

# **The Angels of Interstate 29**

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Sword of the Spirit Publishing

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## Chapter 1

*Septuagenarian.* Tex Harris rolled that word over in his mind. It didn't sit well. He swished it around his mouth and between his teeth a couple of times. It didn't taste any better. He rolled down the window when he reached the red light at the entrance of I-29 and spat. He didn't feel any better about celebrating – or was mourning a better word – birthday number seventy. *I think old age snuck up on me like a freaking bushwhacker.* He glanced in the rear-view mirror at his seventy-year-old face. *At least I don't look any older than I did yesterday.*

The white Stetson covered his thinning hair, giving him the appearance of virility. In the past he'd been told he was handsome. His thoughts about whether that adjective would still apply were interrupted by the car horn behind him. Tex's eyes jerked back to the road ahead where he saw the light was green.

The impatient driver honked again. "I'm going! Get off my ass!" He overcame the insane urge to shift into reverse and play demolition derby with the compact car behind him and eased onto the freeway entrance.

The occasion of becoming a *Septuagenarian* wasn't an event worthy of jubilation in his estimation, but he had decided to visit the senior citizens' center. The motivation wasn't so much for celebrating but more to avoid feeling old and lonely at the same time. *If fifty is over the hill, seventy must be close to being under the hill. Why does the word daisies always pop up when I ponder that term?* He shuddered. "Quit thinking about death, you old coot. It'll come around soon enough without dwelling on it." *Damn, I'm talking to myself again.*

He had just reached cruising speed when he noticed a car ahead on the shoulder. From a distance, he could see that someone was standing beside it trying to flag down some help. He looked in the rear-view mirror to make sure he was clear to slow down without spawning a road-rage attack. He wasn't in the mood to get a can of whoop-ass for his lone birthday present because he'd incensed the wrong driver. The traffic was usually heavy in this stretch, but he was in luck today. He safely reduced his speed and detoured onto the shoulder when he reached the car in distress.

Often in the past on the way to work or some other pressing engagement, he had guiltily shot past marooned motorists. He

always swore that when he retired, he'd stop and help people. Today, he was officially put out to pasture, thanks to the mandatory retirement laws at his former place of employment, and he had no excuses for driving by.

As he coasted to a stop, even his bleary old eyes could see that the driver of the wounded auto was a shapely woman. Attired in tight shorts, the vision of her legs caused his eyes to roll. "Eat your heart out, Betty Grable." He shoved the gearshift into park and got out. His eyes narrowed as he surveyed the scene.

The car ahead of him had gone past the stricken auto, slammed on the brakes, pulled in, and backed toward the woman. Two ratty-looking men got out of the vehicle and headed toward the same destination Tex had his sights on. He wasn't able to see well enough to detect the direction of their eyes, but he had a pretty good idea what they were eyeballing. The young lady had more charms than just the legs of a thoroughbred. He shook his head. Even turning seventy hadn't cured him of the Head-on-a-swivel Syndrome that he suffered whenever a pretty filly was nearby.

He reached the driver just after the younger men arrived.

"We got this one taken care of, pops," the muscular one uttered, barely taking his eye off the bombshell to glance at the old man. "You can get back on your horse and ride into the sunset."

"Are you sure?" Tex gazed ahead to their vehicle, which bore California license plates. He took a mental picture.

"We're positive. Thanks for stopping by, but we wouldn't want you to miss your shuffleboard game."

*Smart ass! Why in the old days, I'd have...* He looked at the bulging muscles of the dude, who was wearing only a leather vest. *I'd have gotten my ass kicked.*

Tex looked at the woman. "Are you OK with that?"

"Whatever. I just need to get my baby to the doctor. He's really sick, and it doesn't matter who helps."

Tex peered through the window and saw the little fellow. He looked back at the two wannabe good Sámi tans. They looked more like the highwaymen from that story. *Something doesn't look right here. My gut tells me these guys are trouble.*

Tex tipped his hat. "OK. Good luck, ma'am."

"Thank you for stopping and for the good luck wish."

"My pleasure." He moseyed back to his truck. After studying the scene ahead of him for a minute, he fumbled into his pants

pocket and pulled out a cell phone. It was his one concession to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He wanted a CB radio, but almost nobody was using them anymore. Pressing the quick-dial button, he called the wrong number twice. "Screw it!" he yelled at the communications device and punched in all the numbers manually. *Luckily I know it by heart. If I had to look up a number on this damned contraption, the baby would be a teenager before I got the number called.*

"Minnehaha Sheriff's Department."

"I'd like to talk to Deputy Sheriff Carson please."

"Can I tell him who's calling?"

"Sure."

After a brief hesitation, the female voice on the other end said, "And who might you be?"

"Just tell him Tex is calling."

"Tex?"

*Did I stutter?* "Yes, ma'am."

A minute later a male voice ricocheted off his ear. "Tex, what the Sam Hill you up to?"

"I need a favor. I want you to run a license plate check for me. I've encountered a suspicious situation with a young woman and baby at risk. I want to make sure I don't drive away from a potential crime scene."

"OK. Shoot the license number to me."

"California 2BCA630."

"Hold on a second. I'll see what the computer spits out."

*Damn computers. I wonder if they need spittoons in them fancy computer rooms for those pesky contraptions to spit into.*

"Ah, Tex, you've got a live one. Stolen and suspected of being used in a crime in Utah. What's your ten-twenty? We'll get a car on the way ASAP."

"I'm on I-29 between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> Street exits."

"Roger that. Sit tight."

"Kit!"

"Yeah, Tex."

"I'm sure I can't wait for your assistance. I'm going in to make sure that the young lady isn't harmed."

He hung up before his friend could protest. *It really is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.* Tex twisted around, endangering the discs in his back, and took down his hunting rifle from the rack in the back. He'd never used it on a man before. Hopefully his perfect record wouldn't be broken today.

*Wait. How am I going to get near them carrying a rifle? I*

*need some kind of cover.* He surveyed the contents of the back seat of the big truck. A blanket which always rode with him just in case of an emergency met his eye. *This is an emergency. Eat your heart out, Linus.* Carefully, he wrapped up his weapon in the blue covering so he could get it out quickly when needed. *It's my birthday. Let's go throw a little surprise party.*

It appeared when Tex came around the corner that the woman was getting ready to transfer her child from her disabled vehicle to the stolen car from California. The baby was crying like George Steinbrenner after watching the Yankees lose in the playoffs again.

"Old, man. I told you we didn't need you. We're taking care of the lady," Mr. Muscles said.

Tex pulled the blanket off his rifle and brought it to his shoulder. "There's been a slight change in plans. Step away from the car toward the ditch. Ma'am, sorry to scare you like this. The car these yahoos are driving is listed as stolen. I'm afraid they were up to something that would've been downright unpleasant for you and your child."

She flashed a look of shock at the men, neither of whom had yet moved.

Tex barked at them. "I'm not going to ask again. Move it or lose it!"

"Lose what?"

"How does a kneecap sound? I hear it's distinctly painful to have your patella split in half by a bullet."

The skinny man immediately scampered to comparative safety near the ditch.

The escapee from Muscle Beach sauntered to the same location.

The gun wavered slightly as Tex took up a more comfortable position.

"Be careful with that gun, pops. It might go off and hurt somebody."

"If it goes off, it won't be no accident and somebody *will* get hurt. That's a promise. And quit calling me 'pops', or I'm going to fix it so you get a new name."

"New name? What do you mean?"

"Maybe you've haven't noticed, but this isn't exactly a Red Rider BB gun I got for Christmas. One-eyed Jack won't work because if I shoot an eye out, you'll be deader than the music at a church roller-skating party. How does One-Testicle Tony sound?"



"You wouldn't."

"Wanna bet?"

"Dirk. I think he's serious."

"Shut up, Jessie!"

"Of course there might be some collateral damage. A 30-06 bullet doesn't exactly perform laser surgery. You might end up like the difference between a Romeo and a Juliet candy bar. You might have to insert a swizzle stick to empty your radiator in the future. As far as your sex life is concerned, you could consider yourself retired. Just think of the money you'll save on Viagra when you get to my age – if you get to my age, which would probably be a miracle."

"What's the difference between a Romeo and a Juliet candy bar?" Jessie asked.

"One has nuts and the other doesn't."

The cries of the baby interrupted the exchange of bravado. "Mister, I gotta get my baby to the doctor – now!"

Tex nodded. "OK. Take my truck. Keys are in it. You got a pen handy?"

"Yeah."

"Write down this number. Give me a call when you've got the baby taken care of. We'll figure out where we go from there."

"OK. Ready."

"605-341-6611."

"Got it. Where will you be?"

"I don't know. I might still be babysitting these varmints, but likely their new nanny will arrive. I might hitch a ride to the jail to make sure these gents get tucked into bed in their new lodgings. I hear the jail is just like Motel 6. They leave the light on all the time."

The girl tucked the scrap of paper with the phone number into her purse and carried the car seat toward Tex's truck. All three participants in the mini-drama watched as she drove away.

"You're making a big mistake, mister. We haven't done anything wrong," Jessie whined.

"Probably not – today. You probably just got out of bed. What did you have planned here? Robbery? Rape? Murder? Babynapping?"

"We were just helping out a lovely lady in a tough situation."

"Right. For your Boy Scout merit badge requirement, right? Don't worry. The Sheriff's Department is sending over someone to relieve you of the stress of staring down the barrel of a 30-06."

They'll sort it all out and make sure you end up where you deserve."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to call your bluff in that case. I'm going to be late for an appointment to get my nails manicured. So I'm leaving now. Maybe Jessie wants to stay and be the butt of your geriatric humor."

Dirk took two steps towards their car. The sound of an explosion reverberated in the little ravine, the setting for this showdown. A Budweiser can that had been in close proximity to his leg flew through the air. He stopped dead in his tracks and turned around. "Anybody can shoot a tin can. It's a whole different story shooting a man."

"You're right, Dirk, if I might be so bold and informal to use first names. This might be a time for a little visualization technique. I'm going to envision you as a pig. That probably isn't far from the truth, so when the time comes to pull the trigger with the sights drawing a bead on you, it'll be easy to think about bacon."

"You're getting me pissed off, old man."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Am I ruining your day? Or maybe your life? You guys might have a rap sheet longer than the list of steroid users in major league baseball."

"That steroid situation probably really bothers you, huh, cowboy? You probably invented baseball. I bet you hunted buffalo with that gun right after you finished your duties in the Civil War," Dirk said.

"You know, Dirk, everybody likes a little ass, but nobody likes a smart ass. Speaking of civil, I'd suggest you try to keep that tongue of yours in that condition."

"You're funny, old man. Did you write the scripts for Abbott and Costello?"

"If I was going to write scripts, I'd probably create something like *Dirty Harry* or *Death Wish* – if you get my drift."

Dirk stiffened. "Great! Just my luck to run into a couch vigilante with Alzheimer's and delusions of grandeur."

"It don't take no grandeur to plunk a polecat from point-blank range. Sorry to disappoint you about the Alzheimer's. My doctor says I have the brain of a thirty-year-old."

"A thirty-year-old watermelon?"

"Dude, you're not saying anything here that is softening my heart. I might mention that my doctor was a little concerned about a bad case of itching, though. It centers right around my trigger finger."

The sound of tires on cement diverted Tex's attention. A police car sent odors of burning rubber through his nostrils before the vehicle came to a stop just ahead of the young mother's disabled vehicle.

An officer jumped out of the car with his gun drawn. Tex relaxed slightly. *The cavalry is here to relieve me of two pains in the ass.*

"Freeze, mister! Drop that gun!"

"Hold on! I'm not the bad guy here. These guys are driving a—"

"Shut up and drop the gun – now! Don't make me shoot you."

Tex gently laid his Winchester on the ground.

"Now step away from it."

The officer walked over to grab the gun. His own gun remained aimed at Tex while he walked past the other two without looking back. Jessie and Dirk began sneaking up behind him.

Tex yelled. "Watch out! Behind you!"

"I told you to shut up!"

The noise of the yelling muzzled the sound of the footsteps as the fugitives drew close. When the lawman detected noise at his rear, he turned around quickly – just in time to absorb a blow to the jaw that laid him on his keister. Dirk followed up to relieve him of his pistol while Jessie outraced Tex to the rifle.

Dirk found a backup pistol on the officer and threw one gun into the tall grass nearby. He aimed the officer's other pistol at Tex. "Now, old man. Care to do your Don Rickles routine or are you only funny when you have a rifle in your hands?"

"Let's get out of here, Dirk!"

"Hold on. This asshole had fun trying to intimidate me with his buffalo gun. I'd like to repay the favor. Trade with me, Jessie."

The two exchanged weapons.

"How'd you like to be shot with your own gun? What's the matter? You're not very talkative now. Maybe I should cut it out and feed it to my cat so you could use the excuse that the cat has your tongue."

"You don't have a cat, Dirk."

"Shut the.... I can't freaking believe you. Why do I let you tag along with me?"

"Because Ma told you to watch out for me."

Dirk shook his head. "Let me think here. If the officer was

shot with the rifle, and the cowboy was shot with the pistol, it would look like a massacre at the O.K. Corral.”

“I don’t see a cor—”

“Jessie! Cork it!”

“What about all those cars driving by. There would be lots of witnesses.”

The sound of an approaching siren grabbed their attention.

“That’s the smartest thing you’ve said today. You’re lucky today, old-timer. I’m going to have to leave you alive. Betsy, or whatever the hell you call your little pet here, is going with me. Thanks for the memories. You’d better hope I don’t cross your path again when I have a better opportunity to leave a real lasting impression on you. Before I go, give me your cell phone.”

Tex dug into his pocket and pulled out the small device. Dirk threw it into the field next to them.

“I’ve got an idea, Dirk. Let’s take the police car instead of our bucket of bolts.”

“Dude! That’s a Sioux Falls city cop car. It’ll stick out like a sore thumb once we leave the city limits. But it would make sense to drive it down the road a piece so Barney Fife here has to walk a while before he can pick up the chase. You take the black and white. I’ll pick you up in a mile.”

“Gotcha.” Jessie jumped into the police car and squealed away.

“Happy trails, gentlemen.” Dirk sprinted to the car he and Jessie had borrowed without the owner’s permission.

The police officer got up rubbing his jaw.

“If I call you shit for brains, would you arrest me?” Tex asked.

“Not unless they pass a law against telling the truth. I really hosed that up. Why didn’t I cover all three of you until I figured out who was wearing the white hat and who had the black hat?”

“Hello-o! What color do you call this?” Tex pointed to his Stetson.

“White. I was speaking figuratively.”

Tex walked away.

“Where you going?”

“I’m going to find my cell phone. I just bought the damn thing. It’s a pain in the ass, but it does come in handy sometimes. Hopefully it survived playing the role of a shot put.”

“While you’re in there, could you look for my pistol? I’m going to walk up and get my car.”

“Good luck. My guess is that your car will be locked and the

keys headed to Iowa. They'll probably litter a ditch with them down by Beresford. You might as well wait for the highway patrol or sheriff's office to arrive."

"How will they know to come?"

"I called the sheriff's office before I made my play. They were sending someone here to shuttle the guests to their luxury suite at county jail. Until you arrived."

"Oh, shit. We're not usually involved in those types of notices, so I didn't know anything about this. I was just driving by on the freeway and saw the gun. I put two and two together—"

"And got five."

"Would it help if I said I was sorry?"

"Will that get my rifle back? My late wife gave me that gun on my birthday fifteen years ago today."

"In that case, double shit! I am sorry – for whatever it's worth. I just got out of the academy two months ago. I've got a lot to learn."

Tex studied the young man in front of him. "If you want to become an old geezer like me someday, you better learn fast."

The noise of the siren reached the point where it was hard to hear anything else. They turned and watched a highway patrolman slide to a stop. The officer jumped out and briskly walked to their side.

"Are you Tex, by any chance?"

"I am."

"Where's the stolen car?"

"I'd say about Harrisburg by now. They stole my rifle and took this officer's gun and car. Their plan was to ditch the car a mile or so away."

"Hold on. I'll be right back."

He was back in two minutes. "OK, I've got an APB out on them. Driving a car with California plates in South Dakota is like riding a llama in the Macy's Thanksgiving parade. They'll stand out like a pink limousine at a Mafia funeral. We'll get your rifle back, Tex."

"I'd appreciate that."

"Who's car is that?"

Tex looked back at the vehicle which had triggered this cascade of wild events. "That belongs to the lady who's driving my truck right now."

"What's her name?"

"I have no clue."

The officer tilted his cap. "She stole it?"

"No. I lent it to her."

"You lent your vehicle to someone you don't even know and didn't even get a name?"

Tex nodded. He looked over at the Sioux Falls policeman. *Don't you even think about considering me stupid after that boneheaded move you made.*

"Can you take her car back to town?"

"If her car was capable of being driven, none of us would be here right now."

The patrolmen wiped some sweat from his brow. "Gotcha. In that case, you need a ride."

"That would be wonderful. As long as you aren't putting the cuffs on me. And it'll give me a chance to tell you why I let a perfect stranger borrow my new pickup."

"I'm looking forward to hearing the story about how you two were disarmed and a police vehicle was added to the list of borrowed cars."

The young city cop looked at the sky. "Triple shit!"

"Wait. I've got to find my phone first. The perp thought he was Roger Clemens and chucked a ninety-eight-mile-per-hour fastphone into the field."

The highway patrolmen whistled. "That'll be like looking for a pebble on the beach. You might be in luck though. I have a metal detector in my trunk."

"Do you have time?"

"Sure. I'll just turn off my lights and turn this into a speed trap while you look. Hey, I have an idea. I have a cell phone here. Let me call your phone and you should be able to find it from the sound."

"A stroke of genius," Tex said. "Why can't all law officers be so bright?" He looked right at the rookie cop.

"Can you dial my gun with that thing?" the kid asked. After getting weird looks from the two older men, he signed heavily. "What comes after triple?"

"Son, what's your name?" Tex asked.

"Arthur Brown. Why do you ask?"

"I just wanted to know it when I see your name in the obituaries."

## Chapter 2

Tex walked through the door of the senior citizens' center with his hat and his attitude on crooked. Unlike many of the people who frequented the place, he only went there when he had nothing better to do. It was summer, so the hunting season was closed, and the fish weren't biting anywhere. Some of his old friends chose to haunt this establishment as their excuse to get out of bed. It was the hope of seeing them that drew him in today.

Several people looked up from their activities when his Stetson entered.

"Tex, you old coot! And you're even older today. Happy birthday!"

"Thanks, Parnelli."

"How's it hangin'?"

"I'm pissed off."

"Better to be pissed off than pissed on. Now what fly has bitten you?"

Tex sat down next to the card table where his friend was playing pinochle. "My 30-06 got stolen, and it's all the fault of a cop."

"A policeman stole your rifle?"

"Not exactly. He just screwed up my attempt to rid the streets of a little riffraff."

"Sir, you appear to be speaking in riddles," one of the other players said.

Tex looked across the table at the speaker. He had never seen him before. *Who the hell are you?* "I don't believe we've met."

"I haven't had the distinct honor of making your acquaintance, Mr. Tex. Fate has now been kind and allowed our paths to cross."

Parnelli slammed a card on the table in disgust. "Damn, I knew you'd lead that!" He turned back to his friend. "Tex, sorry. This is Dr. Alistair Morehouse. We just call him the professor. And, Professor, this is my good buddy from a long time ago, Tex Harris."

Tex merely nodded.

"Pleased to encounter a gentleman of such elevated stature."

Tex studied the man. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"I'd be delighted to enlighten you."

"Do you always talk like you've got a cob up your ass?"

"Why, my good man, whatever is the significance of this interrogation?"

"I'm just trying to figure out who you're trying to impress with your high-falutin' language. Folks around here are down to earth. Putting on airs is frowned upon."

"Tex, get off his f-ass! I know you're pissed, but don't take it out on the professor. He just talks that way because he's in the habit of speaking with educated types. And he's new here."

"My vocabulary is rather extensive, but I'm not familiar with the term 'f-ass'," the professor said.

"You are familiar with the 'F' word, right?" Tex asked.

"I am quite conscious of the fact that many words begin with 'F' and thus could be considered to be in the congregation of 'F' words. However, in this particular case, I believe you are referring to what is known in vulgar vernacular as 'the F-bomb'; am I correct?"

"Way to go, Doctor. You're an expert on explosives as well. In this case Parnelli has conditioned himself to not say the f-bomb. He simply puts an 'F' in front of all the nouns that he wants to stress. That way he can talk the way he wants and not worry about offending the sensitive types who don't like cussing. You follow?"

"Ahh. I comprehend this curious situation. Mr. Fields is camouflaging his colorful language from those who believe that one's vocabulary should be composed of more than just four-letter words."

"Mr. Fields? Damn, if I'd have known this was a formal get-together, I'd have dressed appropriately." Tex shook his head. "If Parnelli didn't hide that word, people would realize that half of what comes out of his mouth is the same word, and that he has a one track mind. Unfortunately, that technique only works with nouns. If he needs to use a verb, he has to use the real word."

"Tex, why don't you shut your f-mouth?" Parnelli said.

"I have to wonder why a professor is hanging out here with us country bumpkins. Surely there must be some educated retirees looking for stimulating conversation in an environment more suited to a...man of letters."

"Indeed, I'll wager there are, even in this intellectual desert. I've just recently relocated to Sioux Falls to be near my daughter and her offspring."

"Isn't Sioux Falls lucky?" *What kind of name is Alistair,*



*anyway? Sounds like a pedantic puss.*

"Tex. You're being an f-jerk and giving this man the first impression that you're an f-prick. Why don't you tell us what happened so you can get the f-poison worked out of your system without attacking people?"

"Fine. I'll tell the story, but I want you to hurry up and finish this game. We've got some work to do."

Parnelli raised his eyebrows. "I'm retired."

"Yeah, retired but not tired. I want to harness some of that piss and vinegar that still flows through your veins. I need to tap into your expertise with automobiles."

"As the young people would say today, whatever. Spill your guts. I'm dying to know what's got you so stirred up today, and on your f-birthday, too."

Tex told the story of his morning adventure.

Parnelli paused from his concentration on the cards in his hand. "No wonder you're more ornery than an f-cat with boot prints on its tail. So I assume you want me to take a look at this chick's car?"

"Exactly. She hasn't called me yet. I figured we'd surprise her and tell her to meet us on the freeway where her newly working car is waiting."

"I hate to say this, but how do you know she hasn't taken off with your truck? Maybe she was with those guys who stole your rifle."

Tex's face contorted. His eyes closed and squeezed tight. "I never thought of that. You could be right, and if you are, I'm going ballistic. However, I'm usually a pretty good judge of character, and this gal was too classy and too nice to be with those scumbags."

"Famous last words. I wonder how many f-dead men have uttered that phrase."

"Perhaps, I could be of assistance," the professor said.

*Yeah, by staying just as far away as possible.* "No doubt you're an expert on the internal combustion engine, and every other blasted thing in the world, but I think Parnelli and I can handle this one."

The professor nodded. "As you desire. I won't coerce an aperture where I'm an anathema."

A few minutes later, Parnelli tossed some bills from his wallet toward the victor of the pinochle game. "Don't spend those guys. I'll be winning them back later. Let's go be heroes, Tex."

The two were headed to the door when Tex's cell phone started playing *Ring of Fire* by Johnny Cash. He reached into his pocket and fished it out. "Hello?"

"Hi. This is Martha Dailey. I'm the gal from the freeway with the baby."

"Ahh. So nice to hear from you, Martha. How's the baby?"

"Stable. He's in the hospital right now, but he'll be fine, thanks to you. I suppose you'd like your truck back."

"That would be nice. I don't think the highway patrol wants to be playing taxi for me anymore."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Anyway, I'm headed out to your car right now. Can you leave the hospital?"

"My baby's in good hands. There's nothing for me to do here right now."

"If you can meet us on the highway, we can either fix your car or help get it to somewhere to get it taken care of. Sound like a plan?"

"Perfect."

"Give us fifteen minutes before you leave. It'll take my friend that long to walk to his car."

Parnelli elevated his middle finger.

"OK. See you there. And thanks again, Mr.—"

"Harris. But call me Tex, please."

"Bye, Tex."

He put his phone back and let out a sigh. "There was never anything to worry about."

"F-liar!"

Tex slapped Parnelli's arm with the back of his hand.

"Hey, no need to get violent. I was just telling the f-truth."

"That's not why I hit you. Get a load of what just walked in the door."

Parnelli glanced at the entrance to the center. A nicely dressed, attractive woman stood peering over the occupants and furnishings of the center.

"Yowser!"

"I second the motion. She looks lost. I think I better see if she needs some help."

"I thought we were a team. If we're gonna help the young chicks together, I think we should do the same for the ones with gray hair."

"Fine. Just watch your language. I don't want her thinking I hang out with rednecks," Tex said.

"But you do."

Tex shook his head and started toward the door. Parnelli came along behind as fast as he could.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Is there something I could do to help you?"

"Uh...not really. I'm just checking out the center to see what they have to offer. My husband passed away a few months ago. My friends and family have been encouraging me to get on with my life and get out more. They recommended I come here and see if I can find some friends my age."

"Ma'am, I'm truly sorry, but you won't find any thirty-year-olds here."

The lady blushed. "You flatter me, but you know dang well thirty went past a long time ago."

"Maybe so, but I can truthfully say you'd pass for someone in her fifties."

"You are very kind. Do you come here often?"

"I live here," Parnelli said. "Parnelli Fields, at your service." He bowed as far as he could.

"Don't hurt yourself, Parnelli, trying to impress this lady. She, no doubt, can still touch her toes. You can't even see yours anymore."

The woman's eyes opened wide. "Are you angry with him?"

"Nah. That's just the way we talk to each other. It's our sworn duty in life to keep the other one humble."

"Which means you have your work cut out for you, Tex, and I don't have squat to do."

"Hey, prune-face. Remember, we're in the presence of a lovely lady whose name we don't even know...yet."

"My name is Elizabeth Adams. Friends call me Lizzy."

"In that case I'll take the liberty of calling you Lizzy, if you don't mind. I'm Tex Harris."

"And I'm Professor Alistair Morehouse, professor Emeritus at Concordia University. The ambience of this establishment has been enhanced exponentially by your delectable presence among us. May I provide a tour of the facilities?"

"That would be wonderful. It was nice to meet you, Tex and...."

"Parnelli. Actually, my real name is Peter, but I was nicknamed after the racecar driver, Parnelli Jones."

"Oh. Interesting story."

"Not! I hope we'll see you again, Lizzy," Tex said as the professor began to lead her away. "We have to leave on a

mission of mercy.”

“I don’t know, Tex. If everybody is as friendly as you gentlemen, the chances are good.”

“I’m looking forward to it, Lizzy,” Parnelli said.

They watched as the elegant lady and the beaming professor walked away.

“I think this is the first time I’ve ever considered gray hair to be attractive,” Tex said.

“The hair is just the covering on the rest of the package. That there is a pretty fine package.”

“Oh, no. I hope she hasn’t awoken those courting desires in you. That would be too painful to watch – again. Though not as hard as watching the professor sweep her off her feet with his sweet-talking bs.” He took one last glance back at the couple before they exited.

“You don’t like the professor, do you?” Parnelli asked.

“I don’t know the man, but something about him sticks in my dander.”

“What? You mean sticks in your craw?”

“That too.”

“He did kind of horn in on our parade, didn’t he?”

“No shit, Sherlock. He’s lucky we have a previous commitment. No way would I have left her in his clutches otherwise.”

“Tex. Do I detect a note of jealousy? Perhaps you have courting ideas of your own?”

“Me? You think the lightning of love could strike this old geezer more than once?”

“Yeah. It could, but I’d just as soon be the one to feel ‘Lightning Striking again and again.’” The last words were sung instead of spoken.

“Lou Christie would roll over in his grave if he heard you butchering his song like that.”

“Lou Christie ain’t dead.”

“In that case, it would kill him if he overheard that rendition. Why don’t you sing stuff by people you sound like?”

“For example?”

“Janis Joplin or Bob Dylan.”

“Kiss my f-ass!”

“I couldn’t miss that target!”

The pair of old friends strolled along the sidewalk leading to Parnelli’s car, a 1971 Oldsmobile Tornado.

“Lizzy looks like a pretty classy woman. Probably a little too

rich for your taste,” Parnelli said.

“You still thinking about that woman?”

“Are you telling me you aren’t?”

“I’m not telling you anything. A man doesn’t have to testify against himself.”

“That’s a damn good thing. You’d been socked away in Sing-Sing or Walla-Walla or Alcatraz-Alcatraz.”

“Shiiiiiiitttt. You did more illegal stuff in one month back in high school than I’ve done my whole life. I never lost any sleep because of a conscience that was poking me in the ribs.”

“Are you bragging or complaining?”

Tex shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Some days I wonder how our friendship has lasted over fifty years.”

“You were just lucky, I guess.”

Tex took off his hat and wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. “If I was really lucky, I’d have gone to high school at O’Gorman instead of Washington. Then maybe I never would have run across your path.”

Parnelli pulled to a stop.

Tex turned around and eyeballed him. “Tired of walking?”

“Yeah.”

“Pee in your shoe and float a while.”

“Whoa. You gotta problem, big guy. You trying to be a comic as if you had your funny cap on today, but you’re wearing your Stetson. It ain’t working.”

“Kind of like you.”

“That’s kind of the idea about retirement. You don’t work anymore.”

“Fine for you, lazybones. Some people would rather work than sit around on their fat ass all day.”

“And some people are really messed up,” Parnelli said.

“I ain’t buying that crock. It wasn’t fair that they forced me to retire. I could still work rings around some of those young punks they got in there now.”

“Are you still foaming at the mouth over that deal? If I’m going to be foaming at the mouth, there better be a Budweiser on the other end of my arm.”

“You’ll have to get it surgically removed to not have one.”

“Are you saying I’m a lush?”

“And this question comes from the man who’s pulled off the alphabetic trifecta. The only man in God’s creation who belongs to AA, AAA, and AARP.”

“Here we go. The old Alphabet Soup game again. You’re

just jealous. First you were jealous of the professor, and now I'm jerking your chain without even trying."

"You live in a dream world, pal. The professor's not the only one who has a vocabulary. I just don't sling mine around like some half-dressed whore trying to drum up business."

They reached the car, and Parnelli stopped to take a deep breath.

"Do you need help getting in the car?" Tex asked.

"Do you need another hole in your f-head?"

Tex shook his head. "I haven't had the dubious pleasure of spending time with you alone lately. I forgot that I need to keep a shovel close by to clear a path through the BS you call conversation."

"Just turn down your hearing aid, you old fart."

"What?"

"Funny. Maybe you really need one of those things."

"Shiiiiiiitttttt. I'll take you on in a hearing contest any day."

"A hearing contest. I've never heard of one of those."

"See. I'm already the winner," Tex said.

"Get in the f-car! There are two ladies waiting for me."

Both men struggled to get into the vehicle. When Tex got his seat belt on, he looked over at the driver. "If you're thinking of who I'm thinking, they're really waiting for me."

"I don't believe it. You *do* have the hots for Lizzy! You turned seventy and fell in love on the same f-day."

Tex looked out the window as Parnelli motored into the traffic.

After a minute of silence Parnelli said, "What you staring at?"

"Golden Times Manor."

"Dreaming of when you can get your ticket punched."

"Yeah. Like I dream of cold toilet seats and wiping my butt with itch weed. I ain't ever going into one of those places, unless I'm visiting."

"I wonder how many of the people living there right now said the said f-thing."

"I don't care. It ain't for me. Jack London said this: 'I would rather be ashes than dust! I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The function of man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.'"

Parnelli pounded on the steering wheel. "Damn, man! You been sandbagging. Sounds like professor talk to me. You're not as dumb as you look."

"Somewhere there's gotta be a compliment in there."

"With a magnifying glass you might be able to spot it."

"Are you casting doubt upon my eyesight now? Is there any part of my person that is going to go unchallenged during this painful journey?"

"Hell, it's only three miles out to her car. We don't have time to hit all of your inadequacies. I might have to take a rain check."

Tex let out a sigh. "Seriously, I've been doing a lot of thought about the aging process."

"I try not to think about it."

"You try not to think at all. You're right about all those people who never thought they'd end up in an old folks' home."

"'Old folks' home' is not politically correct."

"As if you give a rat's ass about PC. Anyway, I looked in the mirror this morning and saw a seventy-year-old looking back at me. I swear that only a month passed since my last birthday. It seems like it was a long time ago that we were in high school sometimes, but other times it seems like we just got out."

"For a change, I get what you're saying. When it really hit me hard was when I realized I had more hair growing in my nose than on my head."

"I hear you. For me it was the day I walked up the stairs and felt more tired than when we'd play basketball for four hours."

"Damn. Those were the good old days," Parnelli said.

"Funny you should mention that. I came to the conclusion that the good old days should be the good days when you're old."

"Are there any?"

"That's just the attitude I've decided to attack. How many people have you read about that retired and died a short while later? If retirement is so great, why are they kicking the bucket with such regularity? I'm telling you, dude, a person has to have a reason to live, or I think they just let the timer run out prematurely."

"I wished you'd started this conversation back at the center. No doubt, the professor would have given you plenty of feedback on your opinion."

"The professor strikes me as a pedantic prick who has an expert opinion on everything."

"At least he's got some alphabet soup after his name. His opinions, like my body, carry more weight than yours."

Tex looked over at his friend. "Ask me if I care."

"Do you care?"

"Funny you should ask."

"Freaking hilarious."

"I might have to do some research and provide some numbers on this topic. Regardless, I think it's time that senior citizens quit existing and get back into the mainstream of life."

"But, Tex. They're tired. They're trying to get out of that mainstream and just relax. And also their bodies won't do what they used to."

"I know that. But half the trouble with our bodies is that we're not using them. If you don't use it, you lose it. I've been reading about older folks who lift weights and even compete in track meets and other athletic contests."

"I might have to hide your reading glasses. What's your point?"

"I don't wanna spend the rest of my days thinking about past days – when I was good for something. There are still lots of things I can accomplish. Maybe you want to sit on your duff and play cards until they haul you away to the old folks' home so you can do even less."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"I hope to kiss a duck you don't."

"So what's your big plan? Or are you just rambling on, juggling all these pretty thoughts and then letting them drop onto the ground?"

"My plan, ironically, came to me this morning. Every day there are thousands of people driving up and down I-29. These people sometimes have problems, like this young gal today. What if we had an organization of seniors who patrolled the highway and kept a lookout for people in distress?"

"That could be dangerous. There's a lot of wackos out there these days."

"No kiddin'. What was your first clue? Anyway, I'm not afraid of dying a valiant death in the service of mankind. What does scare me is the thought of rotting away in a bed somewhere with nobody giving a rat's ass about what I'm feeling or thinking."

"Don't they pay the police to do this kind of thing?"

Tex coughed. "Don't get me started on that subject. But seriously, those guys can't be everywhere. I think we can



provide a valuable service to the community and to travelers. And to ourselves.”

“Where are you going to round up your posse?”

“I’ll start with the senior center. I might check out the retirement homes, too, and see if there’s anyone there who wants to live a little longer.”

“Good luck.”

“I know it won’t be easy. Nothing worthwhile ever is.”

“You’re dead serious about this?” Parnelli asked.

“I’m serious. Hopefully the dead part won’t apply.”

Parnelli took a hand off the steering wheel and gestured. “You weren’t planning on roping me into this scheme, were you?”

“Already done. We’re on our way for our first rescue mission.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. I agreed to help this one girl out. What happens after that is totally up in the air.”

“Fine. We’ll see what a good feeling you get doing something to make another person’s life easier and happier.”

“Being a bachelor, I haven’t had a good feeling in a long time.”

“Spare me your puns, and your Sad Sack stories.”

“I can totally shut up if you want.”

“That’ll be the day.”

“OK, maybe not totally.”

Tex drew a circle with his head. “You’re worse than an f-woman.”

“Hey, you can’t use my f-combo words!”

“Do you have a copyright?”

Parnelli looked over at Tex. “You better believe it. Seriously, Tex, I’m dying to find out if you have a name for this organization or whatever it is.”

“Watch where the hell you’re going, or we’ll both be dying!”

Parnelli looked up in time to see he was drifting toward the cement of an overpass. He jerked the car back on course. “Oops!”

“Double oops. Anyway, I do have a name. ‘Angels of I-29’.”

“I could be an Angel, huh? Kind of has a nice ring to it. Maybe I could make up for some of the stuff I’ve done that wasn’t so angelic.”

“I hope you’re planning on living past a hundred.”

Parnelli grinned. “So much to do and so little time to do it, huh?”

"Right. There's her car right up ahead. No sign of my truck, so we have a chance to fix this baby before she arrives."

"Hands, don't fail me now!"

The two parked closely behind the problem automobile and went through the hassles of extricating their bodies from the vehicle.

"So, what are the symptoms she was experiencing?" Parnelli asked.

"She wasn't sick. It was the baby."

"I'm talking about her car, doofus!"

"Oh. I don't have a clue. We didn't exactly have time for a nice, relaxed conversation where I could get the lowdown. With a baby crying and two hooligans to worry about, getting a medical diagnosis on her car was the furthest thing from my mind."

"You don't know shit from shinola when it comes to cars anyway, so no biggie. I would like to have a reference point to start from. Will the car start? Does it try to turn over at all? That kind of happy horseshit."

"Which means you need to have her here."

"No. It means I need a set of keys. I'm sure she might add to the scenery, but she won't contribute much to my efforts."

"Makes sense. Maybe she left them in the car. She took out of here like a teenager headed for a free kegger. She probably neglected to lock the car and, maybe, to remove her keys."

Parnelli walked over to the driver's door and pulled it open. The chiming of the warning system informed them both that they had hit the jackpot.

"Houston, we have a winner. Now one of us has to get in and try to start it," Parnelli said.

"That better be me. The gal's baby will be collecting his high school diploma before you could maneuver your sorry body into that little car."

"In most cases I'd jump at the chance to argue with you. But today I have to admit you're speaking wisdom. This is an f-sardine can on wheels."

Tex lowered and contorted his body in an attempt to get behind the wheel. "No go."

"If I might make an observation without offending you."

"I'm waiting, pardner."

"If you weren't dumber than a blonde at a MENSA convention when it comes to cars, it might help. Why don't you try moving the seat back before you try to squeeze in?"

Tex glanced up at the sky. "Good advice, doctor, but perhaps you could improve your bedside manner a bit."

Parnelli grinned. "Are you trying to spoil my fun? If I didn't have you to make fun of, I don't know what I'd do. I go to sleep at night thinking of zingers I can nail you with. In the morning I get out of bed with the knowledge that today, maybe, I'll slip one in on you."

Tex laughed. "That's exactly what I was talking about. Purpose. Everybody needs to have something to motivate them to get their mind and body into action. I'm not exactly fond of the *raison d'être* that you've chosen, but what the hell."

"What are you talking about raisins for? I figured prunes are a more likely candidate."

"Forgive my French, Parnelli. *Raison d'être* is French for 'reason for being'. I forgot that the only French you know contains four letters."

"You amaze me sometimes. You don't know a hill of beans about some stuff, but you seem to know a lot about other, usually worthless, shit. I didn't know you spoke froggie."

"I don't. I read a lot though, and that expression is used a lot. Of course someone who only has four books in the house – the Sears catalog, a Chilton manual, and two coloring books – isn't going to glean much culture or knowledge from the written word."

"I learn through living – not from some chicken scratches on paper. After hearing you today, I'm starting to think you have more in common with the professor now than you do me. I can't get out hunting with you anymore, and you won't take me fishing because every time we get out in the middle of a good fishing hole, I get a compelling need to take a dump. We haven't played sports together in years. We're hanging together because of old memories."

While Parnelli was talking, Tex managed to get the seat moved back and made another attempt to shoehorn his six-foot frame into the compact. His hat was bumping the ceiling, so he took it off. Finally, he was positioned to attempt to start the car.

"That's not true. We still watch ballgames together. We're definitely not two peas from the same pod, Parnelli, but that's normal. I'm different from you, and I'm different from the professor as well. We're all unique, just like a snowflake. On the surface we look the same, but if we look closely, the differences become evident. But we don't have to be exactly alike to be friends."

"Your eruption of philosophy sounds just like the professor. How come you don't know everything like him?"

"I think we'll find the professor doesn't know everything. There's only so much time and so much knowledge to absorb. Most of us have an impressive amount of knowledge about what we know. If you converse with someone outside the area of their expertise, you might wind up with the false conclusion that they're not intelligent."

"There's book learning intelligent, and there's real-life intelligent."

"I agree. You're smart about cars, but you don't know jack about culture or modern technology or history."

"Maybe I don't want to."

"But don't think because you don't want to know about them that they don't involve real life. And maybe I don't want to understand cars. Ever think of that? So don't think I'm a moron because I choose not to love what you love, OK?"

"If it makes you happy."

"You ready to check out the car now, Parnelli?"

"Pop the hood – if you know how."

"I'm not totally illiterate about cars, at least the inside of them."

"Then why couldn't you figure out to move the seat back?"

"I don't know. Our brains work in strange ways. My mind was racing about other stuff. About the Angels, the professor, Lizzy, the old folk's home. There just wasn't room for another thought at the time, maybe."

"Tex, if you want to help people along the highway, you've got to use your brain to drum up some common sense. Pie in the sky ideas might be great in some situations, but when the rubber meets the road, you have to apply some real-life principles."

Tex popped the hood open. "That's why I need you around. Someone has to keep me grounded when I'm soaring off into the clouds. Both types of thinking are needed."

"Sounds like you need a full-time babysitter for that. Maybe you should find a new wife."

"No comment on that topic. I've popped the hood now. How about you opening it before I pop you in the mouth and halt your case of oral diarrhea?"

Parnelli spat on the cement and shuffled to the front of the car. After a minute of searching for the release mechanism, he opened the hood and propped it up.

Tex turned the key. The only noise they heard was a clicking. He continued trying, but the car didn't turn over. Parnelli returned to the passenger side door. "You can stop now. Stay right there. I have to go to my car to get a hammer. I'll be back in a second."

"Shhhhhiiiiittttt. Your car is ten feet away. It'll be at least ten minutes before you can cover that distance."

"You talk like I've got one foot in my grave."

"If the shoe fits, wear it. Well in your case, if the shitkicker fits, wear it."

"Don't you go making any snide remarks about my boots. You're just jealous."

"Those boots are made for walking, just like your mouth is made for talking."

"I'm goin'. I can take a hint when it hits me over the head."

Parnelli made the trek to his Tornado and returned with his hammer.

"Can I ask what you're going to do with that? Does she have a few loose nails in her engine?" Tex asked.

"They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks, so I'm not going to try giving you the skill to do this."

"Do what?"

"The problem with her car is that the starter is hosed. It's not making an electrical connection because the brushes are bad. I'm going to hit the starter with this hammer while you turn the key, and the engine is going to roar into life, hopefully. Just don't turn the f-engine off after it starts. Especially after I get out from under the car."

"You're going to have to crawl under the car?"

"That's where the starter is, unfortunately."

"No kiddin'. I should have brought a copy of *War and Peace* to read while you're slipping and sliding that fat carcass of yours."

Parnelli spat again. "You just be ready when I yell 'Go'. If you fall asleep with me under that car, I'm going to use this hammer and hit you so hard on the top of your head you'll need holes in your socks to stick your tongue out."

"Well, I've got plenty of holes, so I'm not worried."

Parnelli shuffled back to the front of the car muttering something unintelligible. He disappeared from Tex's view. A few expletives punctured the air from time to time to accompany the groans and grunts produced by the effort.

Finally, Parnelli uttered the magic word. Tex turned the

starter, and the sweet music of a running engine provoked an emphatic, "Yes!" from him. He reached to turn the car off again, and Parnelli's threat rang in his ears. He pulled his hand back quickly as if he had contacted a hot toaster.

"Oops. Don't want to stir up the old buzzard any more than he is now." He got out of the car. A truck that looked just like his approached. Following the pickup all the way, he watched Martha pull into a spot right behind the Tornado.

She almost ran to her car. "You started it! I'm so jazzed!"

Parnelli's beet-red face peeked around the hood. "Howdy, ma'am."

She jumped back.

"Don't let him scare you, Martha. His meow is worse than his scratching."

Parnelli closed the hood and joined the other two. "Parnelli Jones at your service."

"Hi. I'm Martha." She held out a dainty hand for him to shake.

"Ma'am, I'd love to shake that pretty little hand, but after touching my dirty old paw, your little hand won't be so pretty."

"Oh!" She pulled it back quickly.

"It's just grease and dirt, ma'am. Not leprosy."

"Would you quit calling me 'ma'am'? It makes me feel old."

"Like us?"

"I'm sorry. That's not what I meant to convey."

Tex patted Martha on the shoulder. "That's OK, Martha. Don't worry about giving Parnelli a bad time. It just keeps him in shape to put up with my barbs." He surveyed his friend. "Actually, that was a bad choice of words. He ain't been in shape since we played high school basketball together."

"Back in the days when they used peach baskets nailed to the wall."

"Is that true?" Martha asked.

"I'm not that old," Tex answered. "He might be though."

"So, is my car fixed?"

"Sorry, ma'am...Martha. It's just a Band-Aid to get it started. You'll continue having the same problem until you get the starter replaced."

"Oh. Sounds expensive."

"Not too bad. About a hundred bucks plus labor."

She sighed and a look came over her face that spelled 'worried' in capital letters."

"If you want, I can put it in for you for free. That'll save you a

few bucks.”

“That’s really nice of you, but I don’t have the money to buy the starter.”

Parnelli frowned. He reached into his wallet and looked inside. “It’s your lucky day, Martha. I just happen to have enough greenbacks in here to cover it.”

“I couldn’t let you do that. You don’t even know me.”

“Consider it a Christmas gift.”

“It’s August.”

“I do my Christmas shopping early to avoid the rush.”

“Martha, if I’d left him at the senior center, he’d probably have lost this much playing pinochle,” Tex said.

Parnelli started to respond and then controlled himself before he filled the air with expletives.

She looked down at the ground for a minute and sighed again. “I don’t like being a charity case. Can I just borrow the money?”

“Fine. Consider it a loan. I’m not going to lose any sleep worrying about getting it back.”

“Then I accept very gratefully.”

“Martha, I hate to pry into your personal affairs—” Tex said.

“No you don’t!”

“Shut up, Parnelli. Martha, I was just wondering where the boy’s father is. If it’s none of my business, just tell me so.”

“Iraq. He’s in the National Guard, and they called him up for active duty.”

“Oh, shi...shiver me timbers. Sorry to hear that.”

She nodded.

Parnelli threw his hands up in the air. “Let’s get moving here, folks. It’s hot out here. Martha, if you want to follow me, we’ll stop at the auto parts store and then head to my house.”

“I’ll tag along as a chaperone to make sure this old goat doesn’t scare you none,” Tex said.

“You better put on a mask then, so you don’t scare her yourself, you old buzzard.”

Martha coughed, the kind that was obviously fake.

“Sorry, Martha. When you get to our age, the only exercise you get sometimes is stepping on people’s toes. Tex and I are good buddies. If we weren’t, somebody would have killed the other one over the years with as much guff as we’ve dished out to each other.”

“Kind of like the old Sonny and Cher program?”

“You’re mighty young to know anything about Sonny and

Cher.”

“My in-laws bought some DVD’s of the show, and I watched them.”

“Yeah? The big difference between us and the Bonos is that when they zinged the other one, they sat around smirking and nodding their head up and down. In our case, we’re like ‘take that, you SOB.’”

“Parnelli’s right. We’re more like those trash talkers in the NFL who make a tackle and then stand over the victim, rubbing it in orally.”

“I think we’ve talked enough about how old farts live. Let’s get this young lady fixed up so she can get back to her baby.”

“That would be nice, gentlemen. So, if I hadn’t stopped here and turned off the engine I would have been OK?”

“Yes and no. This problem only impacts starting the car, so you could have driven to Mexico as long as you left the motor running. You would have run into the problem later.”

She nodded. “I see. Thanks so much.”

“Martha.”

“Yes, Tex.”

“Don’t turn your car off until you get to Parnelli’s house. He has a hammer, and he’s not afraid to use it.”

The worried and confused look on Martha’s face prompted Parnelli to answer quickly. “He’s right about leaving the engine running. Don’t worry about the rest of his statement. Just him trying to be funny – without success, as usual.”

“OK.” She reached out her hand to Tex. “Here are the keys to your pickup. Tex, I really don’t know how to thank you. You probably saved my baby’s life. You might have saved my life. We’ll never know. I just wanted to tell you I’m extremely grateful.”

The power of her declaration of gratitude almost had a profound impact on Tex. He couldn’t bear up under the steady gaze of the grateful woman. He was looking at Parnelli when he responded. “Glad I could be there for you.” He turned and started toward his pickup, wiping away a little moisture on his cheek, which was not produced by his sweat glands.

“Hey, cowboy!”

Tex turned around to face his slow-moving friend, who was trying to catch up with him.

“Now what?”

“Sign me up.”

“For what?”



“I want to be an Angel too. Let me warn you though, if you’re going to be rescuing nice ladies like that, you have to learn to accept their thanks without getting so embarrassed. You made me get embarrassed by your embarrassment.”

“It ain’t easy to embarrass you, so I must have really been bad.”

Parnelli nodded. “That sums it up pretty good.”

“About that hammer – I hope you didn’t use that on your ex-wife when you had trouble starting her engine.”

Parnelli laughed and turned to his Tornado. After opening the door, he turned back to Tex. “Maybe if I had, we’d still be together.”

### Chapter 3

After sending Martha off with a new starter and instructions to keep in contact with them, Parnelli and Tex drove back to the senior citizens' center, stopping on the way to eat a quick lunch at Wendys.

Parnelli slapped his knee. "I need to get back and win back those three bucks I lost earlier, and the hundred bucks for the starter."

"Fat chance of you winning that much money. In fact, you usually lose."

"Not when you're playing."

"So, I'm an easy mark, am I?"

"The easiest. Like taking a bottle from a baby."

"Shhhiiiiittttt. I can't picture you taking milk bottles away from babies."

"I'm too decent a guy for that."

"Hell no. If they were sucking on bottles of Bud, you'd be all over them. Milk just won't give you the gusto you crave."

"What the hell do you know about my cravings?" Parnelli pulled a cigar out his pocket and stuck it into his mouth.

"Don't you dare light that sucker up in my new pickup."

"Simmer down. My doc said I'm not supposed to smoke these anymore. He says I'm gonna die if I keep on living the way I do."

"What'd you say?"

"I told him the same thing. In my study of mortality, I learned that the death rate is a hundred percent. We're all headed for the end of our days."

"I'm not going to argue that, but some of us are going to get there sooner because of the way we live."

"Sounds like you're on the doctor's side."

"Hell, Parnelli, if someone is pulling for you to live a better and a healthier life, how can you put them in a pigeonhole as an enemy?"

"It's a free country."

"Yeah, you're right. You're free to be just as idiotic as you want."

"You got that right. Anyway, I figure it won't hurt me to suck on this baby."

"Just don't swallow it."

Parnelli laughed. The laughter died suddenly, as he threw

his body forward as far as his seatbelt would allow him, pulled the cigar out of his mouth, and coughed violently.

“What the—”

“The damn cigar slid down my throat far enough to trigger my gag mechanism.”

“I told you not to swallow it.”

“I’m not deaf. Maybe you planted some kind of suggestion in my head that caused it to happen. You know more about the psycho-babble than I do.”

“Are you saying my suggestion to not swallow it caused you to do just the opposite?”

“Something like that.”

“In that case, don’t you dare give me a million dollars.”

“Nice try. Maybe it wasn’t the power of suggestion after all. It must have just been a case of laughing with a cigar in my mouth. That could be the old fart version of running with scissors.”

“Brilliant deduction, Fidel. Put the cigar back in your mouth if it’ll prevent you from uttering more BS.”

“You’re SOL, buddy. I can talk a mile a minute with a stogie in my teeth. Years of practice, you know. Speaking of practice, I’d better practice on my approach to Lizzy.”

“If she’s still there.”

“That’s true. We’ve been gone almost two hours. Probably not much chance she stuck around that long – unless the professor swept her off her feet. In that case, my palaver will be a day late and five dollars short.”

“You mean a dollar.”

“I had to adjust the cliché for inflation.”

“And you accuse me of being a professor. What time does your class in Econ 101 start?”

Parnelli took the cigar out of his mouth and laughed again. “Can’t you see me in front of a bunch of college kids?”

“Only if they were part of a firing squad.”

“Hell, if they shoot like you, I’d be perfectly safe as long as they were aiming at me.”

“Shiiiiiiiiittttt. I can shoot the eye out of a fly at a hundred yards.”

“Yeah, right. At a hundred yards you’d have trouble seeing an f-elephant.”

“Says you. By the way, I can see well enough to make out a sickening vision of the professor holding the door open for Lizzy.”

Parnelli strained to look down the street. "That SOB! I bet he took her to lunch, and they're just getting back."

"I thought you liked the professor?"

"I never said that. All I did was try to convince you to give him a fair shot."

"That was a good thought, but my rifle's gone."

Tex pulled into a parking spot near the center. The two made their normal, leisurely, painful exits.

Tex's cell phone announced an incoming call. He stopped and dug into his pockets for it.

"Don't be playing any pocket pool while you're in there," Parnelli said.

Tex pressed his fingers of his empty hand into a fist and gestured at Parnelli. His friend's grin widened.

"You go on ahead, Parnelli. I'll catch up."

"And me not find out what your call is about? Forget it."

Tex opened the phone and uttered a greeting. A smile spread across his face.

"That is indeed good news." Tex smiled. "That's not such good news." The smile vanished. "Thanks for the info. I'll stop down and pick it up this afternoon. Bye."

He closed the phone down and slid it back into his pocket.

"What's good and not so good news?"

"You're nosier than Jimmy Durante."

"Thanks. Now, spill the beans."

Tex let out a loud fart.

Parnelli made a face. "That wasn't what I meant. What was your phone call about?"

"It was the highway patrol. They caught up with the jerks who took my gun. Unfortunately, after they forced them off the highway, they took off running and disappeared into a cornfield. They did leave my rifle in their car, so I'm in luck."

Parnelli nodded. "Unless they find their way out of the cornfield and into your house."

"You could have talked all day and not brought up that possibility."

"You could have talked all day without cutting the cheese too. Damn, I bet they heard that one in the center. It was the shot heard round the world."

"I'll just tell everyone you did it."

"Figures. Seriously, Tex, you can't ignore the possibility of these guys making a house call. It could happen."

"Quit trying to scare me, Parnelli. Those guys don't even

know my name. Unless they stumble upon me by accident, I have no worries.”

“Coincidences do occur. Until they’re caught, I’d suggest you stay out of cornfields.”

“I’ll do that, just for you, Parnelli. Don’t want you losing any beauty sleep. Lord knows how much you need that.”

They reached the door of the senior center. Tex got there first and pulled the door open. “Age before beauty.”

“In this case I think beauty entered before both of us.”

Tex looked up ahead and saw Lizzy standing with the professor and another couple. “No argument from me on that.”

The two walked toward the center of the room.

“What’s the plan, Stan?” Parnelli asked.

“I want to tell everybody about the Angels before you get involved in a card game. I might need you to help me make the pitch. After all, you’ve been there and done that.”

“Hurry it up then. My fingers are suffering from the DT’s after going two hours without a deck of cards in my hand.”

“Can you get people’s attention? I’m not very good at interrupting people.”

“And I am?”

“I only hire the best.”

Tex looked around the room. There were about twenty people playing cards or board games. A few more, like the professor and Lizzy, were just talking.

In his normal boisterous way, Parnelli shouted out his message. “Ladies and gentlemen, you too, Krueger, could I please direct your attention to the center ring where the amazing Tex Harris will attempt a feat never accomplished before. Right before your very eyes, he will try to turn all you, even Krueger, into angels.”

Tex took off his hat. There was a little rumbling after the proclamation from Parnelli, but people quieted down in a hurry, probably fascinated by what Parnelli had promised.

“Hi, I don’t know all of you—”

“Speak up, Tex! Some of us here aren’t exactly spring chickens, you know.”

Tex nodded. He began again, struggling to maintain sufficient volume without shouting. “That’s why I’m here. I know quite a few of you, but there are others I’ve never met. My name is Tex Harris, and I’ve got a secret. Actually I’ve got an idea I want to share with you.”

“You’re not going to try to sell us something, are you?”

Krueger asked.

"No, I'm not – well, maybe I am. It's not something that's for sale though. I'm giving this away."

"In that case, I'm still listening."

"Thanks, Krueger. Anyway, I'm not trying to cut down the senior center or anything, but I think there is more in the world for us to do than come in here and enjoy ourselves all the time."

"You got a problem with having fun?"

"Can you stick a cork in your questions until he finishes, Krueger?" Parnelli asked in a less than friendly tone.

"Whatever."

"I'm all for having fun, but even fun gets boring after a while. Shakespeare said something to the effect that if every day was a holiday, there wouldn't be any celebrations. If having fun all the time becomes your focus, I think you're missing the point in life. We're wired to be needed and to have responsibility."

"I've worked hard all my life. I don't need any more responsibility," Krueger said. Defiance oozed out of his words.

Tex looked over at Parnelli. The latter walked over to Krueger's chair and whispered in his ear. The man stood up and accompanied Parnelli out the door.

"Did Parnelli just invite him outside to fight?" a woman who reminded Tex of Granny on *The Beverly Hillbillies* asked. He just knew her name was Sarah.

"If he did, I want to see that." The speaker scurried to the window as fast as his elderly legs could carry him and looked out. The majority of the eyes in the room were upon him. He turned and went back to his seat a minute later. "Nah. They went into the tavern across the street."

"Bummer," Sarah said.

"Excuse me," the professor said. "Were you desirous of observing Mr. Fields and Mr. Krueger engaging in pugilism?"

Sarah's eyebrows knitted into caret-shaped figures. "Zeb?"

"He wants to know if we had a hankering for Krueger and Parnelli to duke it out."

"Why didn't he say so in the first place?"

"Folks, hold on a second," Tex said, his voice growing stronger. "This is not about Krueger and Parnelli. This is about you and me. Just the fact some people are sitting here wishing a couple of old codgers make like George Foreman speaks volumes. We need to get a life. I want to start an organization called the Angels of I-29 that will be comprised of senior citizens who are looking out for the general population."

"We need to look out for them. They're downright dangerous," Zeb piped up.

"No, I mean we need to be protecting them."

Sarah laughed. "You want us to protect other people? From what? Jackrabbits?"

"What Sarah means is that in case you hadn't noticed, we are all physically way beyond our prime. We couldn't fight our way out of a wet paper bag. What good could we be?"

Several other people laughed. Tex's face turned red. *This isn't how this is supposed to go down.* He closed his eyes and bit down on his tongue.

"Mr. Harris," a musical female voice said.

Tex's eyes flew open. He looked over toward Lizzy. "Yes?"

"I have a suggestion. Obviously, there are people here who are not interested in being an Angel. Perhaps all the people who are interested in hearing what you have to say could go over into that corner of the room, so you can continue without interruption, and the others can get back to their exciting lives."

"That is an excellent idea." He flashed her a smile of appreciation. "You folks heard the lady. If anyone has a real hankering to hear me speak my piece, follow me." He walked over to the corner Lizzy had suggested. When he arrived, he turned around to see if he had any takers. Seven of the bigger crowd had chosen to give him a chance. *Not exactly the size of audience I was hoping for, but I'll take what I can get at this point. I wouldn't mind the group being short one member. I don't want the professor in on this.*

Just as he was getting ready to recommence, Parnelli walked in the front door. Tex made a signal and caught his attention. He strolled over in Parnelli fashion to join the small group.

"Folks, thank you for your confidence in me and your interest. I think my idea could be something special. The lives of others, and our lives too, could be changed. I have a perfect example for you." He went on to explain the situation with Martha on the freeway.

"That's a beautiful story, Mr. Harris," Lizzy said.

"Tex – please call me, Tex."

She nodded.

"I zealously concur with Lizzy's observation," the professor said. "The opportunity for allocating a percentage of our leisure time for contributing to the general welfare of civilization without recompense provides a splendiferous means to fulfill one's

altruistic desires.”

“I don’t know about that,” Parnelli said, “but I do know that giving of yourself without asking anything in return is a great way of making yourself feel good.”

“If I’m not misguided, that is precisely what I expressed in the aforesaid verbiage.”

“Yes, you did, professor,” Tex said. “Very aptly stated, I might add, if you were addressing the graduating class of Harvard University.”

“Are you insinuating that a requisite for optimal communication in South Dakota precludes my native language and coerces me to utilize lingua franca that is more rudimentary?”

Tex looked at Parnelli. His eyeballs stuck out, reminiscent of Jack Elam of television and movie fame. He threw back his head and laughed. “Except in the case where you don’t want Parnelli to have a clue what you are talking about, I strongly suggest you scale back dramatically on your usage of multi-syllabic words.”

“Very well. I shall endeavor to optimize my communicational dexterity.”

Tex shook his head. *Good luck, bubba!* “I wanted to share with you the feeling that I got today when that girl told me that I had perhaps saved her life, and that of her baby. I felt alive, and I felt useful. It’s been a while since I felt either.”

“Very interesting, Tex,” Lizzy said. “I can relate to feeling like a spare tire on a 1959 Edsel. I have some questions for you.”

“I’ll do my best, ma’am.”

“Please call me Lizzy. Exactly what do you propose that the Angels of I-29 will do? Did you plan on having someone patrol the I-29 corridor twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week?”

“That’s an excellent question. You probably know that whenever someone answers a question with that statement, they don’t know the answer.”

Lizzy laughed. “That’s been my experience.”

“This is no exception. I have pondered that very question more than once. Most members are probably going to be living on their small social security checks. With the price of gas going through the ionosphere, that plan doesn’t seem to be financially feasible. Also, we have to ask if we need someone out there at two a.m. There’s very little traffic at that time.”



“Which means that anyone experiencing problems will have fewer people to potentially help them.”

“Good point, Lizzy. Also the need to get help may be more urgent at night when much of that ‘S’ ‘H’ ‘I’ ‘T’ happens that you read about on bumper stickers. If we had 168 volunteers, we could man a stretch of highway seven by twenty-four if everyone just did an hour a week. That ain’t gonna happen – in the near future anyway. We’ll have to start small and work out the logistics as we go.”

Lizzy nodded. “That makes sense. Is patrolling I-29 the only thing you have planned?”

“That’s the only thing on my agenda right now.”

“It just seems like there are some seniors, especially women, who might not be attracted to or suited for this kind of assignment. They might be interested in some other avenue for serving.”

“For example?”

“How about an emergency babysitting service? People that have something come up where they can’t find someone to watch their kids while they go to a hospital or something like that.”

“Not a bad idea. Seems that there might be some people that would take advantage of that situation to get some free babysitting when there was no emergency.”

“True. One of the chances you’d take if you offered something like this.”

“Definitely food for thought. Of course, with the type of interest I’ve seen so far, I doubt we’d have the manpower or womanpower to take that on.”

“Pardon me for causing precipitation to descend upon your parade, but what about the rest of I-29, which is an excessive distance from our epicenter?” the professor asked.

“We’d need help from other communities. Watertown, Brookings, Beresford, etcetera, would need to have volunteers as well.”

“How will you recruit people in those areas?”

“I don’t know. Unfortunately, I don’t have any contacts in any of those cities. My plan is basically half-baked at this juncture. I’m sorry. Maybe I should have left it in the oven longer.”

“Don’t worry about it. Rome wasn’t built in a day. Maybe you’ll have some volunteers from Sioux Falls who do have friends or family in those areas. Another possibility is the

Internet.”

“How so, Lizzy?”

“You could create a web page for our organization.”

“Web page. I don’t know sh...nothing about.... Did you say ‘our’?”

“I believe I did. This sounds like a wonderful thing to me. I’d like to be involved.”

“If Lizzy comprises part of your ensemble, you can consider me a fervent participant as well,” the professor said.

*Yeah. I was afraid of that. Maybe he’ll be a flash in the pan. One little bit of adversity will send him scurrying for the exits.* He tried to fake a smile at the professor’s announcement. It hurt his face. “How about the rest of you folks?”

One lady shook her head and walked away.

“We’ll pass for now. Maybe later,” the husband of a couple said before they took their leave.

Tex looked at the last two gentlemen whom he knew, but not very well. He did know they were good buddies.

“Well, Tex. Sound likes an ambitious agenda.”

“Yeah. I won’t debate that point.” *Here comes the excuse list.*

“Ambitious is good in our book. How do we sign up?”

Tex’s face lit up. He was braced for more disappointment. “Boy, I’m so unprepared here that it’s ridiculous. I don’t have anything planned in regard to paperwork or bookkeeping or anything. This plan was just conceived this morning. I’m afraid it’s still in the womb.”

“Sounds like some labor pains will be necessary to give birth to it,” Lizzy said. “We’re not afraid of a little work. We can give you our phone numbers, and you can call when you figure out what you want us to do.”

“You’ve talked me into it. When E. F. Hutton or a pretty lady speaks, I listen.”

Lizzy blushed.

The gentlemen returned to their board game. The professor and Lizzy remained.

“About this web page, Lizzy, I don’t suppose you can create one of those?”

“As a matter of fact, I can.” She handed Tex a slip of paper. “You’ll find my number, as well as the one for Alistair, on this. We’ll await your instructions. Perhaps a kickoff meeting would be in order so we can bounce around some ideas, and I could demo some possibilities on the computer. I’d be glad to host it at

my house.”

Tex beamed. “That is very gracious of you and it’s a whale of an idea. Let’s do it.”

“One more thing I suggest to help us recruit additional members is to create some flyers we can hang up here and other places. Maybe an article in the newspaper would generate some interest. We could set our kickoff meeting for a couple of weeks from the time we get the flyers ready so there is time for the advertisement to attract some more attendees.”

“Once again you’re right on top of things. I think we need to have officers for this thing, and you’d be a perfect person to be a leader.”

Lizzy curtsied. “Thank you. I’ll be glad to do what I can.”

“Additionally I tender my endowments as a volunteer constituent of your squad,” the professor said.

Tex looked him over. “Can you do me a favor, Alistair?”

“I’ll expend every effort to comply.”

“As Yoda said, ‘don’t try, do.’ Would you repeat after me?”

The professor nodded, a curious look twisting his face.

“Me, too.”

“Me, too?”

“It’s not a question.” Tex shook his head in frustration. “Try this one. Me too, Mommy.”

“Me too, Mommy. I don’t comprehend the strategy employed by this selection of words?”

“Let me help,” Lizzy said. “Tex is trying to get you to take your dialogue tie off and let your vernacular hair down. A simple ‘me too’ would convey very simply that you wanted to be on the team just like me.”

“I apprehended that connotation. It’s the maternal reference that perplexed me.”

Lizzy laughed. “If I’m not mistaken, Tex is borrowing from a popular movie called *The Music Man*.”

“Right you are, ma’am.”

“Professor Hill tries to teach two little boys to sing. They try singing ‘me too, Mommy’ in a monotone voice that would make Ben Stein look absolutely flamboyant.”

Tex’s hand went up to scratch his head. *Professor Hill of Gary Conservatory of Music, class of ‘05. He wasn’t really a professor. Perhaps I should check the records at Concordia to see if Alistair Morehouse actually was an educator there.*

“Now the illumination is revealed. I tender my gratitude for your lucid explication, my dear Elizabetheth.”

*Gag me with a freaking spoon.* “Yes, Lizzy. Thanks for translating my pathetic attempt at humor.”

She smiled. “*Au contraire*. I thought it was quite ingenious. I’ve seen that movie about a dozen times, so it registered with me right away. That’s one of my favorites.”

“Mine too,” Tex said, smiling broadly.

“Me too, Mommy,” the professor said in a perfect monotone.

Lizzy and Tex both stared at him and then burst into laughter.

“How do you appraise my endeavor at jesting?”

“Funny, Alistair. Very funny!”

The professor took a mock bow.

“Well, my new friends,” Lizzy said. “I’ve had a ball down here today. I never dreamed I’d make so many friends so quickly. My suspicion was that I’d peek in and run away. I might have too if you gentlemen hadn’t been so kind. But I’m afraid I must leave you now. Thank you so much for your chivalrous attention today.”

“I shall exchange pleasantries with you over the phone, Elizabeth,” Alistair said.

“Until then, adieu.”

“Goodbye, Lizzy,” Parnelli said, breaking the longest silence that Tex had ever seen him maintain while he was conscious.

“Have a nice day, Mr. Fields. You too, Tex.”

All three men watched as the slender figure exited the center.

“With no modicum of melancholy, I must announce my own departure from your esteemed company.”

Tex put his Stetson back on. *Don’t let the door hit you in the ass on the way out.* “It was just marvy getting acquainted with you today.”

“Indeed. Mr. Fields, until our next encounter on the field of pinochle rivalry.” He bowed stiffly and followed in Lizzy’s footsteps.”

“Now what do you think of your professor?” Tex asked.

“I don’t know what to think. I was watching and listening to him pretty closely. He cranked up his vocabulary a couple of notches after Lizzy arrived. I had no trouble understanding him during our card game. Unless I miss my guess, he’s trying really hard to make an impression on her. What do you think?”

“I think he’s phonier than a three-dollar bill.”

“Are you saying I shouldn’t try spending those threes in my wallet?”

"Me three, Mommy." Tex laughed at his own joke, but Parnelli just stared at him. "What's eating you?"

Parnelli bit down on his lip. "I was debating whether I should ask you to make me your volunteer coordinator, at least for now. I can call the volunteers and pass along any information needed."

"Are you serious? That's not exactly automobile-related work."

"You've been preaching to me about expanding my horizons. Maybe there is more to life than the ABC's."

"ABC's."

"Autos, Booze and Cards."

"What about sex?"

"That might be on the horizon I'm expanding."

"Wait a second. I can see clear through you, Mr. Transparentman. You want me to give you Lizzy's phone number so you can hit on her."

"That's rather a crude way of putting it, but it covers the ground."

"Since when have you ever worried about crude? In fact, that defines your style. All of a sudden, you're conscious that you're a dirty old man. What's up with that?"

"A pretty woman can jerk a man in several directions at the same time. A woman like Lizzy can make a guy see the world in a new way."

"Sounds like the kind of punishment they doled out back in the time of *Braveheart*. Tie four horses to a man's limbs and make a wish. Are you comparing what Lizzy is doing to you to something like that?"

"It works for me."

"Sheesh. I didn't realize you were so smitten."

"Damn you Tex. It was bad enough listening to the professor rattle on in words I swear ain't English, but to have you do it to me too really pisses me off. Can't you practice what you preach about using common words?"

"Parnelli, listen. Sometimes people use fancy words when smaller, more common words would work. Sometimes you need a special word to express exactly what you mean. I couldn't think of a word that fits better here."

"Maybe you can think harder next time. I'm not an f-genius."

*What a revelation!* "Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that people should have a miniscule – I mean tiny – vocabulary. I just think people shouldn't go around talking like a thesaurus."



things, too.”

“I thought you already had a boat anchor?”

“Listen, Casanova, two can play this game. I’m gonna need even more help than you learning how to use one of those televisions with keyboards. If Lizzy is going to give computer lessons, she’s gonna have two students.”

“What about your pinochle game?”

“Screw the Queen of Spades. I got my eye set on the Queen of Hearts.”

“Maybe your eye is set on the queen of Hearts, but your lifestyle suits you for the Queen of Farts.”

“What makes you think you’re a better catch than I am? There’s not that much difference between us.”

“Maybe not, Parnelli. However, I don’t think someone whose favorite song is *Ninety-nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall* is going to have much of a chance with her.”

“What if it’s Heineken?”

Tex shook his head. “I’m not trying to hurt your feelings here, Parnelli, but Lizzy is a refined woman. She’s no doubt used to the finer things in life, and any man who wins her heart is going to have to be civilized. You’re not even domesticated and hardly even house-broken.”

“Are you saying that I’m a wild man?”

“You just painted a beautiful self-portrait.”

“Bite my ass!” Parnelli started to walk away.

Tex grabbed his arm. “Parnelli, listen to me. I’m trying to spare you from grief down the road. You’ll be hurt a lot more if she shoots you down after you get your hopes all built up.”

“I see. You’re trying to protect me by shooting me down before I get into outer space.”

“Bingo.”

“Bullshit! You’re just trying to get me off the trail so you can win her for yourself. I ain’t falling for that one again.”

“Again? What are you talking about?”

“You probably don’t remember this, but back in high school you told me you weren’t interested in Madge O’Brien.”

“No, I don’t remember.”

“Then you went out and dated Madge for the next two years.”

“So?”

“I was in love with Madge. I was just going to ask her out when you started dating her. Then when you guys broke up, I was already going steady with Loser Lois. Before I could break

up with her, Madge latched on to that prick she married.”

“Parnelli, you never told me that you loved Madge. How was I supposed to know?”

“Would it have changed things? Would you have stepped aside for me?”

Tex gulped. “I don’t know. Hard to say what I would have done fifty-some years ago.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s water over the f-spillway. This time I’m telling you. I’m going after Lizzy, and I don’t give a rat’s ass what you say. Maybe I’m not a gentleman – yet. I’ve been watching on TV where they do makeovers on people and make them glamorous. Maybe it’s time I did a little makeover on me.”

“You gotta be shittin’ me?”

“I’ve never been more serious in my life. So stick that in your pipe, light it, and then stick the pipe where the sun never shines.”

“Come on, Parnelli. Quit beating around the bush. Tell me how you really feel.”

“We’re wasting time here. It’s time for my makeover to begin. Where the hell do you buy a computer, anyway?”

“Beats me. Let’s go out to the mall and ask.”

“There’s one more thing I want to buy when we get out there.”

“A toupee?”

“Damn. I hadn’t thought of that. Not a bad idea. Might as well look into that while I’m looking for a good dictionary.”

“Dictionary! Are you going to make yourself over into the professor? I can’t deal with one of those types. Another one will send me over the edge.”

“Good! Now I have two goals to reach with my makeover.”

“You irritatin’ bastard. Maybe I will throw my Stetson in the ring for Lizzy’s affection, just to piss you off.”

“Bring it on, buddy. May the best man win.”

“Parnelli, there’s a saying that the chance of finding love after forty is about the same as being struck by lightning. The chance of getting lucky after seventy is probably more like being struck by a meteor.”

“I’ve never known you to run from a challenge.”

“I’m not running. I’m too old to run. I’m just not interested in another woman.”

“Your mouth is saying it, old buddy, but your eyes were singing a different melody when you watched Lizzy talk.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”



"Fine. Deny it all you want, but you're not pulling the cotton over my eyes."

"You mean wool?"

"OK. You're not pulling the cotton over my wool."

"Let's go, prune-*face*, before I lose my lunch."

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later the two cronies entered the mall. They approached the information desk, with no small amount of embarrassment, where a gray-haired woman sat reading a book.

"Ma'am, could you tell us the best place to buy a computer?" Tex asked.

"Sure. San Diego."

Tex blinked and looked over at Parnelli.

"Is that the name of a store here?"

"No, that's the name of a city in California." Neither man laughed, and the woman sighed. "Sorry, I couldn't resist that setup line. The best place to buy is Best Buy. Check the map, store number 122."

Tex tipped his hat to the lady. "Much obliged."

"Good hunting. Hope you bag your limit."

The men consulted the map and figured out the course to reach their destination.

"That lady was weird," Tex said.

"She was probably just a little nervous, having two handsome studs come up to her booth like that. Just caught her by surprise and threw her off a bit. Actually, I thought she was pretty funny. Going shopping like this is almost a form of hunting."

"Except when we go hunting, we usually know what the hell we're going to be shooting at. I have no clue what we're after here."

"Didn't you use a computer in your job, Tex?"

"Not any more than I had to. I know as much about them as I do cars."

"Ooh. That's bad. I know as much about them as I do thesauruses. I'm afraid we're in deep doo-doo."

They located store 122 on the map and made the slow journey to the entrance. The two friends barely made it into the door when a salesman pounced on them.

"Can I help you gentlemen?"

"We'd like to get a computer," Tex said.

Parnelli cleared his throat. "Two computers, actually."

"Were you looking to get a notebook or a desktop?"

Parnelli shrugged. "We just want a computer."

"Notebooks and desktops are two different types of computer. The notebooks are compact so you can carry them around with you on airplanes, etcetera."

"I knew that," Tex said. "I think they sometimes call the small ones laptops, and they have pretty small screens. My friend here is blinder than the bats in his belfry, so I think we need a computer with a wide screen TV attached for him."

The salesclerk chuckled. "We can set you up with nice big monitor, but not quite that big. Follow me." He started walking to the aisle where the desktops were displayed. "How much memory are you looking for?"

"Son, when you reach our age, you want all the memory you can muster up."

"Gotcha. You'll want at least four megabytes, in that case."

"Are these four megabytes going to bite my wallet in the butt?"

The young man laughed. "Nah. Memory's cheap, hombre. How about a hard drive. Do you need a big hard drive?"

"What Tex needs is the drive to get hard." Tex elbowed Parnelli in the arm muscle hard enough to cause pain.

"Excuse me?" the boy said, turning around.

"Nothin'. Just thinkin' out loud."

"Are you guys into gaming?" the clerk asked.

"I love to play pinochle," Parnelli said.

"What's that?"

Parnelli looked at the boy like he was some kind of circus freak. "You don't know what pinochle is?"

"No clue."

"It's a card game. I'm afraid your education has been sorely neglected."

"I'll check my college catalog and see if they offer a course in it."

Tex detected the note of sarcasm and studied the boy. *The poor kid doesn't know who he's messin' with.*

"Good idea. Better late than never."

I believe I'm safe in assuming you won't need any special hardware for video games. Here we have one of our most popular desktops. It's a Hewlett Packard 5700 with four meg of RAM, 160 GIG hard drive, DVD-CD burner combination and

comes with a nineteen-inch flat panel monitor, on sale today for \$1099.”

“I used to have a 1951 Packard 250 convertible. It must be destiny that I drive a 2007 Packard computer,” Parnelli said, his eyes gleaming.

“Does that thing have a Hemi in it?” Tex asked.

The boy laughed again. “No, but it has an Intel Pentium D processor.”

Parnelli reached up and touched a button on the machine. The CD/DVD tray slid open. “What’s that?”

“That’s the coffee cup holder.”

“Neat. I hope it works for beer bottles, too.”

The boy shook his head. “I was just kidding you. That’s for CD’s and DVD’s.”

“And BVD’s?” Tex asked.

“Is that some new media storage technology?” the boy asked.

“No, it’s an old-fashioned technology for storing the family jewels.”

The boy looked puzzled.

“That was my joke, son.”

“I didn’t get it.”

“Obviously,” Parnelli said. He pointed at a monitor that was dark. “How do you turn that thing on?”

“I find that blowing in its ear usually does the trick,” the youngster said.

Parnelli studied the machine in front of him. “Where are the ears?”

The salesclerk turned away and swallowed a laugh. When he was able to straighten out his face, he turned to face Parnelli again. “That was just a little joke. A little sexual reference, you know. I figured a couple of guys like you would appreciate that kind of humor.”

“That was a very little joke. And no, I don’t appreciate it. I happen to be a pastor, and this is one of my Sunday school teachers, and we’re greatly offended. Is your manager available so I can tell him about his customers are being treated?”

A look of panic came over the boys face. “I’m so sorry. I never would have...I mean you don’t look like...I’m sorry.”

“Well, Reverend, maybe we should let the boy off the hook this time,” Tex said, his eyes twinkling.

“You think so?”

“I think he’s learned his lesson.”

Parnelli rubbed the side of his face. "At least the one about judging books by their cover. There are still a lot of lessons he needs. Son, I tell you what I'm going to do."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll let it drop this time. And, I'm going to buy this here 5700, but I'm going to give you one piece of advice before we walk out of here."

"And that is?"

"Don't look down on people that don't understand your new fangled technology. You've grown up with this stuff. We older people haven't really been exposed to it. Maybe a year from now we can come back here and carry on an intelligent conversation about computers. We're trying. But I'm afraid you're never going to be able to carry on a meaningful chat about the stuff we know and lived because you're probably never going to try. I suggest you put forth some effort to understand the older generation."

"Ahhh...OK." His face revealed embarrassment. He turned to Tex. "Would you also like to take an HP 5700 home with you?"

"Do you recommend it?"

"Yes, sir. It's a good machine from a good company, and you'll have lots of room for expansion for the future."

"I'll take your word on it, son. Now, how do we get these things out to our vehicle, which is parked closer to Iowa than the front door?"

"You can drive around the back and pull in right next to the door. A man there will load it right into your car." He handed the two men slips of paper. "Take these to one of the cashiers right over there, and they'll take care of you."

Twenty minutes later, the two new computer owners were pulling out of the mall with their new toys. On their way home, they passed the YMCA. Parnelli stared at the building.

"I've made a decision, Tex."

"That sounds scary. Now what?"

"I'm going to join the YMCA."

"What for?"

"I've got the computer, so I can start improving my mind. Time to carve some of the fat off this old carcass of mine as well. Not only will I be thinking and talking like a new me, I'm going to start looking like it. What do you say?"

"Wild man overboard!"

## Chapter 4

Tex pulled into Parnelli's driveway, and the two men got out.

"I figure I oughta be a regular Bill Gates on that computer after a few lessons from Lizzy," Parnelli said.

"Don't hold your breath, meathead. It's nice that you're not afraid of a computer like some people of the Geritol generation, and you're brimming with optimism, but don't get cockier than a banty rooster with a harem of hens. I'm wondering how you're going to put the thing together."

"Meathead. You haven't called me that in a long time. About two weeks I reckon."

"What's your point?"

"Nostalgia hit when you said it this time. I had the vision of Archie Bunker sitting in his chair and raining judgment down upon the world as he smoked his cigar. He was my hero."

"Some people don't aspire to much in life."

"I don't get it."

"I'm not surprised, dingbat."

"How do you spell that word?"

"T-h-a-t space w—"

"Smart ass! I meant that respire or whatever that word in the middle of your previous sentence was."

"Aspire. A-s-p-i-r-e."

Parnelli opened up his new dictionary and found the word. After reading the definition he turned to Tex, who was struggling to get a computer box out of the back of his pickup. "So, let me see if I understand this now. Because I considered Archie Bunker to be my hero, I'm some kind of pond-water-sucking scumbag?"

"I didn't say that, Parnelli. Beer sucking would be more accurate. Ouch!"

Tex's body crumpled against the truck. The computer monitor he was extracting went up into the air. Parnelli dropped his dictionary and caught it.

"What the hell are you—" The anger in his voice died. "Tex! Are you OK?"

"Never been better. This is my favorite yoga position." Tex's tone changed from sarcasm to anger as he let loose a yell loud enough for the neighbors to hear. He sighed heavily. "Just don't let me fall down, or I might never get back up."

"What's the matter?"

"Threw my back out."

"Oh! Don't expect me to carry you. My back's worse than yours. We'd have two invalids lying on the lawn and waiting for someone to rescue us."

"At least it's summer time. We wouldn't perish in the snow before help arrived."

Parnelli laughed.

"What do you find funny in my previous thought?"

"Nothin'. I was just reminded of the old W. C. Fields line. 'I was once stranded in the desert with nothin' to drink but water. Thought I was going to die of thirst.'"

"Could you get your mind off your heroes and try to be a real one? I'm afraid I can't get back into my truck."

"Talking about optimism, when you bought that big sucker, did you even think about the difficulties of getting in?"

"My back felt fine that day."

"And you call me a dingbat. Why didn't you plan for the future like I did when I paved my steps into a runway?"

"You did that because you're too freaking lazy to walk up steps."

"Whatever." Parnelli stood shaking his head and surveying the situation. "Can you walk, or are we going to need a helicopter to airlift you out of here like an f-beached whale?"

"It's gonna hurt like hell, but with your help, I think I can make it into your house."

"And then what? You planning on livin' with me until you can get back into that monstrosity of yours?"

"I'd rather eat glass."

"That's what you'd get served for breakfast here."

"Would you shut up long enough to let me think?"

Parnelli zipped his lips. He shook his head and unzipped them. "I'm going to take this computer into the house. You can think on a solution in peace while I'm gone. By the way, you're lucky I caught this monitor. If you broke this one, it would have been yours."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. As slow as you are, I should be able to solve the world's problems by the time you return."

"Keep on with the slow jokes, and I might forget you're out here. I'll be sitting in the cool house nursing a Bud while you stand here in the heat holding up your truck so it doesn't fall down."

Tex waved his hand at him. "Ouch!"

Parnelli took the monitor into the house. When he returned,

he managed to remove the box containing the computer out of the truck and carted it off to safer pastures. On his second return he spoke. "Figure it out yet, Einstein?"

"Lizzy."

"You're dizzy?"

"I said 'Lizzy'. Let's call Lizzy and see if she can help."

"Not a bad idea. She can help nurse you back to health, so I can get you out of my hair. And she can help me put the computer together and teach me how to use it. Why don't you give me her phone number, and I'll call her now? She and I can help you into the house together."

Tex closed his eyes. "All right." With a grimace, he reached into his pocket and attempted to get his wallet out.

"You want me to get that out for you?"

"I'd just as soon you keep your hands out of my pocket, pervert."

Parnelli shrugged. "I was just offering to help. Do it yourself."

"I will." After a painful struggle, he extracted a piece of paper and studied it.

"Are you going to give it to me or what?"

"After I memorize the number in case you decide you're not going to give it back. All's fair in love and war, you know."

Parnelli laughed. "Whatever, Mr. Paranoid."

When he got the slip of paper in his hand, he walked into the house and dialed the digits. "Hello, Lizzy?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"Parnelli Fields here, from the senior center. How'd you like to fly your first mission for the Angels?"

"What's happened?"

"It's Tex. He's plastered against his truck right now with a bad back and needs help walking."

"Oh, no. Where are you?"

Parnelli gave her the address, directions, and his phone number. By the time he hung up, he was grinning as he began to mix up some bourbon and lemonade. He began whistling *She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain*.

Parnelli poured some of his bourbon concoction into a glass and then dumped in some ice cubes. He strolled back out to the driveway.

"Lizzy's on her way."

Tex nodded and eyeballed the cold drink. "Is that for me?"

Parnelli took a big swig. "Does that answer your question?"

"Where's mine?"

"I don't want you to aggravate your pain. This glass is pretty heavy, with the ice cubes and all. How you holdin' up?"

"I think it'll quit hurtin' as soon as the pain goes away. Actually, I'm fine as long as I don't move."

"Then don't move."

"I have a little problem that means I need to move."

"What's that?"

"I have to piss like a Russian racehorse."

"Hmm. That is a bit of a dilemma. I hope your teeth aren't throwing up sandbags yet. I could bring out a geography book."

"A what? Geography book? For what?"

"You could open it up and go in the ocean." Parnelli reached down and picked up the dictionary from where he'd dropped it earlier.

"Why don't you look up the word 'incorrigible'?"

"Why?"

"Cause that's what you are! You sorry excuse for a—"

"You know, Tex, if you're not nice to me, I'll just go into the house and leave you out here alone, daydreaming about Dyan Cannon or Sally Fields or maybe Dr. Scholl."

"Why would I daydream about them? I'd be more likely to fantasize about rerouting your nose through Albuquerque."

"Oooh. Big talk for an invalid. Can I give you a rain check until you're done playing the role of Quasimodo?"

"And then I'm going to assign you the role of the Headless Horseman or, perhaps, in your case, the Headless Whoreman."

"That's not very nice, Tex. I'm beginning to think you're just not classy enough for a woman like Lizzy. It's not that I'm trying to hurt your feelings—"

Tex had one hand free with which he gave Parnelli a one-finger salute. Parnelli broke into a belly laugh. "Is that your IQ or how many friends you had before your dog died?"

"That's how many hairs you'll have on your chest when I get done slowly plucking them out."

"I think you better put that flying fickle finger of fate back in its holster since Lizzy could be driving up any second. What kind of car do you suppose a classy woman like that drives? Beamer? Mercedes? Lexus? Caddie?"

"Do you think I give a rat's ass if she drives a luxury auto? I kind of hope she drives an ambulance today."

"A surfin' hearse, maybe." Parnelli went into a Jan and Dean imitation and belted out the lyrics to *Surfin' Hearse*.



Tex yelled at him three times to shut up, but Parnelli kept singing until a car hesitated in front of the driveway and diverted his attention. He walked over close enough to Tex to speak softly but not close enough to have any chest hairs removed.

"Looks like Lizzy might be here. I have some last-minute advice for you, good buddy. If you want to make a good impression on her, I'd suggest while she's helping you walk up to the house, you don't pee on her shoe."

Parnelli studied the grotesque gyrations in Tex's face. "I better back off before you have a stroke. Don't want to ruin my day with guilt."

The car backed up and then pulled into the driveway. Parnelli walked out to greet Lizzy. He studied her automobile and shook his head. She was driving an economy vehicle. The most disappointing thing was that she had a familiar passenger, the professor.

"I brought Alistair along to help out."

Parnelli displayed a hint of a smile. "I'm sure that's going to make Tex's day."

Lizzy walked up to where Tex was hanging on, in more ways than one. Parnelli waited for the professor.

"Hope you don't mind me encroaching upon your festivities, mate," the professor said, smiling broadly enough for Parnelli to see gold in his mouth.

"Not a problem, Doctor. Hope you like bourbon and lemonade."

"Ahh. Nothing more refreshing on a sultry afternoon."

"Let's go rescue the cowboy, and then we'll belly up to the bar."

The two men joined Lizzy, who was discussing Tex's pain.

"I don't think we can walk him up to the house. You don't happen to have a wheelchair?"

"Not yet. Hmm...what could we use as a substitute?"

Parnelli's eyes wandered over to the neighbor's house where the young neighbor girl had just exited the garage with her red wagon. "Bingo!"

"What?" Lizzy asked.

"By curious George, I think I've got it. Just hang right here, and I'll be back in a jiffy."

As fast as he could move, Parnelli walked over to the neighbors. "Hey, Amanda. I'll give you a dollar if I can borrow your wagon for fifteen minutes."

"A whole buck?"

"Yep."

"You got a deal, Pete and Repeat. Will that be cash, check, or credit card?"

Parnelli laughed and pulled a dollar out of his wallet. "There you go, Amanda Angel."

"Thanks. Do you need a receipt, Pete and Repeat? Hey, that rhymes."

Parnelli laughed again. "Yes, it does. Where do you learn this stuff?"

"My mom's a clerk. Sometimes she lets me hang out in the store with her. By the way, do you have insurance in case something happens to my wagon?"

"Nothing's going to happen to it, Amanda. If it does, I'll buy you a brand new Radio Flyer."

"Cool!"

"Yeah. Thanks for helping us out. I'll bring it back in a few minutes."

Parnelli pulled the wagon over to his driveway. After much groaning and moaning, they got Tex into the vehicle made for much smaller and younger passengers. After a little jockeying he found the position that caused the least pain.

"Professor, would you like the honors of pulling the sleigh? Lizzy and I can each take a side to make sure that Tex doesn't fall down and go boom."

"With a wheeled conveyance such as this, it should be a slice of confectionary delight."

"Is that a yes?"

Lizzy laughed. "What Alistair said is that it will be a piece of cake."

"I knew that. Just trying for some comic relief. Speaking of humor, did you hear the joke about the little boy who was pulling a little girl in a red wagon? The wagon got stuck in the mud, and the boy asked the girl to get out and push. After more effort without success, the boy cussed. The little girl told him he shouldn't swear. He wanted to know why. She told him because God is everywhere. 'Is he in the grass?' The girl nodded. 'Is he in the sky?' She nodded again. 'Is he even in my little red wagon?' For the third time she nodded. 'Then why the he...ck doesn't he get out and push?'"

The professor laughed.

Lizzy said, "You told that joke very well, Parnelli. It was one of my favorites when I was a kid."

"I must have suffered from a deprived childhood since that

anecdote was conspicuous by its absence from my developmental curriculum. Tex has either previously derived the pleasure of the humor from that quaint tale, or else his current predicament precludes him from detecting humor.”

“The last time I heard that joke, I fell off my...thesaurus laughing,” Tex said through clenched teeth.

“My good fellow, I fail to comprehend the rationale for using a tome of learning for a seat cushion.”

Tex looked at the professor and a grin spread across his face. “It was a theory my mom had. She thought we’d learn by osmosis and the crack in our rear-end was the most effective orifice for allowing the knowledge to pass. We’d alternate between sitting on a dictionary, a thesaurus, a Bible, and the complete works of Shakespeare.”

“Fascinating concept. However, I’m afraid your mother was deficient in the rudimentary concepts of education. The anus solely provides a mode of egress, not ingress.”

“Yeah. My mom wasn’t a genius like yours. Mom probably heard that joke about sitting on your brains and took it literally.”

“It continually escapes my consciousness that not everyone had the benefits of being cultivated by Mumsy.”

*Mumsy!* Tex studied Lizzy’s face. *I’m sure she’s smart enough to figure out I’m pulling the professor’s chain. How is she reacting to my little game and his inability to figure out that he’s being conned?*

They managed to get Tex up the ramp. “Do we need to remove him from the wagon now?” Lizzy asked. “We don’t want to mess up your house.”

Parnelli laughed. “That’s impossible. Just keep on trucking professor. Straight through that doorway and then to the left. Tex needs to make an emergency pit stop.”

“Pit stop? Must we perform maintenance upon this childish chariot, replacing the tires with impressive velocity and filling the fuel receptacle with petrol?”

Parnelli stared in silence.

“What Parnelli means,” Tex said, “is that I have a pressing urge to evacuate the contents of my bladder.”

“To use his own vernacular, why didn’t he say so?”

Tex started to laugh, but the pain changed his laugh to a groan. After Tex took a big load off his mind, the other two men pulled him back to the living room where Lizzy was waiting.

“We should probably put him on the couch,” Parnelli said.

Lizzy shook her head. “I think the floor would be better. That

will allow me to attempt to give him some relief."

"The floor?"

Lizzy nodded.

"You're the nurse."

They carefully helped Tex out of the wagon again and into a prone position on the carpet. Lizzy knelt down next to him and began to massage his back.

Tex alternated between groans of pain and moans of pleasure. *Eat your heart out, Parnelli! You too, professor!*

The two men stood in awkward silence, observing the therapy.

"Where do I get signed up for one of them massages?" Parnelli asked.

"Me, too, Mommy," the professor said.

They all laughed. "There's a massage parlor out at the mall," Tex said.

Parnelli flashed Tex an old signal from their youth. On the surface it appeared to be a time-out signal from sports. He tapped just his middle finger with his opposite hand in this case, secretly flipping Tex off. "Professor, I believe it's time for that drink. Lizzy, would you like one? You probably need to give your hands a break. It must be hard work loosening up that tough old coot."

"I am thirsty. What do you have?"

"It's a special mix of mine, lemonade with bourbon."

"Don't believe him, Lizzy," Tex said. "It's really bourbon spiked with lemonade."

"In either case, I'm afraid I'll have to decline. I don't drink alcoholic beverages. Just plain lemonade would be wonderful."

Parnelli's face fell. "Ah, sure. Coming right up."

"Mr. Fields, please make mine a vessel of pure nectar of citrus as well. I also don't indulge myself in the consumption of hallucinatory elements. I attempt to imbibe only products that will enhance my health."

Lizzy gave him a big smile. Parnelli stared a second before shaking his head and heading to the kitchen.

"Hey, Parnelli. Don't forget me. I'll have a lemonade, too, please. And don't forget to take the wagon back."

While opening another can of lemonade, Parnelli spoke softly to his cat. "Snickers, why do I feel I've just been dealt into a game of liar's poker?"

Parnelli returned to the living room with a tray bearing three glasses. "Where's the wagon?"

Lizzy looked up from her massage efforts. "I asked Alistair to take it back for you."

"And he did?"

"I think the good doctor will do just about anything I ask him."

"Beautiful women have that effect on men."

She laughed. "I'm afraid my physical beauty is mostly in the past. My concentration now is on my inner beauty."

"From this old geezer's viewpoint, I'd say you're succeeding very nicely in your efforts. And your outer beauty is still enough to stop an old man's heart."

"Parnelli, would you stop with the sappy compliments?" Tex said. "I don't want to have to make an emergency run to the bathroom again to avoid upchucking on your beautiful carpet. And my taxi has left the house."

"Are you cutting down my carpet?"

"No need to. It looks like you already had your lawn mower in here."

"Why you ungrateful son—"

"Gentlemen, please," Lizzy pleaded. "I hate it when people quarrel or use profanity."

"I'm so sorry!" Tex said.

Parnelli flashed him the disguised digit and then said in a sickeningly sweet voice. "Not half as much as I am."

"I'm afraid the muscles in my hands are reaching the saturation point, Tex. I'm going to have to take a break. I hope the massage made you feel better." She reached for one of the glasses on the tray and set it down beside Tex. She then grabbed another one and took a sip.

"You have no idea how much better it makes me feel."

"I hope the lemonade makes you feel better, Lizzy," Parnelli said.

"It hits the spot."

Parnelli looked out the window. "I wonder what's taking the professor so long. I sure hope he's not tutoring Amanda on the use of the English language. That would bring new meaning to the phrase 'there goes the neighborhood.'"

"If she's lived as long as she has next door to you without being corrupted, I don't think even the professor is going to have much impact with one conversation."

"It's a good thing Amanda doesn't live next to Tex. She'd probably talk like a sailor, a drunken one."

Lizzy's eyes opened wide in surprise. She looked at Tex.

Tex was attempting to put his lemonade glass down. *Time for a diversionary tactic.* He allowed the glass to tilt so it was away from Lizzy and let go. "Ah, Parnelli, could you get me another glass of lemonade? Your carpet seems to have drunk mine." He waited for the explosion from Parnelli.

"Oh, not a problem, my friend. I know that your advancing age combined with your injury makes the simplest things in life challenging. Accidents do happen, even more than normal."

*You snake in the grass! You're trumping everything I play. And you're phonier than a forty-dollar Rolex.*

The professor returned while Parnelli was mopping up the runaway lemonade. "That is an interesting juvenile prodigy inhabiting the dwelling on your flank, Parnelli."

"She should be. I taught her half of what she knows."

"Indubitably. The young lass was showing me the full repertoire of utensils that she would be eager to rent."

"She's a real character. When I met her the first time I told her my name was Pete and Repeat. She's called me that ever since. Did you mention the fine print on the rental contracts she'd draw up?"

"The only stipulation is that everything must be returned before her father does. Perhaps you have need of a snow blower this evening?"

Everyone laughed but Tex. *We really do need a snow blower to remove all the crud from the snow job that Parnelli is doin' on Lizzy. If this keeps up, she'll think I'm another Charles Manson and Parnelli is Beaver Cleaver.*

Lizzy reached into her purse. "I've got something here that might help you, Tex. I've used it a few times when I had pain in my back, and it seemed to work wonders." She pulled out a blue hunk of plastic.

Tex stared at it. "What in the world could that thing do to help me?"

"It's called a Sacrum Wedge, and I asked the same question when my husband bought a pair of them on the Internet. I don't understand how they do it, but we had some really good results."

"It can't hurt to give it try. What do I do?"

"I'll put in on the floor. You'll need to roll over and position your back over it, just above your rear-end."

Tex sighed. "On second thought, this definitely is going to hurt me more than it hurts you." *Do I need to score some sympathy points here, or would courage points be more*

*advantageous? I think I'll go with the bravery act.* He gritted his teeth to keep from crying out and flopped over onto his back. After a bit of adjusting, he was seated in the correct position.

"Now comes the tough part, Tex. You have to let yourself relax totally. Don't allow a single muscle in your body to tighten up."

"That shouldn't be difficult for a couch potato like Tex," Parnelli said.

"I beg to differ, Parnelli," Lizzy said. "I have seen no evidence that Tex is physically inactive. If he was really a couch potato, he would probably have let you carry your own computer into the house, and he wouldn't have hurt himself."

*You go it, girl! Score one for the home team.* Tex wanted to laugh out loud, but he held off to prevent the possibility of getting in trouble with Lizzy for gloating.

Parnelli hung his head.

Tex got a fresh idea to take back some more lost ground. "That is darn nice of you to notice, Lizzy. By the way, I decided to join the YMCA just today. I know I'll never get my basketball playing body back again, but I certainly can improve my cardiovascular health and tone up my muscles."

"That's wonderful, Tex. I belong to the Y myself."

Tex waited for Parnelli to complain about the theft of his idea. *Not a peep. Looks like I've stolen his thunder without the lightning bolt striking me. Old man momentum is now on the side of the good guys.* "That's terrific. We can work out together – as soon as my back allows."

"You bet. That would be fun."

Parnelli cleared his throat. "I think that the Angels of I-29 all need to be in the best shape they can. We all need to work out together to meet our goals."

"That is a great idea!" Lizzy said. "Don't you think, Alistair?"

"The sentiments of the possibility of exuding perspiration in the company of these gentlemen are almost overwhelming."

Tex could see that Parnelli had scored. *Lizzy likes cooperation and teamwork. Let's give her some.* "That really is an excellent idea, Parnelli. Perhaps Lizzy can make up some kind of schedule and workout plan we can follow to maximize our efforts."

A look of surprise flashed on Lizzy's face. "You have a lot of confidence in me."

"Yes, I do."

"Make that 'we do'," said Parnelli. "He may be a cowboy, but

he's not the Lone Ranger here. We still need to recruit more people, too. We might look for people at the YMCA. There may be some seniors there who aren't into the senior center activities, but who'd be interested in helping out."

Lizzy nodded. "Another excellent thought, Parnelli. You're pretty amazing."

Parnelli beamed.

Tex was having difficulty relaxing. *Parnelli is putting on the pressure. If Lizzy tells him one more nice thing, some of those buttons will pop off his shirt. There'll be no living with the guy. I gotta come up with a zinger and cut him back down to size.* "Lizzy, do you suppose while you're here, you could help Parnelli set up his computer and give him a lesson in how to use it without inflicting any damage upon himself and Snickers?"

"I'd be glad to." She turned to Parnelli. "Do you know where you want it?"

Parnelli scratched his balding head. "I haven't even thought about where it would go."

"Would you like me to figure out the best place?"

"Be my guest. Just don't go into my bedroom. That room is off limits."

"Understood." Lizzy walked through the rest of the house. She came back a few minutes later. "Alistair, could you bring one box? If Parnelli can grab the other and follow me to the chosen spot, we'll assemble Parnelli's new toy."

The three left the room, allowing Tex to relax more. *Now Lizzy will find how bright Parnelli isn't.* He grinned up at the ceiling. *Wish I could be there to see it.* Five minutes later his muscles were totally slack, and soft snoring noises were the only noises in the room.

About the time Tex was nodding off, Lizzy showed Parnelli how to connect the keyboard and mouse to his new computer.

"That thing's called a mouse?" Parnelli asked.

Lizzy nodded.

"I hope Snickers doesn't eat it – or vice versa. Also, it would be nice if I don't have to clean up mouse turds."

"Please rest assured that there is absolutely zero chance of this electronic rodent leaving deposits of fecal matter."

"Thanks, Professor. I'll certainly sleep better tonight knowing that."

After a few minutes of listening to Lizzy explain the use of a computer to a complete novice, the professor stood up. "May I assume the role of my own gracious host and replenish the



contents of this glassware vessel?" He winked at Parnelli.

"Of course, Doctor. Fill her up from the picnic jug on the kitchen table." He winked back.

The professor wandered to the kitchen, walking right past Tex without even noticing he was asleep. He located the jug Parnelli had indicated and poured a small amount of liquid. He held it up to his nose and smiled. After a small sip, he put the glass on the table. "Kentucky sour mash at its finest," he said to Snickers, who was rubbing against his leg. He filled his glass to the brim. After drinking deeply, he wiped his mouth and said, "That's more like it. After a plethora of this ambrosia, I might be capable of tolerating the Neanderthal that Lizzy has chosen to associate with."

Snickers meowed loudly.

"My sentiments exactly," the professor answered. He returned to the living room and made himself at home by turning on the radio.

The noise woke Tex, who eyeballed the professor with a gleam of irritation. "Thanks a lot."

"You're quite welcome, I'm sure."

"I was being sarcastic. You just woke me up."

"Oh. In that case, gratitude should be your response. You'd discover it extremely difficult to sleep tonight if you slumber excessively at this advanced hour of the afternoon."

Tex was just about to take a stab at expressing how much gratitude he felt for the professor's timely rudeness when the radio disk jockey said, "I have sad news. Dan Fogarty died of cancer today. We have lost a giant. I will be playing four songs of Dan's biggest hits in a row as a tribute to him."

The professor got up. "I think I'll find a classical music station."

"Touch that dial and, back or no back, I'm gonna get up and kick your ass all the way to Iowa. I'd appreciate it if you maintain your silence during this tribute."

A look of shock came over the professor as the strains of *Leader of the Band* filled the room. "*The leader of the band is tired and his eyes are growing dim.*" Tex wiped some moisture from under his eye as he followed the words.

The professor shook his head and walked back to the kitchen. He was just about to fill up his glass again when Snickers appeared, "Hello there, my feline friend. You appear as starved for affection as yours truly. Time to pour some more liquid sunshine inside to.... Wait, if I imbibe excessively, I'll give

off the aroma of a distillery, and Lizzy will know that I've been slightly deceitful. I can't afford for her to have the slightest doubts about my impeccable character, at least at this juncture of the game." He found the container of pure lemonade and refilled his glass. "Would you like some lemonade?" Snickers meowed. "I don't blame you. If you ingested this beverage, you'd truly be a sour puss." The professor laughed at his own joke.

The music from the radio reached the newly christened computer room. Lizzy's attention was diverted immediately. "Oh. I love that song."

"Me too, Lizzy," Parnelli said in the monotone that parroted the one used by the professor earlier. "That's Dan Fogelberg, I believe."

"Wrong. Dan Fogerty."

"Oops. I always get those two mixed up. He was the leader of Creedence Clearwater Revival."

Lizzy laughed. "No, that was John Fogerty."

"Never mind. Remembering names never was my strong point."

"But you never forget a face, right?"

Parnelli studied Lizzy. "Not one like yours."

Their faces took on a matching shade of red.

"Lizzy, can I ask you something personal?"

"That's an ominous question. A woman never knows quite how to respond to something like that. Let me say this. Go ahead and ask. If it's too personal, I'll just decline to answer."

"Fair enough. Does the way the professor talks ever bug you?"

"I hadn't thought about it, so I guess not. My late husband was wonderful, but despite being a doctor, he was a simple man. His knowledge of classical literature and music and other fine things in life was limited. I've always longed to have someone to discuss things like that with me. So, in that sense, the professor and his vocabulary and knowledge is a breath of fresh air."

"And never hot air?"

"I admit that his pomposity is sometimes overdone. I've written it off as his exaggerated attempts to impress me. He probably isn't like that all the time."

"Maybe not."

"It must bug you if you're mentioning it."

"Let me put it this way. I've always lived in a world where

show and glitter are second-class citizens. A car can look wonderful on the outside, but if what's inside is not functioning correctly, that vehicle is just oversized jewelry."

"You think the same is true with people?"

Parnelli nodded.

"So you think I should pop open Alistair's hood and see what he's really made of?"

"I don't think Dear Abby could give any better advice."

The sound of *Longer* filtered through the room. Lizzy's eyes opened wide and then began to tear up. "Oh, my gosh. That's one of my favorite songs." The sound of a male voice joined in from the living room. "Is that Tex singing?"

"It certainly isn't the professor or Snickers."

"Please excuse me. I haven't listened to this song in years." She got up and returned to the living room.

Parnelli hesitated but then followed. He arrived just in time to hear Lizzy join in with Tex.

*"Through the years as the fire starts to mellow*

*Blurring lines in the book of our lives*

*Though the binding cracks and the pages start to yellow*

*I'll be in love with you."*

*When the song finished both had tears running down their faces."*

"That was beautiful, Tex," Lizzy said, even softer than her normal voice.

"You have a lovely voice. That is my favorite song. By the way, Dan Fogerty died today."

"Oh, my gosh." Her head dipped and her eyes closed as *Auld Lang Syne* came through the speakers.

Parnelli and the professor looked at each other and shrugged. Parnelli gestured to the kitchen and began walking. The professor followed him.

"That was a rather unusual scene," Alistair said. "Lizzy appears to be a highly sentimental woman, to the point of being maudlin."

"I don't know who this Maudlin lady is, but she must have her tear-makers near the surface. That crying makes me uncomfortable." He shuddered.

"I second the motion, or should I say emotion?" The professor laughed.

"Maybe I'm making a pyramid out of an anthill, but it seems to me that Tex just took the pole position in the race for Lizzy's heart."

"Perhaps your perspective is perspicacious."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Let me see if I can drum up a phrase that is more common. You just hit the head on the nail."

Parnelli laughed. "You've got it ass-backwards, but I get your point."

"When you mention pole position, I believe you refer to the sport of auto racing. If I'm not mistaken, that is simply a starting position. That means the race is only begun. We'll see who reaches the finish line first."

"That's true. Still a lot of track yet to cover."

"By the way, I was perusing your reading library."

"My what? I don't have a library."

"I was being facetious. I refer to your ensemble of *Sport's Illustrated* magazines."

"Ah. My collector's issues."

"It appears you only collect the swimsuit editions."

"Why, professor, you do have a good eye."

"I believe it takes one to know one. Perhaps you could bring a couple of magazines in here, and we can read while the tear fest continues in the living room?"

"Marvelous idea, Doctor Morehouse."

"Or even better, perhaps, you could drive me home. We could take this little picnic jug of yours and peruse my library. I have some reading material that will provide your eyes with even more to behold." He winked.

"Doctor, for the first time, I believe I understand exactly what you just said. Tex has suggested that I broaden my horizons, if you get my drift. I think checking out a professor's library will fit into that category nicely. Let's go."

"Shouldn't we inform Lizzy of our plan – I mean the first part? I wouldn't suggest interrupting Tex's music, however, unless you desire to have a cowboy boot planted in your hindquarters."

Parnelli nodded, grabbed a piece of paper and a pen, and wrote a quick note. "We're outta here."

## Chapter 5

When the tribute to Fogelberg ended, Lizzy pulled a handkerchief out of her purse and blew her nose.

"Do you have one of those for me?" Tex asked.

She started looking through her purse again.

"I'm just kidding, Lizzy, although those emotional few moments certainly loosened up my sinuses. Why don't you turn the radio off, so we don't have to compete to be heard? I'd do it myself but...."

Lizzy walked over to the machine and figured out where the power switch was. She returned to the couch and sat down. "Is that better?"

"Definitely. It's sad when people leave us, especially good people who we've enjoyed over the years. I look at Hollywood today, and there's hardly anyone left from the good old days. Lucille Ball, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. They're all gone."

"I know. I watched a Dean Martin roast the other day, and the thought struck me that almost everyone on the panel of roasters is gone. In a few years all of us seniors will join them."

"It's really weird, Lizzy. It seems that just yesterday we were the new kids on the block, full of energy and ambitions. Old people seemed like a different species. I was sure I was never going to become one of them."

"You didn't have any luck stopping it either, huh?"

"You tried?"

"Oh, I'm still trying. I try to exercise and eat right. Sleep and vitamins and a positive living environment are also part of my strategy. But despite all the efforts, I just keep getting older."

Tex grinned. "I have a silly thought."

"I'm waiting."

"It's probably kind of nonsensical to compare a human life with football, but when the playoffs arrive, the teams know if they don't win, their season is over. I kind of feel like a team that's way behind right now and facing sure elimination. Just waiting for the final gun to sound. I always thought that was sad to think of the losers going back to their locker rooms to shower and put away their gear, perhaps for the last time."

"That's not silly, Tex. The ones that didn't make the playoffs have already emptied their lockers. The special few get to keep fighting until the end. That's kind of how I view the Angels

organization. That's one reason I'm gung-ho about it. We'll be in the playoffs, while the losers are watching."

Tex rolled over on his side so he could look at Lizzy. *I like this gal's gumption.*

"How's your back doing?"

"Much better, thanks to you." He studied the red and white blouse that made up part of Lizzy's ensemble, along with blue jeans and white tennis shoes. "You know, you kind of surprise me."

Lizzy tilted her head. "In what way?"

"You came down to the senior center dressed to kill and coming across as a rich widow who was a bit on the fussy side when it came to...stuff. But this afternoon you're down to earth, dressed in jeans, and driving an economy car. I don't know which one of you is the real Lizzy."

She laughed. "They both are. As far as cars, I just want something dependable and not excessively expensive. I love to dress up, but I feel just as comfortable in jeans."

"You look really nice in them, by the way. That blouse brings back memories."

"Of what?"

"I'm not sure." He closed his eyes for a minute and tried to go back into the past. "Oh my, gosh. I've got it."

"I hope it's not contagious. Sorry, I couldn't resist. What did you come up with?"

"My grandma had a red and white checked table cloth. I remember sitting at the table as a child with the sun streaming through the windows and the world just spinning in perfect orbit as Grandma fed me an old-fashioned breakfast feast."

"So I remind you of your grandma?"

"Not in the least. You're too young-looking and pretty. I suppose you hear that kind of stuff all the time."

"My whole life. I was blessed with good looks, but sometimes I thought it was a curse. I had boys literally fighting over me when I was a girl. Even after I got married there was always someone coming along that would flirt with me. It's easy to see why the divorce rate is high. People are always misled into thinking that the pasture is greener in someone else's bedroom. After they make the jump, they find out they're still looking for a green pasture. Believe me, I had plenty of opportunities to jump ship."

Tex smiled and felt himself bite his lower lip, a habit he always exhibited when he was nervous.

"What was that look all about?" Lizzy asked.

"I was just thinking that this is the first time you and I have ever been alone."

"Tex, I just met you today."

"I know, but this is the third time today we've run into each other. The other times we were surrounded by people. I really never got a chance to know you."

Lizzy ran her finger through her hair twirling it as if her finger was a fork and her hair spaghetti. "That's not unusual. I have known people for years and still don't 'know' them. Do you see the distinction between really knowing people and just being an acquaintance?"

"Actually, I do. I often think no one really knows me well, even Parnelli, but I've got other people all figured out. That might be egotism on my part. People are pretty complex. We're not like bugs you can put on the end of a stick and examine closely."

"Good analogy. However, I think we certainly could make more effort to get to know people better."

"I'm on board that bandwagon, at least as far as you're concerned. Tell me all about yourself."

"That's an open-ended invitation if I've ever heard one. It would be easier if you just asked me specific questions. But I want to play the game right. You ask me a question, and then I get to ask you. That way we're both getting to know each other."

"Agreed. I get to go first. No, wait a second. That's selfish and not very gentleman like. You go first, madam."

"Normally, it's an honor to go first, but in this case I'm not so sure. I'd like to have a better idea of what kind of questions are going to pour out of your mouth."

"You'll just have to wait until it's my turn."

"OK. I see I'm trapped. It's best to start with something harmless. "How many brothers and sisters did you have?"

"That's easy. None. I always joked that when I was born, I was so ugly Mom decided not to have any more kids. I think when I came out, the doctor spanked her."

"Hey, you stole that joke from Don Rickles."

"He'll never know it's gone. OK. My turn. What's your favorite song?"

"There are so many that I love. One of them we just heard."

"Which one?"

"*Longer*."

"You're kidding me."

"I wouldn't do that. Well, I would, but I'm not in this case. Is there a Mrs. Harris?"

"She passed away from cancer about four years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks. How long ago did your husband die?"

Lizzy dabbed at her eyes with her hanky. "Almost two years."

"My condolences."

"Thank you. Now I think we've gotten the requisite discussion of our deceased spouses out of the way. Perhaps we can focus on life instead of death?"

"I'll drink to that?"

"Alcohol?"

*Open mouth, insert cowboy boot.* "Occasionally. Nothing like...."

"Like what?"

*I'm not going there. Parnelli's love for the sauce is going to make its presence known sometime. I don't need to be the stool pigeon. I'll let him handle that chore himself.* "Nothing like in the old days. I've settled down quite a bit from my youth."

"Was that by personal choice or because you're too old to be a party animal?"

Tex laughed. "As far as being a party animal, I don't believe any zoo in the country would take me. I do like a brew now and then while I'm watching football or basketball."

"So, you're a big sports fan?"

"That's your official question. Yes, I like sports. My turn. What are your dreams for the rest of your life?"

"That's hardly fair. You get a question that requires a yes or no, and you fire back a question that requires a doctoral thesis."

"That's your problem. You chose your question."

She shook her head and smiled. "No, I accidentally asked a question, and you had your lawyers pounce on me and put my feet to the fire."

"Lawyers. Don't even mention that word. Do you know what's black and brown and looks good on a lawyer?"

"No."

"A Doberman pinscher."

Lizzy's face became stern. "My husband was a lawyer."

*Damn. I left room enough for the other boot, and in it went.* "Lizzy, I'm so sorry. I had no idea...."

Lizzy stopped him in mid-sentence by laughing.

"What are you laughing about?"



She made the motion of casting out a fishing line and reeling it in.

Tex grinned. "Your husband wasn't a lawyer, was he?"

"No. I just couldn't resist playing with you a little. My husband was really a doctor."

"Really. Doctors are second on my...list. I have a ton of doctor's jokes, too. Since now I know he was a doctor, I'll spare myself more embarrassment."

"Tex, it's not a problem. Go ahead and tell me a doctor's joke."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm a big girl."

"A man went into a doctor and tests revealed he had cancer. The doctor gave him six months to live and sent him a bill. He never paid the bill, so the doctor called him up and gave him another six months."

"That sounds like a Henny Youngman joke."

"Am I going to have to write my own joke material to impress you?"

Lizzy laughed. "You just did. And I'm duly impressed."

"Does the professor impress you?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but you asked the last question."

"Which you haven't answered yet."

"As Jack Benny said when the thief said 'your money or your life' – 'I'm thinking; I'm thinking.'"

"Ah ha. I'm not the only joke stealer in town. And you're also a question avoider."

"I can see there's no getting off this hook. My dreams...hmm. For one I want to stay healthy enough that I can take care of myself all my life. I'm ready for a Prince Charming to come along and say 'Come grow old with me. The best is yet to be.'"

"I don't think that was Henny Youngman."

Lizzy laughed. "Not even close. Lord Byron penned those words long ago."

"Wasn't he a golfer?"

"That was Byron Nelson. He might have been lord of the links, but he wasn't a poet. At least, he wasn't 'the' poet."

"I knew that. Just another dazzling display of my humor. So, you don't think you're too old to find the love of your life again?"

"When you're too old for love, you're too old to keep your heart beating. I don't see how anyone would want to stay alive without love. That doesn't necessarily mean you must have a

spouse. You can love your grandchildren or the Amanda's next door or whoever. But if you don't love somebody, you're already dead."

Tex felt something surge through his body. It felt like he had touched an electric fence. *What in the world was that all about?* He looked at Lizzy, and the answer came to him. His heart was getting a resuscitation jolt. It was coming alive again.

"Are you OK, Tex? Back pain again?"

"Just a twinge. I'm fine."

They talked for another hour, though it seemed to Tex that only a few minutes elapsed.

"I wonder what's up with Parnelli?" Lizzy asked.

"Parnelli who?"

"You know, the guy who lives in this house."

"Oh, that Parnelli. He's a big boy and fully capable of taking care of himself."

"That's what you thought about yourself until a few hours ago, too."

Tex shook his head. "You didn't have to bring that up, did you?"

"Sorry. I just feel compelled to poke pins in people's bubbles – especially men who think they're self-sufficient."

"My bubble is completely flat, just like my body right now, so you've done your job well."

"Nothing personal, but using cowboy jargon, I hate to see people on a high horse, thinking they don't need anybody and nobody is worthy of their help."

"I'm the same way, Lizzy. I didn't think my horse was that high. Maybe I was blind. As long as we're being so blunt with each other, I have to ask what kind of horse the professor is riding."

Lizzy frowned. "You might have a point. Alistair might have his nose a little high in the sky."

"If he hangs out with Parnelli enough, it'll get shoved into the ground at some point."

"I'm not sure I follow. Does that mean Parnelli is going to pop his bubble?"

"Maybe. I've said too much already. Let's talk about something else."

"OK. I have one question that I've been holding off on. I was a little scared to ask it."

"Lizzy, you're perfectly safe in talking to me about anything."

"You're sure?"

“Absolutely one hundred percent, fully guaranteed security.”

“Do you believe in God?”

*Anything except that topic.* Tex felt his face burn.  
“Ahh...that’s a loaded question.”

“In what way?”

“You know what ‘they’ always say. Never discuss religion or politics in polite company.”

“Who are they?”

“I’ve always wondered that myself, but in this case I’m fully in support of their statement.”

“Are you afraid to talk about it?”

“I’m not afraid of anything, except me not being able to get home tonight and having to live with Parnelli.”

“Let’s talk about God then – since you’re not scared.”

“I don’t see much point.”

“OK. If you’re not comfortable with it. Alistair and I started a discussion about it at lunch today. I find it very stimulating and was anxious to continue talking on that subject. Since he appears to have ditched me for the moment, I thought you could fill in, but obviously—”

“Fine. I can certainly fill the professor’s shoes. Let’s talk about God. Let me warn you that I don’t have much knowledge on the subject, but I’ll contribute when and where I can. I’m a little curious what you have to say on the subject.”

Lizzy sighed. “I’m not sure what to say. I’ve always believed in God. My husband and I were never really churchgoers. We just believed that he was out there. When we died, we’d go to Heaven because we were good, honest people.” She looked over at Tex.

“So what’s your point?”

“After my husband died, I started searching. It just seemed to me that if there is a God, he’d be interested in me paying attention to him. Let me use an analogy. Suppose you worked in a factory and someone told you there was a big boss who owned the factory. But you never saw him. You just did your job as dictated to you by your manager. One day you get called up to an office that you’d only heard rumors about and you meet the owner face to face. He asks you if you’ve been doing what he wanted you to. It seems to me that it would be a little embarrassing to say that you have no clue what he wants because you made no effort to figure out if he existed and what he wanted if he did exist.”

“So you’re saying that God will fire me for not doing what he

wants?”

“I don’t know. That is the kind of thing I am studying, so I can have answers. It just seems wise that if we only get a hundred years or so of living on this planet, that we investigate any possibility that we might live forever somewhere else. If this world is all there is, what difference does anything make?”

“What do you mean exactly?”

“For example, if this life is all there is, when you die, all your memories will be gone with you. If you were happy or sad, rich or poor, healthy or sickly, died at twenty or lived to be a hundred, you wouldn’t retain any of that. Nothing would have any real value. That would mean there is no meaning.”

“That’s kind of a slippery slope you’re trying to climb.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve spent my whole life worrying about money and appearances and enjoyment. I was always planning for the future. Save up money to buy a new car or a new house. Make sure you have enough insurance. Put away money for retirement. Stuff like that. I just didn’t take time out to think about the future that lay beyond the immediate future. Now I’m thinking, and I’m finding there are more questions than answers.”

“I don’t have any answers for you, as much as I’d like to.”

“That’s OK. I feel better about myself because I at least care enough now to search. I feel I’m on the right road.”

“Speaking of roads. I’d like to get on one. I have a suspicion that Parnelli has forgotten about me. Could you give me a ride home?”

“Are you up to it?”

“My back’s a lot better. Now my stomach is starting to hurt from hunger.”

Lizzy looked at her watch. “Gosh. It is past dinnertime. I’m more than willing to give you a lift, provided you can make it to my car.”

“Let’s give it a shot.”

Lizzy helped Tex up from the floor. Each step was painful, but at least he was able to stay on his feet. Getting into the car was a challenge, but he succeeded in getting into the seat and fastened his seat belt.

Lizzy was ready to start the car when Tex said, “Crap! Pardon my French.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I left my keys in the truck. Also, I have a computer in the back. I should probably get that home.”

"Not a problem. I'll throw it into my trunk. You're lucky I'm in such good shape for an old gal. Be back in a jiffy."

Tex watched her in the rear-view mirror. *I certainly am lucky today!*

She got back in the car after her mission was accomplished and handed the truck keys to Tex. "I assume your house key is on this as well. Truck is locked and you're all set."

"You're an angel."

"Just waiting to get my wings."

"Anything I can do to help?" Tex asked.

"I think you did already. And it was your idea to start the Angels of I-29. And now I've got an idea. Let's get your computer set up and hook you up with the Internet and email access. I'll design a rough draft of our flyer and send it to you for your approval. What do you think?"

"I think you're talking over my head."

"Do you want me to scooch down a little in my seat?"

"As if that'll help. My experience with computers is limited to typing data into a program we used to track inventory and sales. I wasn't given access to email, so it's something I've only heard about. So you need to talk slow and use small words."

"Email isn't rocket science. It's basically sending letters via the computer instead of via snail mail. You type them on the keyboard instead of writing by hand. It's wonderful!"

"Snail mail?"

"Post Office. Snail because it's so slow compared to email. I can send a message to someone on the other side of the world, and it can arrive within seconds. Using a program called Skype, I can even talk to people from my computer as if we were on the phone."

"Why would you do that instead of using the phone?"

"It's free."

"Oh. That word has a nice ring to it."

"I'm partial to that one myself. Why haven't you bought a computer before today?"

"I'm an old-fashioned guy. In reality, I'd love to be self-sufficient, though I know you don't like that word. Live off the land and sew my own clothes. You know, like the pioneers. Can you see Davy Crockett doing email?"

"If he'd used it at the Alamo, he might have lived to fight another day."

"Doubtful, Lizzy. Even with an instantaneous message, help would still have taken days to arrive."

"I guess you're right. He needed 21<sup>st</sup> century transportation to go along with 21<sup>st</sup> century communication."

Tex smacked himself in the forehead.

"Mosquitoes?"

"No. I just remembered that I forgot my rifle."

"That sounds like an oxymoron."

"Don't call me names. I was supposed to pick it up at the Sheriff's Department."

"Are they still open?"

Tex laughed. "I don't think they ever close."

"In that case, I could swing by and grab it for you."

"I don't want to impose upon your hospitality."

"It's no imposition. I have no family waiting for me at home and no engagements to pull me away. Let me help you out."

"Never argue with a beautiful woman."

"I'll remember that if I run into any. I think we've sat here long enough. How do I get to the Sheriff's Department and then to your place?"

Tex played navigator as Lizzy piloted. After completing the rescue mission for the Winchester, they arrived safely in Tex's driveway. She helped him into the house and onto the couch.

"You wait here, and I'll get your computer and gun." She reached into her purse and pulled out the blue wedge. "Here's a little present for you."

"Are you kidding? You play nursemaid and taxi driver for me and then give me stuff."

"This is the man's model. I have a female version at home, so I don't need this one. It's nice that someone can make use of it."

"Fine. I'll accept your present. How about we order some takeout food, my treat?"

"I could whip up something for you?"

"Are you for real? After all you've done today, you're willing to cook too?"

"I don't let any grass grow under my feet."

"I see that. However, in this case I refuse to put you through more work. If you'll bring that cordless phone over to me, I'll order us some Chinese. Oops, I better ask if you like Chinese."

"I love it. Sesame chicken and orange chicken are my favorites."

"If I told you they were mine too, you'd probably think I was handing you a line of bull."

"Why would I suspect you of lying about something like

that?"

Tex scratched his head. "You are so naïve. You remind me of Tammy in the movies."

"Oh, yeah, with Debby Reynolds as Tammy. I remember one called *Tammy and the Professor*."

*Why did I mention Tammy? I get Lizzy away from the professor, and then I make her think about him.* "Have you ever considered that some unscrupulous man might sweet-talk you to take advantage of your trusting nature?"

"I might have been born at night, but it wasn't last night. My judgment of character is usually pretty accurate."

"Oh, yeah? Care if I put you to a test?"

"Go for it."

"What is your opinion of my character?"

"You really want to know?"

"Only if it's positive."

Lizzy twirled her hair. "First of all, I think you are very careful around ladies, trying to be a gentleman, but around men you try to be a little macho. I think you've got a hard crust, but you're as soft inside as mush. You're no saint, but you have a good heart and try to do the right things. How am I doing?"

"Makes me sound a little like a chameleon. You got all that out of one a few hours of conversation?"

"Yep."

"I probably shouldn't mention this, but did you know that Ted Bundy and other serial killers were extremely charismatic and personable? In other words, most people thought they were really nice guys."

"Are you implying that I'm at risk of being brutally murdered because of my lack of street smarts?"

"Not exactly what I was worried about. More like a fast and sweet-talking gentleman who comes along, plays the nice guy, and then departs with your money or your heart or both."

Lizzy laughed. "What makes you think I have any money? You saw the car I'm driving."

"I know. Maybe my first impression was totally off-base."

"You weren't trying to hint to me about Alistair, by any chance? You don't seem to like him. Or is Parnelli the one you worry about?"

Tex felt his face burn. *How do I get out of this one?* "I...I...I..."

"Sounds like a Gene Pitney song, *South of the Border*. Tex, I'm not nearly as naïve as you think I am. I can see stars in the

eyes and signs are there that all three of you wouldn't mind having some kind of a relationship with me. I'm very flattered, but warning signals are sounding. One warning I might give you is that I don't like hearing gossip and backstabbing. The successful candidate for my heart is not going to slander other people. I want to give people the benefit of the doubt and encourage them to be the best they can be. Criticism, if it's not offered in love and constructively, brings death not life. I don't like it. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, ma'am. But I don't know why you think I've made you a target for my affections."

Lizzy's eyes bored right into his. "When we were young, it seemed like people beat around the bush, and discussions of romance were usually done by the girls talking to other girls. You and I don't have many good years left. We can't afford to be coy and pretend things are different than they are. People don't fall in love at first sight, but the chemistry might kick in immediately. Love takes time to develop, and I'm convinced most people don't even know what it is. Guys think they're so hard to read. Usually they're like first-grade Dick and Jane stories. See Dick's eyes light up. See Dick's eyes follow Jane wherever she goes. I see that chemistry has kicked in with you guys."

Tex dropped his eyes. "See Jane run. But my name's not Dick."

"If I'm totally off-base, Tex, just tell me. If you can honestly say you have no intentions of having more than just a platonic friendship with me, just say the word."

She waited for a word, but the only noise in the house was the ticking of a clock on the wall. Lizzy nodded her head. "Enough said and unsaid."

"Wait, if you get to be blunt, let me do the same. You think I had a chemical reaction upon seeing you. Are you going to leave me guessing whether you felt...anything?"

"Yes...I'm going to leave you guessing. I'll go get your computer now. You better call for that food, or we'll both perish from malnutrition." She walked out the front door.

Tex shook his head in frustration and dialed the number from memory as he watched Lizzy go out the door. Their order was placed before Lizzy got back. When she set the monitor down and returned to her car for the computer, Tex dialed another number.

"Parnelli, where the hell you at?"



"Scarlett O'Hara's."

"The strip joint?"

"You got it, buddy. The professor thinks it's a blast."

"Do you think Lizzy would like to know what you're doing? What about the makeover on your life?"

"Ah, come on, Tex, get off my f-ass. Did she go home yet?"

"No, she's at my house with me right now. Eat your heart out, buddy. Just a little bombshell for you: Lizzy is searching for God right now. I have a sneaking suspicion he's not hanging out at Scarlett's."

"Just one more night of sowing wild oats, and then I'll start planting domesticated crops. If she's just searching, there's still time to head her off before she becomes a religious fanatic."

"Maybe. Anyway, Lizzy's coming back, and I'm hanging up now. I'm leaving my truck at your place until I'm well enough to drive."

"We can bring it over to you, and the professor can pick me up."

"If you think you're driving my new truck in your obviously impaired condition, you're crazier than I thought you were."

Tex hung up and put the phone on the couch. *I feel like the feline who got busted for eating songbirds. And now I'm thinking like the professor. How much did Lizzy hear?*

"Were you talking to Parnelli?"

"Ah, yeah."

"What are he and Alistair doing?"

"Ummm...sightseeing. Parnelli's just helping the good doctor see more of...his new community."

"That's really nice of Parnelli."

"Yeah. He's a peach of a guy." *Fruitier than a nut cake!*

"He and Alistair make an interesting couple."

"The odd couple, you mean?"

"Ah-ah. Be careful what you say."

"I just mean that they're so different. The professor is...well, you know what I mean. You're an excellent judge of character, so you no doubt have both of them figured out, too."

"I'm working on it. I have a skeleton opinion, and now I'm fleshing in the details. Anyway, where do you want your computer set up? If you want to have Internet access right now, you'll need to choose a location next to a phone jack."

Lizzy followed his directions and had the computer running before the food arrived. She finished signing him up for a free trial subscription to AOL just before a knock on the door

sounded. She glided to the door after grabbing a twenty-dollar bill from Tex and completed the transaction.

"Are we going to eat here or do you want to try to make it to the kitchen?"

"The food will be cold by the time I made it to the table. In fact, it might be moldy. Just grab some paper plates, napkins, and stuff from the kitchen. We can eat off the coffee table.

"Will I be able to find my way around your kitchen?"

"You're a woman, aren't you?"

"Last time I checked."

"Then certainly anything I can do you can do better."

Lizzy broke into song as she departed for the kitchen. *"I can do anything better than you."*

*"No you can't."*

Lizzy stopped and turned back. *"Yes, I can."*

Tex chuckled and shook his head. *No sense trying to get in the last word with a woman. It ain't gonna happen and just prolongs the conversation.*

Lizzy came back a few minutes later with everything they needed. "What do you want to drink?"

"Just water for me. There's a pitcher of it in the fridge. Try not to look at the beer bottles."

Lizzy laughed. "Too late. You already confessed you're a lush." She retreated to the kitchen before he could protest her statement.

Tex sighed. *Either I'm going to have to change, or I'm going to have to change this woman if we're going anywhere with this relationship.*

After eating and enjoying some small talk, Lizzy cleaned up the improvised table and put everything back in the kitchen.

"Now, Mr. Harris, your tummy is full and you're comfortable. I'd say about half an hour until you're ready to sleep."

"I'd never get sleepy while you're here to stimulate me with your charming and witty conversation."

"That's why I intend on leaving. I've probably worn out my welcome by now anyway."

"Not even close. I like having you here."

"Thanks. It's nice being here. It's been a very interesting day, but I'm starting to wear down a little. Can I bring you a blanket and pillows so you can sleep on the couch?"

"I hadn't thought of the logistics of living with this pain by myself. Probably the best thing is for me to sleep right next to the bathroom. When nature calls, I can answer with a minimum

of pain and time.”

“What about food?”

“Maybe you can put some snacks by me, so I don’t have to go anywhere to keep from starving to death?”

“I can do that. I’ll come back over tomorrow around lunch to make sure all is OK. Does that work for you?”

“Wonderfully.”

“However, I must warn you, once you’re back is healed, I will not make a practice of spending time alone with you in your home. It is important that I heed your warning about deceitful men who might try to take something that doesn’t belong to them. If you have a chaperone, it will be fine.”

Tex sat there with his mouth open. A fly took advantage of the opening to swoop in, just as Tex’s swallowing reflex kicked in. He grabbed his throat.

“Are you OK?”

“I think I just swallowed a fly.”

“I heard they taste like chicken.”

“I wouldn’t know. This one went down whole after bouncing off my cheek.”

“I’m sure the experience was much more unpleasant for the fly than for you. In any case, it’ll come out all right in the end.”

Tex managed a weak grin. Lizzy busied herself with getting the things he had requested for his camping expedition at Camp Charmin. She made sure he had the remote control for the television as well.

“Anything else you need, Tex?”

“I think I’m all set.”

“Then goodnight, Mr. Harris. I’ll see myself out and lock the door for you.”

“How can I ever thank you?”

“I’ll think of something. If not, I have another idea. In a wonderful book by Ray Bradbury, called *Dandelion Wine*, a man helps a boy who is very sick. The boy asks the same question you just did. The man tells him to pass it on to someone else. I think you’ve already got the concept down pat with your idea for the Angels. Say goodnight, Dickie.”

“Goodnight, Dickie. You too, Jane.”

Lizzy laughed and closed the door, leaving him in silence. He remained that way for a few minutes until the loneliness descended upon him like a fog bank. He grabbed the remote control and clicked on the TV, hoping to drive away the void that Lizzy’s departure had left.

The next morning Tex hobbled to the front door and unlocked it. He wanted to have it ready when Lizzy showed up. He was camped on the couch watching the World Series of Poker on TV when his doorbell chimed.

Tex quickly changed the channel to PBS. "Come in." He brushed his hair with a nervous hand, hoping to round up any strays. *Why am I getting nervous about seeing a woman at the age of seventy? Go figure.* Prepared to see Lizzy come in, he was disappointed to see Parnelli instead.

"Oh, it's just you."

"Just me! Since when am I a 'just'? Were you expecting Warren Buffet maybe?"

"Or little Miss Muffet."

"Wait. It was little Miss Lizzy I bet! No wonder I get treated like a solster...solstice...screw-it – a door-to-door salesman."

"Solicitor."

"Yeah, that's the word I was fishing for."

"Maybe if you didn't have a hangover you could have landed it."

"I'm hardly hung over at all. The professor got hammered, and I had to babysit for him."

"And chauffeur him?"

"Of course. He didn't have a vehicle."

Tex shook his head, making sure that the look on his face conveyed his disgust to Parnelli. "And you won't have a driver's license if you don't quit drinking and driving."

"Since when did you become my cub scout leader slash mother?"

"It's tough work, but somebody's gotta do it. Just do me one favor, will you, Parnelli?"

"Depends on what it is."

"Please step out of character and just be serious for a moment. First, picture your great-granddaughter."

"Eliza Jane? My precious."

"Yeah. Just imagine some drunk driver plowing into your granddaughter's car and killing her."

Parnelli's face lost all trace of humor. "Why are you bringing up that morbid topic?"

"I'm trying to teach you something that could spare you a lot of grief and someone else even more. Imagine yourself as the

guilty party involving someone else's little angel. Fantasize about being at the funeral and at a courtroom where a brokenhearted relative rails against you for your crime."

"I'm not sure I can do that."

"You don't have to. Please consider how you risk having to live through it instead of just think about it – every time you drive under the influence. Our driving skills as we get older are impaired the way it is without adding to the problem."

"Why are you bringing this up now? Where have you been in the last fifty years, except in the car with me? I don't get it."

It was Tex's turn to think. *Why am I now saying things that I only thought in the past or having thoughts that I never had before?* "I guess Miss Lizzy has influenced me."

"You've only known her one day!"

"I know that. You've only known her one day, too, and you said you were doing a major makeover on your life as a result. So don't give me any crap about one day."

"Is this woman a witch who's put a spell on us? Two days ago you would never have used the word 'crap'. Here we are a couple of seventy-year-olds trying to join the boy scouts because of some senior-aged skirt...."

The noise of the doorbell stopped Parnelli in his tracks. He walked to the door and opened it.

"Good morning, Mr. Fields. Nice to see you again."

Parnelli stood there in silence.

"Parnelli, are you going to get out of the way and let the lady in?" Tex yelled.

"Oh, yeah, sorry." He stood aside, and Lizzy entered the room. She was carrying a couple of books.

She walked up to the couch and handed them to Tex. "I thought these might come in handy. You might want to share them with Parnelli."

Tex examined the top one. "*The Internet for Dummies*. Yeah, this one is right up Parnelli's alley."

Parnelli, standing behind Lizzy, flipped him off. The look that came across Tex's face caused Lizzy to turn around. Parnelli's middle finger suddenly collapsed to join the others as he brought his hand up to his head and began to scratch. "Yeah, sounds like just what I need."

Tex looked at the second book. "*Computers for Dummies*. Looks like we're not the only computer illiterates in the world."

"Tex, everyone started out ignorant with computers at some point. Kids today are learning when they're young. It's just like

languages. They soak up stuff like that when they're kids. Try to teach them a foreign language after they get past that stage, and it's more difficult. You and Parnelli are slightly past the prime learning period of your life."

"Thanks for noticing," Parnelli said.

"But that doesn't mean you can't learn. Too many people bag it because they don't think they can do it. They don't give it their best shot."

"Speaking of shooting, we have to go get your rifle at the Sheriff's Department."

Tex shook his head. "Lizzy already did that for me."

"And your computer?"

"Lizzy already set that up for me."

"I guess you don't need me anymore. Looks like Lizzy is taking care of all of your needs."

"Would you like me to make you gentlemen some lunch?"

"Are you woman enough to meet the needs of two old fa...timers?"

Lizzy laughed. "It's not as demanding as taking care of two teenagers at the same time."

"Did you do that?" Parnelli asked.

"Not recently, but if I told you how long ago it was, I'd give away my age."

"Are you holding out so you can charge for it?"

Before Lizzy could respond Parnelli's cell phone rang. "Yes, Doctor. I see. Can you make a house call?" He moved the phone down to his side.

"You need a doctor?" Tex asked.

"Nah. Lizzy, can you make lunch for three geezers. One Dr. Alistair Morehouse would like to make a house call."

Tex looked up at the ceiling and bit his lip.

"I can certainly cook for four, but this is Tex's house. He needs to make the invitation, not me."

Tex saw that both of them were staring at him, waiting for his response. "Whatever."

## Chapter 6

Two weeks later Tex's back was back to normal and the foursome of Parnelli, the professor, Lizzy, and Tex gathered at the YMCA for their first workout together. If the Angels of I-29 were going to be able to help people, they had to be in satisfactory physical shape. The men found the locker room for males and went inside. They looked at the rows of lockers and the shower facilities.

Parnelli whistled. "It's been a long time since I've been in a place like this."

"That's pretty obvious," Tex said. "You're definitely suffering from Dunlaps Disease."

"What disease?"

"Dunlaps. Your belly dunlaps over your belt."

"That's not exactly a spare tire you're carrying around with you, either."

"It'll be gone soon."

"Don't hold your breath."

They followed the professor to a section of lockers. He began removing his clothing but suddenly stopped when it became evident that the other two were watching him. "I sincerely believe it dubitable that you athletes of yesteryear have forgotten the process of disrobing and donning the attire of an athlete."

"From the look of things, Professor, it doesn't appear your last trip to the gym was long ago. You're downright skinny."

"Insightful observation, my dear Parnelli. I'm an enthusiast of racquetball and have participated in a myriad of aerobic activities to maintain my muscular structure and respiratory capabilities. Anyway, I find it rather disturbing that you two gentlemen are intently scrutinizing my every move."

They both turned away and began to remove their shirts, keeping their eyes to themselves.

"Hey, Parnelli, did you get a doctor's approval for participating in this exercise program as Lizzy recommended?" Tex asked. "We wouldn't want you croaking on us."

"I wasn't looking forward to playing the role of croaker myself." He looked over at the professor and winked. "I got a doctor's approval to workout."

Tex finished dressing and evaluated himself in the mirror. *Compared to Parnelli, I look pretty good. Compared to the*

*professor, I look pretty bad.*

A young man strolled by, juvenile lean mass accenting his muscles.

Parnelli sighed. "What would I give to look like that again? A lean machine. Hair on the head. Bounce in the step."

"You never looked that good, Parnelli. What I don't get with the kids today is this deal with the hair below the lips. If they're going to grow a goatee, why don't they do it right?"

"I hear what you're saying. It looks like they took a patch of hair off their butt and pasted it under their lip."

"Gentlemen, I believe Elizabeth is lingering in the lobby, waiting for us to emerge from this odiferous salon. Shall we depart?"

The three exited and found that the professor was right. Lizzy waved for them to follow her, and they proceeded into a large exercise room filled with various machines and free weights.

Tex and Parnelli looked around the room in amazement.

"Back in the old days, when you went to a gym, you went to a basketball court. This is unbelievable," Tex said.

"They have a beautiful basketball court around the corner. We'll check it out after we exercise," Lizzy said.

"I'm like a kid in the candy store," Tex said. "What do we try first?"

"My routine, gentlemen, is to work out with the weights first and then use one of the aerobic machines afterward. That way I'm not sweating all over the weight machines and have to clean them off."

Parnelli looked Lizzy up and down. "I don't see how any sweat is going to escape that sweat suit you have on."

"Probably not today. I don't usually wear this."

"Were you afraid to show off that beautiful body of yours in front of us?" Parnelli asked.

Lizzy's face reddened. "As a matter of fact, yeah. I thought I'd be modest today. Come on. Let me show you the circuit I do. Remember that seat positions can be adjusted to make it more comfortable for you and give you more leverage."

She led them around the room and taught them how to use each machine that she was familiar with. "Now, you're on your own. If you want to use a machine I didn't show you, good luck figuring it out. One reason I don't use it might be because I couldn't figure out the instructions. You might have better luck."

"OK, thanks, Lizzy," Tex said. "Remember the plan. Fifteen





said.

"Why are we pumping weights?" Parnelli asked.

The professor answered before Lizzy could get started. "The precise terminology employed by the majority of body builders is lift weights or pump iron. The answer to your question is that weightlifting strengthens and rebuilds muscles, defends bones against injury, and enables the elderly to move about with renewed agility."

"Straight from the doctor's mouth," Tex said. "That has to be pure, unfiltered truth."

"My gratitude for your staunch vocal support knows no bounds," the professor replied.

*I was being facetious. Doesn't this guy understand the word sarcasm?*

When their fifteen minutes were up, the Angels convened at the aerobics machine corner. They found stair steppers, bikes, treadmills, elliptical machines, and rowing machines to choose from.

"I'm sure you all know how to use the bicycle, except for perhaps setting the computer to the program you want. I can help with that if you need. Let me show you the treadmill first."

Lizzy mounted a flat belt and stood on it while punching some information into the computer. Suddenly, the belt started moving backward and Lizzy started walking. "This is how you start it. You can get it going faster by pushing this up arrow and slower by pressing the down arrow." She demonstrated both by cranking the speed up to where she was literally running and then moved it down so she was walking again.

"You're showing off, Lizzy," Parnelli said. "There's no way that we'll be doing that speed. The last time I ran anywhere I still had a full head of hair."

"And about fifty pounds less jello to jiggle as you giggle," Tex said.

"I know how you could lose fifty pounds of ugly fat very quickly, Tex. Just cut off your head."

"Well, Mr. Cueball, I don't think they've made a guillotine strong enough to go through your thick neck."

"That's OK, because you're the one that needs the shave."

Lizzy got off the treadmill. "Would one of you like to try this one?"

"What happens if you get it going too fast and can't keep up with it?" Parnelli asked.

"You'll go flying off the back end and have to stick the

landing to make it look like you planned the whole thing,” Tex said.

“And to receive lofty scoring marks from the Russian judge,” the professor said.

“Tex is right about the part about going off the back end. These are a little more dangerous than the other machines,” Lizzy said.

Parnelli nodded. “I think we need to keep Tex’s back in mind and move to something less risky.”

She showed them the other machines.

“I have a suggestion,” Parnelli said. “There’s four stationary bikes sitting there vacant. Why don’t we all take a bike ride, and then we can chat while we pump the pedals. Does that terminology meet your approval, Professor?”

The professor nodded.

“You’ll be lucky if you can breathe at the same time, much less talk,” Tex said.

“Don’t worry about me, cowboy. We’ll set how you do. Fifteen minutes may seem like an eternity to you before you finish.”

“Well, don’t—”

“I think Parnelli has a good idea,” Lizzy said. “Perhaps we can all cycle together and get along without all the squabbling.”

“Squabbling? Who’s squabbling?” Parnelli asked. “Oh, you mean the thing with Tex and me? That’s not squabbling. That’s just the way we communicate with each other.”

Lizzy frowned. “Maybe you do when you’re alone, but I’d like it if you guys were nicer to one another when in my presence.”

“Sorry, Lizzy. I didn’t know it bothered you,” Tex said immediately.

“Yeah, me either. I’ll try to put a cork on my bubbly wit,” Parnelli said.

Tex elbowed Parnelli. “In that case, I think you can get by with half a cork.”

Lizzy cleared her throat – a couple of times.

Tex didn’t say anything further. He simply climbed up on a stationary bike and started reading the panel in front of him. After a minute, he started pedaling while he was reading. After a couple more minutes, he punched some buttons and the pedaling got harder. *Hah. I bet Parnelli hasn’t figured it out yet.*

Right on cue, Parnelli spoke. “Lizzy, I can’t figure out how to set this computer. Can you help me?”

She jumped off her bike and approached Parnelli. She had to lean close to him in order to see and reach the buttons.

*That turkey! His stupidity turned out to be an advantage. He's close enough to count the hairs on her ear. He's probably fighting back the urge to nuzzle her with his nose right now. He looked over at the professor next to him. He's not even breaking a sweat yet. Only four minutes have elapsed, and I'm ready to die. If Lizzy weren't here, I'd quit now. I've already lost enough points with her today without being a wimp.*

The professor looked over at Tex. "It appears your spinal infrastructure is bearing up satisfactorily under the stress of exercise."

"Not bad, Doctor. Not bad at all."

Liz got Parnelli's program set and returned to her bicycle.

"So, Lizzy, are you all ready for the kickoff meeting tonight?" Tex asked.

"Yep. Got goodies baked, house cleaned—"

"I thought we were having it in the back yard."

"We are, but if someone needs to use the bathroom, I don't want them to see a messy house. My granddaughter is coming over to help out."

"That's nice of her. Seems like a lost art for the young people to get involved in the lives of their grandparents. It wasn't like that when I was a young man."

"We lived in a different world back then, Tex."

"You got that right. Remember when we used to get into trouble for taking peashooters to school? Now the kids are packing pistols and sometimes even bigger guns," Parnelli said.

"How about the price of gas? I remember it costing eleven cents at one point during a gas war. You could have literally filled a twenty-gallon tank for the same price as one gallon today," Tex said.

"I'm not sure it's useful to dwell on the past. Our purpose in being here is to prepare for the future. We can't change the world very much, but we can make these days equal to the good old days."

"I perceive no loopholes concerning Lizzy's statement. Our future and our present will be what we make them."

"Thank you, Alistair. It's nice to be understood."

The professor shot her a smile. He looked over at Tex and smirked.

*I swear that dude just stuck his tongue out at me without opening his mouth.*

Tex and Parnelli both labored on the pedals in silence, except for heavy breathing. Lizzy and the professor carried on a conversation without their participation, much to Tex's chagrin. Both the professor and Lizzy owned and rode touring bicycles for exercise.

"I once rode in the Seattle to Portland ride," the professor said.

"How far is that?" Lizzy asked.

"About 200 miles."

"How long did that take you?"

"I departed about five a.m. and arrived approximately noon the following day."

"Surely you didn't ride during the night?"

*Shirley is a good name for him.* Tex looked down at the time on his computer. He'd completed eleven minutes. According to the odometer, he had traveled less than two miles. Even at that slow pace, he was sucking wind.

"Oh, indubitably you are correct. I spent the dark hours in a high school gymnasium attempting to sleep through a symphony of snoring."

Tex decided that he'd had enough of the professor's relating of daring feats. Despite the difficulty keeping his breath, he forced out a question to Lizzy. "Do you have any more ideas for what the Angels can do?" Visions of football players on the sidelines drinking air from an oxygen mask came into his head, no doubt similar to visions of T-bone steaks appearing to people stranded on desert islands. He struggled to focus on Lizzy's answer.

"I do have two more ideas. One of the things I've done over the years is donate blood. People who give of their life-giving fluid are silent heroes. It would be neat if the Angels could donate as a group."

"Marvelous proposal, Elizabeth. I myself have bestowed platelets from my veins to provide transfusion material for those less fortunate in the arena of health. Pray expose your other brainchild."

"You guys might think this one is silly and not something for men to do."

"I possess a healthy skepticism that I would ever consider a suggestion from your lips to be inane."

"Thanks, Alistair. I can't help thinking about people in the old folks homes. That term probably is not very acceptable these days, but that's what I've always called them."

“‘Assisted living centers’ or ‘retirement homes’ are two more politically correct terms.”

Lizzy nodded. “Anyway, my mother was in such a home for a short time. I visited her frequently, though maybe not often enough. In doing so, I discovered that most of those people seldom, if ever, have visitors. They’re just existing, waiting for the sands in their hourglass to run through.”

“How would the Angels be able to assist with that problem? Are you perhaps suggesting that we mount a campaign to make the relatives of such detainees feel guilty about their lack of diligence in providing the same love to their parents and grandparents that was lavished upon them as children?”

“Not a bad idea, Alistair. However, I don’t think we can do that. What we can do is visit people ourselves. Maybe some of those people would be perked up by being honorary members of the Angels. They could feel they were a part of what we’re doing. Perhaps they could even help.”

Tex looked down at the clock. Fourteen minutes and fifty-seven...fifty-eight...fifty-nine...fifteen minutes. He stopped pedaling and took a deep breath. “How are people who can’t even take care of themselves going to help us?”

“They can pray.”

Tex looked over at Parnelli, who was still pedaling. He still had three minutes to go because of his late start. He looked tired, but Lizzy’s comment startled him enough to cause him to look up. Tex shook his head and Parnelli nodded.

The professor also had a look of consternation. “My dear, dear Elizabeth. If the residents of the retirement homes were capable of producing divine blessings, does it not stand to reason that they would be able to pray themselves right out of their habitation? I don’t think it’s wise to place an excessive burden on a deity to perform things either he cannot do or does not desire to do.”

Tex wiped sweat from his brow. *Well said, professor. Glad it’s you getting in hot water with Lizzy instead of me.*

“There’s nothing that God cannot do. There are things he will not do, such as force humans to obey him.”

“You certainly have the right to believe what you want, but I, personally, have never found a need for the crutch called religion.”

Tex thought he detected fire flashing out of Lizzy’s eyes and smoke out of her ears. *The professor better consider taking a smaller bite of chewing tobacco here. I’m not sure he’s going to*

*be able chew on this wad.*

"Well, Dr. Morehouse, what crutches do you use?"

The small amount of exercise that the professor had just completed did not bring as much blood to his face as Lizzy's question.

Tex was chucking internally. *OK, professor where's your silver tongue now? Can you wiggle out of this bear trap?*

"Elizabeth, my profuse apologies. My desire was not to cast dispersions on your faith."

"Really?"

"I would not deceive you, Elizabeth."

"In that case, perhaps you'd like to go to church with me this Sunday."

The professor looked at Parnelli and then at Tex.

Tex wanted to start laughing but held back. *Don't look at me. You're on your own, buddy.*

"Elizabeth, that sounds like a marvelous idea. No doubt Parnelli and Tex would love to join us."

Tex coughed and took a drink from a water bottle. When he brought the bottle back down, he looked right into Lizzy's eyes. He swallowed again, despite the fact his mouth was empty.

Before he could answer, Parnelli said, "Tex isn't much on going to church. He likes to go fishing on Sundays. You can count on me to be there though."

*Says the guy who hasn't darkened the door of a church since he was an altar boy in high school.* "I'm getting a little burned out on fishing. It would be interesting doing something different for a change."

"But, Tex, I heard the perch were biting up at Lake Madison."

"Really? Maybe you should take the professor up there on Sunday, and Lizzy and I'll hold down the fort at church."

"Oh, no you don't. We're not going to leave Lizzy in shark-infested holy waters. We're going to church; right, Professor?"

"Indubitably that constitutes a veritable statement."

Lizzy smiled and the fire in her eyes had tempered to warmth. "Wonderful. We have a date. Why don't we all meet right here on Sunday morning at ten a.m., and I'll chauffeur you to the church? Now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'm going to hit the shower and get home to get ready for our big party tonight. toodle-oo."

The men all said goodbye and watched her sashay into the locker room. The men then made a slow trek to their own locker

room.

"Hopefully, somebody will show up besides us," Parnelli said. "Tex, what'll we do if nobody else signs up. Are we going to fly with just six of us?"

"I don't know. That'll be up to you guys. I'm game, but with only six of us, we could get burned out really fast. Let's not worry about it until tonight."

"I believe this is that magic moment where Doris Day would sing, 'Que será, será,'" the professor said.

Parnelli sighed. "Good old Doris Day. I wonder whatever happened to her. She just kind of dropped off the radar."

"Why don't you Google her and find out?" Tex asked. "Maybe you can email her and see if she wants to be an honorary Angel."

"You're damn tootin'. I think I'll do just that. I always had the hots for her."

Tex disrobed and walked into the shower with his towel draped over him like a shield. He hung the towel on a hook and got under the water. As he stood with the droplets of water pelting his back, he was reminded of Lizzy's hands massaging his back two weeks earlier. The shower felt nice, but nothing like the fingertips probing deep into his muscles. He almost wished his back was still causing him problems.

\* \* \*

Tex and Parnelli arrived at Lizzy's house in Tex's truck. The professor's sporty car was already there.

"Damn. Should have known the doctor would beat our time," Tex said.

"Our time? You told me you weren't interested in Lizzy."

Tex glanced over at Parnelli. "I think I lied."

"Ha! I knew it. I called it."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Quit beating your chest. Even the weatherman gets it right once in a while."

Parnelli laughed. "Wait a second. What am I laughing about? You just cut me down."

"Wow. You really are on top of things, Parnelli. Can't get anything by you."

"Screw you, turkey. Why am I riding with you to my gal's house?"

"Your gal? Where in the hell did you get the impression that Lizzy is your gal? Did she say that?"



"Not yet. Give her time. I have a gut feeling, which you could call men's intuition."

"I see. Is intuition a synonym for bullshit in this case?"

"Look at yourself, Tex. You know Lizzy hates profanity. You use it more than Italians use gestures. She's never going to go for you."

"Your language is worse than mine!"

"Was. When have you heard me cuss lately?"

Tex thought quickly. *Over the last two weeks, Parnelli has cleaned up his act a lot.* "You just told me to get screwed."

"Yeah, but I used a euphemism instead of profanity."

"Where did you learn that word?"

"My dictionaries."

"Dictionaries? You have two of them now?"

"My book and the professor."

"I don't get it. If you're worried about hanging out with me because I'm your rival, why are you spending time with the professor? He seems to have the inside track here to Lizzy's heart."

"I can keep an eye on him this way. Also, I'm trying to learn everything of value he can teach me, so I can steal his lightning."

"You mean his thunder?"

"I already took that!" Parnelli laughed. "What am I doing sitting here with you when a beautiful woman is waiting for me?"

"I have no clue. Grab your broomstick and go sweep her off her feet."

"I'm into modern technology now, Tex. I'm using a cordless vacuum cleaner."

Tex shook his head as he watched his old friend exit the truck. *Damn...I mean dang; he's moving faster these days – in more ways than one.*

Lizzy answered the doorbell, and a bright smile lit up her face when she saw who had arrived. "Come into my humble abode."

Tex looked around as they entered. *This doesn't fit my idea of humble.*

An attractive young woman entered the room. Tex stared in fascination.

"I want you guys to meet my granddaughter. This is—"

"Hello, Tex."

Tex came out of his statue imitation. "Hi, Martha."

Lizzy's facial expression could only be interpreted by the

word flabbergasted. "You two know each other?"

"Well, kind of," Tex said. "You remember the little gal I rescued out on the freeway?"

Lizzy looked over at her granddaughter and then back to Tex. "Yeah, but what...wait...are you saying Martha was that woman?"

"Yes, Grandma. That was me."

"You never told me about that. Why?"

"I didn't want you worrying about me. There was nothing to be gained for either of us by telling you that story."

"Maybe that was good. I would have been worried. Martha, this is Parnelli Fields."

"I've met him, too, Grandma. He got my car running and fixed the starter."

The doorbell rang. "Martha, would you greet the new arrivals, please?"

"Sure." She walked to the door.

Lizzy walked up to Tex. His eyes widened as she violated his private space and continued right to his cheek with her lips. The coolness of that fragile kiss clung to his cheek like morning dew on a rose petal. He fought off the temptation to put his hand up there to touch the spot. However, he did not fight off the urge to look over at Parnelli and give him that special taunting look. Turning back to Lizzy, he said, "What was that for?"

"For saving my granddaughter and great-grandson. They are very special to me."

Lizzy turned and approached Parnelli. "Thank you so much for taking care of Martha's car."

"You're welcome. Where's my kiss?" He bent down to make it easier for her to reach his cheek.

She laughed and then delivered the kiss. Parnelli put his hand near the spot and said, "I'll never wash my face again."

*What are you talking about, dufus? You never wash it now – unless you spill beer all over it, and the hops don't have much soap in them.*

Martha walked in with two gentlemen, one old and old young. Again Tex found himself staring at the young man like a bird dog that had found a pheasant.

"Ahh, Jackson. Nice to see you," Lizzy gushed. "I want you to meet my friends. Everyone, this is Jackson—"

"Brown," Tex said, finishing her introduction. "How you doing, JB?"

"Just like the punter for the Minnesota Vikings, Tex; I can't

kick. Hi, Parnelli.”

“You guys know each other?” Lizzy asked.

“Sh...ure do. Him and me banged heads in sports in high school. He went to the Catholic school, and I was at Washington. Then he became a cop, and we started being teammates instead of rivals.”

Lizzy raised her eyebrows. “What kind of teammates?”

“Bowling and softball,” Jackson answered.

“Is it safe to assume that you know Jackson’s grandson?” Lizzy asked.

“Kind of. I don’t know him, but our paths have crossed. Are you staying out of trouble tonight, Arthur?”

“Mr. Harris, I do apologize again for my mistake. I understand you did get your rifle back.”

“That I did. Unfortunately, the scumbags never got caught.”

The boy’s face became beet red. Martha came to his rescue. “Perhaps you’d like some punch, Arthur?”

“That sounds great. Lead the way.”

The two young people left the room.

JB stared at the two. “I always hoped my Arthur was going to marry your Martha. Too bad they broke up.”

Lizzy nodded. “They were a nice couple.”

Parnelli put out an arm to Lizzy. “May I escort you up the stairway to Heaven?”

Lizzy looked at the other two men. “Looks like Tex and Jackson have some catching up to do. How can I refuse such a gallant offer when my presence no longer seems to be needed here?”

She laced her arm through his and they proceeded to the room where the meeting was to be held.

Tex watched them go. *A monster has been created. I’ve just discovered the answer to the question ‘what do you get if you cross a grease monkey and a professor.* He turned back to his old friend. “I’m puzzled, JB. Why did you bring your grandson here tonight to discuss a senior citizens’ activity?”

“His wife served him with divorce papers just a couple of days before your little incident. That was his first day back on the job after getting knocked on his psychological keister. I brought him along tonight to keep an eye on him, cheer him up, and also to find out about this proposal of yours. If you really get this thing off the ground, you’ll want to cooperate with the police department, right?”

“That we would. We plan on being eyes to help the PD.

They may have to rush in someday to save our butts.” Tex frowned.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Huh? Oh, no, I was just thinking about your grandson. I was pretty hard on him. Now I understand that he was a bit distracted by his family life, and the guilt is kicking me in the gut.”

“Don’t tell me. Apologize to him. Your gut will feel better, and so will he.”

Tex nodded. “Let’s go join the party. By the way, JB, are you familiar with Concordia University?”

“Yeah, it’s in Minneapolis. Why do you ask?”

“Just broadening my knowledge base.”

\* \* \*

Two hours later Lizzy was bidding adieu to the last of her guests. Only the founding four Angels remained. Tex was waiting for the professor to leave. He suspected the reverse was also true.

“How many were here tonight, and how many did we sign up?” Parnelli asked.

Lizzy grabbed some papers off the table and studied them. “We had twenty-two visitors and signed up twelve new members.”

“Not bad,” Tex said. “We shot better than fifty percent. That gives us eighteen to work with. I think we can start making some waves with that group.”

“Depends on how dedicated those eighteen are. If half of them are flaky and what I refer to as ‘jumpers’, we’ll be struggling to get anything done,” Lizzy said.

“What’s a jumper?” Parnelli asked.

“Someone who jumps on the bandwagon when all there is to do is talk, and when the work comes along, they leap right off again.”

“Reminds me of the phrase from sports: ‘when the going gets tough, the tough get going.’ Sounds like the wimps get going too, right out the door,” Tex said.

“Tonight was good, but we need to continue to recruit,” Lizzy said. “I’ll post some stuff on the Internet and make up new flyers announcing our monthly meetings at the senior center the first Monday afternoon of every month.”

“Excellent proposals, as always, Elizabeth. If I might be so

bold as to introduce a diminutive sample of my plethora of original thoughts, I believe we need to generate a web page for members, so we have the capability of posting schedules, announcements, and comments.”

“That’s perfect, Alistair.”

Tex looked over at the professor. *This guy has to be part feline. He always either looks like the cat that ate the canary or the Cheshire cat. Isn’t this the part where he asks for his kiss?*

“Well, gentlemen, I hate to kick you out, but that’s what I’m going to do. Mother Nature is calling for sleep, and I’m going to answer.”

“Enchantée, madame,” the professor said, taking Lizzy’s hand and kissing it before heading out the front door.

Parnelli took her hand and applied his lips as well. “Sweet dreams, Lizzy.”

Tex rolled his eyes. *I’m screwed. I can kiss her hand like everyone else and be a copycat, or I can play the strong, silent guy and refrain from any show of affection at all. There must be something in between.*

He stood awkwardly looking toward her but not at her.

“Good night, Tex.”

*I don’t know what to do.* He just stopped thinking and reacted to his inner impulses. Wrapping his arms around her, he gave her a soft squeeze. “Thanks for everything, Lizzy.” *I hate to let go, but I have to.* He started out the front door.

“Tex.”

He turned. “Yes, Lizzy?”

“Don’t forget about church on Sunday.”

## Chapter 7

The next morning Tex woke up and his legs felt like they contained lead. *What the hell? Oh, from our workout yesterday. It's a delayed reaction.*

He made it to the telephone and dialed Parnelli. "Hey, studmuffin, how are your legs feeling today?"

"There's at least three places I found where there's no pain."

"Me too, Mommy. I forgot what this is like. Reminds me of the start of basketball season every year back in the good old days."

"Exactly. Except in those days it took two hours of sprints to cause this type of misery. Now we can produce it with fifteen minutes of slow biking."

Tex chuckled. "Growing old is hell."

"I'm going to tell Lizzy you said 'hell'. She won't like that."

*Go ahead, golden boy. You'll find out the hard way that Lizzy doesn't like gossip.* "Speaking of Lizzy, she and the professor are able to exercise without the difficulties we're having. Maybe we're placing too much blame for our aches and pains on old age and not enough on being couch potatoes."

"I hate to admit it, but you might be right. The professor was telling me about seventy-year-olds who run marathons and do triathlons. They even have an Olympics for seniors."

"I can just picture you entering the pinochle dealing competition or electric wheelchair race. Jumping to conclusions and throwing your weight around are a couple of other categories you'd excel in."

"Tex, I shit you not. Those old guys are doing the same things the young people do. Running 100-meter, 200-meter all the way up to six-mile races. They throw the discus and shot put. Swimming, tennis, racquetball, archery. All that good stuff."

"My foot gets tired driving for six miles. How do you know so much about this?"

"I Googled it on the Internet. Using the search words 'senior Olympics' I found a site which listed all of the state organizations. I clicked on South Dakota and got a list of the events and the results from last year. The event for 2006 is in Madison next weekend. I thought maybe we should go check it out."

"The only time I associate the word run with myself involves

the toilet. Why would I want to go watch some old guy drop a shot put on his foot?"

"We could get some fishing in while we're there. Maybe even camp out at Lake Herman State Park."

"That's sounds more interesting."

"And the professor said Lizzy was interested in going."

"Oh. That's flour from a different sack."

"I figured that one might be the clincher. Wherever Lizzy goes, Tex is sure to follow."

"Up yours. You're the one who's just like a little puppy. I about puked when you kissed her hand last night."

"Just think how sick you'll be when I announce she's giving her hand to me in marriage."

Tex's voice took on a tone of excitement. "Oh! Oh! I've got a problem here!"

"What's the matter? Heart attack?"

"My bullshit detection meter is threatening to go through the ceiling."

Parnelli's voice took on an angry tone. "Don't do that to me, Tex! I thought something was seriously wrong. I was frantically trying to remember the digits for 911."

"Don't worry about me, Mr. One-foot-in-the-grave. I called the folks at 911 yesterday and asked if we could have a hotline installed at your house. Kind of like the president had with the Russians."

"Bite my...."

"What's the matter? Lizzy got your tongue? With you trying not to cuss, you've reduced your vocabulary by half."

"You forget, Mr. Harris, that I'm replacing four-letter words with ten-dollar ones. It's time for you to dismount from your elevated equine."

"Great. Now I have to stop and figure out what *you're* saying, too. Equine – that has something to do with animals. A cow or...no...it's a horse. Elevated horse? Ahh. You want me to get off my high horse."

"I'm surprised I didn't have to explain that one to you. I warn you that I'm just starting to get warmed up. The good stuff is yet to come. You're going to have a hard time keeping up."

"I'm about to come over there and have you arrested for murder and impersonation of a retired grease monkey. What have you done with the body of my friend, Parnelli Fields?"

Parnelli laughed. "What's the matter, big fella? You don't like Parnelli being a threat to your intellectual superiority. It was

more fun looking down on a grease monkey ignoramus than straining your neck looking up at a sophisticated, suave superman – wasn't it?"

"Surely, you're joking."

"Stop calling me girlie names, and yes, I was joking. However, in thinking about what I said, I realize that it's true. You don't want me to be a threat to you. You want to keep our relationship where it was – with you feeling just a little superior about it."

"You're becoming quite the hot ass on the computer."

"You're changing the subject. I'm no dentist, but I think that's a pretty good indication that I've drilled into a nerve. Would you like more Novocain?"

"I think I need a shot of your old prescription: Johnny Walker Red Label straight with a Johnny Walker Black Label chaser."

"Be my guest. That's sure to lock in Lizzy's impression that you're a barbaric bum," Parnelli said.

Tex felt his anger meter rising. Normally Parnelli could say anything to him, and he let it slide right off like corruption charges off a politician's back. *The game is different now. Parnelli is pissing me off.* "There's an old expression that you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. You can't make a gentleman out of the pig's ass either."

"Oooh. I detect some rage here. And some jealousy. Looks like I don't have far to go to pass you up on the civilized scale. As I'm coming up, you're falling down."

"Listen, Jack! I'll leave off your last name for now, but it's got three letters; starts with A and ends with S. You might be able to figure it out. You're going to show your true colors someday. All this façade you're trying to put on is not going to cut it. You're just going to fall on your head someday and get busted up pretty good."

"Façade?"

"You're just trying to dump some perfume on to make you smell better. You need to shower to get rid of the odor instead of trying to hide it. Maybe we'll see the perfume get washed away at church on Sunday."

"Are you done throwing your ineffective little darts at me? I think it'd be a good idea if we don't ride together to events with Lizzy anymore."

"Parnelli, I agree with you one hundred percent."

"Excellent. Some night I'm going to be staying while you go home."



"And someday pigs will have their own airline." The phone had clicked halfway through Tex's statement. *Parnelli was not going to let me have the last word. And he hasn't heard the last of me. Two can play this makeover game.* Tex stared out the window as a bicycle went by. *Why did I let my body go to pot? This is the only one I get. Why didn't I take care of it? Maybe it's not too late. But first a little detective work is in order.*

Tex turned his computer on. It was time he kept up with the Joneses – and Parnelli. He fumbled for a minute but found the Google website that Lizzy had taught him to use. He typed in +Concordia +Minneapolis and clicked the search button with his mouse. He surveyed the results of his query. *Ha. Parnelli thinks he's such hot stuff because he can Google. It ain't rocket science.*

He clicked on the top link from his search results and found the website for Concordia University. He jotted down the phone number he found there. With a sly smile he slipped on the pair of headphones that Lizzy had bought for him and started up the program called Skype that she had installed for him and taught him to use. He clicked on the dial button and typed in the phone number. Within two seconds he heard a dial tone and a female voice answered.

"Hi. I have an employment application in front of me from a man who claims he was a professor on the staff at Concordia. I'm just calling to confirm that Alistair Morehouse indeed was an employee there?"

"One moment, please."

Tex was on hold for a short while and then a male voice asked him to repeat his request, which he did.

"One moment, please."

*Oh, no. Don't tell me you're transferring me to another person so I can tell this lie all over again.*

"I'm sorry. We have no record of an Alistair Morehouse ever working for Concordia University in any capacity."

"I see. Good thing I checked. Thank you so much for your time."

Tex clicked the hang up button on his computer. *Well, well, well. My dear fake professor. It's going to break my pea-picking heart to tell Lizzy the sad news that you've been demoted to snake oil salesman. I do need to be careful about how and when I reveal this information. It's got to be at the right time, and I have to act like I'm not gloating. That's a mighty tall order.*

Tex returned to the Google screen and did another search.

This time he was looking for bicycle shops in Sioux Falls. He found what he was looking for. After making sure he had his credit card, he stumbled out to his truck on his aching legs. *I have to be crazy to be buying a bicycle at the age of seventy, and when my legs feel like punching dummies. But if the phony professor can do it, I can too.*

Two hours later he returned from the store with a shiny Trek bicycle and almost a thousand dollars less in his bank account. *This thing's going to be as worthless as teats on a bore pig during the winter. Why do I have this feeling I'm going to regret this compulsive purchase? This damn thing cost more than my first automobile.*

Carefully, to make sure he didn't hurt his back, he removed the bike from the back of his truck. *Can I still ride one of these? Oh, yeah, it's just like riding a bike.* He went in the house and put on blue jean shorts, a T-shirt and some sneakers. A few minutes later he coasted out of his driveway. *This thing's got more gears than a Swiss watch. Eat your heart out, Lance Armstrong!*

After a spin around the neighborhood at a slow speed, Tex returned to his driveway. His legs had loosened up some with the exercise, and he had gotten the hang of shifting gears and the using the brakes. *This thing would be great at Lake Herman State Park. I think Mr. Makeover's suggestion for a campout is a wonderful idea. I'll make sure Lizzy brings her bike along.*

\* \* \*

On Sunday morning, Tex had a leisurely breakfast and showered. *What do I wear to church? I haven't a clue. I wonder if I can still fit into my funeral suit. Hold on. What a perfect excuse to call Lizzy. Too bad the drapes are up. I could go out there in my skivvies, but with my luck, some neighbor peeping into my windows will call the cops and complain that I'm a pervert because I'm running around my own house semi-nude.* He pulled his pajama bottoms back on and went out to the living room to use the phone.

"Hi, Lizzy. This is Tex."

"Good morning, Tex. Don't tell me you're not coming to church with us."

"OK. I won't tell you. Actually, I called to find out what would be considered suitable clothing. Do I need to break my suit out of mothballs?"

"Heavens, no. If you wore a suit, you'd probably be the only one. You'd feel like Ann Coulter at the Democratic National convention. This is a pretty laid-back church. What is important to them is what's in your heart, not what's in your wallet or on your back. That's why I like it so much. Some of them will be wearing shorts and some jeans. Dockers or dress slacks with a dress shirt would be considered formal."

"Great. I'm not sure my suit fits anymore. It's been shrinking lately. Thanks, Lizzy. See you in a few."

He hung up the phone and thought for a minute. *Should I? Would I be a scoundrel if I did it? Nah!*

He dialed the phone one more time.

"Parnelli, Tex here."

"This better be good. I just pulled myself out of the bathtub to get this call. I thought it might be L...important."

"So sorry it's not Lizzy. I hope you have a towel draped over you."

"Wouldn't have made it in time if I stopped for a towel."

"Hope your shades are down."

"Some are. But not the ones in this room. I just turned my back to the window."

Tex shook his head and tried not to get a picture of the scene at Parnelli's. "I was just calling to find out what you're wearing to church."

"I don't know. To tell you the truth, I hadn't even thought about it until just now. What about you?"

"I think I'll wear my funeral suit and a tie. Lizzy really likes suits. Wished I had a three-piece version to really make a dazzling impression on her."

"In that case, I'll probably wear some coveralls and a pair of shit-kickers. I don't want to put too much distance between myself and the competition. The contest would be boring then."

"That's fine. Make sure you don't clean your boots off. I want to be around when you open your mouth and insert foot."

"You have a classic sense of humor, Tex. Unfortunately, Hee Haw has been cancelled and there's no market for your jokes. Now, if you don't mind, I'll end this little X-rated phone call and cover up my birthday suit."

"Your neighbors will be grateful."

"Thanks for helping me wash my carpet." Parnelli hung up without saying goodbye, again.

*He's getting a bad habit of hanging up on me. That's OK. When he shows up at church in his three-piece suit, like I think*

*he's going to, maybe he'll say goodbye then. Tex threw back his head and laughed. I've got the professor by the scrotum and Parnelli by the throat. I'd think maybe it's time to call somebody to see if I can get my name engraved on the catbird seat.*

\* \* \*

Tex arrived at the YMCA parking lot in the area Lizzy had designated. He got out of his truck and found a shady spot under a tree to wait. Parnelli pulled up a few moments later and got out of his Tornado. He was attired in a three-piece suit. Tex kept himself from laughing out loud, but just barely.

"You're just a little underdressed for the occasion, aren't you? Where's your suit?"

"Parnelli, I tried really hard to squeeze into those pants, but I couldn't get them zipped up. The coat felt like a straightjacket. I'm afraid I just had to punt and leave it to you to dazzle Lizzy with your sartorial splendor."

"I hope that wasn't a sexual remark."

Tex laughed. "Where's your dictionary?"

"Crap. I knew I forgot something. Notice my use of the euphemism?"

"Your mouth seems to be getting potty-trained real good. So your boots are now considered crap-kickers?"

"Doesn't quite have the same ring to it, does it?"

Tex didn't have to answer because Lizzy's car pulled up. The professor was already riding shotgun.

*Dang! That was supposed to be my honor. Well, Mr. Navigator will be Mr. Mud when I tell Lizzy that he lied about his job at Concordia. I wonder what he really did for a living?*

Lizzy rolled down her window. "All aboard who's coming aboard."

Tex let Parnelli have the door closest to them. He was in the frame of mind to get as much exercise as he could get. *When a time comes for me to really wear that suit, I want to make sure it fits. Maybe a wedding would be the perfect time.*

"Wow. You're really dressed to the tens today, Parnelli," Lizzy said.

"I believe the reference you wish utilized nines instead of tens."

"I know, Alistair. I'm just hinting that he has gone to infinity and beyond in the world of fashion."

"Ahh. A specimen of humor?"

Lizzy frowned. "Somehow I don't think that word works. Humor would be lost in a laboratory investigation of its properties. By the way, gentlemen, if you are game, I'd like to have lunch after church and then visit an assisted living facility."

"Count me in," Parnelli said.

"I'm already a captive audience since I have no escape vehicle," the professor said.

"I'm not going to be a party pooper. I've been wanting to visit one of those places," Tex said. "I just need to be back in time to go for a bike ride this afternoon."

"Bike ride? Are you going back to the Y?" Parnelli asked.

"Nope. Not a stationary bike."

"What then? You don't own a bicycle."

"Do now."

Lizzy glanced at him via the rear-view mirror. "That's great, Tex. If you want company, I'd love to get a few miles in myself."

Tex looked over at Parnelli. His tongue was hanging out.

*Don't bite that thing off, prune-face. That shade of green really doesn't go well with a gray suit either.*

\* \* \*

Tex tried to get out of the car in time to open the door for Lizzy. He was too slow since she didn't wait for anyone to arrive. One of the qualities that Tex liked about Lizzy was her independence. She could appreciate a gentleman's behavior, but she wasn't hung up on being pampered.

The foursome was met at the door by the pastor. "Hi, welcome to Living Hope. I'm Pastor Johnny Walker."

Parnelli looked over at Tex and elevated his eyebrows.

The pastor examined Parnelli. "Johnny Walker Red and White Label. Washed in the blood of the lamb until my fleece is as white as snow."

"Were you veritably christened Johnny Walker?" the professor asked.

"Actually, my name is John Walker, but I always seem to get a lively conversation started with strangers when I tell them my name is Johnny. As John, I'm stuck with meteorology discussions."

He shook the hand of all four of them and they went in.

"He seems like a cool guy," Parnelli said.

"Very good preacher," Lizzy answered.

Tex stopped in his tracks. *Preacher? That means he'll be*

*preaching. I hate preaching. Maybe I can just tune it out. I hope Lizzy doesn't ask me for a critique afterward.*

After some music and announcements, the pastor got up to speak. "Today I want to examine the question: what kind of life does God require of us. Micah 6:8 tells us part of the answer. 'He hath shown thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.' Jesus said that the two great commandments are to love God and love our fellow man. Those give us a pretty good general idea of how we should live. Let's look at specifics. How do we fulfill our duty? That's a pretty big chunk of meat to digest. Let's slice it up into chunks and examine the area of entertainment. How does God want us to spend our time in the area of enjoying ourselves? I suppose some of you are out there thinking, 'If God really wanted me to enjoy myself, he wouldn't have invented church services.' I don't want to hear any 'amens' out there."

Some of the congregation laughed.

"Some of you have bumper stickers that say 'I'd rather be fishing.'"

Parnelli looked over at Tex and grinned. He had one on his Tornado. Tex ignored him.

"Does God want you to enjoy life? Does God have a sense of humor?" Pastor Walker stood looking out on the congregation for dramatic effect. "My answer. A pastor went out visiting one afternoon. At one house he knocked on the door several times, but no one answered. He could see through the window that the television was on, so he took one of his cards, wrote 'Revelations 3:20' on it and put it under the door. 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone will open, I will come in.' The following Sunday, a woman handed him a card with her name and the following message: 'Genesis 3:10. I heard thy voice and I was naked, so I hid myself.'"

The congregation laughed.

"See...laughter...in church. There are no lightning bolts rattling off the pews. Does that mean that God is OK with us laughing and enjoying ourselves, even in church? For some reason some people have the impression that being solemn is synonymous with being holy. They have long-face contests to see who can do the best impression of Eeyore, the donkey from Winnie the Pooh, the eternal pessimist."

"Preach it, brother!" another member of the congregation called out.

Parnelli turned around and glared at the man who had spoken.

"Thanks for noticing," a bass voice said near the front. The congregation exploded with laughter.

The pastor waited for the noise to die down. "My mother always used to tell me I needed a hot meal. I always wondered what the nutritional value of heat was. In actuality, raw fruits and vegetables are better for us than the cooked version because some of the vitamins are lost in the cooking. I think the same thing is true with church. A lack of humor has no nutritional value, spiritually speaking."

"Amen!"

"First of all, I don't want you to worry. I'm not going to be replaced by a stand-up comedian. Our main diet here at Living Hope is not going to be fast one-liners and junk jokes. My point is that it is OK to have it on the menu – like a dessert! God invented fun and also the word 'funny'. The Bible says in Proverbs that a merry heart doeth good like a medicine. God created laughter to bring us relief and to help us cope with stress. The act of laughing tones muscles and forces more oxygen into the lungs. It is a healthy thing to do – even in church."

"Double amen."

Tex looked over at Parnelli and saw fire in his eyes. He couldn't shake the impression that Parnelli reminded him of an attack dog, wearing a muzzle and constrained by a leash.

"God called us to love him and love others. As long as humor doesn't get in the way of that, I say go for it. Some people use humor as a weapon of cruelty. I think we've all seen the devastation that making fun of people can produce. How about homeless guys being beaten for 'a few laughs'? Humor is somewhat similar to a gun. It can be used for good or for bad. It's like cholesterol. You want to have the good cholesterol but not the bad stuff."

"Preach it, Doctor!"

"I'm going to go one step further here regarding the beneficial humor. It doesn't just involve being able to laugh at something funny. It's an attitude of grace. Humor used to be synonymous with the word 'mood'. We always use the excuse that we did something bad because we were in a bad mood. *Hello-o!* Don't let yourself get into bad humor, and you'll prevent problems. Remember the ounce of prevention rule. For example, when a guy cuts you off or steals the parking space

you were backing in to, be prepared – like the boy scouts. Instead of flipping him off, you'll be able to keep your good grace, keep it in the right perspective and perhaps say something like 'Oh, well, it's not important.' Maybe you can even bless the person instead of curse them. How's that for a radical but not new concept? Jesus taught us to do that 2000 years ago."

"Hallelujah!"

Tex looked over to see how Parnelli was reacting to the sermon and the 'hallelujah'.

"Someone joked that they never saw a runner with a smile on their face. This was supposed to be an excuse for avoiding exercise because, obviously, it only brings pain. I'm afraid the same might be said about Christians. If you aren't smiling, you convey a message to unbelievers that Christianity consists totally of pain and drudgery. Why would they want to be a Christian if that is the case? You may be too timid to witness to someone about the love of Christ, but your smile might get the message across. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"Loud and clear!"

"I think so far what I've presented to you has been in most people's comfort zone. Time to reach out and step on a few toes. I've shown you that humor is an important quality of life. However, don't get the impression that we are to enjoy ourselves and be entertained at all times. The words of Ecclesiastes were put into a song and made popular by a group called The Byrds back in the sixties. In chapter three verses one through four we find: 'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh.' I could rest my case here, and let you get off yours and back into the sunshine. However, my main purpose was not to convince you it's OK to laugh in church. I'm here to convince you to take a long look at how you spend your time. Are you in a situation where all work, including spiritual efforts, and no play is making you a dull boy? Or are you living the other extreme, spending every waking moment that you can in trying to find amusement?"

"Tell it like it is."

"If you're at either extreme, I think you're missing the boat, even if you're on a cruise ship. That's only my opinion, but if you



agree with me, you'll be right. I think God wants us to have balance in our lives. Some of you might have figured out that you can combine enjoyment and working for God. You might love music and devote your time to being part of the worship team. You might love fishing and choose to take unbelievers to the lake to fish for men at the same time you try to snag a bass or a walleye. However, if you're going to error by going to an extreme, I strongly urge you to tip the scales in God's favor and not your own. Jesus told his disciples that the greatest among men would be the servant of all. You can find great joy in service."

"Right on, Pastor."

"Maybe you have plenty of money to live the way that will keep you in good humor. You spend all your free time on the golf course, hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, watching TV, cruising on the Love Boat, etcetera. I'm not saying that it's a sin for you to take a cruise. Just think about this. Are you buying Enron stock instead of Google stock? Is your investment going into the toilet? We're all free to make our own choices. Personally, if I had enough money for a cruise, I'd have a really hard time enjoying the mountains of goodies that I hear are laid out all day long on board those ships. I know there are people literally starving to death in Africa and other places of the world. How can I stuff myself to the gills when in the back of my mind I hear the cries of children going to sleep crying and dying of malnutrition?"

Tex looked around the chapel. The faces around him had lost their smiles. No one was shouting 'Amen'.

The pastor held up a piece of paper. "This letter comes from an organization known as Life Outreach International. Their goal is to provide food and water to people who have none. Let's say a cruise costs you \$2000. For that same amount of money, these people can feed 1000 children for a month. My friends, I ask you to weigh the consequences of your choices. A vivid vision of one thousand children still alive on this planet or your fading memories of the Caribbean and stuffing yourself till you couldn't move. Which one is God going to reward? I'm here to witness that when you invest in God's kingdom, your returns will be out of this world. If you choose to invest in Enron, you'll have an eternity to think about your mistake. There are people on this planet who need our help. Please reach out and help them as you help yourself. God bless you for your faithfulness to him."

The pastor took a seat and the worship team played

another song. After that was over, the worship leader dismissed the congregation. When the four friends got outside, Tex turned to Parnelli. "What was your problem in there? I thought you were going to come unglued and clobber one of those guys responding to the preacher."

"In the Catholic Church when I was a kid, you didn't say anything during the mass – even if your hair was on fire. Here these guys are talking back to the pastor like he was a substitute teacher. I just found that hard to deal with."

"Maybe I should have warned you," Lizzy said. "They have interactive church here."

"They certainly do. Also, I didn't see another suit in the whole place. Even the pastor didn't have a tie on."

"How'd it feel to be the most dapper guy in a crowd?" Tex asked.

Parnelli brightened up. "I was, wasn't I?"

"No doubt about it," Lizzy responded.

Tex looked at Lizzy's smile. *Maybe my little joke backfired.*

\* \* \*

After a delicious lunch, Lizzy navigated her vehicle to the Golden Years Manor. They strolled into the lobby together with a bit of hesitation. They weren't sure what was going to happen. Lizzy pointed to a receptionist desk, and the men followed her to it.

"May I help you?" the young woman manning the post asked.

"Yes, we have what might be a strange request," Lizzy said.

"Go ahead, make my day."

Lizzy laughed. "We're here to visit someone."

"That's not so strange. Unless you're planning to bust them outta here. What's her or his name?"

"That the strange part."

"You've forgotten the name of the person you want to visit?"

"That's not it. There is no person that we want to visit."

The woman pulled out a stick of gloss and moistened her lips. "You've got me really confused now. You want to visit a person, but there is no person you want to visit?"

"There's no specific person that we have in mind. We're just here to visit someone who needs to have company."

"Oohhhh. Now I get it. Gosh. I don't know who needs to have visitors. One thing I could do is direct you down to the

community room. You could just mingle with the people hanging out there.”

“That sounds like a good start. Perhaps we can find out from them who’s in need.”

After getting explicit directions on how to arrive at the desired destination, Lizzy set sail with her entourage.

“This looks like the place,” she said after a fairly long hike.

A television blared in one corner of the room with a few people sitting in front of it on couches and wheelchairs. Other people sat on chairs around the room, mostly just staring into space.

“Excuse me. Would you mind moving your posteriors so I can wheel into the room? It’s drafty out here in the hallway.”

The four Angels turned around and beheld a woman in a wheelchair behind them. A man held on to the back of it.

Tex moved quickly aside and looked back at the couple. *I swear that wheelchair is holding him up as much as it’s carrying her.*

“We’re so sorry,” Lizzy said as she stepped out of their path.

“That’s OK. You kids just never have any respect for old people.”

“Kids? I’m almost seventy.”

“So what’s your point, kid?”

“My name is Lizzy, by the way. How old are you, if I might ask?”

“Of course you can ask. This is a free country. And I have the freedom to tell you where to hike your kite off a short pier.”

Parnelli laughed. The woman turned and stared at him.

“My name is Irene, but most people call me Granny. This gent behind me is my old man, heavy accent on old and light accent on man, if you get my snow drift.”

The man offered no response to the putdown. Lizzy looked back at him with concern.

“Don’t worry about him. He left his hearing aid in the room and can’t hear a word I’m saying, not that he’d pay attention anyway.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It comes in handy sometimes. Now, about my age, I guess there’s no reason to hide it. I should be proud of the fact that I made it this far. I know I don’t look a day over eighty-eight, but I’m actually eighty-nine. I’ll tell you right now if you see me with a man who’s not a hunk, he’s a relative. Am I allowed to call you kid now?”

Lizzy laughed and looked at the men standing together on the other side. "Sure, Irene. If it makes you happy."

"What would make me happy is to get out of this wheelchair and twirl around the room to some nice Straus music with that guy over there." She pointed to Lizzy's three friends.

A look of amusement lit up Lizzy's face. "Which one?"

"The one with the suit. I like 'em nicely dressed with a little meat on their bones."

Parnelli's mouth dropped open. Tex and the professor both laughed. Tex was glad he was off the hook because when the bony finger did the pointing, he was afraid it was aimed at him.

"Maybe you prefer to tango, Junior?"

Tex slapped him on the back. "Yeah, Junior. Show us what you can do with two right feet."

Parnelli leaned over and whispered, "Tex, I'd be really careful about what you say. I'd hate to have to tell everyone here about the time we were kids and you took a dump out in the woods and used itch weed to wipe your butt."

Tex straightened up and glanced over at the women. They were looking at him and Parnelli. "Lizzy, why don't you stay here and get acquainted with Irene. Parnelli and I are going to make the rounds and say hi to some more people." He walked away with Parnelli close on his heels.

The professor looked over and saw Irene eyeballing his own physique. "Me too, Mommy." He beat a hasty retreat in the direction the other two had gone.

"Which one of those guys is your main squeeze, Lizzy?"

"None of them."

"What's your problem, honey? Can't decide which one?"

"Irene, I hardly know them. We only met a few weeks ago."

"Makes no difference. At seventy, you don't have many good years left. You better make hay till the cows come home."

"What if I want the one in the suit?"

"I'd be disappointed, but I'd take one of the others."

"What about your husband?"

"He's going to kick the farm any day now. I'm just planning for my future. I figure I'll marry a younger man who'll take me out of this dump. All there is around here are old folks."

Lizzy smiled. "What a novel concept."

"How come you're hanging out here? Do you have a relative here?"

"No, none of us do. We're just here to visit someone who is lonely."

"Do-gooders, huh?"

"I prefer the term 'good Samaritans.'"

"A rose by any other name still has thorns. Well, take a good look around, honey. See what the future holds for you unless you get lucky and your number gets drawn in the death lottery before you lose the ability to take care of yourself."

"That's rather a bleak outlook on life."

"Thank you. And now, if you don't mind, I'm going over to the TV and watch 'Wheel of Misfortune'. The old man likes to watch them spin the wheel around. He used to like to watch the girl turning the letters, but he's forgotten why now. Nice meeting you, Lucy. Don't take any wooden quarters."

"Lizzy. You mean wooden nickels?"

"No, I said what I meant, and I meant what I said. Have to adjust for inflation, you know." Irene turned and slapped her husband, who was dozing on his feet. "Get ready, you old geezer. The chariot is about to take off." She put her hands on the wheels and began to move the chair toward the TV with her hubby hanging on behind her and trying to shuffle his feet fast enough to keep up.

\* \* \*

Two hours later the four called it an afternoon and walked back into the sunshine.

Parnelli took a deep breath and blew it out. "Man, it's good to get back into the fresh air. The reek of death fills that place."

Lizzy adjusted her bonnet. "It's not exactly the most pleasant place in the world to spend a sunny afternoon. But we did bring some of that sunshine into the lives of those people, I think."

"Indubitably," the professor said.

Lizzy laughed. "And it was a kick meeting Irene. She's a card."

Tex looked over at Parnelli and grinned. "I'd say that was an understatement. I think she's the whole deck. I can't say much for her taste in men, though."

Parnelli shook his head and rolled his eyes toward the sky.

"I can't help but think about what the pastor said this morning," Tex said. "He mentioned kids that were starving for food. I think there are people in there starving for some affection."

"Bingo!" Lizzy said. "And we fed them today. You know,

Tex, I can't help but think that the idea of the Angels of I-29 was planted in your head by God."

Tex shook his head. "God and me haven't exactly been on speaking terms."

"Maybe, that's changing. Maybe, he's been speaking to you all of these years, but you just started listening."

## Chapter 8

The Angels started their patrols the next week. Due to the limited number of participants, they only covered the highway four hours a day during the hours of peak traffic. The only action they stirred up were two motorists who ran out of gas and one whose car died. Three grateful people benefited from the Angels' generosity. Tex's little circle of four had performed their service during the week, so they were free to spend the weekend camping.

On Friday morning, Tex loaded up his truck with his bicycle and camping equipment. He put his fishing equipment into his fourteen-foot boat and hooked the boat trailer up to the hitch. His first stop was Parnelli's, where the two men stowed a large tent into the back of Tex's truck. Anything that could blow away was placed in the back seat and the rest went in the back.

While they were getting prepared to leave, Parnelli's neighbor, Amanda, came over. "Hey, Pete and Repeat, you goin' fishin'?"

Tex looked back and saw the little girl standing there with a can in her hands.

"What was your first clue, Amanda?"

"You have a boat attached to the truck. It's too slow for water-skiing, and you have fishing poles in it. I figure that makes you a good candidate to be a customer of mine."

"You got something else you want to rent us?" Tex asked.

"No, sir. I got night crawlers for sale." She held up her can. "One dollar for a dozen. I just caught them last night so they're as fresh as a pie right out of the oven."

"A dollar, huh? Gosh, when I was a kid, we only got ten cents a dozen."

Parnelli shook his head. "And you had them delivered by Pony Express. Everything has gone up in price about ten times from when we were younger. Quit bitchin' and deal with it. And give the girl a buck. They'll cost us a bunch more at the Lake, and they won't be so fresh."

"Me pay? I'm the one taking out a loan on my house to fill up the gas tank of this monstrosity. At two gallons per mile, it'll cost me a fortune."

"You're the one who chose to buy this gas-inhaling nightmare. They post the fuel performance figures on the car so even dummies like you have no excuse. Besides, I'm throwing

in some money for gas.”

“Fine. You buy the worms, and I’ll throw in some money on them when we settle up.”

Parnelli turned to the wannabe worm vendor. “Amanda Angel, we can’t buy your one dozen worms.”

Her little face drooped into a frown. “You can’t?”

“Nope. We want to buy two dozen.”

“Oh. Cool! Here, you take these, and I’ll run home and get another can.” She handed him the can and scrambled back to her garage. They didn’t have to wait long for her return. After paying off the juvenile entrepreneur, the two men started getting in the truck.

“Is there anything else you guys need? Maybe a jug of lemonade? Or some sandwiches?”

“How much do you charge for sandwiches?” Parnelli asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never sold one. Maybe a quarter.”

“Amanda, you can’t even pay for the sandwich fixings with a quarter. You’d lose money.”

“Oh, no. The fixings don’t cost me anything. I’ll just get them out of the fridge.”

Tex laughed and looked over at Parnelli.

“I think we’re good, honey. Thanks for the offer though. I think you better talk with your mom about using ingredients from the kitchen to sell on the streets. She may like to be involved.”

“OK. I’ll try. Good luck fishing.”

“Bye, Amanda Angel.”

Tex carefully backed his truck out of the driveway, especially taking note of where Amanda was. He aimed his metallic steed in the direction of the YMCA and turned to Parnelli. “I image that Irene was probably a lot like Amanda when she was a girl.”

“Irene?”

“Your admirer from the old folk’s home.”

“Oh. Would you please quit bugging me about that? She’s old enough to be my mother – not to mention the fact she’s married already. Almost sounds like you’re trying to get me hooked up with somebody else, so I’ll remove myself from contention for Lizzy.”

“I can’t get anything past you, can I?”

“Dang straight. A fella has to get up mighty early to pull the Lycra over my eyes.”

“Why don’t you ever use the word wool?”

“I’m allergic to the dang stuff.”



"If you're going to be this much of a pain in the ass on the way to Madison, maybe the professor should ride with me."

"You think he's going to trade a chance to ride with Lizzy for a chance to suffer your politically incorrect happy horse dung?"

"Dung?"

"Remember the new me. I don't use bad words."

Tex slapped himself in the forehead. "Oh, yeah. How could I forget? Pigpen turns into Mr. Clean. And come back tomorrow for another episode of *The Old and the Shiftless*."

"Maybe, I should put the bike in the seat, and I'll ride in the back."

"Not a bad thought. I might actually be able to carry on an intelligent conversation that way."

"You couldn't carry a conversation in a freaking wheelbarrow."

Tex shook his head. "Your insults aren't going to penetrate my armor, Parnelli. Might as well save your energy for fishing. I'd hate for you to be so tired you had to stay back at camp while Lizzy and I are fishing."

"Don't forget the professor."

"I think he'd be bored out of his gourd by fishing, unless they're biting like crazy. One trip will probably suffice to turn him off. You and him could stay in the tent and talk about the impact of the Roman Empire on the history of the world or the mating rituals of the tsetse fly."

When they arrived at the YMCA parking lot, they found Lizzy waiting for them. Tex waited for her to pull in behind him, and then he steered toward the freeway. About thirty miles later, they exited the freeway and got on a two-lane road that led to Madison. Less than half an hour later they pulled away from the ranger station after checking in for their reserved campsite.

The first thing Tex did was unload the boat and pull it up on the sand. He then drove his truck to the campsite where Lizzy was waiting. There was no sign of the professor.

"Where's Alistair?" Tex asked.

"He went for a bike ride. It was his desire to check the place out."

"Why didn't you go with him?" Parnelli asked.

"I told him I needed to help you guys set up the camp. His lack of desire to pitch in and help rubs my fur the wrong way."

"I can relate," Parnelli said. "I have to say it torques me off to think about him out there enjoying himself while we're working."

"What if we just left the stuff here and went fishing?" Tex asked.

"That's devious, thoughtless, mean, evil and nasty," Parnelli said. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"Aren't you afraid someone will steal our equipment?"

"Things are pretty safe around here. Campers seem to take care of one another. You watch my back and I'll watch yours kind of thing. Just to be safe we can put anything that's small in the cab and lock it up."

"Works for me," Lizzy said.

"You're not worried about offending the professor?"

"Alistair didn't seem to worry about offending us. I'll write him a note and leave it on the windshield." She went to her car, returned with a pen and paper, and sat down at the picnic table in their area. In a neat calligraphy she jotted down:

'Dear Alistair, We went fishing. Go for another bike ride. Lizzy and crew.'

While Lizzy was scratching out the note, the men took care of the loose ends.

"You know, Tex, I haven't been out fishing with a lady in a long time. If Mother Nature calls, I'm afraid I won't be able to whiz over the side of the boat."

"Or use a tin can either. We'll be stuck coming back to shore, or you could have your teeth throw up sandbags."

"That might help my mouth from flooding, but that would only increase the pressure in other places."

"No doubt. So you better go use the john now and hope you can hold out till our fishing is done."

Parnelli nodded and headed off to the restroom on the campground. Tex watched him go. *It seems like yesterday all they had out here were outhouses. Now you even have indoor plumbing when you're trying to get back to nature. Somehow it just seems wrong. Except that hot shower will be nice tomorrow, so Lizzy won't have to put up with our smell.*

Parnelli returned from his mission to find Tex layering on sunscreen with Lizzy's help. "What are you putting mayonnaise all over your body for?"

"That's sunscreen, Parnelli," Lizzy said. "You need some too."

Parnelli laughed. "Oh, no. I've been out in the sun for seventy years without that stuff, and I'm still going strong."

"That might be because of the layer of grease you always had over you from working with cars. Now that you're retired,

you're probably unprotected," Tex said.

"I have my trusty fishing cap. That'll keep the sun off."

Tex closed his eyes and enjoyed the tingle as Lizzy applied SPF-30 to the back of his neck. *Go ahead, Turkey, be the tough guy and get sunburned. I don't want to watch Lizzy putting her hands on your slimy skin and letting you feel what I'm experiencing right now anyway.*

After the short walk from the campground to the boat, the trio pulled the boat further into the water and loaded up. Lizzy took the seat in front of Tex. With the task of pushing the boat into the water completed, Parnelli, with much struggle, took the seat in front of her. The first seat wasn't wide enough for his expanded posterior.

"You know, one of these days I'm not going to be able to get into a boat like that anymore. You're going to have to pick me up at the dock."

Tex nodded. "I thought that might be the case today. That's another reason to get yourself into shape. If you don't use it, you lose it."

"I'm afraid I've already lost it. And getting it back ain't going to be easy."

"That's true, Parnelli," Lizzy said. "You know all about New Year's resolutions. I think the gyms are full the first two weeks in January, and then reality sets in, causing people to bag it because of the difficulty in keeping up."

"People need something to motivate them," Tex said. He looked over at Lizzy, dressed in blue jeans and giant sun hat. *Or somebody.*

They pushed out far enough from the shore so Tex could start the motor. It kicked into life on the first pull, and Tex headed the point of the boat to a place where he'd been successful in the past. He turned back to the shore once and saw a bicycle stopped on the road next to the beach. With an internal chuckle he turned back to watch where he was going. *Eat your heart out, professor.* When they reached the right spot, Parnelli dropped the anchor.

"OK. How do we do this?" Lizzy asked. "The last time I went fishing I was about twelve."

Tex smiled. "In that case you need a refresher course. Thirty years is a long time."

"You're not a math major, are you, Tex? Or maybe you're math isn't so bad after all, and you're just a brown-noser."

"Obviously his math is faulty," Parnelli said. "Any idiot knows

that there are only twenty-five years between twelve and thirty-seven.”

“You two are incorrigible. I’d like you to know that I’m proud of my age. When I was sixty, I was still in the hide-my-age stage. Now, I’m proud to say I’ve made it sixty-eight years, and I’m still kicking. So if you two scoundrels will quit trying to butter-up an old lady and get to fishing, I’ll be a happy camper – pun intended.”

Tex shook his head. *I’ve never met anyone like her.* “Do you want me to put the worm on the hook for you?”

“Thanks, but need to learn to do this myself. Show me, please.”

Parnelli threw his line out and starting reeling it in again.

“Don’t you need a worm, Parnelli?” Lizzy asked.

“I’m using artificial bait, known as a lure, in this case a red and white daredevil. Tex likes to drown worms and stare at bobbers. I like some action in my fishing, so I cast lures. He catches more fish than I do, but I catch bigger ones. After you get all set up, I’ll take a worm to put on my second rod. I always fish with two, so I have the chance of catching the small stuff while I’m casting for the big ones.”

Lizzy turned back to Tex. “Do you usually fish with two, also?”

“Yep. I cast some, but that’s a lot of work, so I normally just still fish with both lines. Big shot over there hardly ever catches anything with all that effort he puts out.”

“That means I’m stealing your other rod. I can just watch you two fish. It’s not my intention to cramp your style.”

“Don’t even worry your pretty little head about that. I’ll help you watch your line, so it’ll be almost the same as fishing with two.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m positive. Now watch me. I take a night crawler and tear off a small chunk – just enough to fill the hook.” He ripped a piece from the main body and laid the worm on the floor of the boat. The body of the intended bait convulsed like a decapitated chicken.

“Doesn’t that hurt the worm?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never asked, and they’ve never volunteered that information.”

“I think from the reaction that it’s suffering.”

“Maybe. The interesting thing is that it will grow back the segment I took off if I put it back in the ground.”

Lizzy shuddered.

"Now I slide the hook right into the middle of the body and slide the worm up until the entire barb of the hook is hidden and the worm is on securely enough that it won't fall off. Now I need to set the bobber above the hook at the depth I want. In this case we're fishing in shallow water so we want it set about three feet. Now I'm ready to try my luck." He cast the line toward the shore. "When you cast near the shore, the trick is to try to keep the line out of the trees and the weeds on the shore."

Lizzy pointed to a tree by the shore. "Looks like not everybody has the trick down."

Tex laughed. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but a couple of those are mine. One of those red and white ones belonged to Parnelli in a previous life."

Liz shook her head. "Hey! Where's the worm?"

Tex reached down and grabbed it just before it disappeared into a drain hole cut in the bottom of the seat. "Rascally little guys will take off looking for a hiding place as soon as they quit doing the funky chicken." He tore another piece of worm and reached his hand out towards Lizzy.

She gingerly took the slimy creature, making a face when the goo made contact with her skin. After a couple of passes, she got the worm on her hook. "How's this?"

"Not bad for a rookie. Now, to cast it, hold the button down, bring it behind your head, shoot your arm forward, and release the button after your arm has gone past ninety degrees. With other people in the boat, you need to be careful. I hooked my dad right above the eye when I was a kid. From that day on, I learned to make sure I kept the hook pointed in a safe direction on the back swing."

"You tell me that story right before I make my first cast? How can I continue with the worry I'm going to make one of you a Cyclops?"

"Sorry to scare you. Just remember, you need to be careful, not paranoid."

"I'll try." She followed his directions and made her first cast. The bobber and other equipment slammed into the water right in front of her.

"You have to let go of the button."

"OK." She tried again. This time the bobber went straight up into the air and came down on top of Lizzy's hat. "I let go."

"Yes, you did. A little too early."

On the third try the bobber splashed into the water about

fifteen feet from the boat.

"Bravo! Now just keep an eye on your cork, and if it goes under you have a fish. Even if it just bobs in the water you might have one biting. They don't always take it under, but sometimes the wind makes it bob, too."

"What's a cork?"

"Same thing as a bobber. In the old days they actually used a cork. Red and white plastic is a whole lot easier to see, believe me."

"OK. I think I got it. At least the part with the bobber. Then what do I do if I get a fish?"

"Make sure you don't have any slack in the line and give the line a quick but not overly forceful pull to set the hook, and then reel in the line."

"Won't that hurt the fish's mouth?"

"Again, I haven't discussed the aspect of pain with the denizens of the deep – or the shallows in our case. After all, they're just fish. They just swim under there, eat and grow bigger, and then get eaten by something or someone else, unless they die from disease or winterkill before that. There is no meaning to their lives."

"That sounds like the way some humans live. I guess without God, we're not much different than the fish."

Tex took off his cap and scratched his head. He hadn't thought about God in a long time before Lizzy came along. Now she wouldn't let him stop thinking about the subject. "Lizzy. I think you have some action out there."

"What?"

Tex pointed at the bobber. It dipped a couple of times. "Reel in the slack and get ready."

She did as directed. Suddenly, the bobber disappeared from sight.

"Now!" Tex yelled.

She gave a pull on the rod and started reeling. The tip of the pole bent slightly as she continued to reel. "I think I got him. I feel something on here."

"Yeah, it looks like he's yours. Reel it up to the bobber and then lift it into the boat."

Lizzy did as directed and a few seconds later lifted a nice-sized perch into the bottom of the craft. Lizzy gave a squeal of delight.

"Beginner's luck. Never fails," Parnelli said.

"Did you want to take it off the hook yourself?" Tex asked.

"That looks harder than putting on a worm."

"Yeah, it can be. Depends where you hook them. Sometimes it's easy. In fact, sometimes they fall off the hook themselves. But sometimes they swallow the dang thing and it's a real problem. You have to pull the thing right out of their body and sometimes more than just the hook comes out."

"Sounds gross."

"It's not the most pleasant thing in the world. And these dang perch will stick you with their fins or gills and that can sting, so you have to be careful and hold them just right."

"I think I'll let you do that part. At least for now."

"No problem, ma'am. Glad to help out." He removed the fish, put it on a chain stringer, and threw it into the water after connecting it to the oarlock.

"At least we didn't get skunked," Tex said.

"Skunked?"

"That means to not catch anything. Like a shutout in sports."

"Gotcha. Is there a lot more fishing terminology to learn?"

"Not for us. I'm sure those big time pro fisherman have their own jargon, but Parnelli and me don't get very technical in this area. We're just a couple of old-fashioned guys."

Lizzy tore off a piece of worm for herself and threaded it onto the barb.

"You want to try casting in the same place where you caught the last one. There might be a school of fish right there."

"They don't get summer vacation?"

Tex laughed. "School is just a term that means a group – like a gaggle of geese or herd of cattle or a pod of whales."

Lizzy threw out her line even further this time.

"Reel it back slowly to the spot you were in."

Before the bobber made it back to the same area, it went under the water again. Lizzy let out a shriek and pulled hard. A minute later she pulled in another perch. "Fishing is fun!" she said. "When are you guys going to catch something?"

Parnelli reached for the second rod. "I'll take a worm now." He threw his line out in the general vicinity where Lizzy had caught hers.

Tex recast his own to get as close as possible without interfering with Lizzy's line. They watched Lizzy pull in two more without them getting a nibble.

"Well, Parnelli, we're not going to let a rookie show us up, are we?" Tex asked.

"I don't know. Maybe she's got some perfume or something

on her hands that are attracting the— I got a strike!” Parnelli jerked the rod and begin reeling. The pole bent in half. “Whew doggies. I got a good one here. Nice walleye or northern, I betcha.”

“Looks like it,” Tex said. “Lizzy, see that big net on the floor in front of you?”

She looked down. “Yeah.”

“When Parnelli gets the fish up to the boat, you need to have the net in the water so you can scoop it up.”

“Why didn’t we use the net before when I caught something?”

“Because the fish weren’t big enough to worry about. When you get a big one, you don’t want it falling off just as you lift it into the boat.”

“Understood.” She picked up the net. “Tell me when.”

“Let Parnelli guide the fish into the net.”

After a few of minutes of struggle, Parnelli brought the fish alongside the boat. Lizzy took a swipe at it with the net and smacked it on the head. The fish dove, causing Parnelli’s pole to bend toward the water. Suddenly the rod sprang back to a straight position, causing Parnelli to let out a string of curses. He reeled in his line and discovered his line had broken off.

“That one went about ten pounds. I had him.” He rippled the air with some more choice words. “Damn! Lost my favorite daredevil too!”

Tex shook his head. *So much for the makeover of Parnelli Fields.* He glanced at Lizzy. She had turned away from Parnelli and looked like she was about to cry. *And so much for your courtship of Miss Lizzy.*

“I’m sorry, Parnelli,” Lizzy said.

“You didn’t break his line,” Tex said.

“No, but I messed up with the net. I should have had it scooped up before the line broke.”

Parnelli looked at Lizzy. “Tex is right. It’s not your fault. Handling that net isn’t exactly easy for a veteran. Getting it right the first time is too much to expect. Northerns are especially tough to net because of those long lean bodies and the way they slither like a snake. So just forget about it.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “And please forgive me for cussing like a teenager.”

Lizzy turned back toward Parnelli. “You’re forgiven.”

Parnelli gazed into her eyes. “That was really stupid of me. Having your respect means a lot more to me than catching a



trophy fish. Looks like I was a double loser on this one.”

“Parnelli, you know I don’t like profanity. However, just because you lost your cool and let some anger out of the pressure cooker doesn’t mean you lost my respect. You’re human. I’ve been instructed to dole out grace just like God gives it to me. This is a forgotten event. I think you have a bobber out there which needs some attention.”

Parnelli looked out on the water and saw she was right. A minute later he brought his own perch into the boat. “That’s more like it.”

After Parnelli threw his line back out again, Tex handed something to Lizzy. “Would you please give this to Parnelli?”

She passed it over.

“You don’t need to do that, Tex,” he said.

“I know. I got a bunch of red-and-whites. Put that baby on and go back and catch that big northern.”

“I don’t think that guy is going to be hungry for a while with that hunk of metal stuck in him. Sad thing is that it’ll probably kill him.” Parnelli put the daredevil on his other line and began casting again.

After Lizzy caught another fish and Parnelli pulled in two more perch, Parnelli gave a shout. “I’ve snagged another big one!”

As Parnelli was fighting the creature on the other end of the line, Tex said, “Do you want me to man the net this time?”

“No. Lizzy will do just fine!”

The fight this time was shorter. Lizzy scooped up the new arrival and then struggled a little to lift the net into the boat.

“There’s something weird about that fish,” Parnelli said.

“What do you mean?” Tex asked.

Parnelli reached into the net and examined his catch. “Well I’ll be a chimpanzee’s nephew. I actually literally snagged this guy. The daredevil caught him in the gill. Holy guacamole! I don’t believe it.”

“Why don’t you believe it? I snag fish every once in a while when I’m casting.”

“I know. But this is the same fish I just lost!”

“Are you sure?”

“My daredevil is still hanging in its mouth.”

“That is a fish story to tell around the campfire. Nobody’s going to believe that one.”

“But you’ll be my witness.”

“As Sergeant Shultz used to say on Hogan’s Heroes, ‘I

know nothing.”

“Why you son of a...preacher man.”

Lizzy and Tex both laughed. “All right, Parnelli. I might backup your fishing fairytale for you, but I better never hear a certain itchweed story again.”

“Itchweed?” Lizzy said.

“Forget it, Lizzy. This is one story you’re never going to hear. Right, Parnelli?”

“Fine. In fact, there are lots of stories about Tex you don’t want to hear.”

“Ditto, buddy.”

The two men glared at each other.

“Gentlemen. Enough with the testosterone. Let’s warm up this conversation before we have to cut holes in the ice in order to fish. I don’t want to hear any of your secrets from the past. I’m just interested in the good things you’re going to do in the future.”

A few hours later the fish weren’t biting at all. Tex looked over at the other two. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m getting hungry. What do you say about heading back in?”

Parnelli nodded his head vigorously.

“That’s probably a good idea. Alistair is probably getting a little lonely by now.”

*Isn’t that too bad.* “OK, Parnelli, haul up the anchor, and we’ll haul buns out of here.”

When the trio approached the beach, they saw the professor standing on the shore with crossed arms. Tex pulled the motor up and let the boat coast into the shore.

“Don’t just stand there, Professor. Grab the boat and pull it up,” Parnelli said.

Despite the frown on his face, the professor gave him the hand he requested and Parnelli was able to get out of the boat without getting wet. He and the professor pulled it up even further and Lizzy exited.

“My deepest gratitude for abandoning me here alone and forlorn. I’ve been humming *Solitary Man* by Neil Diamond all afternoon.”

“What’s the matter? Don’t you know the words to sing?” Parnelli asked.

“You weren’t here. We didn’t know when you’d be back,” Lizzy said.

Tex unhooked the stringer from the oarlock. *You snooze, you lose, Pal.*

"Never mind," the professor said. "I probably would have expired from ennui."

"On we?" Parnelli asked.

"Pardon my French. That signifies boredom. You likely failed to capture any of the piscatorial species."

"I don't know about that, but we caught a mess of fish," Tex said, lifting the heavy stringer up and making his way to the front of the boat. He handed the stringer to Parnelli and got out.

The professor stood gawking.

"Come along, professor. You can help us set up the camp. Maybe you'd like to help clean the fish, too?"

"Why, are they dirty?"

Tex laughed. "On second thought, Parnelli and I will take care of the fish. We're going to have us a little fish fry."

An hour later they were enjoying the fresh filets fried in butter along with potato salad and rolls.

"Food really does taste better outside," Lizzy said.

"Fish really tastes better fresh out of the lake," Parnelli said. "That northern was more fun to catch, but these perch taste better. I just wish Tex had helped out so we'd have enough for breakfast tomorrow."

"Fish for breakfast?" the professor said. "My culinary tastes revolt at the idea of consuming fish for two consecutive repasts, especially when one of them is breakfast."

"I'm with the professor," Tex said. "Fried eggs, bacon, and pancakes will hit the spot for me."

"What do you call that concoction? Campground cholesterol?" Lizzy asked.

"I don't call it anything except fine dining."

"Oh, Tex. If you're going to work out to try to be as healthy as you can so you can help other people and stay active for more of your life, you need to look into improving your diet."

"Yeah, Tex!" Parnelli said.

Lizzy lifted a finger and pointed. "You too, Parnelli."

"Moi?"

"You heard me. I'm convinced the Frito Bandito is your biggest hero. Have you guys ever heard of fruits and vegetables? An apple a day keeps the doctor away."

"Does that mean we can't have our typical campout breakfast tomorrow?" Tex asked.

"No. I'm just telling you that you should confine that type of eating to a few times a year. Enough lecturing you guys. I wanted to discuss the Angels. I think we need to have some

kind of identification.”

“You mean like badges?” Parnelli asked.

“Not quite that formal. I was thinking about T-shirts and insignias to put on the cars, so people will recognize that we’re genuine helpers. You know how some people freak out when strangers try to help them. If people get to know us, we won’t be strangers.”

“That means we need some artwork. That’s your category,” Tex said.

Lizzy nodded. “Ball’s in my court. I’ll whip something up and run it by you. Let me go get my notebook, so I can jot down some ideas.”

“You know, Parnelli, I feel really bad that the professor didn’t get to go fishing today. Maybe you’d like to take him out. Might get some walleye action around sunset.”

“You finagling SOB. You’re just trying to get us to leave, so you can be alone with Lizzy. I’m not fallin’ for that ploy.”

“Appears to be an astute observation, my dear Parnelli. And an equally perspicacious countermeasure. Although I wouldn’t disapprove of encountering some privacy later to break out the flavored lemonade I brought.”

“Professor, you didn’t.”

“I’m back. What did I miss?” Lizzy asked.

“Ahhh not much. The professor was just saying that when life hands you lemons, you should make lemonade.”

“That’s a sour but positive thought.”

“Yeah. Heavy accent on the sour,” Tex said. “How would you like to go for a bike ride, Lizzy?”

Parnelli started groaning.

“What’s the matter, Parnelli?” Lizzy asked.

“Sunburn. Looks like I should have used that sunscreen.”

“I can help.” She went back to her tent.

Tex glared at Parnelli.

“Nice try, Tex.”

The professor positioned himself so he was almost in Tex’s face. “I am obligated to protest your repeated attempts to remove me from Lizzy’s presence. You benefited from her charisma the entire post meridian while I suffered from isolation. I shall not tolerate future endeavors of similar ilk.”

Lizzy was on her way back, so Tex held his tongue. The thought of lashing out with his fists crossed his mind. *I’m afraid I could kiss Lizzy goodbye if I did something like that – except there wouldn’t be any kiss.*

"This will relieve some of the burning." She popped open a tube of aloe vera lotion and began applying it to the back of Parnelli's neck.

When she moved around to his face, Tex couldn't take it anymore. "Since we're not going fishing again tonight, I'm going to bring in the gas tank and fishing gear."

"Maybe you could help him, Alistair?"

"My sincerest regrets, Elizabeth, but I have suffered damage to my skeletal structure which precludes me from physical exertion. It appears I'll be in dire need of your massage magic when you terminate with Parnelli."

A look of concern came over Lizzy's face. "I'm afraid a bike ride is going to be out of the question tonight, Tex. Nurse Nightingale has to tend to her patients."

Tex headed toward his boat. *And I have to tend to my patience, cause I don't have any! And if I unleash on the professor, he might really have the damage he's faking now.* It took three trips for Tex to get all the stuff, since he also brought in Parnelli's tackle box and fishing poles. After his last trip, he grabbed the bicycle out of his truck. "Bye."

Nobody seemed to notice his exit. If they did, no one bothered to reply. This slight intensified the anger that was already smoldering inside him. He walked the bike over the grass until he reached the road. He tried to vent his rage as he pedaled the cycle around the park. When he got to the entrance, he entertained an impulsive thought. *What if I rode the bike all the way to Madison? How far is that? About four miles. How long will that take? Only an hour at eight miles an hour. I still have at least two hours of daylight. I'm doing it.*

The going was easy until Tex had to pedal uphill. He geared the bike down to the lowest level. At that gear ratio, the pedaling was easier but he didn't go very fast. There was a noticeable gratitude when he finally crested the incline and saw a flat expanse of concrete in front of him. He could now see Madison in the distance. With a couple flicks of his wrist he set the gears up to allow him to travel faster. With less exertion needed, he was able to get back to running the angry thoughts through his head concerning Parnelli and the professor.

Tex became thirsty before he finished the first leg of the journey. He remembered where the baseball field was, having played there a few times in his youth. In addition, he'd participated in track meets at the track around the football field which was right next to the baseball field. He'd be able to get a

drink there. When he arrived at the baseball park, he got a small shock. The track that he had run on in high school was gone and with it the football field. In its place was a softball complex. There were games being played on three fields. Nobody was at the baseball field. He took a long drink from the drinking fountain. Never had tepid water tasted so good to him.

After deciding to rest a little before starting the trek back to the lake, Tex surveyed the baseball park. A memory that he had not savored in years flitted into his consciousness. When he was seventeen, right here on this field, he had made the best catch of his baseball career, taking off at the crack of the bat into right center field to run down a ball that had triple written all over it. The euphoric feeling that came over him when he ran back to the dugout washed over him now as if he was reliving the moment. *How long ago was that? Fifty-three years. Unbelievable.*

*Wouldn't it be great to be young and skinny again?* He sighed. Growing old was hell, but it seemed to be the only game in town. The only alternative seemed to be even less appealing. He turned and looked out over the other fields. *Those are all girls!* All three fields were populated by girl softball players. Another indication of how life had changed. When he was a kid, the girls didn't even have sports teams. *I wonder what kind of an athlete Lizzy would have been. Speaking of Lizzy, I'd better get back to camp before she gets worried about me.*

Tex was just about out of energy when he reached the big hill he'd climbed on the way to town. He coasted down it all the way to the entrance of the park. *Hills are fun – when you're going down.* He managed to pedal the rest of the way around the park back to the camping area shortly before sunset.

Parnelli and the professor were seated at a picnic table playing cards.

"Where you been, Tex?" Parnelli asked. "Lizzy got worried and went out looking for you."

"When?"

"About ten minutes ago. I told her you probably biked about a quarter of a mile, got tired, sat down to rest and fell asleep."

"And you couldn't be much further from the truth." Tex resisted the urge to give Parnelli a slap on the back to see if his sunburn was still painful. His mind was distracted from the verbal abuse by an approaching bicycle. He walked over to the path to wait for the rider.

Lizzy dismounted from the bicycle and walked it through the

grass with Tex at her side.

"Parnelli said you were out looking for me."

"Yeah. I was a little concerned. You were gone for a long time and we never saw you go past here."

"I appreciate your thinking of me. Sorry to have interrupted your time with the other gentlemen."

"It was good to get out and see more of the park. It's beautiful here. Where were you anyway?"

By this time the two were within earshot of the improvised card table.

"Madison."

"Madison!" Parnelli said. "Did someone give you a ride to town?"

"No. I'll have you know this seventy-year-old body rode all the way in and back."

"Come on, Tex. Where were you really?"

"I just told you, prune-face."

"I heard you, but my BS meter is going off."

"Then you need to get it fixed. It's so used to being around you and going off constantly that it obviously is malfunctioning."

"What the—"

Lizzy tapped him on the shoulder. "Parnelli, I see no reason to doubt the truthfulness of Tex's statement."

"Yes, ma'am. Hope you enjoyed your long ride, Tex."

*You patronizing SOB. I liked it better when you were calling me a liar.* "That long ride took a lot out of me. I need something to eat, and then I'm going to lie down."

"Are you sure you're OK, Tex?" Lizzy asked.

"Fine. I just need to recuperate. By the way, thanks for worrying about me."

"Welcome. I'm feeling a little tired myself tonight. I think I'll retire for the evening. See you gentleman in the morning."

"Good night, Lizzy," Parnelli said.

The professor jumped up from the table and bowed. "Bon nuit, Elizabeth. Parting is such sweet sorrow."

Lizzy retreated to her small tent erected next to the large tent the men would sleep in. After consuming a granola bar, Tex lay down in his sleeping bag. The noise of the two men playing cards kept him from going to sleep. In the old days he would have been out there at the table, excited to have an opportunity to extract some moldy cash from Parnelli's wallet. Lizzy didn't approve of gambling, so their sometimes not-so-friendly poker game was not part of the camping adventure. He lay there

thinking about how drastically Lizzy had changed their lives.

"Ouch!" Parnelli yelped.

"Shhh. Elizabeth is attempting to slumber," the professor said. "Ouch!"

Parnelli slapped at his arm. "That does it. I'm not going to sit here and be a pincushion or a blood donor. Let's move this game inside."

"Inside what edifice?"

"Our tent."

"Isn't Tex ensconced within?"

"I don't know what you're suggesting that he's doing there, but he is in the tent. It's only nine o'clock, so he can't be sleeping yet."

"Appears to be the appropriate occasion to commence imbibing from the lemonade jug and switch to poker."

"Sounds like a plan, Professor."

The two men gathered up the cards and the lantern. They entered the tent where Parnelli pulled out a box of poker chips, and the professor uncovered the jug of bourbon and lemonade.

Tex rolled over and looked at them. "What do you yahoos plan on doing?"

"Shhh. We're going to have a little poker game. Want in?"

It was pretty obvious he was going to have trouble sleeping with the two intruders in the tent along with their light. Lizzy wouldn't know he was gambling, unless their loud mouths betrayed them. *But I'd know I was doing something Lizzy didn't like. If I run around doing things she doesn't approve of and hiding the fact, I'd be lower than a pregnant bacteria. I either have to live in a manner she finds pleasing or give up the quest. I could try to bring her down to my level, but why would I want to ruin such a fine woman?* "No thanks." He tried to position himself so the light wouldn't bother him.

"I'll see your buck and raise you five," Parnelli said softly, taking great pains not to be overheard in the tent next to them.

The professor rubbed one of his mosquito bites. "I believe this is a ruse to persuade me to retreat from the field of challenge – sometimes alluded to as a bluff."

"You have to put your money in the pot to find out, Professor."

"You potentially could be taking advantage of the fact I'm a neophyte at this endeavor. It seems ill-advised to put an Abraham Lincoln in jeopardy at this juncture. I capitulate."

"Jeez, Professor. Better not do that with other people



around.”

“My dear, Parnelli, in the verbiage of Hoyle, that means I fold.”

Parnelli raked in the chips. “Why can’t you say so in the first place?”

“What was the worth of the configuration of cards you possessed?”

“Like I said before, Doc. If you want to see ’em, you gotta pay for it.”

“You mean I’ll go to my tomb never possessing the knowledge of whether I had a superior hand or not?”

“If you want throw the five in the pot, now, I’ll tell you. However, I get to keep the pot no matter what.”

The professor sighed. “I am obligated to decline your ungenerous offer. How am I to rest assured of the veracity of your statement?”

“If that means, how are you going to know whether I’m lying or not, I guess you wouldn’t. Only the Shadow knows what evil lurks in the heart of poker players.”

Tex had suffered enough. The temptation to join their game was overwhelming. Past memories of picking up his cards and discovering what delights the dealer had doled out flooded over him. His hands ached to perform his favorite quirk of showing just one card at a time as he opened the cards like a fan. His heart longed for the thrill of throwing a big bet into the pot. He rolled out of his sleeping bag.

“Ready to play now?”

“No.” Tex began to pull on his tennis shoes.

“Ready for a shot of happy lemonade?”

“I have no desire for any of your Kickapoo joy juice concoction.” Tex grabbed a windbreaker from his bag and put it on to ward off the pesky mosquitoes, which some Dakota people claimed resembled miniature helicopters capable of carrying off small children. After grabbing a flashlight, he stumbled through the door of the tent. Once outside he threaded his way through the trees to go down to the beach near where his boat lay on the sand.

A big log beckoned to him as a resting place. He sat on the rough wood, switched off his flashlight, and gazed up into the clear sky. Stars filled the heavens and also his heart with wonder. A shooting star streaking through the inky velvet background snared his attention. It was brilliant for a few seconds and then vanished. *Kind of like our lives here on Earth,*

*flashy, temporary, and forgotten. Is there really a God out there who created all of this? If there is, why does he give a rip about an old man in the middle of nowhere who's lived a lifetime without paying much attention to his maker? Doesn't he have more important things to worry about? Maybe God delegates people on Earth to be his ambassadors. Perhaps he sends someone like Lizzy along to bring love and concern into empty lives like mine.* He closed his eyes and listened to the water lapping against the sand.

A vehicle stopped on the road above him. The sweep of a flashlight scanned the beach and then his boat, stopping on the motor. The lights of the truck went out and the doors closed softly. Muffled voices headed his way.

"We have to do this quick."

"Why are we taking just the motor?"

"Getting away with a boat and getting rid of it afterward ain't easy. The motor's worth the most, and it's a lot easier to carry."

"Why are we doing this now? If we wait until later, no one will be awake."

"That's true and the park will be closed. You wanna sit there at the gate until morning waiting for them to open it for us?"

"Not tonight."

"That's why you do the heavy work, and I do the thinkin' here. No more talkin'."

*My boat is the only one down here tonight. No doubt what their target is. What's the best way to break up this little party without waking up another party in a nearby tent?* Since he had been sitting in the dark for a while, his eyes were adjusted to it and were able to make out the outline of the two men gingerly making their way with a tiny flashlight held close to their body to prevent detection but allow them to see enough to navigate. He slipped behind the log that had served as his throne and gateway to the heavens.

*I can scare the living hell out of these guys – I think. But it might backfire and maybe scaring them isn't enough. Their truck is still running. That means the keys have to be in it. How will these wannabe thieves react if their getaway truck got away? Let's find out.*

Tex felt along the sand until his hand encountered what he was groping for. He grasped the big rock and chucked it into the water not far away from his boat.

"What was that?" one of the men asked.

"Sh—. I don't know. Probably just a fish. Shut up and get to

the back of the boat and disconnect the motor.”

When the noise of the stone connecting with the water sounded, Tex had carefully made his way to the road and opened the driver’s side of the truck. Without closing the door fully, he shifted into drive and gave it gas. He flipped on the lights as he pulled away. The sound of yelling penetrated through the cab of the pickup. *Hope Lizzy slept through that!*

When Tex got to the top of the hill around the bend from the campgrounds, he pulled off the road into a short driveway which led to a closed gate. After pulling the keys out of the ignition, he exited the truck. Winding up like Whitey Ford, he tossed the keys as far as he could on the road ahead. *That ought to keep them out of trouble tonight. Hold on, a car might run over them and bend the car key making it unusable. Oh, well, part of the lesson being taught tonight – with no extra charge.*

With the aid of his flashlight, he found the entrance to the nature trail that led back to the campgrounds via the scenic route. *No sense meeting the yahoo’s on the road on the way home.* By the time he got back to the tent, Tex was exhausted. A long bike ride and a fairly long walk in the same day was asking a lot of his out-of-shape, seventy-year-old heart. The poker game was still going on.

“Where you been?” Parnelli asked.

“I went for a stroll.”

“You missed all the excitement.”

“What. Did you win a big pot?”

“No. Somebody stole a truck right next to the campgrounds.”

Tex took off his hat and wiped his brow. “Really?”

“And you didn’t hear or see anything?”

“Just crickets and nighthawks. Dang, I always miss all the fun.” He took his shoes and windbreaker off and slipped back into his sleeping bag. In two minutes he was oblivious to the clinking of poker chips behind him.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Tex awakened to the smell of camp smoke and bacon. *Ahh! Love that smell.* His two tent mates were snoring and showed no signs of regaining consciousness in the near future. The empty lemonade jug lay on its side. *This might be my chance to have some one-on-one time with Lizzy.* After donning his shoes and jacket, Tex stepped out and took in a

deep draught of fresh air, spiked with campground odors.

Lizzy sat at the picnic table. Tex sauntered over. "Morning, Lizzy."

"Top of the morning to you, Tex. How'd you sleep?"

"With that soft mattress under me, it was almost like being in bed. Slept like a college student in a seven a.m. class after an all-night beer party."

Lizzy laughed. "I'll take your word for that one. Are your two companions awake?"

"I have a feeling they're not going to be rousing out of the sack for quite a while. They were up pretty late last night."

"Talking?"

"Yeah. A lot of talk about investments."

"Oh. High finance, huh?"

Tex thought about the amount of bourbon that had gone down the gullets of the two poker players. "Definitely high."

"I'm guessing you're ready for that big breakfast now and don't want to wait for the others to wake."

"About as much as I'd like to have a prefrontal lobotomy."

"I figured so. I'll get cracking on it, pun intended when I get to the eggshells."

Tex and Lizzy shared a long leisurely breakfast. Tex was enjoying himself immensely. A quick glance at his watch told him the hour for them to leave for the senior games was approaching. *Can we leave Parnelli and the professor here sawing logs?*

"About time to get ready to leave, isn't it?"

Tex nodded.

"Better wake up the boys. They'll be upset if we leave them behind. I don't want to hear Alistair bawling again tonight."

*That makes two of us!* "I'll see what I can do."

Tex entered the tent noisily, hoping that would be enough to do the trick. No luck. "Time to wake up, guys." No response. Tex did a rendition of taps through his lips. Still no sign of life. He gave Parnelli a couple of shakes. The object of his attention simply rolled over. "Screw this." Tex grabbed a bottle of water and unwound the cap. He positioned himself right over Parnelli's face and started pouring slowly. Parnelli came up sputtering.

"Flood! Man the boats." He opened his eyes and beheld Tex standing over him. The water bottle had already been hidden behind Tex's back at that point. "What the hell's goin' on here?"

"Reveille. Up and at 'em, soldier boy."

"I ain't no soldier boy. Leave me alone!" He lay back down.

"Suit yourself. We're leaving for the senior games in about half an hour. If you want to do a Sleeping Beauty imitation, that's fine with me. I'll have a better chance of getting the kiss in this story."

Parnelli shook his head to clear the water off his face and the fog out of his mind. "I forgot about the games. Can't miss those since they're one of the big reasons we made this trip."

"I'll leave it to you to wake the professor. I won't ask any questions about your methodology, so feel free to be creative. Oh. The bad news is: you don't have time for a classic breakfast. The good news is: you can stop at McDonald's and get an Egg McMuffin to go."

Parnelli groaned. "Thinking about food makes me a bit nauseated right now."

\* \* \*

The foursome piled into Lizzy's car and made the short trek to Madison. After getting directions on how to find the track, they pulled into the parking lot. A woman at the gate passed them schedules of events. The friends took a seat in the bleachers and perused the schedules since there was no action on the track.

"Check this out," Parnelli said. "The top three finishers in each contest qualify to participate in the national senior games."

Tex nodded. "Luckily they have this divided by age groups, so the fifty-year-olds aren't competing against the seventy-year-olds."

"Look at all the events they have available!" Lizzy said. "It's a veritable smorgasbord. Horseshoes, badminton, jump roping, swimming, tennis. My gosh. There's something for everybody."

"Not quite," Tex said. "There's no poker on the venue." Parnelli glared at him.

Their conversation was interrupted by a voice over the loudspeaker. "Last call for the ninety to ninety-four-year-old male 100-meter run."

"Ninety! You've got to be kidding. Are they timing them with a calendar?" Parnelli asked.

"Be nice, Parnelli."

"I'm serious, Lizzy. How fast can a ninety-year-old run? You saw Irene's husband, and he's not even ninety yet."

"I know. It is a little hard to fathom someone of that age running at all, much less competing."

A minute later a gun sounded and the foursome looked down the track and saw two elderly men coming down the track toward them. One of them already had a sizeable lead over his competitor. The scoreboard clock read twenty-seven seconds when the leader crossed the finish line.

Tex turned to Parnelli. "Think you could beat him?"

"He was running pretty slow."

"Yeah, but could you beat him?"

"Maybe, not right now. My makeover isn't complete yet. Give me a year, and I'd kick his butt."

"You wouldn't be running against him. You need to worry about what speed the seventy-year-olds run."

"I don't have to worry at all, because I ain't going to be competing."

The eighty-five to eight-nine category was next. The winner came in under eighteen seconds.

Parnelli shook his head in disbelief. "Holy guacamole! That old dude was sprinting. He's almost old enough to be my dad!"

The eighty to eighty-four category was won in a slower time, but the seventy-five to seventy-nine winner came in with a time of 16:37.

The next heat was seventy to seventy-four women.

"Finally we get to see some females in action," Lizzy said.

The winner in that heat was just under twenty-five seconds.

"Think you could beat her, Lizzy?" Parnelli asked.

"I don't know. I'm tempted to find out next year. Now here are the guys in your age group. This ought to be interesting."

Four men competed in this heat. Only two seriously threatened to win with the victor coming across in 15.18 seconds.

"Wow. That's pretty good. How fast did you run the hundred in high school, Tex?"

"Around eleven something. But that was one hundred yards not meters. This is even further."

"That old guy wouldn't have been that far behind you when you were a kid. This really is unbelievable. How do these old dudes do it?"

"I would guess they keep themselves in good shape, eat well, and avoid self-destructive behaviors," Lizzy said, looking squarely into Parnelli's eyes. He turned away.

"Lizzy, were you really thinking about competing next year?" Tex asked.

"I think it would be a blast. I'd need a training partner

though. I'm not going to do it alone."

"It would be my pleasure to prepare for future competitions with you," the professor said.

"I want to race, too," Tex said.

Parnelli laughed. "You think you can run a fifteen-second hundred?"

"I didn't say that. I said I wanted to compete. Not everybody comes across the finish line in first place, but at age seventy crossing the finish line is criteria for being called a victor."

"When's the last time you ran?"

Tex's brow furrowed. The little gears in his mind seemed to be spinning around. The picture of the last time he ran came to his mind. His eyes misted up, and his chin began to quiver.

"Are you OK, Tex?" Lizzy asked.

Tex shook his head. He stood up and began descending the bleacher stairs.

"What's up with that? He looks upset."

"I don't know, Lizzy. Maybe he just has to use the john."

"Why would a question about running trigger such a reaction? I just don't get it." She gazed down at Tex slowly making his way toward the entrance.

\* \* \*

After an hour of watching a bunch of strangers compete, Lizzy said, "This would be more fun if we knew these people. I've seen enough to satisfy my curiosity. Why don't we go do something else?"

Parnelli stood up. "Works for me, Lizzy."

The professor stretched. "Where you lead, Elizabeth, I'll always follow."

Tex still stood against the fence watching the action by himself. The three made the trip to Tex's side. Parnelli and the professor kept on going toward the car.

"Tex, are you ready to do some more fishing?" Lizzy asked.

He nodded and started toward the car with her.

"Mr. Harris, if it's none of my business, just tell me so. When Parnelli asked you about running, you had an unmistakably emotional reaction. I just wondered if you wanted to talk?"

"No!" Tex looked over at Lizzy. *That was harsh.* "I'm sorry, Lizzy, for barking at you. Actually, I don't want to talk about it, but maybe I should. I've been holding it inside for a long time."

"I just want you to know that you've got a sympathetic ear

waiting for you whenever you need.”

“I appreciate that, but today probably isn’t the best time to spill my guts. It would be preferable to do it sometime when Parnelli and the professor aren’t around.”

“Whenever it works best for you, Tex.”



## Chapter 9

After lunch, the foursome lathered on sunscreen, including Parnelli, and loaded up the boat for a fishing venture.

Tex handed Alistair a lifejacket. "Here, Professor, better put this on. State law you know."

"If I'm not misguided, requisite application of a flotation device is simply to possess such a contrivance on board. Donning it upon your person is not mandatory."

"He's right, Tex," Parnelli said. "Can you swim, Professor?"

"Any imbecile can negotiate the water using propulsion techniques similar to denizens of the deep."

Parnelli coughed. "Tex can't swim."

Lizzy looked over at Tex. "Is that true?"

"Why do you think I'm sporting this ugly orange thing?"

"I was a member of the swimming team in college," the professor said, adding a little gloating to the boating.

"That's nice, Doc. Looks like now you've grown your own inner tube around your waist so you don't have to put forth too much effort to stay afloat."

Alistair turned to look at Tex. "My dear fellow, if a modicum of spare blubber will serve as a flotation device, you're perfectly secure in removing the gaudy artificial one that the fashion police would surely rebuke you for."

Luckily Lizzy was between the two men. "How about we go fishing, gentlemen?"

"Fine with me," Tex said and kicked the engine to life. A short while later they anchored and threw out their lines.

After about an hour of little luck, the professor said, "Does angling always provide this extravagance of diversion?"

"It was lots of fun yesterday," Lizzy said.

Tex bit off a grin. "The professor wasn't with us then. Perhaps there is some type of cause-effect relationship here."

"Are you implying that I'm a damper on your festivities?"

Tex grinned. "Oh, no. I was just thinking out loud."

"My gluteus maximus has reached the tolerance threshold. I can't abide this unforgiving bench any longer." He stood up.

"Professor, it's not a real good idea to stand up in a small boat, even if you are used to it."

"Poppycock. I have the equilibrium of a gymnast."

Just then the wake from a passing boat struck their craft and the professor lurched slightly. He repositioned his foot to

maintain his balance, but in the process he stepped on the lifejacket in the bottom of the boat and totally lost control. He pitched forward and went over the side. Parnelli grabbed his fishing pole to make sure it didn't take a dive as well.

The professor resurfaced and, thrashing the water around him, started swimming away from the boat."

"Hey, professor, where you going?" Tex called. "The boat's over here."

"Help me out of here!"

Parnelli grabbed an oar and held it down in the water so the professor could reach it. He pulled the professor to the side of the boat. "You gotta be real careful getting in the boat, or you're going to tip the thing over, and we'll all be treading water. Everybody lean your body to the other side, so when the Doc puts his weight on the side of the boat we counterbalance him.

The professor finally managed to drag himself over the side and took his seat again. He reached down, grabbed the life preserver, and strapped it around his upper body.

"I thought you said you were on the swimming team, Professor?" Tex said.

The professor looked down. "Yes. But I was the student manager."

Tex and Parnelli both let out a belly laugh. When he saw that Lizzy didn't look amused, Tex stifled his mirth.

"Well, we might as well go somewhere else to try our luck now. I'm afraid the professor scared all the fish to the other end of the lake."

The professor tried to wipe some of the water off his face. "I'd rather you deposit my wet derriere on the beach. I'm not sure that my heart can withstand the excitement of this so-called sport. Parnelli, perhaps you'd care to join me for a spot of lemonade and a few hands of cards."

"The fish don't seem to be biting, and there's no sense wasting a whole afternoon and risk aggravating my sunburn. Sounds like a wonderful plan, Doc."

Tex nodded. "Lizzy, would you like to continue fishing?"

"Yeah. If you're game."

Tex smiled, gave her a thumbs-up, and motored the boat back to the beach, dropping off the two men. "Maybe you'll need a little nap, Professor, after all that exertion." The professor glared at him but held his tongue, probably because the motor presented too much competition.

"Sometimes I think you two don't like each other," Lizzy

yelled over the noise.

"I get along with just about everyone, Lizzy. So I figure the problem must be in the professor's court."

Lizzy rolled her eyes. "Men! You guys are impossible. So, where are we going to fish now?"

"Since Parnelli's not here to man the anchor, let's try drifting for a change."

"What's that mean?"

"We don't put the anchor down but just let the wind push us where it wants to."

"Is that an effective way to fish?"

"Definitely. It provides movement in the bait, plus it lets you cover a wider area, allowing you a greater opportunity of finding a school."

When Tex got the boat in the proper location to allow them to sweep much of the lake, he turned the boat so it was parallel to the waves and then killed the motor. He showed Lizzy how to let the bait drag behind them.

After she had her line out far enough, Lizzy cranked the wheel of her reel until it clicked. "Well, Tex, Parnelli and Alistair aren't here. This would be a perfect time to talk."

Tex shuddered.

"Are you cold?"

"Just my feet. I'm not sure I want to tell you about this."

"Oh!" Lizzy's smile froze on her face and disappeared.

"It's not that I don't want to tell *you*. If I was to tell *anyone* about this, you're the only one I'd tell."

Tex looked into Lizzy's eyes. It seemed like she was trying to penetrate into his soul to read the thoughts he was trying to conceal, yet pining to provide even a small amount of catharsis. He blew out a big sigh. Her eyes had tipped the scales.

"Lizzy, there was an accident a few years ago, one which I'd like to forget about, but I can't." He looked at her, waiting patiently and ignoring any desires she might feel to pump him for the information. "My son had a beautiful three-year-old daughter. She was a little Angel, literally, for that was her name. One day Grandpa got the huge opportunity to babysit for the little darling. We were out in the front yard enjoying a beautiful spring day, and I got distracted by something. I took my eye off Angel for a moment, and the next thing I hear is the squealing of brakes and.... Tex looked away to the horizon. My granddaughter died at the scene that day and part of me died with her."

"You told me you didn't have any children."

"In a way I was telling the truth. My son disowned me after the accident for letting his little precious be taken from him. He and his wife were decimated. She ended up filing for divorce later, and my son moved to Alaska to get away from it all. Later he moved down south somewhere. I don't even know where he is today. He's never forgiven me for my one moment of negligence."

Lizzy put her hand on Tex's shoulder. "And you've been carrying this around with you, eating you up inside ever since?"

Tex nodded. "I don't know how many times I've wished it'd been me that was hit by the car that day."

"Have you forgiven yourself?"

"What? How can I do that? I caused the death of the sweetest little girl you ever saw. And the breakup of a wonderful couple. And the loss of not only my son's love but his presence in my life. How can I forgive myself for that?"

"Tex, my words might be lame. I've never gone through what you did. It's easy for me to sling out advice about washing away guilt and healing the past. But let me tell you what I know about forgiveness. I've read stories of people who had loved ones murdered. They were in a psychological jail until they granted forgiveness to the perpetrator of their loved one's death. The blessings that flowed after that forgiveness defy description. It became apparent to me that love and forgiveness are the most powerful forces upon the Earth. What happened to you wasn't deliberate. You didn't kill Angel. You had a moment of weakness which allowed an accident to happen. We all have things we wish we could take back in our lives. Most aren't as serious as yours, but just the same we don't get do-overs in life. All we get to do is forgive those who have trespassed against us, which typically includes ourselves."

"Can I tell you another secret?"

"Of course."

"Sometimes I just want to crawl into my mother's lap and cry like a toddler whose world has been tipped upside down. I want to quit being a man and being strong and mature and just be a kid again. Is that crazy or what?"

Lizzy shook her head. "I've had days where I wished I could crawl into my daddy's lap. Wanting to do it isn't crazy. Actually doing it might be. It's a form of running away from reality and responsibility. This is only a guess, but I wager that our mental hospitals are filled with patients who just couldn't take the

pressures of life anymore. They gave up the fight that the rest of us continue to face. We all need help making that stand, Tex. You've been trying to go it alone. Maybe you're succeeding at making it look like you're surviving, but you're letting significant parts of you die inside. Does that make any sense?"

"It's true. I understand that our society demands men to be strong and silent. Admitting weakness is folly. What woman wants to be married to a weakling?"

"Tex, strength is not defined by how cold and distant and void of feeling you can be. Real strength is being able to be vulnerable. To show imperfections and not play the games most people get involved in, hiding their true selves so that people have a good opinion of them. Courage is not absence of fear but having the resolve to stand up in the face of that fear. I heard a sermon once where the pastor said only the strongest man could admit his weakness and turn his life over to the Lord."

"We couldn't have this conversation without bringing up God?"

"I don't think so, Tex. Ultimately, nothing that happens on this planet has any significance except in the light of eternity. Does it matter who won the Super Bowl in 1968? Or the World Series in 2005? Or who won the giant jackpot lottery and became a millionaire and who had their life savings invested in Enron and became poor. All those things seem big to us at the time, but when all is said and done, what really mattered in life?"

Tex nodded. "We do have a tendency to major on the minors."

"By the way, have you forgiven your son?"

"What? I'm the one that hurt him. Why would I need to offer forgiveness?"

Lizzy shrugged. "Think about it. From what you're telling me, your son has inflicted great hurt upon your life, and he made a choice to do that. You need to forgive him."

"But I don't...well, maybe, I have been resentful toward him. But like I said, I have no clue to his whereabouts, so I can't tell him I forgive him."

"Maybe not to him, but your healing will start when you forgive him in your heart."

"That's poetical, and commonsensical – if that's a word."

"If it isn't, it should be. I think you need a big hug, Tex. I'd give you one right now, but I'm afraid we'd become members of a synchronized falling-out-of-a-boat team."

"I hope you offer rain checks. We'll be back to the shore sometime today."

"You got it. By the way, does Parnelli know about this?"

"He knows that my granddaughter was killed. I never told him about my negligence. That day was the last time I remember actually running. I sprinted to the street, but it did no good."

"Now I see why you reacted like you did. I probably would have done the same. By the way, thanks for having confidence enough in me to share this personal history."

"And thanks for taking a little of the pain away."

"My pleasure. Now maybe I can share a little bit of burden with you?"

"Absolutely, Lizzy. I have a strong shoulder."

"I'm in a little quandary. Alistair is coming on very strong with comments that lead me to believe he's going to propose to me."

Tex swallowed hard and tried to hide the rush of adrenaline he felt zing through his body. After an uncomfortable silence, he said, "Exactly what do you want from me?"

"I just needed to tell someone about it, I guess. I can't really expect you to give me guidance."

"Well, I could say something like Nancy Reagan did about drugs. Just say no."

"That's one of the possibilities, I guess. No, yes, or maybe later."

"Don't you think he's rushing things? You just met a few weeks ago."

"That thought did cross my mind, but also I'm not a spring chicken anymore. I'm not sure I can afford any extended courtships. My first one was six years. But this one would be the courtship of Eddie's grandfather. Alistair believes six weeks is a good time frame."

"Maybe I'm all wet, Lizzy, but it seems to me that the older a person gets, the more set in their ways they are. You need to find out what each other's ways are. You might find that you'd drive each other crazy. It takes time to explore all of those possibilities." *And to have someone else find the dirt. Of course, Lizzy might want to know about the professor's lemonade addiction and gambling fetish.*

"That's very wise, Tex. If I act in haste, I might repent in leisure. Thanks for the words of wisdom. Ooooh. Something tugged on my line!"

“Tug back!”

\* \* \*

In the morning, Lizzy and Tex went on a bike ride while Parnelli and the professor got their beauty sleep. Later, on their way back from using the shower facilities, they saw the two sleepyheads were stirring about the camp.

“I hope, since we’re out in the sticks, Lizzy won’t suggest going to church today,” Parnelli said.

“Indubitably, my good man. Fortunately, I have discovered one charm possessed by this rustic ambience.”

“What’s that?”

“No church bells or steeples.”

Parnelli wiped some sleep from his eye. “Here come the cozy couple. I’m almost jealous of Tex.”

“Almost?”

“I’ve decided that I’m never going to be able to change my life to suit Lizzy. There’s no sense in beating my head against a wall. I’d rather have the freedom to have some fun than have some honey.”

The professor grinned. “Parnelli, stand by and observe a master at work. I intend to have both.”

Tex and Lizzy had just reached hearing distance when the sound of a guitar strumming drew all of their attention. A small group was gathered around on the beach. They began to sing.

Lizzy stood transfixed listening to the harmonious sound. “Gentleman, I do believe that’s a church service in progress.”

“Church? On the beach?” Parnelli asked.

“Why not? I don’t think God is impressed with fancy structures or prejudiced against people worshipping him in the great outdoors which he created. Would any of you care to accompany me?”

Parnelli coughed. “I think I’ll pass, Lizzy. I have a spot of a headache this morning.”

The professor grabbed one of Lizzy’s arms in his. “Enchanté to be your escort this morning.”

Tex threw his shower bag down next to where Lizzy had placed hers. He encircled Lizzy’s other arm and looked into the professor’s startled eyes. *Eat your heart out, professor.* “Three’s company. Shall we go?”

Lizzy laughed. “I feel like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*. Gentlemen, start your engines.”

The three threaded their way through the trees down to the beach. An hour later they returned arm in arm again. When they arrived at the camp, they stood there still bodily entangled. Neither man seemed to be in a hurry to give up his hold.

"I can't believe the guy spoke on forgiveness, Lizzy. You just mentioned the topic yesterday and bam."

"When God wants to get our attention, Tex, he sometimes works in that manner. Now, it's time that I get some lunch ready, so if you fine fellows would like to let me have my arms back, I'll get to work."

"I'd rather embrace your delicate and lovely limb than dine with kings," the professor said.

Tex looked up at the sky. *And I'd rather embrace your ugly neck in a ranger chokehold.* He complied with Lizzy's request and stepped away.

"That's extremely sweet of you, Alistair, but there are two other hungry men to consider."

The professor looked around. "I don't believe I'd derive any pleasure from embracing their appendage."

Lizzy laughed again before extracting her arm from the professor's.

\* \* \*

The friends packed up their gear and at four o'clock started the return trip to Sioux Falls with Lizzy following Tex. Shortly after entering I-29, Tex said, "Look at that car up ahead of us. That turkey is all over the road."

"Looks like he's under the influence of something. I'd be real careful passing him, especially with him driving a Hummer. That thing's like a tank."

"I intend to be. Can you grab my cell phone and call Lizzy. Her phone number is on index card in my glove compartment. Warn her to be careful."

The noise of a loud stereo hijacked Tex's attention as a car full of teenagers zipped by the truck. "Where's a cop when you need one?"

The speeding car caught up with the weaving driver. Just as the kids pulled alongside, the Hummer wandered across the white line right into their path. The young driver attempted to swerve to the left, but went too far and the car went out of control, rolled over once and slammed into the base of a cement overpass. The Hummer continued down the highway.



Parnelli had managed to dial Lizzy's number and was talking to her when the accident occurred. Tex, who had already been slowing down to keep Lizzy from reaching the Hummer before he could warn her, pumped the brakes and then grabbed the phone out of Parnelli's hand.

"Lizzy. Do not stop for the accident. We'll take care of it. You need to call 911 to report the accident and report the drunk driver on the road. Then get close enough to that Hummer to get his license plate and back off from him. Is that clear?"

"Won't you need my help at the accident scene?"

"Other motorists will help out, I'm sure. Just keep going and do what I said, please." He threw the phone in Parnelli's lap and maneuvered the car onto the left shoulder where he brought it to a halt near the mangled remains of the kids' car.

"Why didn't you follow the drunk and let Lizzy handle the first aid?" Parnelli asked.

"Because I wanted to spare her. From the looks of that car, there might not be anyone alive to give first aid to. Let's go."

They covered the distance from their vehicle to the wreck as quickly as possible. The car had hit broadside with the passenger side taking the impact. Only the passenger on the driver's side in the back seat showed any signs of life. They were able to open the back door and were stunned by the carnage inside.

"What are we going to do?" Parnelli asked. "This guy might have a spinal injury. Should we move him?"

"If we don't stop the bleeding, there won't be any worries about paralysis." Flashbacks from his time in Vietnam assaulted Tex and threatened to engulf him in a wave of nausea. He forcefully willed himself to take the young man into his arms and with Parnell's assistance place him in the grass. Two more cars had stopped in the interim. Parnelli and a couple of other good Samaritans tried to halt the flow of blood with the T-shirts Parnelli had retrieved from his bag. Tex went back into the car to determine if anyone else was alive. He didn't detect a pulse on any of them.

The wait for the emergency vehicle to arrive was the second longest of Tex's life. Scenes of the ambulance arriving to pick up his fallen granddaughter haunted him as he stood by watching the others attend to the severely injured teenager on the ground. A highway patrolman was the first official on the scene. The ambulance arrived later and Tex's prognosis on the other three victims was confirmed. Tex and Parnelli gave the

patrolmen their testimony concerning the accident as the injured man was loaded into the ambulance and taken to the hospital. After the patrolman had all he needed from them, he told them they were free to leave.

The reality of the situation seemed to really hit when Tex re-entered the normality of his small world inside the truck. The receding of adrenaline left a sensation of weariness.

"Parnelli, phone Lizzy to make sure she's all right."

After complying with Tex's wish, Parnelli ended the call and put the phone back. "She's fine. The highway patrol caught the guy near the Dell Rapids exit. They hauled the guy off to jail, so we should see a Hummer sitting on the shoulder up ahead."

"Where is she?"

"She just dropped the professor off at his place and is headed home. Oh, darn!"

"What's the matter?"

"I forgot to send her your love."

"Parnelli, I'm not in the mood for our little word games, today."

"Sorry."

"You're forgiven." The words Tex had used sank into his consciousness. He shuddered, feeling like a dog trying to shake water off its fur. The sensation that he was being stalked by his own conscience was not shaken.

"Parnelli, do you think about death much?"

"More than I like to. Why do you ask?"

"Those kids back there. They were driving down the freeway enjoying music and probably laughing, and literally a few seconds later they're lifeless."

"Maybe if they had been thinking of death and watching their speed, this wouldn't have happened."

"Yeah. That thought went through my mind. It's a wonder that any teenager ever reaches adulthood. Remember how crazy we were back then?"

"It takes a bit of work to remember that far back, but I can dredge up some pretty crazy moments from our youth."

"We grew out it, but those kids never got a chance. Poof. All that potential for good erased from the planet in a heartbeat."

"Sheesh, Tex. They might have all grown up to be Ted Bundy's or something. Maybe the world was spared grief because of the accident."

"Perhaps. We'll never know. I do realize that I need to consider every single day I have left as precious and make the

most of it.”

“Then you should have gotten into our little poker games. It was a blast. The professor may be smarter than I am, and he may be richer too, but if we keep playing long enough I might reverse the latter status.

“Is that all you think about? Don’t you ever ponder your legacy? What are you leaving behind for your family to remember you by?”

“My poker chips and the money I have saved up. They’ll have fond memories of me.”

“Don’t bet on it. They’ll bank and then spend that money without one speck of remorse that you’re gone.”

Parnelli nodded. “You’re probably right. Screw them if that’s the case. Maybe I’ll just spend it all before I go.”

“That’s a great attitude.”

“It’s my money!”

“I’m not talking about the money. It’s just the emptiness of your life that strikes me.”

“Emptiness of my life? Since when did my life get empty? You never complained about it before.”

“I’m not complaining, just observing. It’s your life. It just seems like such a waste to live with so little love.”

Parnelli stared at him. “Oh, I see, from the man whose life is overflowing with it.”

“Hold on. I’m not saying my life is what I want it to be. I guess I should have phrased it how empty *our* lives are. I’ve gotten a glimpse of what life should be like.”

“Why are you suddenly questioning everything in your life? Didn’t you already go through your midlife crisis?”

“I don’t know. All of a sudden, it’s like I’m some nearly blind guy that somebody put a pair of glasses on. Things around me look a lot different.”

“Lizzy.”

Tex turned and eyeballed him. “What?”

“You heard me. Lizzy caused all this. You were starting to act strange right after we met her, but this weekend after you two were out fishing alone, you’ve really gone off the deep end.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“There ain’t no maybe. She almost did the same thing to me, but I got smart. You still have time to do the same. In fact, the professor is probably going to take her captive soon, and you’ll be back to your ornery old self – and maybe even worse.”

“Sounds like you’d like that.”

"You'd be a helluva lot more fun to be around."

Tex blinked and focused on the highway ahead of him where a black Hummer sat in mute testimony of a recent tragedy.

\* \* \*

The next afternoon Tex got a call from an *Argus Leader* reporter.

"Mr. Harris, we'd like to interview you and get your story about the accident yesterday. From what we understand, you saved a young man's life."

"There's your story. What else matters? I didn't stop so I could toot my own horn."

"I'm sure you didn't, Mr. Harris. We need more heroes in life, and we need to share their stories with other people. Besides, I understand you started an organization called the Angels of I-29. This would be a great chance for you to promote that organization and maybe get more volunteers."

Tex scratched his head. *What harm could it do to give the guy a little of my time? Maybe it would encourage other people to be heroes.* "All right, you made the sale. I'll name the place. My buddy Parnelli did most of the work, so you better plan on including him."

"Not a problem."

"Tomorrow at the senior center at two p.m."

"Perfect! I'll be there. How will I know you?"

"I'll be wearing a white Stetson."

"Gotcha!"

Tex hung up the phone but then immediately picked it up again and dialed Parnelli.

"Hey, prune face. I thought I better give you a heads-up. Your weekly pinochle game has to get over right at two o'clock tomorrow and you better dress up a little bit."

"Dress up! To play pinochle?"

"No. For the photographer. *The Argus* is doing a story on us."

"No kidding? I'd better get a haircut in the morning."

"Your nose or ears?"

"Eat a rock!"

Tex laughed. "You just reminded me it's lunchtime. See you tomorrow."

The reporter got his story and a bevy of photos to accompany it. He insisted that Tex wear his good guy hat. The two were discussing the interview when Lizzy and Alistair strolled in. The professor had her arm wrapped up again.

The professor's smile threatened to engulf them. "Afternoon, gents."

Tex wiped whatever trace of smile he might have had off his own face. "Professor."

"Eh, what's up, Doc?" Parnelli asked.

"Well, I am ecstatic to find your esteemed personages upon the premises, so that you can partake of the bliss of the next few moments."

Tex swallowed hard. He had a sinking feeling that something had gone on between Lizzy and the professor. He looked at Lizzy. She seemed surprised and puzzled by his statement about sharing bliss. *Now what's this con man up to?*

As the four stood there in their own little isolated corner of the spacious room, Alistair released Lizzy's arm and knelt down. "Elizabeth, in the presence of these witnesses, I hereby request your hand in marriage." He pulled a ring from his pocket. "Will you accept this ring as a token of my undying and unwavering affection and give me verbal confirmation of your willingness to become my spouse?"

Tex felt adrenaline surge through his body. *I can't believe he did this – and in public. I gotta stop this!*

"Excuse me, folks. I hate to interrupt such an eloquent proposal of marriage, but I think this is like the part of the wedding where the pastor says something about speak now or forever hold your peace. I'm speaking. In all fairness to Lizzy, I think she should know that you were never a professor at Concordia University."

The professor stood up and faced Tex eyeball to eyeball.

"And in what manner did you come to be in possession of such knowledge?"

"I called the university to ask them."

"You doubted the veracity of my statements. You slunk behind my back to try to dig up malicious slander on me to foil my efforts to win the woman you wanted?"

"Professor, that is irrelevant. What matters here is whether you lied. If you told a whopper about your past, how can Lizzy trust you for the future?"

"Excellent point, Tex! One minuscule issue here must be examined under the microscope to determine truth. Which Concordia University did you phone?"

"There's more than one?"

"Mr. Harris, the name Concordia is borne by several esteemed institutions of higher learning run by the Lutheran Church."

Tex felt his face turning red.

"I called the one in Saint Paul, Minnesota."

"You might endeavor to contact the establishment in Chicago where I actually was employed."

Tex forced himself to look at Lizzy. Her face showed shock and anger at the turn of events. *I haven't felt this bad since my son disowned me.*

The entire proceeding was interrupted by the chirping of Lizzy's cell phone. She removed it from her purse and checked out the incoming number. "Excuse me, gentlemen. Hello, Martha."

The blood which had highlighted Lizzy's face a moment earlier drained out as she listened to the voice on the other end of the phone. Tex felt the urge to hold her up, as she seemed to stagger. Alistair grabbed her instead.

"I'm on my way over right now. Bye."

"Alistair, I must ask that you take me back to my house to get my car. Martha just received a visit from representatives of the army. Her husband was killed in Iraq."

Tex felt another kick in the stomach. This one was empathy for another person and not himself.

"Certainly, my dear. We can discuss my proposal on the way to your house."

She glared up at the professor with a look of disbelief. Her glance then went to Tex. Finally her eyes rested on Parnelli. "Mr. Fields, would you give me a lift to my house, or do I need to call a taxi?"

"But, Elizabeth, I already have offered to convey you to your residence."

"And you also had the insensitivity of wanting to talk to me about marriage when I'm reeling with the loss of a family member. I think I need to deal with you – and Mr. Harris – at a later time. Parnelli, your answer please?"

Parnelli glanced at the professor, who nodded his approval.

"Sure. I can drop you off wherever you want."

"Thank you." She pulled out of Alistair's grasp and with a

firm set to her jaw walked to the entrance. Parnelli had to hurry to keep up with her.

Tex took his eyes off the departing couple and returned to the angry face in front of him.

"My dear Mr. Harris, you are indeed fortunate that I pride myself on being a man of peace. Otherwise, to use a vulgar expression, I'd kick your ass all the way to the Rocky Mountains." He strode away to the exit.

Tex stood there in a state of shock. *How did my world go to hell in just five minutes?* Tex got the vision of a bucking bronco. The horse did everything he could to rid himself of the rider on his back. Tex wanted to buck the feeling in his heart right out of his body. In the past he had dealt with such emotions by stopping by the local watering hole to attempt to drown his sorrows with liquid anesthesia. In light of his new self-awareness, Tex realized he couldn't run away in that fashion. *What's the best way to deal with sorrow? Reach out and help someone else.* The idea had just popped into his head. *Yeah. I'll help someone else. It's been a while since I visited Irene and the folks at the home. Maybe someone there needs more cheering up than I do.*

With his head bowed down, he made his way back to his truck. As he pulled into traffic, the sounds of *Rocky Mountain High* pulsed through the speakers. The professor's threat rang in his ears. *I used to like that song. Time to change the station.* He fiddled with the dial. A pleasant-sounding song came through. He left it there while he put both hands on the wheel to make a turn. When the turn was successfully negotiated, his concentration went back to the radio.

*"Forgiven, forgiven, forgiven and free. Forgiven, forgiven eternally."*

*Not again! This theme is haunting my footsteps.* He reached to change the frequency again. *Wait a minute. If Lizzy is preaching forgiveness, doesn't that mean she has to forgive me, also? That's a two-way road.*

Tex arrived at the home and strolled down to the community room where he always found someone to talk to. He spotted Irene's wheelchair in the corner and headed in that direction.

"Hi, Irene. Where's John today?"

The older woman gazed at him and blinked back tears. "My John passed away this weekend. The funeral is tomorrow."

Tex's mouth fell open. "Oh, my gosh, Irene, I'm so sorry!"

She sighed. "Me too. We were together for sixty-eight

years.”

Tex did a quick calculation. *I was in diapers when they got together.* “Where’s the funeral?”

“Right here in the home. Where’s Lizzy today? You’ve never been here without her.”

“That’s true, Irene. She had a family emergency. Her granddaughter’s husband was killed in Iraq.”

Irene looked up at him. “How old was he?”

“I’m not sure. Early twenties I think. They have one baby.”

“That is such a raw deal. Why couldn’t God have kept that young man alive and taken me instead?”

Tex shrugged. *What can I say to that?*

“I want to help. Can you tell Lizzy I want to try to console her granddaughter? What’s her name?”

“Martha. That sounds like a wonderful idea. You both lost husbands. Maybe you can help each other heal.”

“Maybe. So, do you have one of those new-fangled phones that don’t have a cord?”

“Cell phone?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Got one?”

“Yep.”

“Well, what’s stopping you from using it?”

Tex shrugged again. “Nothing.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out the phone and speed-dialed Lizzy’s number.

“Tex, there’s no need to try to apologize right now.”

“Lizzy, I’m not calling to apologize. I’m over at the home. Irene’s husband passed away. His funeral is tomorrow at....” He looked down at Irene.

“Two o’clock.”

“Two p.m. Irene wants a chance to console Martha. I’ll leave that in your hands to arrange if you want it to happen. Sorry to interrupt your time with Martha, and tell her I send my condolences. Bye.”

“Bye, Tex.”

“OK, Irene. I passed the message along. It’s in Lizzy’s hands now.”

“Thanks. Those are pretty good hands to be in. When you going to make your move on her?”

“What?”

“I know you want her. I just don’t understand why you’re waiting around.”

“Lizzy’s too good for me.”

“Then improve yourself and get up to her level.”



"You make that sound simple."

"In what way is she too good for you? Too smart? Too rich? Too young?"

"None of those. In character. She's just too nice a person to waste her life on me."

"BS. Pure BS. Character is simply trying to do what's right. All that takes is desire. You become good by wanting to be – with the good Lord's help. You won't get there by yourself."

"Irene, you never told us about your religious life."

"You never asked me."

"I'm asking now."

The two sat there for an hour as Irene poured out a history of her life and her dealings with God.

"I'm getting pretty tired, Tex. I need to have my daily nap."

"Can I push you to your room?"

"Yes, I think you can, but you may not. I'm not about to lose the ability to do something myself."

Tex smiled. "I know the feeling, Irene. Stick to your guns!"

\* \* \*

Tex pondered Irene's words as he drove home. His route took him right past a running track at one of the local schools. Memories of the meet in Madison triggered a desire to try to run. When he arrived at home, he dressed for exercise, mounted his bike and headed to the track. He walked several laps. After trying in vain to touch his toes, he stretched the best he could. There were no markings on the track so he estimated where the start of the hundred and lined up there after drawing a line in the cinders. Triggering his start with an imaginary gun, Tex tried to explode out of the imaginary blocks like in the old days. It seemed more like crystallized honey dripping out of a bottle. After thirty yards he stopped. *I couldn't even be competitive in the ninety and over category.*

As he was walking back to his bike, thinking of how disgusted and discouraged he was with his physical condition, he remembered that he had run to the accident scene on Sunday. *My body is capable. It's the mind I need to conquer.* He went back to the starting line. Four times he tried to complete the straightaway. All four times he failed, but he knew he was getting better. It was something he knew he could build up to. His attitude was positive as he made the journey home. He couldn't help but think of how nice it had been to ride with Lizzy.

## Chapter 10

Tex didn't bother telling Parnelli about the funeral the next day but went to the home alone. It was a hot day for a black suit, but he wanted to be properly attired for the occasion. When he entered the community room, where the short memorial service was to be held, the first person he saw was Lizzy. Then his eyes focused on Martha and her baby, and finally upon Irene. He hesitated for a moment, but then made up his mind to speak to Martha. He wouldn't intrude upon Lizzy.

Martha watched him coming. His eyes were upon her the entire time it took him to cross the room. He wasn't quite sure how to handle it, but he opened his arms to offer a hug and she accepted the invitation.

"I am so sorry about your husband, Martha. Words fail me." He fought back tears. "I just wish I could have prevented it somehow."

"Tex, I really appreciate your concern. It won't bring Tommy back, but it does make me feel better that there are other people around who care."

"If you need anything from me, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thanks. I might do that someday, but you're probably safe."

Tex nodded and walked away to stand by himself on the other side of the room.

\* \* \*

"Did something happen between you and Tex?" Irene asked Lizzy.

"Why do you think that?"

"He didn't even say hi to you and walked away."

"He knows I'm mad at him."

"What sin did he commit?"

Lizzy told her the story of the proposal scene from the senior center.

"Lizzy, dear. Forgive me for intruding into your life, but I think you're making a horrible mistake."

"Why do you say that?"

Irene looked around the room. She lifted her finger and pointed. "See that woman in the red dress?"

"Yeah."

"She used to be very wealthy. Some sweet-talking guy came and swept her off her feet. One of her friends warned her that the guy was a phony. She didn't listen to him and he made off with a good portion of her nest egg. Instead of being mad at Tex, you should be grateful that he was looking out for you."

Lizzy pursed her lips. "I supposed you could look at it in that light."

"No supposing, woman. I don't know what other light you could put it in."

"What if I thought he was just trying to sabotage Alistair's attempt to win my heart, so he could win it himself?"

"If he deliberately lied about the guy, then you'd have a beef with Tex. Sounds to me like he was being diligent for you and just made a mistake. It happens to the best of us. I even made a couple of those myself over my eighty-nine-year marathon. Look how lonely he looks over there."

Lizzy took a peek. "I guess he does look a little uncomfortable."

"He looks very dapper in that black suit. It's easy to tell he's a bachelor though. A wife never would have let him out of the house with that tie on."

"Tex is really a great guy," Martha said.

Lizzy looked up at the ceiling. "Oh, great. Now I'm being ganged up on."

Irene stuck her hand up and Martha gave her five.

"Fine. I'll go talk to him if it will make you two happy."

Irene folded her arms. "It's not what will make us happy. What will make you happy, Lizzy?"

"The problem, Irene, is that I don't know. I'm very confused right now."

"There's no shame in confusion. That's simply nature's way of saying, slow down and look before long-jumping into a pit of alligators."

Lizzy laughed. "Interesting that you'd use a track analogy."

"I used to be a jumper about the time they invented dirt. Back in those days they called it the broad jump. Ironic people watching a broad doing the broad jump."

Lizzy laughed again. "You're killing me here, Irene. I'm trying to be serious, and you're cracking me up."

"You're just lucky it's my husband's funeral today or you'd be rolling on the floor waiting for the paramedics to arrive."

Lizzy looked over at Tex. She caught him looking their way, but he quickly turned. "Yes, maybe I am indeed lucky. I'll be

back in a minute.”

“Take your time, dearie. Martha and I’ll be just fine here with the baby to watch over us.”

\* \* \*

Tex looked over and saw Lizzy headed in his direction. *She’s probably going to the bathroom.* He tried to turn so he wouldn’t see her. When he turned back again she was almost standing on his foot. He jumped slightly.

“Lizzy! What are you doing here?”

“I came to support my friend, Irene, at her husband’s funeral.”

“I know that. I mean what are you doing here next to me?”

“It seems like a good time to chat about yesterday.”

“Lizzy, I’m really sorry. I didn’t want—”

“Tex, no apology necessary. You were doing what you thought was right. People should have to apologize when they do something they know is wrong.”

“What about accidents?”

“OK. Those are worthy of apologies too. What you did was actually sweet. It’s flattering that someone would go out of their way for me like that.”

Tex shook his head. “I’m not so sure I did it just for you, Lizzy. The professor waltzed in and hypnotized Parnelli and yourself and some of the others down at the center. Maybe I was just jealous and wanted to put him in his place.”

“How long ago did you call the university?”

“A couple of weeks ago.”

“Then if you were doing it for yourself, why did you wait until he proposed to me to bring your information to light?”

“I don’t know. And even if I did wait, maybe I told you to keep him from having you instead of protecting you.”

“You’re trying really hard to look bad in my eyes, aren’t you? Usually people try to defend themselves; you’re trying to testify against yourself. Aren’t you familiar with the fifth amendment?”

Tex looked down at his feet. “Yeah, but I think in this case I might have been doing exactly that. If so, I’m still the scumbag you thought I was yesterday.”

“Tex, look at me.”

He looked into her eyes. “I never thought you were a scumbag. I was angry because you did something that I thought was wrong, but that doesn’t mean you are not a good man.

Even good people do bad things sometimes and vice versa. The big question mark is about consistency and effort. Most of your deeds are honorable and your effort is not to be questioned. The judge is throwing this case out of court, so quit trying to confess."

Once Tex had made eye contact, he didn't want to lose it. He felt like his soul was being sucked right out of him and pulled into her pupils. It seemed impossible to look away even if he wanted to. "So, how's Martha doing?"

"As well as can be expected. I was surprised she agreed to come along today. She was a basket case last night. A lot of hugs and crying and prayer got us through the night."

"Wow, sorry I couldn't have helped out in some fashion."

"That's very noble of you, Tex."

*Noble? No one has ever used that word in the same sentence as Tex Harris before.* "It's pretty easy to be noble after the fact. Volunteering for something after the job is done is pretty easy to do."

"That may be true. If you want to prove you're nobility, I'm going to the blood bank tomorrow. If you'd like to observe your right to bare arms, you can join me."

"What time?"

"Actually we can go anytime during the day."

"Can I work out afterward?"

"Nope. You'd be weak and also in danger of opening up the hole they made with the needle to draw your blood out."

"In that case, I'd like to do it after a workout."

"That's fine. I'd love to work out with you, but I better not leave Martha alone for so long at this point. Also, make sure you eat something after you work out and drink lots."

*Should I tell her about my running? Nah. I better wait until I can run an entire hundred meters.* "I can go to the gym at eight a.m. and be at the blood bank at ten a.m."

"Perfect. I'll see you tomorrow. I'd better get back to the girls before the service starts. Wait, no sense you standing over here alone. Come with me." She grabbed his hand and led him back to the wheelchair.

When Lizzy let go of his hand, it felt cold and naked. *I could get used to that pleasure real easily.*

\* \* \*

The next morning, Tex arrived at the blood bank fifteen

minutes early. He ate another granola bar and drained another bottle of water while he waited. *With all this water in me, I hope I don't have to run to the bathroom during the donation.* He brushed the oat crumbs out of his teeth with his finger and popped some chewing gum into his mouth.

Lizzy pulled in shortly before ten. The two strolled to the front door together. "Have you ever given blood before, Tex?"

"A long, long time ago."

"A lot of people are afraid to give blood. It's a shame, because it really isn't that big of a deal. Imagine having the ability to save lives by just enduring a little poke of a needle and maybe a little bit of light headedness and not doing it."

"Not hard for me to imagine. That's what I've been not doing for the last fifty years. I never really thought much about it."

"Same with most people. They don't think about it until they or one of their loved ones needs a transfusion. Then it kicks in that unless people donate their blood, transfusions won't be possible."

"You ought to be the national spokeswoman for maintaining the blood supply. All the males would sign up."

"Yeah, right. I think someone is trying to flatter me."

"Who?"

"Look in the mirror. You're getting almost as silvery-tongued as Alistair. Speaking of the professor, I'm supposed to do a patrol with him tomorrow on I-29. I don't feel comfortable right now being alone with him. I was going to see if Parnelli would switch places with me. Then I could go out with Parnelli's partner."

Tex grinned. "Who happens to be me. I think that can be arranged."

The receptionist at the desk greeted them.

"Good morning. We'd like to make a donation. My name is Elizabeth Adams. This is the first time here for my friend."

"And your address Ms Adams?"

"2417 N. Roosevelt."

"Is everything else current?"

"Yes."

The woman printed out a sheet and handed it to Lizzy with a clipboard and pen. "Please fill out the questions and bring it back to me. Now, sir, I'll need to see some picture ID."

Tex pulled his driver's license out of his wallet and handed it to her. She typed the information into the computer and handed back the plastic card. She gave him the same list of questions

and Tex took a seat next to Lizzy.

After returning the forms, the two sat and chatted until a nurse called Lizzy's name. "See you in a few, Tex."

A few minutes later another nurse called Tex's name. He stood up and followed her into a little room. After taking his blood pressure and temperature, she said, "Can I take your pulse please?"

"Will you give it back?"

"Hee-hee. Give me your wrist, sir, please."

Tex held out his arm. "You don't expect my pulse rate to show up accurately when a beautiful woman is holding my hand, do you?"

The girl rolled her eyes. "Now I lost count and have to start over. Since you used the word beautiful, I think I can overlook it this time."

After getting his pulse reading, she took a small sample of blood from a finger in two small glass tubes.

"Is that the whole donation? Am I done?"

The girl laughed. "No, Mr. Harris. That's just a sample we use to test your iron count. If you have iron poor blood, we can't let you donate."

"Maybe I should have eaten a couple of nails for breakfast then."

Grinning broadly, the girl said, "I don't think that iron would have hit your bloodstream in time. You'll have to eat them for dinner the night before."

"I'll try to remember that. In polite company, can nails be eaten with the fingers?"

"I think you have to eat the fingers separately."

Tex grinned. "You've heard that one before."

"Not with nails, but I could see your point."

"Point. Nails. You're pretty funny."

"You're not bad yourself. Wait here and I'll be right back with the results from your iron check."

"It might bounce."

"What?"

"My check."

"Ahhhh."

She came back a little later. "No need to eat the nails. You've got iron to spare."

"Cool."

"Now I have to ask you a bunch of personal questions, and we'll be done. Have you received blood or blood products in the

last eight weeks?”

“Never.”

“Have you had sex in the last twelve months with someone who has taken illegal drugs with a needle?”

“Wow. You weren’t kidding about the personal part. You’re mighty forward for someone who just met me. I usually don’t discuss my sex life until the second date.”

The girl grinned. “Sorry, part of the job description. Answer the question, please.”

“No.”

“Have you had sex in the last twelve months with someone who has taken clotting factor for hemophilia?”

“Ma’am I haven’t had sex in several years with anyone at all, so maybe you can omit those twelve-month questions.”

“Sorry, I have to ask you all of them.”

“OK. No I haven’t.”

“Have you had sex with a man even one time since 1977?”

Tex blinked. “Not hardly.”

“Were you born in or lived in any of the following countries: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Niger, or Nigeria.”

“Could you repeat those again?”

“Were you—”

“I was just kidding you. No, I wasn’t and haven’t.”

“I hope you don’t harass the people at Baskin and Robbins like that.”

“Not me. That would be cruel to run someone through thirty-one flavors and ask for a repeat. You only had eight of them.”

When they reached the end of the questions, Tex felt like he had run through a gauntlet. “Do you have to ask these questions every time a person donates?”

“Yes, sir. Are you going to give us such a bad time whenever you donate?”

“Yes, ma’am. Well, maybe. I just answered a ton of personal questions for you. Perhaps you can answer one for me.”

“Shoot. I reserve the right to tell you to take a hike.”

“Granted. If you have a good-looking *young* man in here, do you feel a little funny asking them all those sexual questions.”

“Depends on how you define funny. And now time for the main show.” She escorted him out into a room full of recliners. Lizzy was sitting on one of them with her arm raised in the air.

Tex pointed at Lizzy. “I think that young lady has a



question.”

The girl laughed. “Donors do that to stop the bleeding quicker.”

There was a rush of activity and a couple of nurses ran to one of the chairs and began working on a patient.

“What’s the matter there?”

“She fainted. Some people have that problem from time to time.”

Tex’s eyes opened wide. “Has anyone ever died?”

“If they had, do you think I’d tell you that and watch you run out the door?”

“You know me too well.”

“All right, Mr. Stand-up comedian. Time for you to sit down.”

He complied.

“Are you allergic to iodine?”

“Only if I drink it.”

“In that case, I’ll only rub it on your skin. Try not to lick it off.”

She took a large swab stick and rubbed the brownish liquid onto his arm. She handed him a rubber ball. “Please squeeze this three times and then squeeze and hold. By the way, this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.”

Tex looked at the needle. “I can see that. Why do I suddenly have the urge to jump up and yell, I’m a pincushion?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll page our resident psychiatrist.”

Tex’s mouth dropped open. “Really?”

“Gotcha! I still owe you a few. Now please do the squeeze thing so we can get you back to the comedy club.”

Five minutes later, she removed the needle from his arm, and Tex got to hold his arm in the air. A short time later, he was directed to the canteen where he found Lizzy dining on fruit juice and crackers.

“Well, how did it go, big guy?”

“Easy as falling off a cake?”

“You mean falling off a log?”

“You fall off a log if you want, I’ll fall off a cake.”

Lizzy laughed. The girl who was rummaging in the refrigerator for the apricot juice that Tex requested said, “Is this comedian your husband?”

Lizzy’s face turned three shades of red. “One of two ain’t bad. He’s a joker, but he’s not in my deck.”

Tex patted Lizzy’s hand. *Not yet anyway.*

The girl placed a cup of apricot juice in front of Tex. “Here you go. Thanks for donating today. You can give again in eight

weeks.”

“Do you accept tips?”

“Never got one before.”

“I’ll give you one.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Don’t trust any man under seventy.”

The girl shook her head and walked away.

“What’s it feel like to flirt with a girl young enough to be your granddaughter?” Lizzy asked.

“I don’t know. Do you want me to flirt with one and find out?”

“You are in fine form this morning. You probably shouldn’t take any of the cookies. They might be peeling you off the ceiling. Will you come back with me in eight weeks?”

“If I didn’t already wear out my welcome, I’d be honored to do this again.”

“Great. And you can start looking around you now and wonder whose life you saved with your generosity.”

“Makes me feel heroic to hear you say that.”

“People who donate blood are called silent heroes. And speaking of heroes, did you see this yet?” She pulled the morning edition of the *Argus* from the table in front of them. A picture of Parnelli and Tex decorated the front page. The story was entitled, ‘An Angel in Need is an Angel Indeed.’

“Nice-looking guy.”

“Yeah. And then there’s the one in the Stetson.”

“Funny, Lizzy. Talk to yourself for a minute while I read this article.”

“Hope your Stetson still fits after you finish.”

He put his fingers up to his lips. “Shh. Hero at work.”

Lizzy poured some water from a pitcher and took two cookies from a glass-covered tray. She read from a *Readers Digest* on the table as she ate.

“Wow. That was great. The Angels got some good press there. I hope we get some additional support.”

“Tex, you’re acting like a young colt in the pasture at springtime. What’s up with that?”

“I think your presence has intoxicated me and given me a severe case of spring fever in the summer.”

“At first blush, pun intended, I’d think you were joking, but I have a feeling you’re dead serious.”

“Dead serious sounds so depressing. Certainly we can come up with a better cliché than that.”

“Like?”

“Like one hundred percent, genuinely and indubitably serious.”

“That paints a vivid picture, but I don’t think it’s cliché material.”

“Oh, well. At least you get the point that it *is* your presence that makes me feel like galloping around the paddock.”

“Interesting. Is there any chance your attitude has anything to do with the forgiveness you felt yesterday?”

Tex’s smile froze in place. “That word again. I swear I’m being assaulted by a bunch of letters from the alphabet. I can barely fight them off.”

“Why are you trying? Maybe it’s not the letters, but God who is trying to get your attention.”

Tex looked out the window and bit down on his lower lip. “Why would God waste his time on me?”

“Because he loves you, and he wants to be your Father.”

Tex looked around the room nervously. “Lizzy, if you want to pursue this discussion, I’d suggest a more private place.”

“Good idea. When you get sufficiently refreshed, we can retreat to my car.”

Tex helped himself to another round of refreshments and pondered the turn of events as he ate. *God wants to be my Father? Have I disowned him, just like my son did me?*

The two made their way back to Lizzy’s car and made themselves comfortable in the front seat.

“Before you get started, Wonder Woman, I have a question for you. If God created all of us, is he not automatically our father?”

“In a way yes, but the Bible indicates that in the natural realm, we are an enemy of God. In order to become his child, we have to ask him to be our Father. It is almost like an adoption process without all the legal hassles. You simply surrender to him and ask to be his child.”

“Where does Jesus Christ fit into the picture? Is he the Father?”

“Obviously he isn’t the Father, or he wouldn’t have been talking to us about his Father in the Bible all the time. In fact, he said that he himself was not good. Only his Father in Heaven is good. And he wishes we were perfect, just like his Father in Heaven. It also mentions that Jesus was the firstborn of many brethren. One passage I ran across says that those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God.”

“This is all rather confusing. I haven’t really dealt with this

stuff since I was sent off to vacation Bible school in the summer. I always suspected my mom sent me there to get me out of her hair when school wasn't in session. My parents never went to church and never talked about the Bible, much less read it."

"I understand the confusion, Tex. I've been suffering from it myself. There are a lot of different ideas on how we come to God. Jesus said, 'No man comes to the Father but through me.' What did he mean by that? Does that mean that only through his sacrifice on the cross is God accepting adoption requests? Or does it mean that Jesus is the adoption agent and you must deal with him to get to the Father?"

"Sounds like you're not exactly sure yourself."

"It should sound that way. I'm not. Some days I just want to throw up my hands. One conclusion I arrived at is that this process can't require a genius. God wouldn't make it so hard that people who aren't endowed with advanced intellectual capacity couldn't find him. It mentions in the Bible that God looks upon a man's heart and not on the exterior. I don't have any confusion there. My goal is to make my heart as pure as possible. That means I have to filter out all the junk that tries to gain entrance."

"Junk?"

"Hatred; bitterness; jealousy; pride; unforgiveness."

Tex flinched. "Right back to that word again."

"Yep. All roads seem to lead to forgiveness. Through the death of Jesus on the cross, his Father is able to forgive us our sins against him."

"You have to understand that this kind of talk isn't natural for a tough old goat like me."

"I know, Tex. Men often have trouble with this type of stuff, even ones who've been around religion. It must be very foreign to you."

"Perfect word – foreign. But this father and son relationship is something that I understand. The need to reach out in love and not knowing how or feeling awkward because love is kind of a sissy mentality."

"In the eyes of the world. Exactly, Tex. The world values strength. Loving involves vulnerability which seems to be a form of weakness. When you love someone, you put your most important possession out in front of you. If the beloved chooses to crush or ignore that love, our spirits are damaged. I have no idea what God goes through when men reject him. He who has total power in the world gave the puny creatures he formed out

of the clay of the Earth the power to break his heart.”

“Why would he do that?”

“So he could feel the joy of being accepted by those who wish to choose to love him. The love he gets from them must offset the pain he gets from not being loved by the others.”

“If I had two children, maybe I would have understood that better. Since I have only one, I’ve only known the pain.”

“What about before your son disowned you?”

Tex sighed deeply. “You’re right. I did know that love for a while, and then I lost it. I guess I do understand the contrast of the two situations.”

“Was the love better than the loss?”

Tex stared out the window again. His only response was to shrug.

Lizzy put her hand on his shoulder. “I have a request which might sound really crazy to you. Can I pray over you?”

“You mean when you say your prayers before bed?”

“No, I mean right now. I want to put my hands on your head and pray a blessing over you.”

“You know that if any other person in the world suggested that, I’d tell them to back off. Somehow with you it almost sounds inviting.” Tex sighed audibly. “Why not? Go for it.”

“Bend over toward me if you can.” Tex complied, and Lizzy took off his Stetson and placed her hand on his head.

“Sorry about the hair. I think I’m do for an oil change.”

Lizzy laughed. “No worries. Now stop with the jokes because I’m going to get real serious here.”

“OK.”

“Father in Heaven. I lay my hands on Tex’s head today and speak a blessing into his life. I don’t know all the interior hurts, Lord, that tie Tex down just as securely as any ball or chain ever did for a prisoner. But you do, Lord, and I ask you to cut those bindings and set him free. He’s spent a lifetime of toughening up his soul to deal with the world. I ask that you become the protection he needs to prevent the world from inflicting wounds to his spirit and soul. Let him revert back to the innocent boy who once looked at the world as a marvelous and happy place. Let you become the joy of his life so that he might share with others as he reaches out in love to them. Father, I ask that you do a supernatural work in his life and heal the relationship with his son, as you build a relationship with Tex as his Father. As Tex opens himself to you, I pray that his son will seek Tex and open himself up. I pray the spirit of forgiveness be over both of

them as they reach out to rebuild the bridge that was destroyed. Teach him, Lord, how to respond to you, how to ask for forgiveness, and how to grant forgiveness. Help him be strong enough to admit his weakness and his need for you. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.”

Midway through the prayer, Tex had begun shuddering slightly. By the time Lizzy finished, violent sobs welled out of him. Lizzy leaned over, reached around his waist with both arms and held him.

“Let it go, Tex. The accumulated grief and tears of many years have been built up in you. Let God’s love wash over you and cleanse you from the crud which life has handed you.”

For ten minutes she held him and spoke words of encouragement to him. At that point, the spigots went dry.

“Do you know how long it’s been since I cried?”

“I have no clue. Maybe when your son disowned you?”

Tex shook his head.

“After the accident?”

He shook his head again. “I couldn’t even cry then. I felt anger, and I felt emptiness. And I felt guilt. But no tears came.”

“In our world, men are taught not to cry. It’s such a shame. The tears get dammed up inside and block the emotions from flowing out of them like God intended. A petrified spirit is the result.”

“I was a naïve kid of thirteen. I was playing the pinball machine at a gas station where my brother-in-law had taken me so he could play cards. There were some older guys watching me. This machine was really tough to beat. I had just about racked up enough points to win an elusive free game. One of the jerks pushed the machine and caused it to tilt, ending my game and my chance to win. I started to cry and ran to my brother-in-law. Some of the men there with him called me a baby and a sissy. Sis’s husband gave me heck when we went back to the car later. I swore I would never cry again. Now I’ve broken that vow. And you know what?”

“What, Tex?”

“I’m glad. I feel like a guy who’s been on a campout for a week with no shower or shave. It was just like being cleaned up from the grime of that season.”

“I might be wrong, but I think that was just the first layer of dirt. You’ve got a way to go before you’re really clean.”

“Thanks for sharing that with me. Do you mean I’m going to have to bawl like a baby some more?”

"Not necessarily. I don't think that's the only way to heal."

"That's a relief. Can you imagine if Parnelli or some of my other buddies saw me doing this?"

"A little bit. It probably wouldn't be pretty."

"Parnelli would either laugh his head off, or else he'd be totally in shock and reaching for a phone to call the funny farm."

"Seems to me you've been going through your whole life worrying about Parnelli's opinion. Is what Parnelli thinks more important than what God thinks?"

Tex snorted. "I never ever thought about it. Maybe I've been tied to his apron strings like a mother. We've been hanging together for about sixty years. I've always tried to impress him and stay one step ahead of him in the competition for manhood."

"Really. Looks to me like you were both running in the wrong direction to become real men."

"I'll let you break that news to Parnelli. I'm not touching that one with a ten-foot pole."

"Or an eleven-foot Norwegian?"

Tex chuckled. "Exactly."

"Why would Parnelli listen to me?"

"Because...."

"Because why?"

"Because he...ah...thought you were pretty...special, to the point...."

"To what point?"

"That he thought he was in love with you."

Lizzy blushed. "Good thing he only thought he was."

"Those were my words. He was a goner first time he saw you."

"I certainly never did anything to encourage him."

"You didn't have to. You know he'd shoot me if he knew I told you this."

"It will never escape my lips. Your life is safe with me."

Tex's ears perked up. *My life is safe with her. That has a nice ring to it.*

\* \* \*

That night after lying down in bed Tex struggled to get to sleep. The vision of his experience with Lizzy was so vivid in his memory banks that it kept replaying in his head like an instant replay on the football broadcasts. His analysis showed a

different facet of the encounter each time. Thoughts of what he could and should have said or done plagued him. What haunted him was the thought that he might live the rest of his pitiful life without Lizzy's arms around him. The words of encouragement flowing over him had been like balm over burns. The combination of the two was the most pleasant experience that Tex had ever lived through. *What kind of man needs to have a woman build him up? Isn't the male the one who should whisper sweet nothings that bring encouragement? Oh, if I could only pray a blessing over Lizzy like that and let her know how special a woman she is. Pray? Me? That sounds like an oxymoron.*

His thoughts continued to churn in his head as his whole body seemed to get involved. His legs began to ache and his stomach hurt. "No sense lying here in bed. I'm not getting to sleep." He got up and prowled around the house seeking an escape hatch from his emotional roller coaster ride. The TV grabbed his attention. *That's what I need. Something to take my mind off all this stuff.* He plopped down on the couch and depressed the power button on his remote. The screen exploded to life with the World Series of Poker.

"I don't think Lizzy would like me watching this." He started flipping through the channels. Nothing seemed appealing. He was just about to flip to a new station when the word 'forgiveness' stabbed through him like a guided laser beam. His hand froze on the remote.

"Hi, I'm Sid Roth and tonight on *It's Supernatural* we have Theresa Griffith Hurlbert. She brings to us one of the most amazing stories I've ever heard. This unusual lady plays twelve different kinds of flutes. That might not be unusual for a talented musician, but this skill is being applied to minister to people supernaturally. She plays healing music over people. Theresa actually records CD's without any music written down. She shows up and lets the Holy Spirit lead her in what she plays. In person she actually plays over a person and then sings the message that is being sent. Theresa will join me in a minute and play a blessing over my own head. Don't go away."

Tex sat there in fascination. *What the heck is this all about?* He flipped to the next station. The words that Lizzy had said that morning came back. "I don't think that's the only way to heal." He paused and thought for a moment before flipping back to the previous channel.

For the next half hour he watched and listened. The story of Theresa concerning her marriage fascinated him. She said that



God told her to place an order for a husband. She wrote down forty things she wanted in a man. One of them was that he was to be thirty-nine years old. She was fifty. And the man who met all of those qualities actually came along and proposed. Either this woman was a liar, a nutcase, or her life had been touched by God. When the show finished, Tex found that he was now sleepy and make his way back to the bedroom. *Why would God touch this woman's life so drastically and let millions and maybe billions of other people suffer alone?*

\* \* \*

He sat up. Where did the music go? His mind was in a fog bank. Only the red digits of his alarm clock showing that it was two a.m. gave him a feeling of normalcy. "I must have been dreaming. But it was so real." He tried to recall all of the details. A woman played an instrument and laid her hands on his head and then sang a song over him. "It's the woman from the TV show. The power of suggestion." Then he realized the voice that had sung over him was Lizzy's.

"OK. I'm losing it. I'm officially going nuts here. How do I stop it?"

*Do you want to see your son again?*

Tex tried to peer through the darkness to see where the voice had come from. Then he realized he had not actually heard a voice, but yet it seemed like he had. *Do I want to see my son again? More than anything in the world, except for having Lizzy by my side the rest of my life. What if I had to choose between the two? Which would I opt for? How can I make either one of my dreams come true?*

*Ask and you shall receive.*

"God? Is that you? If you're talking to me, let me know. Otherwise, I'm going to see a doctor and find out what's wrong with me. This is just crazy."

Tex sat there deep in thought. *If God is real, that would make him the most powerful king that ever existed. What kind of a king responds upon demand from a lowly peasant? Especially when that peasant didn't even acknowledge the king as a ruler.* Visions of his days of youth, brandishing swords of wood and pretending to be knights of the round table, welled up inside him. Memories of bowing down to whoever played King Arthur that day and saying, 'My life is yours, my liege,' swept over him.

*Why did these memories come back just now? On impulse*

Tex rolled out of bed and got down on his knee. Like the nine-year-old of the past, he said, "God, I don't know if you're there, but my life is yours my liege. Either kill me, let me go back to the way I was, or change me, because I'm going crazy here in no man's land. And if I might be so bold as to ask, please bring my son back to me and let Lizzy become my wife. From what I've been told, you allowed your son to come to Earth and suffer in the cruelest way possible, just so that I might kneel before you and be heard. As I love my son, let me love your son and accept him as the Prince of my life. Please forgive me for all of my transgressions against you. And help me to forgive myself. While you're at it, maybe you could nudge a little forgiveness out of my son."

He lay there for a moment thinking about what he had just said. *Did I really mean it, or am I just sucking up to God in the hope of getting what I want?* Sleep claimed him before any comforting answer arrived, alleviating the torment for the moment.

## Chapter 11

When Tex awoke the next morning, the sun was up higher than usual. He stared at the ceiling for a minute. *Did I dream all that stuff last night or did I really pray? The flutes. I wrote that lady's name down.* He pulled himself out of bed and went into the living room. The pad where he wrote the name delivered mute testimony that he hadn't dreamed it all. He turned on his computer and googled the lady's name. Samples of her music left him wanting more, but he couldn't figure out how to download, and he didn't want to wait for CD's to be shipped. Lizzy can help me. That'll be a good excuse to get her over here.

He jumped in the shower and serenaded the shower curtain. Thoughts of the night before kept running through his head, and he belted out the words to *Oh, What a Beautiful Morning*. "Eat your heart out, Gordon MacRae." After eating a hearty breakfast, Tex plopped down on the couch.

"OK, God. Last night I kind of asked you to adopt me. I'm not sure if you accepted or not, and I don't know what is expected of me as your adopted son. Seems like being a son always involves chores of some type. I just hope that those cattle on a thousand hills that the Bible says you own aren't all milk cows and you don't ask me to milk them."

*I should poke open a Bible and explore a little bit. Unfortunately, I don't have one. I wonder if you can read the Bible on the Internet.* He got up and did some more googling.

"Ah hah! Here we go. Free of charge and dust-free also." He was reading in Romans when the noise of the doorbell pulled him away. *Who can that be?* He pulled the door open and got a pleasant surprise.

"Lizzy! And Martha! What are you guys doing here?"

"Hello, Tex. We do have a patrol together on the highway. Martha wanted to come with us and see what it's like."

Tex smacked himself in the forehead. "I totally forgot about it. I got wrapped up in something else, which I'll tell you all about later. Come on in. I'll be with you in just a second. It's a dang good thing I took a shower this morning, or you'd have to wait a long time."

He almost ran to the bathroom and brushed his teeth and combed his hair. After trying to get the hairs to go where he wanted them, he gave up. *That's the advantage of wearing a*

*Stetson. Bad hair days are easily covered up.*

"All right, ladies. Time to rescue somebody. Let's bounce!"

Martha laughed. "Keeping up with your teen slang, huh, Tex?"

"My mom always said I should learn to speak a foreign language." He did a Groucho Marx impression, pretend cigar and all. "And that's about as foreign as you can get."

Lizzy laughed. "That was good. I'm afraid Martha's not going to get it though. Groucho was just a little before her time. Oh, and speaking of rescues, I have some good news."

"I'm on the edge of my chair."

"You're standing up."

"Figuratively, I'm on the edge."

"Whatever. We've had a dozen calls about joining the Angels."

"That's great. We can probably get one or two real soldiers out of that batch."

"You're pretty pessimistic, aren't you?"

"If pessimistic is a synonymy for realistic, you're right on. I've seen the way human beings act. Lots of people are willing to jump on the bandwagon, so they can blow their own horn, but when they find out it involves a sacrifice and the dreaded 'C' word, they bail in a hurry."

"What's the dreaded 'C' word?" Martha asked.

"Commitment."

"Ah. I thought maybe you were going to lay more slang on us."

"Nah. I don't want to confuse your grandmother."

"You're still spunky this morning I see, Mr. Harris. I thought maybe you'd sleep it off."

"Believe it or not, I was even spunky before you arrived. You should have heard me singing in the shower. On second thought, scratch that thought."

"Doing opera again?" Lizzy asked.

"Not quite. Oklahoma."

Lizzy started singing *I'm Going to Wash that Man Right out of my Hair*.

"I certainly hope you're singing about the professor and not me."

"I'll never tell."

"Why does that not surprise me? Martha, do you want to drive my truck. Your grandmother and I can sit in the back seat."

"Not without a chaperone you won't."

"You'll be a chaperone."

"Not a very good one if I have to keep my eyes on the highway."

"Oh, well. It was worth a shot."

Martha grinned. "You mess with my grandma and that may be what you get."

"In that case, maybe you better ride up in the front with me."

"Maybe we girls should play it safe and both ride in the back."

Tex's mouth drooped into a pout.

"She's just playing with you, Tex. I'm riding shotgun," Lizzy said.

They got in and headed for the freeway entrance.

For an hour they cruised north and then turned and cruised south. Everything was normal. When they swung to the south for the second time, they spotted a car along the shoulder. Tex pulled in. "You girls stay here just in case. You know the drill, Lizzy. Call 911 at the first sign of any trouble."

"Got you covered, Tex."

He walked up cautiously to the driver's side door. A minute later he waved Lizzy and Martha over. By the time they arrived, two young children and their mother had exited the ratty-looking car.

"Oh, what darling kids!" Lizzy said.

"Thank you, ma'am."

Tex removed his hat and wiped his brow. "We got trouble here. She's from North Dakota and is headed to Nebraska to see her family. This car looks like it's on its last legs. She doesn't have much money beyond her gas and food expenses. Looks like she could use a guardian angel."

"They can stay with me for the night," Martha said.

"Or you can stay with me," Lizzy said.

"I really appreciate the offer, but I'm afraid you didn't realize that I'm an Indian."

"Of course we knew that. What difference does that make?"

"Nice white folks don't put up a squaw and two papooses."

"Funny. I thought only nice folks did something like that to help a fellow human."

"Exactly!" Martha said. "We don't look at you as a squaw."

"Ladies, I hate to break up this interesting conversation, but you're missing the point. A sleepover here is just a Band-Aid. She needs some major repair work on this bucket of rusty bolts,

and she doesn't have the money. Since she's not from South Dakota, the welfare office is probably not going to help us any."

"Wait! I've got it!" Lizzy cried.

"I hope it's not contagious," Tex said.

"I hope it is. Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty."

"Sounds like a bumper sticker."

"It is, and also a way of life. Haven't you seen that commercial where some lady stops a guy from running into the street with a car bearing down? So he does something for someone else, and they do something, and so on. Good deeds spawn good deeds."

"That's really nice, Lizzy, but what random act of kindness is going to fix this car, and in a timely fashion?"

"Elementary, my dear Harris. I have a 1996 Taurus sitting in the garage. It's not a world beater, but it's mechanically sound and has a lot of miles left in it."

"But that was Grandpa's car," Martha said. "You were keeping it for the memory."

"Heck with memories. This woman needs a car, and I got one I should probably get rid of."

The woman shook her head. "I can't pay for you it."

"I know, dear. What's your name, by the way?"

"My friends and family call me Little One."

"OK, Little One works just fine for me. I'm not asking you to pay for it. It's a gift from God to you."

"From God?"

"He gave it to me. I've just been borrowing it until he wanted it back. Looks like the time has arrived."

"You're sure you want to do this?" Tex asked.

"Positive. I'm actually excited to be in a position to help someone."

"OK. We can't just leave this heap here for the government to tow away. I'll use my AAA card and call for a tow. I'll haul it over to the car cemetery. This one will fit right in there. You guys can put all her stuff in the truck and then take her over to get her new car."

"And then we'll pick you up at the junkyard?" Lizzy asked.

"Great minds think alike."

"You're a peach, Tex."

Tex chuckled. "I'm probably closer to a lemon."

Lizzy shook her head. "You're a hard man to compliment."

"I hope you never give up trying."

"Then start helping us move this stuff." She grabbed some bags from the trunk which Little One had opened. Tex waded in and got his share.

An hour later they picked him up at the designated rendezvous point.

"Everything OK?" Tex asked.

"Hunky dory. Little One is on the road again for Nebraska. I feel like I really made a difference in someone's life. And now I have more room in my garage."

"You truly are an angel. Unfortunately, our patrol time is up. Another team is on duty now. Hope we didn't miss anything."

"Me too."

Tex drove them back to his place. "Hey, Lizzy. I want to show you something, and I need your help. Can you come in for a few minutes and show me how to download music from the Internet?"

"Sure. It's going to cost you."

"How much?"

"Two glasses of lemonade."

"Steal of a deal."

"But don't make it like Parnelli does."

Tex looked up in surprise.

Lizzy grinned. "And they thought I didn't know."

"I'll never underestimate you again, Elizabeth Adams."

"You better not."

Tex got three glasses and a pitcher of lemonade from the kitchen. Martha, sitting on the couch and leafing through a magazine, got the first glass. Lizzy, already on the computer, got the next one. Tex poured himself a glass and took a sip. "Ahh. Now I'm ready to get down to business." He sat down in the chair next to Lizzy and showed her the page from which he wanted to download.

"Do you have your credit card, Tex?"

"Right here next to my heart, heart, heart." He pulled his wallet out of his back pant's pocket.

"I don't think your heart's down that far," Martha said.

"Martha, you're almost as sharp as your grandmother. Actually that's from an old TV show called *Hee Haw*. They don't make them like that anymore."

"Thank goodness," Lizzy said.

"I don't know. They had some mighty fine looking girls on there."

Lizzy shook her head. "I don't want to hear about them,

please. And if you start to sing that song about gloom and despair, I'm gonna bop you over the head with the lemonade pitcher."

"That's what I call a real deterrent to song."

"Fill in your credit card information here and we're all set," Lizzy said.

Tex did as directed and clicked the button to pay the bill.

"OK. Now see all these underlined names."

"Yeah."

"I click the right button of the mouse at the same time I hover over the line and a menu shows up like this."

"Cool."

Ten minutes later all the songs were downloaded and Lizzy loaded them into Windows Media player. She hit the play button and the same soothing sounds that Tex had seen on the TV the night before began to ooze out of his computer speakers.

"Nice music," Lizzy said.

"Yeah, really," Martha added.

Tex shut his eyes and tried to relive his dream where Lizzy sang over him. He was interrupted by the doorbell.

"Now who's here? Two callers in one day. What's the world coming to?"

"You enjoyed the first visitors, didn't you?" Lizzy asked.

"True. Could I get lucky twice in a row?"

Tex set his lemonade down and walked to the front door. He pulled the door open and blinked. The men standing there looked familiar, but he couldn't place them. The fact one of them was wearing a jacket on a hot day just caught his attention before the gun came out from behind the jacket.

"Back in the house, old man. Slowly and carefully."

Tex backed up and the two men advanced into the room, and one shut the door.

"Remember me, Father Time? It was so convenient of the newspaper to print up that nice story about you, telling me what your name was so I could pay this visit."

Martha gasped.

"What do we have here? Isn't this the same babe that we were going to, ah...help out on the freeway?"

The skinny one studied Martha. "Looks like her. I never forget a pair of--"

"Shoes?"

"Exactly."

"Looks like we've got us a regular homecoming party. One



babe for me and one for you. We'll have to take turns taking the flesh off the old guy. Or maybe we can do it simul...slimul...at the same time. What is that ungodly music?"

"Music to heal your soul, Dirk," Tex said.

"Oh, the old man remembered my name. Too bad we have to turn the lights out on such a brilliant brain."

"What do you want from us?" Lizzy asked.

"First of all, douse that music or I'm gonna shoot the computer and put it out of its misery. Second, I want all the drapes closed in this room 'cause this is a private party. The neighbors will have to find their entertainment elsewhere today."

Lizzy reached over and clicked on the pause icon, killing the music Dirk found irritating.

"Ah. That's better. Now I can think."

Both Lizzy and Martha began to close the drapes and shades.

The phone rang. Dirk and his partner jumped.

Tex instinctively started moving toward the phone.

"Hold on, old man. Where do you think you're going?"

"I was going to answer the phone."

"Not in my lifetime."

The phone rang for the fourth time. The answer machine picked up and they could hear Tex's pre-recorded greeting. After the beep a voice began to speak.

"Dad. Hello. It's me, Jack."

Tex's jaw dropped. He turned to Dirk and said through clenched teeth. "That's my son. He hasn't spoken to me in sixteen years. I'm going in there and tell him I love him, and the only way you're going to stop me is by shooting me. If you plan on killing me, at least have the decency to let me make peace with my son and give me a chance to forgive him."

Tex turned and started toward the kitchen.

"Dirk, what are we going to do?"

"Shut up. You watch the women. I'll take care of the old man."

He fell in step behind Tex. "You say one word out of line, and your son will hear the gunshot that takes you out. Keep it on speaker phone."

"Dad, I just wanted to tell you that something special has happened in my life. I hope that you're able to forgive me for what I did to you."

Tex pushed the button. "Jack. It's me."

"Oh, Dad. I'm so glad you're there. I hate talking to those

machines.”

“Where are you?”

“Knoxville, Tennessee.”

The gun poked Tex in the back. “Tell him you love him and forgive him and end this thing.”

“Jack, I gotta get going. Before you go I want to ask you to forgive me.”

“Forgive you? I’m the one who needs to be forgiven. What I did to you was, as Daffy Duck would say, despicable.”

“You are forgiven. In fact I forgave you last night. I love you, Jack.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

“So I gotta run. Call me back later, please. And say hi to Ruthie for me.”

There was a pause on the other end. “Will do, Dad. Bye.”

“Bye, son.”

“Good job, old-timer. You just bought yourself another hour or two of breath. And now I can feel all warm and cuddly because I let a father say goodbye to his son one last time. What a touching scene. Speaking of touching, as the phone company would say, time to reach out and touch somebody.” He threw out a right jab that caught Tex in the solar plexus, knocking the air from him.

Tex leaned over the kitchen counter and fought to recover as Dirk laughed.

“There’s the first payback. Nobody screws with me and gets away with it. As I remember, you were a big comedian when you were holding a gun on me. My turn on the stage, Father Time. And there ain’t no guy with a hook to pull me off until my act is finished.” He laughed again and pushed Tex in the direction of the living room. He hammered him with a left right combo to the shoulder blades.

\* \* \*

A thousand miles away, Jack paced nervously.

“Are you sure your father’s in danger?”

“Lori, he used the code phrase. When I was a kid we arranged that phrase so that if ever one of us was in a position where we couldn’t speak openly, we would drop the phrase ‘say hi to Ruthie’ into the conversation.”

“Your dad’s pretty old. You haven’t talked to him in ages. Maybe he has Alzheimer’s or something.”

"I know. The thought crossed my mind. The fact that he said I was forgiven and he loves me could be evidence of that. He wasn't exactly a demonstrative father figure in the past. The trouble I have is how do you call 911 in another part of the country."

"I don't think you can. You need to call the police department directly."

"That's the rub. I don't know the number."

Lori ran to her computer. After browsing to Google she typed in 'Sioux Falls Police Department' and hit the search button. Jack stood over her shoulder as she clicked on the first link that came up.

"Click on the contact us button."

She did so and a list of phone numbers came up on the screen.

He scanned the page. No numbers at the top. The first number listed was for the mayor's office. Then a whole section on complaints followed with several numbers. City attorney led another list of more bureaucratic departments. "Why can't they put a number at the top for this? Argghhh. This is so frustrating. My dad could be getting killed while I read through all this crap."

"There – under 'Police'."

"Always dial 911. Thanks a heap! Or we could call Animal Controller. Maybe the dog catcher will run over and save my dad's life."

"How about the next one?"

"Police Law Enforcement Center. That sounds more promising. Can't hurt. Maybe someone can connect us to 911 or something there." He scribbled the phone number on a yellow sticky and peeled it off before running to the phone.

He dialed the number and waited. "I'll pay you back for the long-distance call."

"Don't worry about it." She knelt down and started to pray.

"Sioux Falls Police Department, this is Arthur Brown. How can I help you?"

"Officer Brown, you are an officer I hope?"

"Yes, I am, sir. What can I do for you?"

"I think I have an emergency."

"You think? You should call 911 then."

"I can't. We live in Knoxville, Tennessee. I don't think the good folks there are going to do much good for my dad in Sioux Falls."

"It's possible that they would have a number for us. I see

your dilemma. You said you think you have an emergency. Can you describe your problem, and I'll do what I can."

"I was talking to my father on the phone just a few minutes ago, and he uttered a secret SOS phrase that we arranged years ago."

"How old is your father?"

"Ahh. About seventy now."

"Any signs of mental disturbance, Alzheimer's, etcetera?"

"I don't know. This is the first time I've talked to him since about 1990."

"Yikes. I'm afraid we might not be able to send a squad car on this kind of information. Why don't you give me the name and address of the party, and I'll see what my commanding officer says."

"My father's name is Tex Harris. No scratch that. Tex isn't his real name. It's Alfred Harris."

"Tex Harris. Can that be the Tex Harris who wears a white Stetson?"

"You know my dad?"

"Roger that, and I'm on the way to his house. Hang on a second, and I'll have someone get your contact information so we can get back to you." Arthur set the phone on the desk and sprinted down the hallway. He ducked into the lunchroom. "Jenkins. Sorry, man, but I've got an emergency. There's a guy holding on the phone at your desk. Get his name and phone number and any other relevant info. I'm outta here!" He sprinted to his squad car.

\* \* \*

When he reached Tex's residence, Arthur slowed down and surveyed the front of the house as he drove by. "Drapes are all closed. Three vehicles, one of which is Tex's truck." He scanned the other two vehicles and noted the license plates. The policeman repeated them over and over until he got out of sight of the house where he could pull over. The first thing he did was write down the numbers he had been reciting. Then he called in.

"Arthur Brown here, I need some info on a couple of license plates." He read the first one.

"That's registered to Elizabeth Adams of Sioux Falls."

Without looking at the paper he recited the second number.

"That one belongs to a Frank Short from Rapid City. It's listed as stolen."

"In that case, I need backup at 1722 N. Grant. Definitely a stolen car in the driveway and a possible home invasion going on with potential hostages."

"Roger that. Backup will be on its way ASAP."

Arthur scratched his head. "Lizzy is in there with him. And maybe even Martha. She's been staying with her grandma since her husband died. Oh, God, please don't let Martha be in there. And help me do the right thing here. Don't let me screw this one up. Oh, no. This could be the same scumbag that I let get away. I was hoping he had the brains to leave the area. If not, that newspaper story would have been all he needed to follow up on his threat of revenge. Rats! How am I going to undo the harm I caused? How do we get out of this situation without someone dying?"

\* \* \*

Dirk threw his head back and examined the ceiling. "Oh, man. What a time to get a bout of diarrhea. Little bro, you keep these guys covered. I've got to visit the little boy's room. I might be in there for a while."

"Got you covered. I mean, I've got them covered. They're in good hands."

"They will be in good hands when I get back and start the party. Curse this damned irritable bowel syndrome."

Tex surveyed the skinny young man who held the gun on him. "You know what happens to murderers and rapists, little brother of Dirk?"

"Shut up. Do you think I'm stupid?"

"I believe you're from California. I don't know what they do out there, but here in South Dakota, you get to sit in a funny-looking chair and have about a zillion volts of electricity fry your body. They say death is instantaneous, but I doubt it. You would probably feel like you were lit up like a Christmas tree for a while."

"I told you to shut up. When Dirk gets back, he'll take some of that sass out of you."

"Young man," Lizzy said. "What prompts you to get involved in something crazy like this? There is nothing for you to gain and lots to lose."

"Ma'am, this is my brother's play. I'm just backing him up. That's what brothers do."

"If he was being a good brother, he wouldn't jeopardize your

life just to get some stupid revenge.”

“You aren’t going to turn me against my brother, lady, so don’t waste your breath.”

“I was just wondering what your mother would think of all of this.”

“She ain’t gonna think nothin’ about it ’cause she’s dead, bless her soul.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? You didn’t know her. Why should you care?”

“Because I know how hard it is to lose a mother, especially at a young age like you. You can’t be much more than twenty-five.”

“Not that it matters, but I’m twenty-three.”

“You know, I bet your mom is watching us right now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“From Heaven. She’s probably sitting there yelling at the top of her lungs for you to stop this and find a better way to live.”

“Well, Dirk ain’t gonna hear her ’cause he don’t believe in Heaven.”

“Do you?”

“I hate to be disrespectful to a nice lady, but I need to have you put a cork in it. Dirk ain’t gonna like it if I let you do too much jawin’, especially about religion.”

“I’m sorry, ah...I don’t know your name.”

“Jessie. Like Jessie James.”

“Nice to meet you, Jessie.”

“No, it’s not, lady. Bad stuff is gonna happen here soon, so don’t go playing Pollyanna on me. Just zip it up before I get mad.”

“Do you have a girlfriend, Jessie?” Martha asked.

Jessie yelled, causing Martha to jump. “That does it. I don’t want any of you asking me any more questions or kissin’ up to me. You hear?”

Martha nodded.

A minute later Dirk poked his head through the doorway. “What’s goin’ on here with all the racket?”

“These people were pissin’ me off, Dirk. I let ’em have it.”

“You’re pretty scary when you get mad, bro. Maybe one of these good folks needs to use the bathroom after that outburst.”

Jessie laughed. “Yeah, but it’s probably too late. Probably soiled their diapers already.”

“I’ll find out real soon if the ladies did. Maybe we’ll have gramps strip down and run around the living room like a kid

playing strip poker. Now it's time for the fun to begin. I think we need to flip a coin. Winner gets first go with the woman of his choice. There's a nice big bedroom back there."

Jessie took a quarter out of his pocket and flipped it into the air. "Heads or tails?"

"Tails because that's what I'm going to be dining on here shortly."

"Darn. You win, Dirk. I suppose you're gonna take the young one."

"I'm not so sure. I think the old one might appreciate it more. She looks like she's been going without for a while."

Tex cleared his throat. "If you touch her, you better make sure I'm dead when you walk out of here because otherwise I'll track you to infinity and beyond. You'll be living like the guy on *The Fugitive*, always looking over your shoulder."

"What's up with that tough talk, pops? Is this little lady your woman?" He turned to Lizzy. "Is this your man?"

"I'm unattached," Lizzy said.

"Maybe so, but I see the light in the eyes of the old codger when he looks at you. He's got the hots for you." He turned back to Tex. "I'm such a nice guy that I can't believe it. First I let you say goodbye and I love you to your son. Now I'm going to give you the same chance with this lady. Anything you want to say to her before you're separated forever?"

Tex looked over at Lizzy. She studied him just as intently. "As a matter of fact, I think I would like to say something. Lizzy, if I don't make it out of here, I want you to remember that I consider you the finest lady I ever met. I didn't think women like you really existed. Parnelli wasn't the only one who was a goner the first time he laid eyes on you. I think my Stetson did a 360-degree turn without me laying a finger on it. I know it might not be worth much, but I want to tell you that I love you and wish that we could have had a chance to get know one another a lot better."

Dirk started clapping. "Bravo. Fine farewell speech. Let's see what the lady has to say in return."

"Tex, I am so flattered by your words. I've seen you grow as a man and as a human being over the last few weeks, and I am glad I got to share this time with you. I, too, wish we could have had a chance to explore possibilities. I am so thankful that you discovered the miracle of forgiveness before—"

"Enough soap opera stuff. Time for the R-rated portion of our show. Tex, just to piss you off, I'll be taking your little woman

first.” He pointed his gun at Tex as he gestured to Lizzy. “Ma’am, you can walk back there, or you can get carried. Choice is yours. Old-timer, I want you sitting on the couch next to the girl.”

Lizzy stood up and began to walk toward the bedroom.

“Good decision. That’ll save me some energy for the good stuff.”

Tex’s path to the couch took him right next to her. He gave her a big hug and looked into her eyes.

“Good job, pardner. Get her warmed up for me.”

Tex stared into Dirk’s face. A waggle of the pistol sent him back on course for the sofa.

“Little, bro, take good care of our company while I’m gone, and it might be a while. Oh, wait. This is his house. That makes us his company, huh? Take good care of our hosts.” He laughed as he turned and followed.

Tex closed his eyes. *God, I haven’t asked you for anything since I was a kid. I’m asking now. Please deliver Lizzy from the scumbag. Give her supernatural strength to resist him.* The word forgiveness rang through his consciousness. *Forgiveness? Are you asking me to forgive Dirk? How can I forgive him for what he’s going to do?*

*How could I forgive those who tortured my son?*

His eyes began to tear as he contemplated the situation.

“What’s the matter, cowboy? Get somethin’ in your eye?”

“Leave him alone!” Martha commanded.

“Ooh. A feisty one. I like my women feisty. Hope Dirk hurries up in there.”

Tex folded his hands. *I give up. I give you my anger and my bitterness. Take it from me and give me the same forgiveness that I now grant Dirk. Bless him. Save him from himself. Touch his heart like you’ve touched mine in the last few days.*

\* \* \*

In Tennessee a couple knelt on the living room carpet and interceded on Tex’s behalf. The same words kept going through Jack’s head. “Not by might not by power but by my spirit says the Lord.”

\* \* \*

Outside the house in Sioux Falls, Arthur heard the same



words. "Does this mean I'm not supposed to use force here, Lord. Are you taking care of this one for me?" The words repeated again.

\* \* \*

Inside the house Tex was hearing the same words. *OK, Lord. Let your Spirit do a mighty thing in that case.*

Lizzy's voice reverberated through the house. "I rebuke you in the name of Jesus Christ."

Dirk let out a string of oaths. A minute later he appeared in the living room. His face was almost white. "Change of plans, Jessie. I want you to have her first."

"But I want the young one."

"You can have her later. I want you to try the old hen."

Jessie shrugged. "I don't get it."

Dirk started screaming. "Your gonna *get* it if you don't *get* in there like I said and *get* it over."

Jessie's lip quivered. "Sorry. Take it easy. This is just confusing me a little."

"You're gonna be really confused if I get any madder and send you to dizzy land."

Jessie obeyed, and Dirk moved over to guard Tex and Martha.

There was no noise from the bedroom. Ten minutes later Jessie and Lizzy came back in. Lizzy was buttoning her blouse.

A look of relief came over Dirk. "Now she should be real warm. Lady, you're not done yet. Come on with me.

Instead Lizzy walked over to the couch and knelt down and began to pray words of intercession for Dirk and Jessie.

"Stop it! Get up! Now!"

Martha knelt down and added her petition.

"Both of you. Quit now. Quit or I'm going to kill the old man."

On cue, Tex knelt down and began to pray in earnest.

Dirk ran to him and clubbed him with the handle of his revolver. Tex slumped down and reached over to touch his bleeding head. He continued to pray.

Dirk paced the room like a madman. He brought his hand down on the computer desk and hit the mouse. Flute music filled the room. Dirk's hands went over his ears. "Leave me alone! Get away from me!"

"Who you talkin' to, Dirk?" Jessie asked.

"I don't know. It's like a ghost or something. I think this lady

is a witch. I'm killing her now. He raised the gun and aimed at the praying woman. Just as he pulled the trigger, Jessie lunged in front of him. "No, Dirk, she's just like Ma!"

An explosion stunned everyone in the room right after Jessie's last word. He staggered backwards and a blotch of red appeared on his shirt.

Dirk stood in shock. "Jessie! No!" He ran to Jessie's side and lifted him up. "Why did you do it?"

"Dirk, it would have been like killing Ma. You would have been just like our old man, a woman killer."

"No! I'll never be like our old man, may he rot in hell."

"I'm goin' to see her, Dirk. Ma's coming for me."

"No. Jessie. Don't leave me!"

Jessie collapsed in his arms. Dirk sobbed for a second but then recovered. "You made me kill my own brother! You're going to pay." He raised the gun again.

"I rebuke you in the name of Jesus Christ," Lizzy spoke authoritatively.

Tex watched in amazement as Dirk's head snapped back like he had been struck. The blood drained out of his face again.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, Arthur's backup had arrived. Two officers positioned themselves at the front door and another covered the rear entrance. On a whim Arthur reached over and tried the door. It wasn't locked. Right after Lizzy's words had staggered Dirk backwards, giving the separation that Arthur needed to make a play, he burst through the door with his partner behind him and sprawled on the floor.

"Freeze, police!"

Dirk squeezed off a quick shot, kicking up carpet fibers to Arthur's right.

Arthur's shot caught Dirk's arm, knocking the gun to the floor. Dirk tried to grab it with his left hand, but Tex pinned his hand to the floor with his cowboy boot. Dirk yelled out in pain, again. Tex then brought his knee up and caught Dirk in the nose. Blood spurted all over the carpet. Tex lifted his leg to give him another shot but arms from behind restrained him.

A pistol at point blank range convinced Dirk there was no sense continuing to grip the pistol. He let go, and Arthur's partner picked it up.

"We'll take care of it from here, Tex."

Arthur snapped on a pair of handcuffs and read Dirk his rights.

Two more officers slid through the front door and helped escort Dirk out to a waiting squad car. As they walked by Tex said, "One word for you, Dirk. Your considerably long prison sentence might be bearable if you learn one important word."

"What's that?"

"Forgiveness."

Dirk spat on Tex's boot as the officer jerked him around and headed him toward the door.

Tex turned to their rescuer. "Arthur Brown, you are a sight for sore eyes. Your grandpa can be proud of what you did today."

"If I hadn't screwed up the first time, this turkey wouldn't have been on the loose."

"That incident is long ago forgiven. You done good today."

"Martha, are you OK?"

"I don't know." She surveyed the blood on her clothing.

Arthur helped her up from the floor. "Where'd you get shot?"

"I didn't. This all came from the two bad guys."

"Oh, thank God."

"Believe me, we will."

He held out his arms and swallowed her up in a bear hug.

"I'm going to get blood all over your uniform."

"Ask me if I care?"

"Do you care?"

"Funny you should ask."

Lizzy grabbed Tex's hand and pulled him toward the kitchen.

"I think we better leave those two alone for a minute. It's awfully soon after the death of her husband to start thinking of a replacement, and Arthur's divorce isn't final yet, but I think those two were meant to be together. He made the mistake of letting her go once. You saw how he recovers from his mistakes. I don't think he'll make that error in judgment again."

"Are you OK, Lizzy. I wanted it to be me who blew Jessie away after what he did."

"But, Tex, he didn't do anything. He told me just to act like he had so Dirk wouldn't get mad at him. We just sat and talked very quietly about his mother."

Tex became conscious that his mouth was hanging open. He shut it but then opened it again to say, "You are amazing. What did you do to Dirk?"

"I simply invoked the name of Jesus in rebuke. There is power in that name."

"How did you know to do that?"

"I read a story once of a man breaking into a house. The woman rebuked the guy from her bed and slammed the guy right out the window. That stuck with me. I decided someday, when I needed it, I'd try the same thing. I don't know if it'll work every time, but it worked twice today, and that's all that matters right now."

Tex grabbed a paper towel and started cleaning off his boot. "That's not absolutely true. There's something else that matters here."

Lizzy looked at him with a puzzled expression and gave him a gesture of being clueless.

Tex opened the cabinet door and threw the dirty paper towel in the trash. "Did you really mean what you said?"

"Oh! About what?"

"About me."

"Ohh, that. Well, it was said under duress. A jury would have to throw out that testimony, but I stand by what I said."

"And so do I."

"So where does that put us?"

Tex looked around the room. "I'd like it to put you right in the middle of your new kitchen."

"Seriously?"

Tex nodded. "The professor has a ring he's not going to need. Perhaps I can take it off his hands and spare him the embarrassment of taking it back."

"But, Tex. I don't think it's legal to be engaged to someone you've never kissed before."

"I think you may be right. Don't want to be illegal." He grabbed Lizzy around the waist and pulled her close. They drilled into each other's eyes before they brought their lips together and closed their lids.

They were lip-locked when Martha and Arthur entered the room.

Martha cleared her throat. "You might want to come up for air some time."

Tex pulled away and glanced over at the grinning young folks.

"It's OK. That was our engagement kiss."

Martha squealed and threw herself into Lizzy's arms. "I'm so happy for you, Grandma."

Tex slapped himself on the side of the head. "Ow." He pulled his hand back and found it was bloody. "I totally spaced! My son called me. My son actually called me. And now what am I going to do? I don't have his number?"

"Not a problem, Tex. We policemen are always happy to help out. He pulled out a cell phone and dialed a number. A minute later he handed Tex a piece of paper. "There you go. All the way from Knoxville, Tennessee."

"How did you get this?"

"He gave it to us when he called in."

"Oh, my word. That was so long ago that I forgot that I slipped in our little warning message. He remembered."

"If he hadn't, we wouldn't be here right now and this whole thing might have turned out differently."

Tex scratched his forehead. "I'm not convinced of that. I'm starting to think Lizzy and God could have handled those two without help."

A knock on the open front door got everyone's attention.

Tex rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Come on in, Parnelli. You too, professor."

The two walked in with looks of stunned surprise. Parnelli walked up to Tex. "What is going on here? More cop cars than at the coffee shop. Ambulances. What the hell happened?"

"Hey, pruneface, I'll thank you kindly to watch your language in front of my fiancée."

Parnelli's mouth dropped open even further than usual.

The professor's eyes were two narrow slots. "I do believe that Martha is a little young for you, Tex."

"For the first time I can remember, I totally agree with you, Doctor. I was referring to Miss Lizzy."

The professor shook his head. Everyone stared at him as he continued to shake it. "No way does she consent to marry an old goat like you."

Lizzy smiled. "I certainly wouldn't have married an old goat, nor a young one either. Tex has become one of the sheep."

Parnelli and the professor exchange gestures. "Exactly what do you mean, Lizzy?" Parnelli asked slowly.

"Tex has become a lamb of the Good Shepherd."

"Are you implying that Tex has got religion?" Alistair asked.

"Not the term I'd use, but you've got the general idea."

The professor bit his lip. "And I thought you were a classy lady. Obviously it was a case of mistaken identity. Mr. Fields, I seem to have worked up a powerful thirst for some very potent

lemonade. Shall we exit stage right?"

Parnelli thought for a moment. "You're driving." He turned to Tex. "Later, you can tell me exactly what the he...heck happened here."

"I'll be glad to. You're not going to believe it, but I'll tell you anyway."

The rest of the group watched the stunned men disappear through the doorway.

Arthur laughed. "Somehow I have a sneaking suspicion that the good doctor won't be your choice for best man."

Everyone else laughed.

"Weren't you about to use the phone?" Lizzy asked.

"Oh, yeah. You know, it just seems like some kind of dream to be dialing my son. Excuse me a minute, folks."

"Grandma, Arthur is going to take me home. The babysitter is going to think I was killed. Ooh. That was a bad way to phrase it. I almost was."

Lizzy gave her a hug. "I'll see you later."

Tex picked up the phone and dialed. A woman answered. "Can I speak to Jack, please?"

"One second. May I ask who's calling?"

"Tell him it's Ruthie."

He heard a hushed conversation in the background and then a voice said, "Dad, is that you?"

"In the flesh. Thanks to your heroics. The police showed up and saved the day."

"Then they're the heroes, not me."

"What prompted you to call me today of all days after sixteen years of silence."

"You're not going to believe this, Dad. I met this girl, Lori, at work. She's a Christian, and she led me to the Lord early this morning. The first thing I wanted to do as a newborn believer was to reach out to you for forgiveness."

Lizzy joined Tex at the phone and put her arm around his waist. "As a matter of fact, son, I won't have any problem at all believing that story. None at all. I actually went through a conversion process myself in the middle of the night."

"What time was that?"

"Two a.m."

"You're kidding."

"Why would I kid about something like that? I remember looking up at the clock and seeing it was exactly two a.m."

"It was exactly three a.m. for me."

"So, what's your point? Tennessee is in the central zone isn't it?"

"Most of Tennessee is, but we live in the eastern part where we're an hour ahead of the rest of the state. We went through this at exactly the same time."

Tex looked at Lizzy. "I'm getting overwhelmed by all of this...I don't know what to call it."

"How about display of the power of forgiveness?"

Tex nodded, gently at first but then more vehemently. "Yeah! You nailed it! The power of forgiveness. So, Jack. When can we get together? We have a lot of catching up to do and the telephone just doesn't cut it."

"Are you retired yet?"

"Not by choice, but yep."

"Then why don't you come down here and visit, ASAP?"

"I can't wait to see you, son, but perhaps I'll try. Maybe I can drop down to Nashville on my honeymoon."

"Honeymoon?"

"Yeah. It's a long story. I'll tell it all to you then."

"OK, Dad. Hey, I hate to pull away like this, but I'm not retired. Gotta scoot. Talk later and arrange that visit. OK?"

"You got it. Bye."

"Love you, Dad."

The dial tone sounded before Tex could answer. He placed the phone back in the cradle and looked over at Lizzy.

"Tex Harris, you've just won the heart and marriage promise of Lizzy Adams. What are you going to do next?"

Tex laughed. "I going to Disney...no I'm not. Well, we might fit it in after Nashville. I have the strangest craving to visit the dirt track down the street."

"Not the most scenic area I've encountered."

"You right, Lizzy. But I figure if you have a dream of running in the senior Olympics next year, now is the time to start making it come true. I hope we have a lot of years left together, and I think exercise might be a key to helping us realize that wish."

"Are you going to eat healthier, too?"

"Anything so I can have a few more days of waking up with you next to me."

"Why, Tex Harris. I never realized what a romantic you are."

Tex grinned. "Why Miss Lizzy, you ain't seen nothing yet!"

