way it wrapped him up, and partly because it made him feel close to his grampa. He and a book were soon comforted into the chair ready to become caught up in some exciting adventure that would transport him far, far, away. From time to time Curt moaned. Tommy shuddered but understood that right then there was nothing for him to do about it. It was mostly up to Curt. He was keeping track of time between doses. Curt tended to be Stoic, so, out of habit, might not ask for pain relief. Knowing it was available might change things. Giving him no choice – Tommy's preference – most certainly would change things for the better.

At six, Ollie began organizing the break for his crew.

"Sammy, how about calling Billy and seeing if he could come and spell us here. We can go down for breakfast, stretch, get a breath of fresh air and such."

"I need to 'and such' first, then I'll make the call."

He grinned and left for the bathroom. Soon, Billy arrived. It wasn't so much that the relationship between the two boys seemed changed in any basic way since the interchange down on the street, earlier, as it was awkward. They understood and would handle it. Billy was amazed by the presence of the secret room.



Tommy made him pledge – right hand in the air and left over his heart – never to reveal its existence.

He did (pledge, not reveal). There were those ‘sort of smiles all around – well, Tommy remained stone cold serious. Since it had been his suggestion to hide Curt in there, he felt some responsibility for having made the room’s presence known.

His plan was to move him into their bedroom later in the morning, since interference from his father was no longer a threat. The move would make it more comfortable and make it possible to add others to the care-taking team without revealing the room. A rollaway cot could easily fit into their room. Tommy would take that and give his bed to Curt.

The backup arrived, was thoroughly briefed by Tommy, and the three Jansens went down to the dining room. It had become their standing, too early in the morning, breakfast request. Ollie would call it out: “Some of everything for three, Cookie – make that five, Sammy’s here.”

It always got a laugh from the kitchen. At the rate Tommy’s appetite had picked up that just might soon need to be extended even more. The lad seemed oblivious to the change.

Sammy brought up the obvious.

“So, family, how are we doing?”

Tommy: “In my case, better than one might think considering the simply horrific day just past. I have learned that I am, in fact, as strong as I figured I would be in such circumstances.”

Ollie motioned for Sammy’s take on things.

“I guess like Tommy says; I am grateful that I am still here and functioning pretty well. I have never been terrified like I was up on top of that pickup. I’m also grateful to everybody who acted to save my life. I feel terrible pain – distress – inside. It’s hard to sort it out into components. Sorrow about the two beatings. Sorrow about the ignorant fathering behavior. Just as much

sorrow about the way the town reacted to it. I mean I have to be pleased they so clearly rejected what Curt's dad did, but I just hate the way they went about dealing with it. I know we don't hate people, but I've decided there is an awful lot of stuff out in the world I have every right to hate. Hope that isn't offensive, Grampa."

"I might choose another word than hate, but I am quite certain I understand how you are feeling."

"Just what word *would* you use, grampa?" Tommy asked, never shy about pressing somebody on an issue.

Ollie gave it a moment of studied thought.

"There are things that frighten and disgust and puzzle me – I don't believe I hate them. Hate is the forerunner for destruction of the object of the hate. Maybe it *is* hate, then. I would opt to *change* things rather than *destroy* them, I suppose. You see, hate by my definition, precludes or prohibits making change in something because once it's destroyed, there is nothing left to work with.

"Try it this way. If I hate somebody and follow that to its intended end point, that person is eliminated – gone. If I – what would that word be – something just less than hate – then he remains, and both he and I continue to have the opportunity to make changes that can improve whatever it is."

Tommy had been listening of course and analyzing.

"Let's substitute 'Hitler' for 'somebody'. You really think there is one chance in Hades that anybody is going to reform him?"

"Point well taken, son. Within our human species there are some people who are hopelessly evil – I admit that. My preference is to isolate them from the rest of us so they will never be in a position to harm anybody. I understand there is a powerful belief that such people should be put to death. It would certainly be cheaper than supporting a lifetime of incarceration. Still, the idea

that once a person is dead there is no chance for rehabilitation remains one of the rallying calls for the anti-death penalty forces in the world.”

“*That* and the idea that all human life is precious,” Tommy said extending the concept. “At this stage in my philosophic development, it is impossible for me to see how the life of a vicious, despicable, clearly dangerous person, who presents a threat to the very continuation of the human species – or large parts of it – is *precious*. I am still working on that.”

Sammy weighed in.

“I have read that there is more and more evidence that at least some violent and sociopathic people are that way due to inherent biological and maybe even genetic characteristics – bad brain and chemical stuff. If that proves to be true, then it isn’t *them* we can legitimately blame for their behavior, but it’s their physical make up – they seem to have no choice. I used to believe the more firing squads for people who ruin other people’s lives the better. I’ve had to pull way back from that.”

“Fascinating,” Tommy said.

“It *is* a fascinating field of study to follow,” Sammy said, thinking he was merely agreeing.

“No, not that; fascinating that you actually read something.”

The ensuing chase around the dining room was brief and ended as they always did with Tommy on the short end of it, giggling himself into damp underwear. Clearly the odds involved were still acceptable to him; to merely work his brother into a rage was the win as far as he was concerned. Actually, by the time he’d been contained under a chair in the corner, smiles and laughter had replaced rancor on both sides. They were brothers. Sammy offered him a hand up – then slapped him ‘up side’ his head.

Once order had been restored, Ollie’s coffee refilled, and blueberry cobbler with ice cream set in front of them, they all felt better for it.

The chief agent entered the room, easily finding them since the dining room did not officially open for another half hour. He carried a large, brown envelope.

“I am not sure to whom I should deliver this information. It is about the *Bauxite Affair* as it was referred to in the initial inquiry slash request for assistance, which only came to my attention recently.”

“What am I missing here?” Ollie said looking from face to face to face. “Bauxite? Affair?”

“You remember, grampa – the newspaper article – aluminum for war planes.”

“Ollie nodded.”

That had been Tommy providing the answer to the agent’s question without ever really providing the answer to the agent’s question. Tommy reached for the envelope. The agent handed it over.

“Can you summarize what you found for us?” Sammy asked, scooting his chair aside to make room for Agent McGuire. He pulled in another chair and sat.

“It all fell together quickly and easily, but never would have seen the light of day except for the research you two undertook.”

“It was more like one of Tommy’s hunches and a lot of good luck,” Sammy explained.

The agent continued.

“A man by the name of Willard Zempler, also calls himself the local Wizard of the KKK and has used other names, got wind of the original report of the supposed ore bed just east of town. He had established himself as the Klan leader fifteen years ago through brute force. He is filled with hate, has a violent mentality, and has considerably fewer wheels turning inside his head than most. We have acquired firsthand reports that he and his lawyer hatched the idea to obtain the land specifically by inciting and directing the Klan activities we have witnessed over the past

several months. In all, there have been five burnings – as they are referred to locally – causing twelve deaths, for which Zempler has been charged – lots of witnesses eager to save their own hides. The banker was a dupe and knew nothing about the sinister side of the plan. BXT was an in-state corporation set up with Zempler and his attorney as the sole participants.

“With the arrest of their brains – the Wizard – the Klan seems to be dying a well-deserved death around here – the old, ‘rats abandoning the sinking ship’, cliché. We probably won’t be able to charge many more of the individuals who abetted those who committed the murders, but shutting down Klan activity at the top, anywhere, or for any amount of time, is a fine thing.”

“What sort of involvement will grampa have?” Tommy asked. “Will he need to testify like in the first case? It seems to me that will expose him to retaliation.”

“With the list Bosley and his cohort provided, Oliver’s testimony will not be needed. His presence as a plant within the local Klan provided us crucial information about the who, where and whens as we worked to gather evidence. We would not be near the end of this case without his cunning assistance. The Bosley list confirms it all and the court will work from it, so, this time, your grampa is free and clear. Since he regularly brushed shoulders with the Klansmen, nobody will ever suspect he was actually a spy for the government – just one of the good ‘ol boys.”

“Thanks, for that. I feel a lot better.”

Sammy had one more concern.

“So, what are you saying? Is it safe for us to remain in Ledger or do we have to move?”

“I’d like to say you are safe here. There is just one catch – one rogue Klansman – Raskin – sort of a lone wolf – is still out there. Reportedly, he has it out for your grampa and with Zempler’s arrest, he sees himself as heir apparent to the position of local Wizard. We have nothing to pin on him at this point, so

the answer to your question is still up in the air. Agents are at work, however. Once he is under wraps, there should be no problem about you remaining.

“Like the Wizard, Raskin works closely with his attorney. Word is they are inseparable. The reason for that is not fully understood. City boy and country boy relatives, is one rumor.”

McGuire stood, ready to leave. Tommy had one final question.

“What about the claim about a bauxite deposit over east?”

“Ah, yes. Turned out it had its origin in the report from a boy scout working on a geology badge. He misidentified a chunk of silica as bauxite. Unaware of the mistake, his troop leader spread the bauxite rumor. The local paper caught wind of the story and, although thinking it worthless, nevertheless published a tiny story when the editor came up five inches short on page six. That was apparently the source of all this.”

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

### **Not at All Bad – Impressive Even!**

In consultation with Curt's mother, it seemed best for him not to return home at that time, so he stayed with his Uncle Cliff who lived with his wife and son on the north west corner of Ledger. That had been in place two weeks and according to Curt was working fine. He was back in school. His father was to be released from the hospital soon. Tommy spent more time with Wally, even though things had been worked out, so Wally got to see his brother every day.

Curt would not be back to his old self for a month according to Dr. Sounder and wouldn't be out for sports until the following school year. He assigned some exercises and Sammy helped him with them every morning before they caught the bus to school. The three of them – Curt and the Jansens – had missed a lot of school but were easily capable of catching up.

Curt found girls were for some reason more attracted to him since the 'incident', as he chose to refer to it. Tommy explained it

away as their motherly instincts and cautioned him about not counting on the attention to continue once he returned to his old, normal, self. Sammy was happy to attend to those girls' needs while his friend was otherwise occupied.

\* \* \*

It was late one Friday evening. The boys, as was their habit, were finishing homework so they would have the entire weekend free from educational concerns – Tommy's phrase. Ollie was at a library meeting.

"Nine o'clock on the button and I am finished," Tommy said. "How about you?"

"A few algebra problems left. No big deal. How about you go down and get us a snack – milk, sandwiches, cake, ice cream. Feel free to surprise me with anything else you have reason to believe I would enjoy. You can chat up Cookie for ten minutes. I'll be finished here in fifteen."

Tommy left, always happy to feed his brother. He joked that it mellowed him out and kept him easier to live with – much like a lion trainer treated his big cats.

Sammy finished his problems and set the work aside, enjoying the momentary feeling of freedom it represented. He did have to wonder just how a knowledge of algebra was really going to enrich his life.

The phone in the living room rang. Sammy thought it might be his grampa offering some structure for the rest of the evening – when he'd be home, any things the boys needed to take of before the weekend got underway – things like that.

He entered the room and picked up. It *wasn't* his grampa. There was structure offered but not the sort Sammy was expecting.

"My name is Raskin. I am holding your grandfather. I know he works with the FBI. To have him returned to you safely, have them put together one hundred thousand dollars in small,



unmarked bills. I will give you a half hour to contact them. I will call back then to arrange for the time and place. You got that?”

“Yes, Sir. They won’t do it, you know. They never pay ransom. But I’ll pass your message along. Assuming they will even be willing to talk about it, we will need to talk with grampa, to assure us he is okay, you understand.”

The phone clicked dead on the other end. Tommy arrived with the cart of goodies.

“Have to eat the ice cream first. It’s been sitting out so it’s soft.”

“No ice cream, Tommy.”

He went on to fill him in about the call and get his response.

“First, call the library and see what anybody knows about grampa’s whereabouts – keep the ransom call out of it.”

“Why me?”

“Your deep voice is taken far more seriously than my weak soprano offering. At this point in my life I figure I’m still a good quart short of the necessary hormones.”

Sammy made the call. Ollie had left the building over an hour before, commenting it would be a nice evening for a stroll up and down Main Street.

Tommy – ear to the receiver – had listened in and responded to Sammy.

“I guess we call Agent McGuire. I can handle that.”

He gave the operator the number and waited. McGuire was always available. Tommy wondered when he took care of the necessities of life – showering, eating, sleeping, bathrooming. He came on the line.”

“Got a situation here, Agent. That man, Raskin, that you mentioned, just called Sammy and said he was holding grampa for a hundred-thousand-dollars ransom. He seemed to know we didn’t have that kind of resources and that Grampa has a relationship with the bureau, so said to contact you folks, who he

assumed would come up with the cash – small, and unmarked. Sammy told them you didn't pay ransom and Raskin hung up. He said he'd call back in half an hour – that will be at nine-forty-five."

"Let me talk with Sammy. . . One thing we can count on, Sammy, is that the ransom is not the real goal here. Probably will be to free all or some of the Klansmen we have in custody. Having Oliver is their ace in the hole – their muscle. We must stall him on the money front – try for 48 hours. He won't accept that. Bargain it down to thirty-six, he'll still balk. Hang up.

"I am on my way to the hotel but won't be there until ten fifteen or so. Leave things hanging. You are really in the driver's seat. Every time you stop talking, his chance for getting what he wants dries up a little more. He needs to keep the line of communication open. Keep that in mind. He will make it seem your grandfather is in serious danger and that is the primary focus. It isn't. Insist on speaking with him each time to ensure he is still alive and well. If they refuse, hang up."

"I've never been much good a playing hard ball, Sir. Maybe I should let Tommy handle it over the phone."

"No. Raskin won't take a kid's voice seriously. Has to be yours at least until I get there. I have already alerted the agents on site at your place. I am leaving now. Here is a radio dispatch number through which you can contact me in the car. Only in an emergency. Raskin may have the frequency hoping we use it so he can listen in."

He provided the number and hung up.

Sammy hung up.

The boys both looked at the clock.

"Got a great idea," Tommy said. "Be back in just a few minutes."

And he was, with Cal in tow.

"I've filled Cal in on the new situation and on my idea. Now let me tell you."

They talked about it for some time. Tommy positioned their typewriter on the table so Sammy could see the page as he typed. The idea was, when he (Tommy) had a suggestion during a call, he'd type it – ten times faster and much more legible than his printing.

Sammy understood his part and practiced possible responses in his head while Tommy rehearsed Cal across the room. The clock read nine-forty-five. The phone rang. Sammy sighed and picked up.

“Hello.”

“Raskin, here. You make the contact?”

“Yes, I did. They weren't keen on the money for ransom idea. But then, while we were talking, grampa walked in. I don't know who you are holding, but it sure isn't Oliver Jansen. What you trying to pull?”

“I know Oliver Jansen by sight. I've made it a point to get to know him by sight. The man I have is Oliver Jansen.”

“If you want to talk to grampa, he's right here. Then maybe we can handle the misunderstanding.”

He handed the phone to Cal.

“Hello. This is Ollie Jansen. I'm not sure I understand what's going on.”

There was a long pause. Tommy began typing. It was not for Sammy but a summary of what was going on for McGuire when he arrived. He removed that sheet and rolled in another.

Raskin came back on the line.

“It is you people who are pulling something. This man is the boys' grandfather. I am certain of that.”

Tommy typed.

Sammy read and took back the phone.

“We can easily clear this up, Sir. Our grampa has a small, brown, birthmark on the back of his right shoulder – not clear up on top but you can see it from behind him.”

Tommy was impressed at his brother's ability to take his idea and ad lib.

More silence. Just about the amount needed for an old man to slip his shirt off his right shoulder.

Presently: "I will call you back at half past the hour. Get your act together down there or else. I am a man of little patience."

Sammy hung up.

Agent McGuire arrived. Sammy handed him the summary.

"I hope you haven't put your grandfather in danger. If Raskin becomes convinced he is *not* Oliver, he may just dispose of him."

"I doubt that, Sir. I put it into the calculation. He needs *his* man to be grampa. As long as we can keep him doubting our contention that he isn't, grampa will be safe. If he were to dispose of him, he has no leverage whatsoever. Please give me your take on that."

"I guess my take is like yours. Like you suggested, we must build in some doubt about our story, give him reason to believe it is false to keep his hope alive. I can help that along by making it appear the Bureau might go along with the money. That should give him some hope we are bluffing about who is who. We wouldn't arrange payment for a nobody."

"Excellent. You think like an agent."

The others caught it and smiled. It zoomed over Tommy's head.

"How about tracing the call?" Sammy asked. "They are always tracing calls in the movies and on the radio."

"We have agents on that. Out here in a rural area, that becomes a problem. There must be twenty-five or thirty separate phone companies across this state. To trace from one to another presents many obstacles. We will keep at it, however."

Tommy returned to the business at hand.

"Raskin just used the term, 'down there'. Down is used to

denote South. That would suggest he is somewhere north of here.”

“A very good catch, Tommy. *Very good.*”

Using his Walkie-Talkie-type phone, he passed on that information to an agent waiting somewhere close by, presumably with access to a phone with longer range. They did not dare tie up the phone from the suite.

Sammy addressed Agent McGuire.

“What is the real deal about ransom? Will the Bureau pay it to save grampa’s life?”

“We’ve been known to do that in rare circumstances – never advertised, of course. The hard truth is that the captive is seldom released by kidnapers even when they receive the ransom. I’m counting on Raskin to settle into his real plan with the next call.”

“And your take on what that *real* plan is, please,” Tommy said.

“First, he will now say that regardless of who he has taken captive, he will be killed if we don’t cooperate. He will believe that no life would just be written off by the Bureau. Second, he will spend less time talking about the money and begin listing men he wants released. With his best men – that is the ones who are most willing to do terrible things – out of circulation, his little empire no longer exists. Run of the mill Klansmen are spineless wannabees. Along for the glory but never for the danger.

“Men like Raskin live and breathe power. Without those men, he has no power. He’ll soon get around to his real purpose for all this. His leverage is a man’s life. He’ll probably negotiate away some portion of the money for one or two men. Then, he will negotiate away a bit more for a few additional releases. We don’t know how many men he believes we have. Once we begin talking names, we’ll have a better idea what he really knows. What ignorant men like Raskin don’t understand is that once we release

a man, we keep track of him, and merely re-arrest him when the appropriate time comes. So, you see, we can negotiate all of them away. It doesn't matter to us in the long run.

"We will demand to speak to Oliver up front on this next call. During that chat, try to get some sense from him about what he knows about his whereabouts. Have to talk some sort of code on the fly. I just imagine if anybody I've ever known can do that, it is you three."

Satisfied with how things were developing, Sammy returned to being Sammy,

"There's food. We don't want it to go to waste. Tommy can arrange for more. Dig in. I'm going to."

McGuire continued thinking out loud and he and Tommy brainstormed ideas and possibilities. They decided for Sammy to insist that Tommy get to speak with his grandfather – the boy was distraught – uncontrollable – might blow the whole arrangement. That idea might make Raskin believe the situation with the kid strengthened his position – how could the Bureau not take the little boy's feelings into account? How could it hurt to let them speak?

The phone rang.

"Hello. This is Sammy, again. You have to let my little brother speak with grampa. He's going crazy here – throwing a fit – ready to tell the world what's happening. Either they get to talk, or I hang up."

"Okay. That was my idea as well. Just for a minute or so this time. Let me get Oliver ready."

That may have meant remove tape from his mouth and such.

Tommy and McGuire held their ears close and listened. An agent had arrived with a device, which he stuck onto the receiver with a suction cup – like the end of a dart gun dart. On the other end of a connecting wire were two sets of earphones that allowed both of the agents to hear the conversation. The second was

prepared to take everything down in shorthand and began immediately.

Tommy took the phone and waited.

“Hello, this is Oliver.”

“Tommy here. Grampa?”

“Yes.”

“Sure doesn’t sound like my grampa. Who are you? What you trying to pull?”

“I assure you I . . . oh . . . you’ve seen through me. So, where do we go from here?”

Tommy assumed Raskin was also listening.

“My grampa has been up north and just returned. I assume you know him if you have been able to convince Mr. Raskin you are he.”

“I must admit that I do. Met him up north – like you said – not long ago at his cabin in the woods. Picked up some blue berries in the area for him. Even that didn’t stop him from fuming.”

“Up north, you say. That seems right.”

“In the end, it most certainly seems right.”

Tommy continued.

“Not sure about ours. Is it one, two, three, all *ours*.”

“I prefer one and a half, you know. Always have.

“I can’t see what drove you to impersonate him. Sounds Crazy to me. Some loco motive, I guess.”

“First, you’re right, but then you’re wrong, plainly wrong. Currently from Easter to the old-fashioned Christmas. He’s the crazy one, drove me mad the whole time we were together.”

“Are you really on Raskin’s side in all this?”

“I have to go now. You boys stick to a straight course, you hear. Nothing will do but the straight *and* narrow.”

Raskin came on the line.

“I think you two are crazy. Let me talk with an agent. I’m sure there’s one there by now.”

“Agent McGuire here. Give up your hostage and you are free to go. There will be no money for an obvious imposture.”

“You wouldn’t let an innocent man go to his grave, now would you, Agent *McGuire*, did you say?”

“What do you really want, Raskin?”

“My ten little Indians freed from your reservation. I am sure you know their names.”

“Have no idea what you’re talking about.

“I will call again at five before midnight. You will have made the arrangements – any ten will be a good start. Otherwise, midnight means the end for Jansen.”

He hung up.

During the call, two other agents had arrived, remaining in the background.

All heads turned toward Tommy who began the explanation of what he had learned.

“Okay. It’s like this, men. Grampa is being held sixty miles due north of here when following connecting roads that form a straight line. Some or many of them are single lane – none are main routes. He is being held inside a woods or forest off to the right of the road. There may be a cabin involved. It is not close to a railroad, but it *is* under a flight path with planes flying an east – west trajectory.”

“What?”

“What?”

“What?”

“What?”

Sammy didn’t play the ‘what’ game. Few things about his brother even came close to surprising him.

Tommy tried to bring a sense of urgency to the room.

“I suggest, agent, that you position that search party *now*. I have the feeling if we don’t get to him by eleven-fifty-five tonight, we may never see grampa again. I will explain how I arrived at my



conclusions while you get that underway. Oh, and one more thing, there will be an older model, blue pickup truck involved; one that burns oil like it's going out of style. It is the one that delivered grampa from here to wherever they have taken him. Go, now! Get on it!"

McGuire put in a call. His voice did finally take on an urgent tone.

Tommy went to the food cart and emptied the melted ice cream into the empty milk bottle – Sammy had already drained it – and proceeded to drink it as he nibbled on a ham sandwich. He may have actually preferred ice cream in its just melted state. That would require an experiment.

"Grampa says my appetite is picking up, of course the excitement of speaking long distance always makes me hungry."

He alone appreciated what he thought had been a hilarious line.

All chairs were suddenly turned in his direction.

"Seems I'm on. Okay. I'm sure you will find my explanation simple and all quite straight forward. I will offer the clue and what he meant by it. Sometimes you heard me leading him – setting him up for specific responses. When I was a preschooler, he and I used to play this game during my nap time. We called it, 'Where might I be if I said this.' The purpose of naps was merely to keep me quiet. I never slept.

"I knew we were good to go after I refused to acknowledge who he was, and he modified his initial objection to that in mid-sentence. That went like – *I assure you I . . . oh . . . you've seen through me*. He was on his way to affirming who he was, but then caught on to what I was doing and backed off to see what was what from my end.

"Then, I wanted to establish for sure the direction he had been moved from here. I had suspected north from Raskin's mention of 'down there'. I suggested a northerly location and

grampa agreed and ran with it. I also suggested he must have known grampa to be able to assume his identity so easily as to fool Raskin. That allowed him to talk about a cabin in the woods.

“He used the word *fuming*. I had to wonder why. It was in the context of *‘picked up some blue berries*. Put those three items together with the vehicle culture of this part of the country and it easily became *a blue pickup burning oil – fuming*. Which pickups burn oil – old ones – *an old blue pickup leaving a cloud of oil smoke in its wake – perhaps, even, ‘buried in a cloud of oil smoke’*.”

“By now you can see how simple all this really is.”

Eyebrows raised. Men moved uneasily in their seats.

“Grampa made several references related to the road. *Straight and narrow* was probably the best clue. Find a series of roads that form a straight path north. *His references to ‘narrow’ made me think one-laners – lots of one lane blacktops in this part of the state*.

“He indicated that at the far end of the path – *Up north, you say – the goal of the search will be to the right – that seems right*.

“I put several numbers out there that seemed irrelevant, but I did it quickly enough and immediately let it drop, so Raskin didn’t jump in to question it. *‘Not sure about ours – one, two, three, all ours.’* I emphasized the word *‘ours’* so he would pay attention, trying to find some meaningful reference. He did in the numbers. *O-u-r-s really meant h-o-u-r-s*. He didn’t take any of my suggestions for the number of hours but chose one and half, instead. An older pickup on back roads probably could average forty miles an hour if in a hurry. Forty over a span of one and half hours, suggested a distance north of here of about sixty miles.

“To make sure I had the distance right, I had to verify he had, in fact been driven in a car or truck. I used the phrase: *I can’t see what drove you bla bla bla. Sounds crazy to me. Some loco motive, I guess*. His response gave two additional pieces of information. He indicated that *‘drove’* was correct – the first of the

two items. Then, he indicated that the loco-motive idea was wrong. I took that to mean they neither used nor encountered railroads since he did not define it further. That should be helpful when the team is looking at a map of the area, which is strewn with them – every Podunk has at least a railhead. Look for a spot sixty miles due north of here that is isolated from them. When he said you are *plainly* wrong, I understood that it meant I was wrong in assuming the location was near a train – the railway – and instead, that in some way a plane or planes would be involved as a clue. He then went on to indicate the flight path overhead using two holidays – E or east from his term ‘Easter’ and west from Christmas. I’ll admit that took me a second or two, also. There is not a direction with a C designation. Plainly he meant *east to its opposite west* and could have left it there, but the foxy old gentleman threw in a definer – an Old-Fashioned Christmas would refer to the Winter Solstice – the W for west.

“Later on, he again emphasized ‘drove’ as in *drove me crazy*. Then the stick to a straight course . . . *nothing will do but the straight and narrow*, and one final warning to *avoid the main routes*.

“Part of *why* Raskin let it go on, I think, was that he probably kept trying to figure it out – to understand if any information was being disclosed – and, because of its disjointed nature he couldn’t figure it. When I felt it was time to stop, I presented a clearly useless phrase – ‘are you really on Raskin’s side? He understood and cut things off.

“I assume you got it. Let me see that map, agent.”

He ran his finger about it for only a few seconds then pointed to one spot – tapping the map repeatedly.

“This is where you will find Raskin, his attorney, and Grampa – sixty miles due north of Ledger, in this woods marked Lawrence Woods, which is off to the east of the road – the right, traveling north – and there will be an old, blue pickup parked

beside it.

“One final thing, perhaps; we were not really speaking to Raskin. I imagine it is his lawyer – a midwestern accent and an educated speech pattern. Certainly *not* a mentally slower or impatient man, Agent McGuire. Like I said, all quite straight forward.”

Sammy stood and addressed the group.

“And, he *really does* believe it was all quite straight forward, folks.”

“Who took my sandwich?” Tommy asked looking around.

“You ate it, Runt boy.”

“I never eat a whole sandwich.”

“Apparently, that is changing – like grampa said.”

Tommy nodded thoughtfully, then . . .

“Apparently that *Runt Boy* name-calling will soon have to change, then, also, *Massive Hormone Vessel*.

In another setting . . . but, then, that was *not* another setting.

\* \* \*

They sat and waited and watched the clock. Agent McGuire made and took calls on his portable radio. He had relayed Tommy’s take on things, so the entire force was in the know. The calls revealed nothing of relevance for the others in the room.

At 11:52, the phone rang. Was it Raskin calling three minutes early? Not like the punctual history they had established with him. McGuire thought it might indicate his level of anxiety had got the best of him and he couldn’t wait. The inconsistency was disturbing at every level to Tommy.

Sammy answered. His manner was that of a, calm, cool, and collected teen boy. To the others, it seemed – unrealistically – like a straightforward sort of call.

“Hello. Yes, Sir. How fine. Certainly. Okay then. An hour and a quarter. Will do.”

He hung up. Tommy was there, toe to toe, looking up into his face.

“What’s what?” big brother.

“It was grampa. The agents just freed him. Raskin and his attorney didn’t fare so well. They tried to shoot it out. Grampa is fine. He says he will be home in an hour and fifteen minutes and that we should assemble one Jansen family sized feast and invite the neighborhood.”

“Actually, Sammy, it is clear he said an hour and a quarter – not an hour and fifteen minutes.”

Knuckles were unleashed!

Actually, Knuckles *back and forth* were unleashed. Something new between the Jansen Brothers. Sammy massaged his shoulder with some sincerity. He offered Tommy a respectful nod.

He intended it to say:

‘Not at all bad, Tommy – impressive, even.’

Tommy returned the nod. He intended it to say:

‘Not at all bad, Sammy – impressive, even.’

\* \* \*

\* \* \*

## AND THEN WHAT?

With the demise of Raskin, grampa’s association with the KKK was essentially erased, so the Jansens remained safely in Ledger. They were happy about that. They had come to like the little town – well, most things about it – especially the changes that were underway spearheaded by the young people. They both hoped to help further those changes. Grampa was elected president of the library board. Sammy and Ruby became an ‘item’ – as predicted, sharing a bus seat. Tommy began spending lots more time in the kitchen decked out in his completely new wardrobe – every item a size or two longer and bigger around – more stylish, even. In his resolve to become a fully responsible

young man, he took to wearing suspenders as well as his belt. Could a bow tie be far behind? His mantra became: “*Six feet or bust.*”

The boys had a bet on how many weeks would pass before Chief Agent McGuire came knocking on their door again. (Spoiler alert. It wasn't many! Look for, *The Italian Conspiracy: 1940*, soon.)

The End

[Wouldn't it be an interesting activity for the reader to sit down and write what he or she believes Sammy said in his essay!]