

# Perfect Score

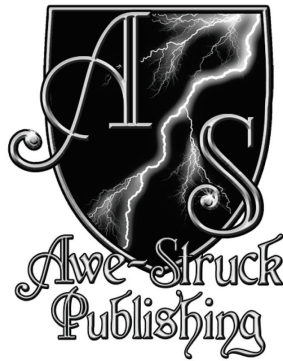


Susan Roebuck

# *Perfect Score*

by

Susan Roebuck



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## Prologue

1963

*Justice for all God's children!* My uncle had been in a good mood but reverted to type when he spotted the poster. "Liberal claptrap."

He thrust open the car door forcing a kid on the sidewalk to jump back. "Hey, watch it, mister."

But my uncle regarded him as too far down the food chain to merit attention, let alone an apology. Instead he glanced back at me and said, "I'm going to get something for your leg."

While I waited I scratched my finger-nail down the plaster of Paris, creating not only a teeth-clenching scratch but also satisfying curly bits that fell to the floor of my uncle's new shiny black Fleetwood.

Despite the leg, I felt pretty good. After all it's not every day a guy learns to inhale smoke right down to his air-bags instead of blowing it out his nostrils, and I was dying to get out on the windy sidewalk, flip out a cig, and show the world what I could do. Problem was, the old chauffeur would sure be quick to yap off his big mouth to my uncle, so I stayed put on the fawn leather seat and jiggered to the beat of Mac the Knife instead. *Oh, the shark, babe...*

"Oh not that again," muttered the chauffeur through his teeth.

"Doo-be-doo...*out of sight.*" I shuffled for good measure and raised the tone when I reached the bit about the body on the sidewalk. *Yikes!*

The chauffeur rustled around, probably wishing I would keep my trap shut, but my life's pleasure was to wind the old guy up. "Jeepers, I mean why not get a Ferrari two five zero GT, instead of this old tank? They're like crazy, like wow."

I snorted my contempt when he couldn't come up with anything better than, "Don't do that Master Alex, your uncle won't like it." I put my one Chuck's sneaker even more firmly on the leather seat, rubbed it about and resumed picking at the plaster on my other leg.

A noise from the street, as teeth-clenching as my plaster scratch, forced me to crane my neck to look through the rear window.

It was the kid my uncle had almost knocked over. He looked about my age, but maybe he was thirteen because he was smaller than me. He was chugging along the sidewalk, pulling on a long metal pole attached to a wooden trailer on two wheels. The flat bed held a tottering tower of squashed cardboard that threatened to tumble off but must've been held up by this kid's sheer willpower.

The wheels were the cause of the ear-splitting squeal which drew pissed-off glances from all the old biddies he passed, but he frowned at them as if they were the ones making the hullabaloo. The load looked too heavy, but he whistled tunelessly through his teeth like he was on a jaunty walk to the soda fountain. Except the state of his clothes told me he probably didn't have a nickel to his name: his oversized, grubby Milwaukee Braves t-shirt with sleeves chopped off to his shoulders was a long way from home and the cuffs on his tatty, frayed pale cotton pants of indiscriminate color were rolled up over bare ankles and a worn pair of sneakers.

He saw me scoping him through the window and continued to eyeball me so the nearer he got, the clearer his curious dark eyes became. They were unblinking, as if they could see right into the core of a person. A breeze blew his hacked-about brown hair from his face, and I was treated to the full blast of his stare as he drew up beside me, stopped the trailer with his foot, leaned one arm on the car roof and peered in through the window with frank curiosity, crossing one leg over the other.

I rolled down the window as the chauffeur said, "Don't do that Master Alex, the air conditioning." I ignored him and held out my uncle's pack of Chesterfields to the boy. With filthy fingers he took two, put one behind his ear and the other between his lips, all the while observing me. Like a cat mesmerizes a mouse, he held me there until he took the cigarette out of his mouth and raised his eyebrows in a query I had no idea how to answer. Instead I gawped back like a spaz until he said in a real low voice, "Light. Master Alex."

I rummaged about in my pocket and pulled out my lighter with a Playboy bunny on the front. Before I could spin it, he'd taken it from me and was examining it while a small smile creased his cheek. He shot me the same half smile and then glanced down at my James Dean red zip up jacket and plastered leg with frank amusement. Was he mocking *me*?

"What?" I said, pissed, but before he could say anything, his smile dropped right off his face. Looking up the street, he held out my lighter to me. As I took it from his palm, my fingers brushed his hand and he glanced down at me then back up the street.

"Hey kid." A testy guy with a hammer chin, whose grody apron was straight out the slaughterhouse, stalked toward us. He drew right up close and glared down at the kid who hadn't budged. "You steal my dog again, I'm calling the cops."

The kid turned a kick-ass beam on him, ferocious enough to make the guy take a step back. "I didn't s...steal him. I took him, bath and b...brought him back."

Wind gusted against the car in the brief silence that followed the kid's statement, and the guy in the apron screwed up his face as if he hadn't heard right.

"He said he gave the dog a bath and then brought it back," I supplied slowly enough for a loony to understand.

The guy looked like he was about to drag me onto the sidewalk, but he clocked the car and the chauffeur and decided against it. Instead he called to a nearby cop. "Hey, Officer. Come over here will ya. I got a complaint."

The kid stiffened, seemed about to run, but then stayed put as if his brain wanted one thing and his body another.

"Kid here stole my dog."

The cop sauntered over, his hand on his nightstick. "Sam," he said solemnly to the kid. "What you been doin' now?"

"He says I stole his d...dog, but I didn't. I gave it a bath goddamn. *Mange*. Oozing, crus...crust...crusty *sores*." He had a real strange way of talking like his tongue tripped over the words. Something was out of kilter right enough.

"How d'you get in my store? Huh? You broke in."

"Door was *open*." Sam looked sullenly under his brow.

"The hell it was." The guy seemed about to grab Sam's shirt, but one look at the kid's face made him double-take and decide against it. "Okay, okay. So you gave the dog a bath."

"Sulfur."

"You ask him, Officer, where he got the sulfur from? Betcha he stole it."

"Well Sam?"

The kid shuffled his rough old sneakers in the dirt. "Friend of m...mine. Gave it. *Donated* it."

"They use it to rid their humble abodes of bugs," the cop explained to the store guy. He eyed the kid with a mix of frustration and impatience. "Why don't you get yourself home, son? You're in bad company out here."

Sam crossed his arms as if the conversation bored him.

The cop sighed again. "Then I'll just have to take you down to the station, call Welfare again..."

He didn't get the rest of the sentence out because Sam moved faster than his shadow. He paused at the entrance to a dark alley where he danced like a boxer bouncing on his toes as he pointed at the store guy. "Your fruit's all r...rotten. He's selling rotten fruit, Officer Crombie. Turn them over, the g...good bit's top. Bad bottom."

The store guy put his hands under his apron. "I'll give him bad bottom. You goin' after him?"

The cop shook his head. "I'll never catch him. He's quicksilver, that kid."

"Delinquent." The store keeper hunched his shoulders and walked off down the street, cussing as he went.

I kept watch on the alley to see if the kid would reappear, but apart from litter swirling about in the wind, nothing much happened on that old street until a group of high school kids came along and debated whether to knock the cardboard off the kid's trailer he'd left by the car. "Leave it," I said through the window, trying to imitate my uncle's imperious tone, and, to my surprise, they did.

I'd just placed the Chesterfields pack on Sam's trailer when my uncle returned waving a rattling pill box. "These will sort your leg out," he said as he got in. He told the chauffeur to take us home.

The chauffeur set off at his usual pace of slightly faster than stop while I whined about agitating the gravel. Then a now-familiar screech had my ass bouncing like Jell-O as I scrambled to look back. Sam was once again hauling on his towering trailer. "Hang a louis, *hang a louis*," I shrieked.

The chauffeur frowned at my uncle in the rear mirror. "Do you want me to turn left, sir? Is it worth it? We'll only go round the block and end up right back here again."

"Do it. Once round the block. Please." I squirmed round to plead with my uncle, but he was more interested in the pill box. In a single fluid motion he shook out two mega-size tablets and tipped them into my dried-up mouth which blocked any more hassle.

He glanced through the rear window. "Keep going," he instructed. "Straight on."

The pills stuck in my throat as I craned my neck to catch a last glimpse of the boy who, with smoke clouding round his head like a halo, was dwindling into nothing at all.

## Chapter One: Sam

Spring 1968

The wind blew straight off the frozen prairie and rattled the ill-fitting window panes in his hut. Sam opened one eye. Five am. Don't ask him how he knew. It wasn't the owl hoot, or the coyote yip, or the creek ice splitting, or even the cattle coughing that gave it away because these noises were constant throughout the night. He just knew it was time to get up.

He rolled out from under the warmth of an old moth-eaten wolf pelt and, without bothering to light his paraffin lamp, pulled on jeans and a stiff-with-wear plaid work-shirt. He laced up scruffy, ancient leather boots before finishing it all off with a green wool jacket.

*I'll block those holes with creek mud*, he thought as the wind whistled through the gaps in the raw-wood plank walls. He put his shoulder to the door. Oil for that too—maybe Josh Pike had some in the barn.

He'd hardly put his left foot outside when snow seeped through a hole in the boot sole. Standing on one leg, he broke the ice in his ceramic sink, splashed the small amount of water pooled there on his face and drank a handful.

*Six hours of shoveling hay and muck*, he thought as his boots rang on the iced-up alkali path leading to the main yard. A Canadian goose hooted a teasing honk. *Laugh all you want, birdie*, Sam stuffed his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders. *At least I'm not up to my butt in freezing water. Just my left foot.* His hair blown horizontal, he bent into the biting wind and squinted through stinging hail as three yellow cow dogs rushed up the path, their tails whirling, breath white and freezing on their whiskers.

"Can't find a darn cow dog when I want one," he'd heard Josh Pike complain the previous day.

"That's because they're always with the boy," Mrs. Pike responded. "Sam."

"But I feed 'em."

"Animals love Sam because he has such a kind face, and everyone knows amber eyes make the animals feel lucky."

"Never heard such a load of horse poop in all my life," Josh Pike muttered, his eyes skimming his land.

The Pike place had pretensions to be a ranch, but Sam didn't think it quite made it. Divided into three sections: a creek, steep terrain and some



disordered pastures lying in a flood plain, the property bordered the much larger Raw Pines ranch next door. Josh Pike told Sam he'd worked the land for twenty years but, as far as Sam could see, with little to show for it except the old man's love for the place which was as rigid as the winter weather: driving stinging snowstorms that stank of rusty nails. And a wind that could blow a calf over.

Three hours later, the range in the distance just visible across the frozen prairie, Sam removed his jacket, hung it on a gate post and pondered his next task.

He took a closer look at the steer lying on its side, kicking its legs and bellowing as if Sam was about to knife it. Can't have been easy forcing your darned head through the rails in the fence, he thought. He rolled his sleeves up, picked up an axe and got to work on the fence rail with several powerful swings, taking care not to jolt the animal's head.

"Cain't you smell that good air?" Josh Pike had clambered onto a section of the fence, unaware or uncaring that he was tossed up a few inches every time the axe hit the rail. He raised his weathered face to the watery sun with all the pleasure and leisure of a sunbather on a distant beach. "Have to punch the bastard to get him in the chute." He nodded at the struggling steer, his words jarring with each blow of the axe. "Yet he done put his head through the fence happy as a flea. Takes some beatin' huh?"

Sam had no breath for words, but Pike continued undeterred. "Betcha we could show them folks you worked with in Silver Creek a thing or two, eh boy? On how to run a cattle ranch. Betcha learned more up here in this month than you did in the three years you were down there. Eh?" He leaned closer to Sam, his face alight as he waited for Sam's affirmative. "Eh?"

"Near...nearly," Sam gasped, referring to the fence.

With one final massive blow, the axe-head wobbled as it finally split the fence rail. Sam kicked at the steer's rump to encourage it up and watched it skitter back to the herd, still bellowing its woes.

"You reckon you could slaughter beef?"

"If...if I have to."

The old man nodded as if satisfied with the answer. "Make some people weep. So pretty."

Sam rubbed his hand over his face. Like so many conversations in his life, this one made no sense at all. Why was the old man leaping from

subject to subject like a demented grasshopper? And what was pretty? The back end of the rapidly retreating steer or a slaughtered cow?

"The view," Josh Pike explained although Sam hadn't voiced his question. The old man nodded at the distant range where the peaks were shining pink like his bald pate. "And you know little guys like us can."

Sam raised his eyes to the gun-metal grey sky above them. Can what? Sam was the first to admit that even on a good day his own mind was at best in total disarray, but it wasn't in the chaos Josh Pike's evidently was.

"Cry. Cry at the view." Josh spoke as if explaining to a first grader. "Little guys get away with it. Betcha bawled when you left your family in Silver Creek. Eh?"

Bawled? Cry? Sam stared at the farm owner in disbelief. Sure he'd been sorry to leave—Silver Creek held all he loved. But *cry*? Sam couldn't remember the last time he'd cried. When did he last cry? He wracked his brains.

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On his first night as a street kid, that's when he'd last cried. He'd found a warm-air grid to lie down on, certain with twelve-year-old optimism that the night would get going fast. He was out of luck. Less than ten minutes passed before nicotine-yellowed fingers that looked as if they'd been peeled by the switch-blade they held had hauled him by his neck off the ground. Too many hands to count pinned him against a damp brick wall and a knee or three kept him upright. First they stole his penknife, then his packet of gum. They took his soft-toy rabbit, his three dollars and finally divested him of his sneakers and pants. When there was nothing left, they continued to hold him while they punched, pinched, probed and bit until they were finally done. Then they dropped his limp body on freezing concrete where he curled into a wet ball.

"Giddyup there laddie."

Sam stiffened and used his final store of resistance to kick out as more hands fell on him. Except these hands were gentle and warm.

"That's right," the gravelly voice continued as Sam wilted against the solid body. "No more fight left in there, is there? But, oh my Lord, you're swift for a little 'un. Gave them old boys a run for their money, sure you did. Couple of 'em will be limping for a day or two and good luck to 'em. Come on now." The hands lifted him under his arms and helped him to his

feet. “We can't have that little white ass shining like a beckoning beacon, now can we? Need to get you decent, oh yes we do.”

His name was Itinerant Dan. “But you can call me Itinerant for short.” He swigged a long draft from a bottle of clear liquid, the fumes of which made Sam's head swim. Itinerant looked like so many on the street—dirty, smelly, hairy, ageless, in need of a dentist and with more than a whiff of insanity about him—but his eyes were bright with life that hadn't quite been snuffed out. “Here.” He handed Sam a moth-eaten blanket which smelt of a thousand unwashed bodies. “Someone always dies at night—we'll get their shirt and pants.”

He turned his back as Sam wrapped his head in the blanket and cried for the very last time in his life, longing for his mother who wasn't there and never would be. When he was all out of weeping, Sam scrubbed at his face and then emerged from the blanket. “No one,” he told the hunched figure, “will ever pants...steal my pants again. Not unless they want...dead and gone.”

“I believe you kidlet,” Itinerant replied as he picked the burrs out of his sock. “Oh yes I do.”

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“I'd cry,” Josh Pike's creaky old voice brought Sam back to the windy ranch. He generally avoided memories but this one had rolled in unbidden.

“I'd cry,” Josh Pike said again. “If I had to leave this place.”

“You won't,” Sam assured him, picking up the axe and hitching his jeans over his hips. “We'll squee...squeeze a few more...*you know*....out of the place.”

“Dollars?” Pike's hope glittered in his eyes.

It was nearly noon when they washed up in freezing water at the pump in the yard, even though Josh Pike had done nothing to dirty himself. He dried himself on the towel before handing it to Sam.

When he'd finished, Sam followed the old man into the farmhouse to bid farewell to Mrs. Pike, as he had done every day since he arrived there a month ago.

She was dishing up dinner which she flourished under his nose, “Pork and beans! Alex's favorite.” The menu changed from day to day, but it was always Alex's favorite, whether it was smoked ham or sausage and gravy.

Curiosity finally getting the better of him, Sam asked who Alex was.

“Hmm?” Mrs. Pike's attention was on her perpetual *I Love Lucy*. “Who, honey? Alex? My son Alex?” She gave no further information, such as where he was or why he didn't help his parents out on the ranch. Instead, she asked Sam as she had done every day, “Are you off, honey? There now.” She wiped her hands on her apron and addressed her husband who shook his week-old *Daily Bugle*, “It just goes to show that lightning can fork straight through a rainbow.”

Josh Pike sank lower into his old overstuffed armchair until his knees were higher than his shoulders. “Can't think why,” he said to Sam, “you want to work in that bar, boy, when you could stay here and eat your dinner with us.”

As Sam got into his pickup and waited while the wipers failed to clear the windshield of dirty snow, he thought Josh Pike conveniently forgot that the Pike Ranch brought Sam no much-needed cash. The odd jobs—or rather, the heavy work that kept the ranch's head above water—were in exchange for his accommodation in the hut and an occasional supper. No, it was *that bar* that brought in the cash.

He'd walked through the swing doors of the Thud Bar a month ago and into a fight.

Two buckaroos wrestled like lumbering bears locked into a growling waltz that knocked over tables and sent glasses and bottles flying. Customers lined the perimeter howling incitement with raised beer bottles while the bar tender flicked a white towel as if shooing a skunk out. When one of the fighters leaned back intending to take a swipe at his opponent's jaw, he stepped backwards into Sam.

He grabbed the guy's outstretched arm and, in a flash, stepped between the two men and pushed them apart. Combined, the two men were probably about four times Sam's height and weight, yet both seemed frozen in surprise. “You done?” Sam asked as polite as if he was asking them to have a drink. One promptly nodded but the other hesitated and, in Sam's book, hesitation meant attack so he propelled the man backwards into the wall. “You done?” he asked again in the same tone as before. The cowboy, goggle-eyed, stared at Sam for just a second before he looked away.

“Done,” the cowboy muttered.

Sam released him and turned to the guy with the white towel who took a nervous step backward.

“I'm looking,” Sam said. He paused for several seconds while the bar held its breath. “For. Work.”

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Sam's hours at the Thud Bar were from midday to midnight six days a week. Besides sending shots down the bar, his other tasks included hauling kegs and bottles, swabbing down the wooden bar and giving a lick and a promise to the glasses.

"And making sure customers don't kick ass too often," Charlie the bar-owner told him on his first day while Jim Reeves crooned on the juke that he got the blues when it rained. "As you saw yesterday, fights just flare up, they come outta nowhere like the weather. We need to nip bar brawls in the bud. Get 'em out in the street."

Sam thought High Falls main drag indeed meandered as if laid out by the bar's Saturday night punch-drunks. "Okay," he said. "I'll nipple the..." He stopped and reconsidered. "I'll sure...make sure the bar doesn't get scathed."

Charlie chewed this over. "Don't you mean unscathed?"

"No." Sam looked around the brown bar, not brown from any paint but from eons of exhaled fumes that stuck. He wondered how a bar fight could make the place look any worse than it already did.

Sam spent his first day serving customers: hard, weather-beaten, rough-looking ranch folk who came in to break the bovine monotony.

By five o'clock it was pretty quiet and he was ready to take a break. As he leaned against the grime-encrusted sink, he contemplated the branding irons on the walls and the bar stools that weren't—they were just old tractor seats or parts of saddles, or anything Charlie had managed to filch. The juke was roaring an assortment of distorted Jim Reeves, culminating in the Everly Brothers' *Cathy's Clown* which Sam had heard six times already.

He was pondering how he could improve the grass growth in Josh Pike's pastures while a small portion of his mind registered the conversation between Charlie and a prematurely grizzled thin man who had told Sam earlier he was Doctor Thomas Trillium, the High Falls veterinary.

"He just walked in, did he?" The doctor's voice was thin and reedy.

"Yep. Yesterday. Said he was looking for work."

"And you think he can protect your precious bar from your testosterone-fueled, feisty clientele? He looks like a gust of wind will blow him over."

"I tell you this, not only did he break up a fight in here yesterday but after being on the Pike Ranch for two days old Josh Pike says Sam's already pulled a breech calf from a cow. Josh says the boy's powerful right enough. He might not look it, but I guess he's the sinewy type."

"I take your word for it. You say he pulled a breech by himself and it survived? Then he's an odd-jobber *par excellence* you ask me. Wonder what else Josh Pike reckons an odd-jobber's position description entails—castrating, branding and dehorning the calves, perhaps?"

Yes, Sam thought as he pondered a long-horn skull with three eye-holes hanging on the wall.

"Getting the bull ready? Spot-checking the heifers for breeding, vaccinating against brucellosis?"

Yes, yes and yes to that too. And that's before breakfast. Sam let the conversation wash over him as he gazed at a couple clinched in a lively dance by the jukebox, the girl's tight mini-skirt being stretched to its full potential. He heard the click and bounce of balls on the pool table and a gob of brown tobacco juice hitting the sawdust, but he only winged back in when the veterinary said, "Did you say his name's Sam? He's very vague, you know. Look at him daydreaming. Are you sure he's all there?"

Sam frowned because he didn't like that kind of talk. He'd only been sorting stuff out in his mind, deciding how best to improve the working facilities at the Pike Ranch and how he could build a proper working chute which would help the *veterinary* when he treated the cattle. He was about to tell him when the girl dancing in the mini-skirt began licking her partner's hairy ears and Sam yelped out a laugh instead.

"Welcome back, Sam," said Charlie, joining in Sam's laughter, although he couldn't have known what was so amusing.

The veterinary didn't crack a smile. He knocked back his fifth whiskey shot, heaved himself off his tractor seat and said to Charlie. "Just make sure he knows what he's up against when he meets Mule Palmer."

Sam paused in tossing a bag of chips at a customer who'd asked for it. "Wh...who?"

"Mule Palmer. You'll know him when you meet him, he's not the most beautiful sight in the world. But sleep safely in your bed for a while longer, young man, he's not here just now. Where is he, Charlie?"

"How the hell should I know? Annual vacation? Gone to buy a crock-pot? Having the aggression sucked out of him?"

"On a social visit with Satan more like. Well just make sure he," the veterinary nodded at Sam, "is prepared for him when he gets back."

Sam threw the two men a look which he hoped conveyed that if this Mule Palmer guy needed to be rendered a stain on the fabric, then he—Sam—was the man to do it.

## Chapter Two: Alex

Bongo drums. How the hell did a guy like me, with straight As in acoustic guitar and piano studies, end up on a stage playing bongo drums for chrissakes? I had a reputation to maintain and being wild, woolly, and wicked just ain't easy with those things wedged between your legs.

"It'll be a blast," Jamil, who came from Arabia or someplace, had said. "We'll conjure up the spirit of the shifting dunes, the limpid oasis. We'll sock it to the judging committee—they've never seen anything like this before. We'll be a first in the Academy's history."

Damn straight. I'd been in half a mind to do something more traditional along the lines of *Floatin' Cornflake* followed maybe by *The Lady Came from Baltimore* with some pretty nifty acoustic guitar riffs. But Jamil had pouted and lifted irresistible soulful eyes.

"You got great rhythm," Jamil winked at me now, and I flashed a bright grin back.

"If you reckon that's good, wait 'til you see my rhythm when the action really gets started," I sparkled. He raised his dark eyebrows in reply which made me shiver in expectation.

While I slapped the drums with the knuckly part of my palms in an attempt to sound like a lumbering camel, I admired his dopey, dark beauty and his arm muscles rippling as he picked away at the strings on his oud. He half closed his eyes and looked sultry. "Come on Alex, you're a nomad, constantly on the move in mesmerizing, undulating, never-ending sand." He upped the plucking and created a sound like a pebble in a tin can which was anything but mesmerizing. The vibration unhooked the banner hung over the stage and *Verdigris Music Academy—Graduation Talent Contest* wafted delicately to the ground where it lay in a heap.

Yeah, we were nomads all right, dressed like fatheads in tunics and towels. We hadn't rehearsed, we weren't in harmony, and we had no idea what either of us was doing. Jamil said improvisation was the name of the game, that's how they did things where he came from, that's how they captured that special tone. Special tone, my ass.

I kept up what I hoped was a swaying rhythm with one hand and reached down with the other for the Bud bottle beside me.

"Hey, I want one a them," yelled a little kid, who looked about six, in the front row. He was the most enthusiastic member of the audience. Everyone else which was, let's face it, the whole faculty, sat on their seats



their legs a-dangle when they should've been writhing about in the death-throes of musical ecstasy.

"Get that kid a beer," I yelled. I'd had a few by then myself and I was hoping to get a laugh out of Jamil, but he simply upped the tempo until he sounded like a sand blaster.

"Hot rocks!" he cried.

I'll give you hot rocks. Just as soon as we get off this goddamn stage. I thrashed the drums and bounced my fingers as I gazed balefully at his sweaty face. The things I do to get a...

Then, as if I had a telescope stuck to my eyeball, I spotted someone in the audience. First he was magnified as I zoomed in to make sure it was him, and then he was very far away as my shock melted into an overwhelming desire to get outta there, fast. The moment I quit bongoing, the sound was turned off like water from a faucet, creating a silence that was loud in my ears as I gaped like a loony into the audience.

"That stinks," cried the little kid from the front row.

"Yeah," I agreed, paralyzed, unable to take my eyes off the figure who was returning my stare ten-fold. Why did he choose today to turn up for chrissakes? And how did he know I was here? I raised my eyes to the ceiling. Can you beat it? First time he ever comes to see me perform, and I'm wearing a dress.

"You crazy, man, or what?"

"What?"

"Who is that?" Jamil followed my gaze. "The President of the Waldorf Astoria?" Nothing less in his mind would absolve me for bringing his shambling symphony to a halt.

"Not quite. It's my uncle."

I removed the towel from my head and levered myself off the stage into the audience where someone gave a stilted clap and muttered, "Did you say these two are representing the Advanced Music Studies course? You gotta be kidding."

My uncle was gabbing to a clueless-looking turkey in a check shirt. It was a mighty fine conversation because my uncle's face was a study in fascination like he'd just been told the world was banana-shaped after all. "Now you're for it," I told myself as I shuffled from one bare foot to the other. I coughed discreetly which made him jump as if he didn't know I was there. As if.

"Ah Alex." His tone sounded warm, his smile flitted around his lips, but his eyes were nailed to his face.

“Hello, uncle,” I said, trying to relax and failing. “We were just fooling around there, it wasn't the real thing. I don't really play bongo drums, as was, no doubt, painfully obvious. Did you know the Governor's son is studying here at the Academy? I came third in my course. Out of forty.”

His stare was the one he'd perfected to wither me at forty paces. “A tree stump could pass a course here. And the Governor's son drinks too much.” His nostrils flared, seeking out my fumes so I shifted backwards. “When were you going to tell me?”

“Tonight. At supper.”

“The hell you were.” If my uncle wasn't who he was, he could be a mind-reading circus act.

“You mad at me?”

He mused at the ceiling as if assessing the light quality and his expression softened. “You know, they do say it is a waste of energy to be angry with a person who behaves badly, just as it is to be angry with a car that won't go.”

I turned this over for a while and a half and then shot him a sideways glance. “Guess I sucked up there, huh?” I indicated the stage where a girl from music theory was wailing, *Blue Moooon. You saw me standing aloooooone*. “I mean, you can't *not* be mad at me. Can you?” I had this lousy feeling I was digging my own grave here.

“Just listen to yourself,” he said sorrowfully but so gently that a glimmer of hope blossomed. Maybe things weren't going to end up too bad after all. What could he do to me anyway? Force me onto the stage to confess my crimes in a public humiliation? Confine me to the reception desk in the draughty entrance hall of his hot-shot empire where I'd flick paper clips at the chicks all day? Give me a break.

“I want you to pay me back,” he said through such tightly clenched teeth the words had to fight their way out.

“Excuse me?”

“I want a complete refund of all I spent these months in the mistaken belief you were studying for a Management Certificate. I want my money back.” He didn't take a lick of notice at the shock that must've registered on my face. Where the hell was I going to get some of that? Money wasn't something that hung around me much. “No you can't sell your car,” he said, his clairvoyant skills honed to perfection. “It's not yours to sell in any case. It's mine. I want you to ask your mother for the money. I want her to pay for your cheating and lying this time.”

“Ask Momma?” I put my hand on his arm. “No, no, no.” My voice rose in a perfect scale. “She can’t...Please don’t make me do that. I don’t want to go up there.”

He stared in askance at my hand so I removed it. “Then you and I have nothing more to say to each other,” he said with finality.

That may have been no big deal for him, but his words sent an icicle down my spine.

“You get me my money,” he continued. “Every cent from your mother. And soon. And then we’ll see.” He glanced at my arms spread now in supplication before he turned and jostled his way through the crowd.

*Don't walk away from me,* A voice shrilled in my brain with childish terror. *Don't go. I can do better. I promise. Just don't turn your back.* I bit down on a sob as a movement behind me caught my eye. It was Jamil, his mouth a thin line, his eyes unreadable. “Sounds like you pissed him off,” he said. “What did you do? Enroll here when you should’ve been on another course?”

“Hope you enjoyed the floor show,” I muttered, my mind on how I could turn this goddamn situation around to get back in my uncle’s good books.

Jamil whistled through his teeth. “Sheesh. Why don’t you tell him to screw it? You’re a bit old for him to beat up on you, aren’t you?” He waited for some reaction but I could only stand there with my neck bent. “So you gonna go see your mommy?” he insisted. Was it my imagination or was there a hint of a sneer flickering around his, now I came to look at it, old bozo mouth?

He waited for a reaction and then gave up. “Have a nice life, Alex,” he said, which was a pretty dumb thing to say considering the state it was in right then. I barely spared him a glance as he went one way while I headed in the other toward the bar.

## Chapter Three: Sam

Sam was lounging against a fence taking a break from digging an irrigation ditch when a blue Ford Mustang swirled up to the house and skidded to a halt. A tall pale young man dressed entirely in black, with a mane of hair as black as his clothes and down to his shoulders, got out, hoisted a duffle from the vehicle and limped into the house. A shriek from Mrs. Pike and Sam assumed prodigal Alex was home.

Sam turned his attention to the warm newborn calves, stretched out like seals in the willow patch. "Make the most of it, little babies," he murmured. "Tomorrow'll turn icy again." He sauntered into the barn where he contemplated a tiny nose and front feet emerging from a heifer's straining rear.

Just before midday he went into the kitchen to inform Mr. Pike about a fourth birthing, news that brought a smile to his craggy face. Sam was about to leave when Alex wandered in and leaned against the door, blocking Sam's exit.

"Where's my dinner?" gummed Josh Pike who for reasons Sam couldn't fathom always removed his teeth to eat.

"In the cow pond, where d'you think?" Alex said loudly, a cigarette balanced on his lower lip sending up wisps of smoke that forced his green eyes to squint. Sam glanced from mother to father but neither reacted to Alex's strange response. Mrs. Pike continued broiling steak while Josh Pike sat squarely at the sticky table, one meaty hand holding a knife, and stared at Mrs. Pike's ample rear.

Humming, Mrs. Pike placed a full plate in front of her husband, her attention on the flickering TV set.

"Here's your poison, darling. Eat it all up now," Alex continued in his mocking voice. Although neither elder Pike took any notice of Alex's rudeness, Sam was reluctant to hear any more. He padded toward Alex who watched his approach with obvious amusement. When he reached the door, Sam nodded at the handle indicating he'd like to leave. Alex hesitated just a moment too long before silently stepping aside.

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An hour later in the bar, Sam handed a second shot of Wild Turkey to Dr. Trillium who sat stick insect-like on a bicycle saddle stuck on a pole.

“Thanks. Not visiting the Pike Ranch so much these days, but I hear tell that all's well up there.”

Sam swabbed down the bar with a dirty cloth and nodded.

“Josh Pike says you're preparing new forage pastures. Impressive.”

Sam stared into middle distance. “S...seeds and things.” Although Sam smiled affably at the older man, he was tired of the questions. He drew a beer for another customer, and then folded his arms, his attention on a poker game, the players filmy like ghosts in the thick smoky atmosphere.

Trillium smacked his thin lips. “You got any orphans? Bum calves?” Sam shook his head and Trillium raised his eyebrows. “None?”

Sam shook his head again.

“No breeches?”

“Some.”

“Some?”

Sam decided for politeness sake he should give the veterinary a little more attention. “They're okay. Any C...C sections and Mr. Pike...um...would have called you.”

“Thanks very much. By the way, Mule Palmer was asking me today if I knew anyone interested in exercising one of the horses up at the Raw Pines. A three year old colt.”

Sam shook his head, but, undaunted, Trillium continued. “He's the Raw Pines foreman, you know, been away for his annual break. There's good stabling up there, but they're short-handed. Only a little fella—the colt, not Mule Palmer.” He waited for Sam to acknowledge the joke. “Would you be interested?”

Sam was startled. “Me? I don't have time...no extra time.” And feeling that was the end of the conversation, he picked up a color crayon and began marking labels on bottles he was stacking. He sensed the veterinary's myopic eyes on him.

“I feel there's some kind of methodology connected to what you're doing.”

Sam nodded and held up a yellow crayon against the Miller bottles.

“Ah. I get it. Yellow for Miller, Blue for Budd, Red for Schiltz, Green for Falstaff, Orange for Canadian Club. Very pretty. A regular rainbow.”

Sam ignored the condescension, put his crayons under the counter, inspected a pot of beer nuts and removed a piece of lint. “They breed horses on Pine...Raw Pines?” He wiped his hands on his pants.

"I'm not the one to ask. I, unlike others, do not hold the privilege of being invited to enter that exclusive territory. They have their own veterinary. It's an experimental farm."

Sam often made his way up the creek to the ranch neighboring the Pike Ranch, and he'd seen the large herd of longhorns and the weird-looking corn that grew from seed to eighteen inches in a month. He'd also spotted seven pregnant heifers corralled separately and had been unable to identify the breed of milky-colored cattle.

By evening he'd served enough liquor to swim in; three men and two women were asleep on a pool table; he'd served a zillion lukewarm franks and beans, shouting *One up!* after each one, and was sick of showing dirty glasses to water when a figure emerged through the fog from the general direction of the jukebox. Jim Reeves sang. As Alex approached, Sam's first thought was that his black leather vest and well cut black leather pants were too good for the likes of the Thud Bar, for the likes of High Falls or even the whole planet for that matter. His next thought was to wonder why Alex limped. He even had time to decide that the guy didn't resemble either his mother or his father. Alex settled on a tractor seat next to Trillium who had returned for his evening stint.

"Evenin' Doc." Alex pushed his long hair out of his eyes.

"Alex." Trillium drained his whiskey and set it down with a bang. He gave a brief nod at Sam before he quickly left the bar.

"Nice to see you too." Alex watched the veterinary's retreat then turned to Sam with a white smile. "Hi. Didn't get a chance to say hi in the kitchen, so I'll say it now. You're Sam."

"Yes," Sam acknowledged. "Wh...what'll you have?"

"And I'm Alex."

"Yes."

"I'll just have a beer tonight."

Sam pulled a beer, handed it over and watched as half disappeared in one gulp.

"Hear it's not so good to get on the wrong side of you." Alex's voice was soft—surprising because of his size, being a good head taller than Sam and easily forty pounds heavier.

Sam looked down at himself. "Which side?"

"The right side."

Sam twisted to look at his left side. "This side? W...why?"

"I meant the right side. Wrong side? Never mind. Quiet in here tonight. You from around here?"

“N...near enough.”

“High Falls isn't near anyplace.” He offered Sam a Bull Durham which he took.

“Silver Creek.”

“Must a been desperate to come work up here.” Alex tapped his cigarette packet on the bar and studied the bullet ridden wall opposite. He hummed a tune, his leg rattling a rhythm on the stool. “Came up from down south myself. Just spending a coupla days with Momma.”

“Right.” Sam put a shot in front of a customer, caught the coin he sent in the air, threw back a handful of change and then returned to listen to Alex.

“Live with my uncle and aunt down there,” Alex continued. “He's a big wheel in Verdigris. Richer than Solomon. Can I get you a drink?”

“A beer,” Sam muttered. What had he done to deserve so much information in such a short time without even asking for it?

“Christ. This shite poke town makes purgatory look like a wild party. They got nothing else but Jim Reeves on that jukebox?”

“Everly Brothers.”

“Christ. So, tell me,” Alex searched around for a topic. “You play pool?” He looked hopefully at the pool table.

Sam knew how to get in gear sure enough, but it was too much trouble to find the words to tell Alex.

“You get drafted?”

Sam shook his head again and mentally groaned as Alex hunkered down for a long story.

“Me neither.” He looked down at his leg. “Four-F. Dummy leg. Broke it when I was fourteen. Well, it was my own fault. Some kids I knew were fooling with this hot-rod, and instead of getting inside, I stood at the open door. Soon's they started burning rubber I fell out.” He looked curiously at Sam. “You okay?”

Whoops. Sam really would have to stop this irritating habit of his of watching people's mouths when they spoke. He transferred his eyes up to Alex's and nodded.

“Yep. Even though my uncle gave me the best medicine, it ended up shorter than the other, thinner too.”

Sam was looking at Alex's mouth again, so he turned his attention to a cowboy tilting the pinball machine.

Undeterred, Alex continued. “You say you didn't get drafted?”

Sam raised his eyebrows at a customer who asked for whiskey and port. "Whiskey and...?" Sam searched the row of bottles behind the bar.

"Port."

Sam chewed his lip. "Port? I didn't c...color port."

"It's there." Alex pointed at a dark bottle. Sam tried to follow the direction of the finger. "There." Alex jabbed his finger. "Right in front of you. Gallo port."

Sam sighed, his hands on hips, scanning the bottles as Alex leaned across the bar, his finger almost touching the port bottle. "There. You ditz. Can't you read?"

Having given the customer his liquor, Sam went round the bar collecting glasses, and when he returned, Alex repeated his initial question. "You say you didn't get drafted? Give me another beer and a shot, can you?"

Sam obliged then took a moment to turn the faucet on full blast, spraying himself and the bar around him and treating the glasses to more water than they'd seen in days. "Nope," he said lightly, wiping his cheek with the back of his hand. "They said I was more of a...*thing*...danger to my own side than the en...nem...other side."

"Wow." Alex leaned backwards almost falling off his tractor seat. "My uncle always said that 'bout me too."

"Yeah, well maybe...in my case, it's because I'm a ditz."

"Hey Alex!" A raucous voice wiped the smile off Alex's face like a slap.

"Oh shit. Mule Palmer. Thought he'd be down the road tonight."

A current of bad breath swept over them carrying with it the aroma of undigested raw bull hide with the hair still on. "Hey, Alex is home for a change, stayin' with his mommy." A hulk of a man, full muscle, his back so straight it could be used for checking walls. He looked like he'd been toned, polished and turned out either by the prison service or the marines. He stood behind Alex, his chest bursting through his shirt and his squinty eyes disappearing into folds of flesh dotted with pimple pricks. He addressed the bar at large. "You ever seen anythin' so smart? You ever seen anyone so well turned out as this pussy?"

Mule Palmer paused in his observation of Alex as he spotted Sam. He studied him, taking in his small frame and Sam knew from experience he was sizing him up as an easy target. But, for the moment, Alex was more amusing; he'd sunk over his beer, his hair a curtain over his face, hunched



down as if he wasn't really there. Mule Palmer's paw landed on Alex's leg, just below the knee. "Real leather. You sweat much in there?"

He reached to grip Alex's collar but before he made contact, Sam rounded the bar until he was next to the beefy man. Mule raised his eyebrows in what could have been surprise but a scornful grimace soon curled over yellow teeth, his face wearing a *go on, take me on* expression. Needing no more encouragement, Sam grabbed Mule's wrist. Cartilage scraped against bone as Sam squeezed, triggering a flash of pain mixed with surprise across Mule's face. Sam nodded at the wrist, indicating he could break it. His eyes beginning to water, Mule lowered his arm. Sam nodded again, this time to show his approval. He released the wrist but kept his eyes on Mule, mentally conveying that he would be flipped onto the spit slimy sawdust floor if he caused any more trouble.

Mule chewed briefly on the inside of his cheek and inspected his wrist as if puzzled that someone of Sam's stature had the power to hurt it like that. He wandered over to the safety of the pool table which he leaned on while he inspected his boot sole. He picked off something yellowy-brown, sniffed it, grimaced and let it drop to the floor.

Sam returned behind the bar where Charlie was looking at him with approval. "You pack a wallop when you want."

"Only w...when I'm dis...not grunted." Sam polished a glass into a smear.

Alex shuffled on his seat. "Thanks for not letting him kick my ass," he said lamely.

"W...wasn't going to let him your ass kick."

"Excuse me?"

"...let him kick your ass. Hell, he's...he's duff stuffed. Can't...doesn't have the *thing* ...the right to push people around."

Alex observed him with a quarter-smile before he asked for another beer. When it arrived, he took a long pull then crooked his finger for Sam to listen closely. "Mule Palmer has a hula girl *and* a nodding dog on his dashboard," he whispered, his breath tickling Sam's ear.

Sam flung himself back in horror, grasping the counter for support. "No! B...both? They're m...mortal enemies."

Alex chuckled, putting his finger to his lip. "Shh, he doesn't know that."

Sam chuckled as he polished the same spot on the counter and watched the pool table where Mule had joined in a game. "You

should...um... go home, Alex,” Sam told him. “Before he withers his gaths...gathers his wits.”

“Bartender,” Palmer imperiously waved a finger in Sam's direction. “A pitcher here.”

Sam waited while Alex left then he supplied the requested beer and returned to the bar. “Suppose that's the end of the year...three year old colt now then,” he said to Charlie who looked baffled.

## Chapter Four: Sam

Sam was wrong about the colt.

The following morning an ancient truck pulled into the barnyard while Sam was cleaning out the hay store in the barn. Wiping his hands on his baggy overalls, he jumped out of the loft and met Mule Palmer's green smile as he hauled himself out of the vehicle.

"Doctor Trillium mention somethin' about a three year old?" Palmer's skin was sallow in the watery sunshine as he inspected the barnyard. "You improved the drainage here. Used to be real muddy and slippery. Hell on hooves."

Sam looked at a channel he'd dug to drain the overspill and cast a quiet look at Mule, assessing his mood. Was he here for revenge? Sam usually followed his instincts, and if the hair on the back of his neck had risen, he'd have been on red-alert. But Mule wasn't exuding hostile vibrations this morning.

"Well, do you?"

"What?" Sam asked.

"Ride the goddamn horses."

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Sam followed Mule's truck along the deeply rutted trail choked with hawthorn, the pickup's tires sinking into quagmires. They passed one fertile hay meadow after another before they reached the steel arch entrance announcing Raw Pines. The log barns, tidy corrals and whirring sun-bleached windmills held a certain fascination for Sam, but it was nothing compared to the scent of leather and the assortment of horse blankets, saddles, bits, halters and bridles in the stables block.

An urgent snickering from a far stall drew his attention. "This here's the three year old." Mule whacked the horse on the nose, and it kicked out at the rear wall. "Mean bastard, a biter. They're gonna get rid of him."

"Rid?" Sam touched the colt's nose. "No. He's b... beautiful."

"Take care," Mule said. "You never know what that bastard's gonna do. Well I'll be damned." He watched in amazement as Sam pulled the horse's ears which made the animal snort and stamp its hoof in pleasure.

Mule shook his head. "You don't value your fingers or somethin'?" He moved into the chestnut's line of vision, and it flattened its ears, rolled its eyes and, swift as a snake, bit out at him. Mule jumped back, but Sam

simply placed his hands either side of the chestnut's head and the horse's ears rose again.

Mule slapped his thigh. "Hey. Look at this. Looks like an old plug starved a love."

Sam looked around for a saddle. "He the one I'm r...riding?"

"Yep. See how long 'fore he throws ya. Need a laugh."

"His name?"

"Nope. No name 'cept Mean Bastard."

All horses needed a name, Sam decided. "Jasper. Th...that's his name." He threw a blanket over the horse and rocked a saddle in place before fastening the back-cinch. He climbed on, leaning down to pat the burnished neck feeling the horse was as eager for a ride of its life just as he was.

"Betcha don't make it to the creek," Mule called after him as he trotted out of the stable block.

Sam gazed at the sloping pastures, dotted with piñones and junipers. In the far distance he could see the white wood perimeter fence that bordered the Pike Ranch.

"Who owns this place?" he asked Mule over his shoulder. "God and girl...his girlfriend?"

"Near enough. Try Timothy Finch."

The name meant nothing to Sam.

He kicked at Jasper's flanks and felt the surge in the horse's muscles as they shot through the barnyard. Heifers fat with calf scattered in the home pasture as Sam galloped past. The bruised brush sent up a fragrance of sage as Jasper jumped the creek that separated the far end of the ranch from the prairie.

When they passed onto Pike Ranch land Sam dismounted and tied Jasper to a juniper. While he waited for the horse to graze, he sat in the dappled shadows of the willows and cottonwoods as fluffy clouds skidded across the sky. Shifting into a warmed willow patch he lay back, arms and legs akimbo, his eyes tightly shut, enjoying the warmth on his body and wishing life could be like this sunny spot forever. But when a shadow passed over his eye-lids, he was on his feet, body poised for attack before his eyes had time to open.

"Hey," Alex held up his hands, palms out in protection.

Sam narrowed his eyes, watching Alex's every move.

"Hey," Alex said again, lowering his hands. "You know what you look like?" Sam didn't answer so Alex did. "A mule-deer in meltdown."

Sam had no idea what Alex meant and he waited in silence to see what the explanation would be but instead Alex looked behind him, up the low butte to a pine stand of lodgepole and ponderosa where Sam's hut stood. "That's new," he said.

Sam still said nothing.

"That where you live?" He waited for Sam's nod then continued. "I wondered because Momma said you were living here and I couldn't figure out where. The old trailer behind the house is the Y for roaches, so I knew you couldn't be in there." He stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the small structure camouflaged by the pines. "Can I take a look?"

Sam wasn't used to people around his hut, around his life for that matter. "Why...W...what you doing out here?"

"I need to walk every day," Alex nodded at his leg. "Otherwise it gets stiff and hurts. What's with that?" He nodded at Jasper, grazing sedge.

"Horse." Sam took a deep breath. "Quarter horse."

"Probably. No idea. Only thing I know about horses is that fried potatoes go nicely with them." He shot Sam a grin that wasn't returned.

Sam walked up the steep incline to his place in the shadows, looking back once to see if Alex was following.

"It's a cabin," Alex said, his hand on the wooden door.

"No. A hut. It's not all w...wood. A shed roof. Mud there—see it's shooting...sprouting *stuff*...aspen on the wall."

"I would never have known it was here, except when I was passing the sun reflected on the pane and caught my eye." Alex indicated the single window. "Where'd you learn to build something like this then? You have Lincoln Log kits as a kid?"

"Log? Lin...? No." Sam took a breath and wondered how to explain it. "Gravel," he said at last. "Gravel...I got gravel from the old...*you know*...pit, down there." He pointed into the distance. He refused Alex's offer of a cigarette and reached into his shirt pocket for his own Lucky Strike. "The w...wood, planks, I found. I asked Josh...your father, he said I could...um...build this."

"You asked who?"

"Mr. Pike."

"JP my father? Christ, that's like saying Martin Luther King wasn't assassinated."

Sam chewed his lip while he thought about this. "But he *was*. Last w...week," he added sadly.

“Right. So JP's not my father. I was a baby when my Pa bugged out. Then my Momma married JP, and by the time I was twelve, I couldn't stand scoping his toilet-face no more. So I left. Fact is my uncle begged Momma to let me go live with him.”

“You w...wanted that?” Sam couldn't believe anyone would volunteer to leave their mother.

“Oh yeah, see, the last thing I wanted was to mould away with the cows. Verdigris sounded much more fun.” A bird flew over, and he cringed. “So, what do you do? Out here? I mean, what do you do when it's cold? Must freeze your balls off.”

Sam shrugged his contempt of the cold.

“And what about eating? I know Momma gives you something. Do you eat at the bar?”

“Sometimes.” Not often because he was tired of franks and ham and cheese on very old rye. “I fish. I shoot. I love the prairie. Its secrets. It changes with the light, the w...wind. I like the roll...mist coming up, the pines rolling in...rolling in the...” He grinned ruefully. “Guess you know w...what I mean.” His eye was caught by Jasper. The horse was shaking his head, pawing the ground, his ears pinned back.

“What's it doing?”

Sam got up and moved closer, trying to calm the animal with a whispered “Alrighty.” It seemed to work until Alex came up, and then Jasper reared, pedaling his front legs high.

“Christ,” Alex jumped back, but Sam merely moved to one side.

“Something's bad...wrong.” Sam caught the reins and held on until the horse calmed. “He's not in good...fit generally.”

“Could've fooled me, the way you two shot up the prairie earlier.” Alex kept his distance.

“He has a w...wheeze. I'll take him back.”

## Chapter Five: Sam

The next evening, Sam was sitting on his log outside his hut and thinking. Had he got a fair price for the two pregnant heifers he'd taken to auction that morning? It was a pity the Pikes felt the need to sell the healthy animals with good breeding potential, but he supposed they must need cash. Not for wages for him, that was for sure.

Sam'd expected something close to delight from Josh Pike as he handed over the notes. But instead Pike had merely grunted and stuffed the money in his pocket.

Perhaps I should've stuck out for more, Sam thought as he blew smoke at the cow dogs who were each angling to lie on his foot. They all cocked one eye open as Alex climbed the hill but then closed their eyes again.

"So this is where they all are."

Sam stood up, threw his cigarette into the dirt and nodded at the dogs. "You can...take...have them if you want. I was going to pull ticks...the ticks off."

"You're welcome to them then. Just thought I'd keep you company."

Sam settled back on his log. He watched Alex lean a guitar against a trunk and shifted over to give him space. Alex sat down with a sigh, bathing Sam in a whiff of stale alcohol.

"I went to the bar, but you weren't there."

"Day off." Sam got to his feet and inspected his little gas stove which held a sizzling frying pan. "You want trout? There's...it's too big for me. And potatoes."

"Wow, a feast. Where'd you get it from?"

"The creek."

"You *caught* it?"

"*Salvelinus fontinalis*."

"Excuse me?"

"*Trout*," Sam replied. "*Freshwater fish regarded for its flavor.*" The words rolled into his mind like a rising tide and spilled out of his mouth with ease—some old chestnut that had once implanted itself in his brain—lining ready to be regurgitated verbatim at a time like this. These recitals didn't occur often but when they did, it was like a pleasurable tickle. And what he mostly enjoyed was the other person's expression. "*Trout belong to the salmon family, Salmonidae.*" He looked at Alex's bewildered face

and hoped he wouldn't ask for repetition, because it sure wouldn't come out the same the second time around. "Dumber found," he murmured.

"Dumbfounded," Alex agreed, although his lips hardly moved. He shook his head as if to clear it, probably thinking he hadn't heard Sam right.

To stop him asking, Sam served up the fish on two cracked plates. He handed one to Alex, settled himself on the log and forked up a mouthful of the white flesh which he spat out onto his plate.

Alex spluttered as he saw tears form in Sam's eyes. "Hotter than you expected, huh? *Oh Mary don't you weep, don't you mourn.*" He sang in a clear voice.

"I ain't no Mary," Sam swiped his eyes with his shirtsleeve. "You go...go... *Mary* ...s...someone else."

Alex drew in a deep breath, a sign Sam now knew was a prelude to a long tale. "'Spect you're wondering why I'm still here and not back down in Verdigris."

"Verdigris?"

"You never heard of it? About two hundred fifty miles south from here. Big city. Famous for its tire plants. So, you want to know why I'm not there?"

Sam wasn't really much intrigued, but he decided to show willing. "You're visiting your folks, your ma...mother."

"Right. But I usually only come up for a day or so once a year. 'Bout as much as I can take in this one stoplight town. This time, thought I'd stay a bit. Just finished a course. Advanced Music Studies. At the Academy. Did pretty well too." Alex paused, waiting for a reaction Sam didn't provide. "Yep," Alex continued regardless. "And now my uncle's mad as hell at me." He waited, perhaps for Sam to ask him why, but then realized he'd have to wait til Doomsday. "See, he wants me to go into business and, six months ago, he sent me on a business course. Thing is, the Music Academy across the road looked more attractive, and I enrolled there instead. And he just found out."

Six months? Sam watched Alex chase a potato around his plate. *How the hell could you do one kind of course while pretending to do another? How could you fool someone for so long?*

Alex must've read his mind. "I hide my shit well. But, boy, he's mad. He doesn't yell or slug me, it's just you know he's mad. A kind of tic..." He tapped his temple either to show the guy was nuts or to show where the tic was. Alex pushed his hair back with a shaking hand. "You got any beer?"



Sam indicated the open door of his hut. "Whiskey." He waited for Alex to return with the bottle and then stated, more for something to say than anything else, "You want to do music and not...that other thing...business."

Alex took a deep draft from the bottle before he poured some into a cup for Sam. "Right. You know I *was* going to tell him. About the music course. I was fixing to present him with my diploma so he'd see how well I did. I reckoned he'd say *Alex, it is perfectly clear to me where your true vocation lies.*"

"And he didn't."

"No. Trouble was he came to see me perform on a kinda bad day." Alex took another long slug of whiskey. "I don't really know why I'm telling you this."

Neither did Sam. If he'd done something like that he sure as hell wouldn't yak about it.

"See," Alex continued. "He still wants me to go into the business, like my Pa did. And I tell you this, Sam, I'd do anything to be like him."

"Good pa... man? Your pa."

"The best. You know, when I was a kid I used to think he was still alive," he laughed self-consciously. "I used to buy him birthday and Christmas gifts. Dumb, huh?"

"Did you k...keep them?" Sam imagined a closet full of wrapped gifts festering somewhere.

"Nah. They were dopey stuff anyway. Candies. I ate them."

They finished their supper in silence, Alex taking regular pulls at the whiskey and the bottle was almost empty when he finally stretched out his legs. "That was good." He patted his belly and then continued with a scowl. "My goddamn uncle. He can't get his head around the fact I'm twenty. I'm not a kid anymore."

"Same as me. Almost."

"You nineteen? Figured you for younger. Anyhow, who do you know our age obeys their uncle? Huh?"

Sam was hard put to name anyone his age, let alone anyone with an uncle. "So wh...why do you? Obey."

Alex prepared to drain the whiskey. "Oh sorry," he held up the bottle and Sam indicated it was okay for him to finish it. "Why do I? Hell I know. I don't mean he's *bad*. He's never been *mean*. He's been real good to me since I was twelve. Paid for my education, given me everything. Gave me my car. You like my car?"

“L...looks like it could make toast...good toast.”

“Ha!” Alex contemplated his boots. “I guess I’ll go do this course he wants me to.”

“Business.”

“Right.”

“The w...one you don’t w...want.”

“Right. I’d rather do shark wrestling. Thing is, I do like singing. Got myself a band. Knew Wills and Bella since we were at junior high. It’s just the three of us in our band, it’s called WillAIBe. That’s for Wills—he’s on keyboard, me on acoustic guitar and Bella who’s vocals and flute. We did a few good bashes this last year. Mostly college and rodeo gigs.” Alex burped gently.

Sam squinted through his cigarette smoke at red thunderclouds massing behind the range on the dark blue horizon. “Did you l...learn that...” he nodded at Alex’s guitar resting against a pine trunk. “When you were a... *you know*...kid?”

Alex shuffled, getting comfortable on the log. “Partly. Old JP gave me my first guitar, and he showed me the first three chords, some very standard folk stuff, finger-picking, basic strumming, stuff like that. And he had a friend who’s dead now, but he took me further. Did some classes in music at high school, learned the piano there too, but my uncle, he didn’t encourage me none. I used to take piano classes when he thought I had baseball practice. Beats me how he reckoned I could play baseball with my leg like this, but he kinda ignored it.” He looked ruefully at Sam who was building his own picture of Alex’s uncle. “Suppose I sound a bit screwed up to you.”

Sam turned this over and decided not to tell him yes, he did think Alex was screwed up.

“You want to hear something? Don’t move.” Alex got up, ungainly in his cups, his limp more pronounced. He picked up his gleaming guitar, the same warm chestnut color as Jasper.

“Course,” he said, settling down with the guitar. “In our gigs we have to play a bunch of blues and country music, specially if we’re at a rodeo and some of this *let’s have a revolution* stuff and doo wop if we’re at a college. But folks sure like to boogie, and I like to make ‘em do it.”

“Boogie,” Sam repeated.

“Yeah. Boogie. I don’t much like psychedelic rock, I prefer folksy type music, bluegrass, soul, Guthrie, Dylan, that sort of stuff, but one day I’ll just play my own songs. I’ve so many songs in my head, they

practically dance to get written down. So, what do you want to hear? I can play anything.”

“Anything?”

“Well, how about something by Simon and Garfunkel?”

“Garfle and...?”

Alex strummed a chord. “Never heard of them? I thought they were as famous as Jesus Christ. Never mind, perhaps you never heard of him neither. Okay. Let's try someone else.”

He tried out a couple of chords, his head down, concentrating and then settled in. The drifting lyrics and melody sent Sam into a dream. He watched Alex's fingers stroke the frets, captivated by his long slim fingers and neat nails on the strings.

*Wasting time.*

As the last chord echoed and faded, Sam blinked. “Did you w...write that? It's good. Time w...w...wasting time.”

“Yeah right. And the fact nothing's ever gonna come my way. That's not my song, old buddy, that's by Otis Redding, died a few months ago. You not heard it?” He strummed a lower register. “Now if you want to hear something by me, here's just some music—no lyrics yet. But this is mine. Listen.”

He started out with a lazy scale, descending, tumbling and then swelling. To Sam, who knew as much about music as he knew about the Swedish Royal Family, the sounds that shimmered through the night air were stunning, a kaleidoscope of notes that rippled rainbow-like, sparkling into his mind.

“What?”

Sam blinked and realized Alex had stopped with his hand in midair. He was looking at him curiously.

“What?” Sam replied, his mind a dazed fug.

“You looked like you were focused somewhere between here and there. Like you were watching something. What was it?”

“The pattern in...intri...cate?”

“Intricate pattern?” Alex took his hands from the instrument and sat straighter. “Where?” He looked at the sky.

Sam sighed. He'd goofed up again. “No. I didn't see any...” He started to get to his feet.

“Wait,” Alex repeated the chords he'd just played, upping the rhythm which made Sam sit down like a blind man, feeling for the log and staring into middle distance. Alex stopped strumming. “You see it again?”

Sam nodded.

"What about this?" He played the first chords of *Sitting on the Dock of the Bay*.

"A...some."

"More when I do this?" He played his composition again, upping the tempo, chopping a chord, adding to the rhythm layer upon layer. "What do you see?"

"A shift in light. Moves...place... from one place to another." Sam's finger pointed and jumped semi-circles in the air. "A glow. Tinged...tinged with yellow or red on the high notes and blue on the *thing*. I don't know." He passed a hand through his hair before he tentatively reached out and touched the guitar's burnished body, his fingers lingering. "It's alive," he murmured, stroking the bodywork. "It...." he searched for a word, "breathes."

Alex plucked a chord. "The vibration from the strings builds up in here, in the sound-box, in sound-waves which come through the sound-hole here."

Sam's fingers traced the curves, lingering to feel the diminishing throbbing. "The song of the box...soundbox."

Alex chuckled. "You really are a crazy, fucked-up son-of-a-bitch, aren't you?"

"So I've been t...told," Sam replied dryly and took his hand away thinking Alex was a fine one to talk.

Cattle rustled in the pastures and the sky had turned deep lavender. Sam lit a cigarette and, although he didn't look in Alex's direction, knew he was being observed. And he liked it about as much as he liked Alex's next question.

"What about your folks?"

Sam inhaled his smoke deeply and blew it out slowly. He took his time about sucking on the cigarette again but it seemed Alex was a determined son of a so-and-so who wasn't going to let go of a question once he'd asked it.

"What about them then? Were you poor as a kid?"

Sam whirled round on the log. "Why?" His suspicion and discomfort were instinctive because he'd heard enough rich-boys' jibes to last a lifetime.

Alex leaned backwards, his palms out in a typical attitude of *whoa* that Sam had come to recognize. He had the wicked urge to scare the living daylight out of Alex just to see it.

"I'm interested, that's all," Alex relaxed, probably seeing Sam's amusement. He sounded sincere and Sam decided to cut him some slack.

Picking at a piece of loose wood on the log and crumbling it while he prepared his words, he finally said, "My ma killed...was killed w...when I was seven. Freak tornado. She was watching the storm outside the, *you know*, the...trailer, dumb thing to do I guess, and w...one of those things...lightning....hit a power line just above her."

"That's hard. What about your pa?"

Sam twined his fingers around each other then spread them wide like starfish. "He quit early."

Alex whistled through his teeth. "You ever have any run-ins with cops?" he asked.

Sam eyed him again. His social graces may not be his finest quality but even Sam knew that this question wasn't one you normally asked in polite company. He looked at Alex who innocently blew smoke at a snowy owl flying ghostly overhead. "Huh?" He wasn't going to let it go so Sam gave in.

"They w...were always after me. And Welfare—these women with their...*you know*...their *faces* hanging out. Sometime I broke into someone's house and slept in their bed. I liked b...beds...soft beds."

"So you were the original Goldilocks."

Sam snorted. "Some Goldilocks. Met a bear...a few bears in my time though."

"I'll bet," Alex imitated Sam's snort. He squinted through his smoke at the moon-lit prairie grasses and, like Sam, could probably feel the cold chill seeping up from the creek. "How about sage hen fried in sage tomorrow night? Reckon you might get one out there on that old prairie."

"I...I...going to...*you know*... tomorrow. I'll be w...with Amy. A month...she...she hasn't seen me, so plenty to talk about."

Alex cocked an eyebrow. "I'll bet. And not only talk about." He got to his feet. "When do you get back? Monday? I won't be here on Monday, I've spoken to my uncle who says he misses me so I'm going home. Thanks for the trout."

Surprised at how abruptly Alex had left and wondering what he'd done wrong, Sam watched him limp toward the alkali path. "Goodbye then," he said into the cool night air.

## Chapter Six: Alex

I'll never forget the day I came home from school and found my Pa standing on our doorstep. I'd seen his photo—the only one Momma had of him—a trillion times so I knew it was him.

"I'm your Uncle Timothy," he said.

"Nah. You're my Pa," I corrected, my jaw itching to say, *aren't you supposed to be dead?*

"Twins," Momma explained, her mouth pursed up like a cat's ass. "It's your Pa's twin. Your Uncle Timothy."

"How would you," my new-found uncle asked me with a happy smile, "like to come to Verdigris with me?"

Did I need coaxing? Did I heck. I was out of that house and into his fancy car faster than Sputnik with nary a backward glance at Momma which I guess was pretty brutal now I come to think about it. After all, it wasn't as if I'd ever been mistreated on the Pike Ranch, never beaten or stuffed in a closet.

See, I was just a country hick and this guy who looked like my Pa was rich—he wore a wide hat, had a chauffeur and a big car. Not like old JP who could barely stretch to an old straw cap and, instead of the Strato-streak V8 Pontiac I urged him to get, went out and bought a three-wheeled tractor which he expected me to be seen in public on—a bean wagon would've been less humiliating.

I reckoned Uncle Tim's house was a palace when I got there. I ran up and down the spiral staircase, swung on the numerous doors one by one until my uncle shouted for me to hush up for chrissakes and act normal. His wife, Auntie Vita, said well, what do you expect after that beat up wreck of a place he was living in? He's worse than those Polacks down the street and this is going to be a helluva uphill battle.

That got to me—I knew how to behave so when she offered me a plate of Marshmallow Crispy Treats and a red drink she called Texan sweat, which indeed smelled of armpits, I ate and drank delicately. Then I threw up on the Persian rug in the hall. That earned me my uncle's first look of contempt before he retreated to his private den where no man, except him entered, and he stayed there for nigh on most of my life, out of sight and me well out of mind.

It did occasionally cross my mind to wonder why they bothered with me since they weren't much interested, but I figured it was because he and Auntie Vita didn't have kids of their own and he needed someone to

inherit all that dough he was making. Pretty soon after I arrived he took me to his huge head office in Verdigris saying it was time to see the family firm. But the revolving doors were all the attraction I needed, and I twirled around in them until I threw up and he took me home.

\*\*\*\*

And I'll never forget the day I first saw Sam on that windy old Silver Creek street. I couldn't take my mind off him.

The next day when my uncle and I were back in Verdigris I shuffled into the lounge with a mid-pubescent sidle, you know the kind—it goes in two directions so you can make a quick getaway if necessary. My uncle was reading a newspaper. “No,” he said, although I swear I hadn't uttered a word. “For the hundredth time, I am *not* taking you back to Silver Creek. Just forget about it.” He had that kind of drink-your-milk voice which had me shivering like a pup in a slaughterhouse.

“Aw,” I whined two toned because my voice was on the point of breaking.

He screwed the paper up and threw it on the table with such force I jumped, as high as a kid with a busted leg could jump, that is. He got up and fixed me with a flinty stare. “What *is* this obsession for the place? I have no intention of ever going back to Silver Creek and it's no good saying you want more of those pills because the factory here in Verdigris is ready to manufacture them. Alex, forget about Silver Creek—it's a place for losers. You only have to look at the type of people they're raising there.” He pointed at the screwed up paper. “Kids like that should be put down at birth if not before. They are Bad News.” He added this last snippet as he left the room.

I pouted at the paper but picked it up out of curiosity since there was nothing else to do. Idly leafing through it looking for *The Gumps*, I came to the article my uncle had pointed to.

*The Silver Creek Bugle*  
*SILVER CREEK SKID ROW*  
*November 14 1962*

*A strong aroma of coffee fills the vaulted ceiling of Saint Marks, a church which the bishop gives over to the homeless people of Silver Creek at night. Yet though the place looks comforting, with mattresses and cots*

*laid out among the pews, there are some who prefer to sleep out in the streets in a persistent stink of garbage.*

*One such homeless person is a boy whose freckled face seems younger than his thirteen years. Sam's reluctant to give his surname because, he says, "People is after me" as if he means the Mafia.*

*Sleeping in doorways, under bridges in a carton or on the backseat of wrecked cars is not only preferable to sleeping in the church shelter, but, according to Sam, better than the security of a children's home because, he says without elaborating, "They do things to you there".*

*Life on the street is far from easy for Sam for he is constantly looking over his shoulder. His striped cotton t-shirt is insufficient for the cold night air and his jeans have seen better days, yet he is unwilling to take any of the donated clothes from Saint Marks, or "the flop", because, he says, he has a friend who keeps him clothed.*

*The place he calls home is where the sick gather until they're collected by the hospital truck at dusk; the beggars' spot where the inhabitants whine for dimes and who can make "up to forty five bucks a day"; the alcoholics' corner where winos lie around in an alcohol stupor; the soup distribution center which he says he never touches, preferring what "his friend" gives him.*

*Sam stutters and has a speech deficiency of some kind that makes him hesitate while he searches for words, yet his bright eyes dart curiously at the shadows into which he constantly dives to collect treasures he packs away in the old sack bag he carries over his shoulder, "to sell".*

*He lives under a dripping archway and his thin frame belies a toughness that goes far beyond his years. He has a carton where he keeps his blanket and pillow and from underneath, he pulls out a wooden dog which he carved. He holds it up and makes it pretend-bark, a testimony to his youth.*

*"I'm an asteroid," he says beguilingly. "They're homeless too."*

*But, like a will-o-the-wisp, one minute he's there and the next he's gone and the reason is simple: he's seen a patrol car roaming the streets looking for strays like Sam in the hope of taking them to a better place. Sam doesn't agree, though, and makes it clear he prefers the cracked, stinking sidewalk with just the wind whistling for company and the echo of Roosevelt's voice, "Homelife is the highest and finest product of civilization. Children should not be deprived of it."*

*Reporter: Sol Arkwright*



“Shit city,” I muttered, thinking about my own life which mostly revolved around Captain America comic strips, wishing my dick wasn't out of control and that I knew perfectly well why it reacted more around the boys than the girls, pretending my Pa was still alive and was real proud of me. I didn't need to think about living in a carton or watching my back.

I read it over and over until Sam—and I was certain it was my Sam they were talking about—became real, at least in my dreams. I fantasized about him and spent hours, days, weeks daydreaming that I joined him in Silver Creek where we pounded the sidewalks together. “I'm an asteroid,” he said, just like he'd said in the article.

“Is that right?” I responded. “Then enter my orbit, Mr. Roid, and let's see what sins we can comet.” We killed ourselves over that.

But it was the nights that got me all steamed up, when we kept each other snug. I was a little hazy on what we actually *did* under the stars—something to do with friction and a little kissing—but, hell, snug with Sam was enough for me.

I grew older and so did the fantasy. By now I had him living with me in Verdigris. I even started to quote stuff he said. If he told me that New Zealand used to be attached to some place called Malta because oceanographers discovered the underwater mountains were connected, then that's what I regurgitated in class the next day. If I didn't watch it, though, something like “Sam said that Socrates was a two-bit pipe player” would slip out and people would look puzzled and ask, “Sam? Who the hell is Sam?”

I even laid a place for him at the supper table until Auntie Vita said, “Isn't it about time you learned to count?”

I wasn't totally off my rocker, and I knew it wouldn't take much to get hauled off to the loony bin. So Sam and I talked about it and Sam decided I'd better stop taking him to school with me. It was better this way because Sam had been known to stir up trouble when I talked to other guys owing to his jealous tendencies.

I missed him at school but, boy oh boy, the welcoming return was worth a crock of gold. A soft warm body curled up in my bed, he'd greet me, squinting with sleep and desire. “You want to come in too?” Naked, he'd pull the bedclothes up giving me a glimpse of all I'd been dreaming about since morning.

Who needed asking twice? Jeez, I was only too ready to smother his pliant body with kisses because by then I was a tad less wet behind the

ears about what was what. And we'd even, once or twice, *gone the whole way*.

"Why you home so early, Master Alex, honeybunch?" our old maid, Dolores, yammered one day as I headed for the staircase. "Shouldn't you be doin' somethin' after school like most kids your age? Like a hobby or some kinda sport? 'Cause whatever it is you're up to in that old bedroom a youn every day just cain't be healthy none."

"I have important assignments to finish," I told her, mustering my dignity about me like a blanket.

"Well them old assignments sure do make a mess," she muttered bleakly as I pushed past. "Which I has to clean up."

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The years passed and the dreams did too, but when I finally saw him, in the flesh so to speak, in my Momma's kitchen all those years later my memories came roaring back and nearly blew me away. I wanted to leap onto one of the farm horses and canter round the yard and celebrate. Just another dream, that's all, because me on a horse? Get outta here—I'd do better on a pregnant heifer.

This Sam wasn't a dream and he wasn't a kid any more. Except he looked much the same, just a tad taller perhaps, still with an unruly thatch of brown hair, chestnut like the horse he rode.

Because I am a realistic kind of guy, I knew within three seconds of seeing him that this wasn't the person I'd been dreaming about. I guess it was the way he looked at me as if I'd bitten a kitten's head off just because I was baiting old JP, pretty mildly if I remember right.

This Sam didn't remember me and couldn't care less. Over the next day or so it seemed half the time he just suffered my presence, and half the time his mind was on something else. Even when he was rooted, he had a kind of stunned look about him as if surprised to find himself on this planet at all. The only time I made a shred of an impression was when I played my guitar, and then he looked like he'd been turned upside down into a vat of psychedelic syrup.

That was a scene, the two of us sitting on his log in the early evening eating trout, surrounded by dogs. He'd shown me around his little kingdom and his sparse belongings, his grey sweater hanging over what looked like a handmade chair, a moth-eaten pelt of some kind over his thin mattress. His aluminum pots, his one glass, one plate. I'd screwed my nose up at the

tank of newts he kept by the ceramic sink because he said he liked them suckers, and I'd flung myself back in horror at the small woodchuck he had in a cardboard box. "It's dead," I'd rasped.

"It's asleep," he retorted. "I found him with a bad leg, I guess he was bitten. I'll keep him safe here for a while. But he can always go if he wants. That's important for wild things—they can go if they want." He didn't say it as clearly as that—there was some backtracking and missed words but that was the gist.

We blew smoke together at the lightning bugs while I wondered for half a second if the old Finch charm was finally working. But then I shot my mouth off a night too much. I guess I should've been more discreet, but, hell, he was such a good listener and his eyes drilled into the core of me like he knew better than anyone else exactly what was going on in there. And that was the trouble because whatever he saw there was about as appealing as cold oatmeal.

Then, at the end, he spoiled the mood big time. "I'm off to see Amy." He told me looking like he'd hung the moon. "Haven't seen her for a month so you can imagine how much I miss her."

Shit. How could I not have known that he was married? I guess he had every right to go and see his wife, but I went away with an unshakable feeling of having been double-crossed. Jeez, how could my judgment of people suck so bad?

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The next morning I was scowling at a dust storm that Sam's old pickup had swirled up as he whizzed past to get a piece of little wifey when Momma slipped an envelope into my hand. I opened the flap, still wet from her spit, and stared at something I never expected to see—two hundred dollars in cash. She was at the wringer washer turning one of my white Egyptian cotton shirts yellow. For a moment I was speechless until I managed to whisper, "Thanks Momma."

She didn't turn, just missed a beat or two of the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* theme tune she was laboring over and continued to wring the life out of my shirt. She hadn't even asked why my uncle wouldn't pay for my college course; she'd just accepted it and come up with the whole ball of wax.

How had she rustled up the cash? Well, I'd spotted Sam wrangle a couple of cows onto a goose-neck trailer the previous morning and JP

muttered something about auctioneers. Ah well, I thought, the place is full of cows, they won't miss one or two. And just think how much they'll save on feed.

## Chapter Seven: Sam

Sam drove for three hours from High Falls, away from the plains, up steep highways flanked by fragrant spruce fir and pine forests, through snowy passes that wound toward the valley where Silver Creek nestled.

Once in town he passed boarded up stores, diners, and dusty, half-finished building lots. The only places doing business were gas stations and liquor stores. At the bus station more people seemed to be leaving than arriving.

He didn't stop but continued on out of town, up a hill where he turned sharply into a cedar-flanked driveway which led to a large grey building. He parked in front of the notice that said, *The Silver Creek Home for the Crippled*.

"Yes, the new drug Amy's now taking, Oxiprine, is working up to a point," Dr. Knights, the resident doctor, told Sam a few minutes later. "But she has had one grand mal attack since she started taking it." He flapped his hands against his thighs and raised his shoulders. "That means Oxiprine still won't be subsidized until it's proved to be one hundred percent effective. I'm sorry, Sam. But it's still early days, and her neurologist is optimistic and would like to keep her on the drug. Obviously."

The doctor shifted his eyes left. As if talking to the wall, he said quietly, "I guess you haven't read the latest letter the administration sent you." Sam hadn't. "The Home's fees will increase at the beginning of the year. It's the only way we can continue."

Sam shook the doctor's outstretched hand and headed down the corridor, trying to fight down his panic. How the hell was he going to find the cash to cover new drugs and increased fees?

His boots squeaked noisily on the grey parquet floor of the antiseptic smelling corridor, and a TV set tinkled to itself in a glass-fronted communal room. The only visible life was a stout man in red overalls leaning on a mop which Sam assumed substituted the man's missing leg because he never did any mopping and neither should he for he was a resident not a worker.

"How's it goin', Pete?" Sam shook hands with the slack-mouthed man.

"I drew a picture of Amy with one eye bigger than the other, and now she's mad at me."

"Bummer," Sam agreed. "Why not make the eyes...you know...the same s...size?"

“Good idea, I hadn't thought of that.”

“Sam!” A nurse, dressed crown to sole in white, ran toward them. “*Bonjour, cheri.*”

“H...Helen.” He stood stiffly with his hands by his sides as he found himself open for inspection.

She gave a critical nod as if she wasn't entirely satisfied but said, “Amy's outside in the garden. She's expecting you. I'm off duty in a sec. so I'll get changed and meet you there in a mo.” Her voice always struck Sam as one you'd use to speak to nutheads.

She'd had her long fair hair cut, and it sat on her head like a helmet, the locks glued together geometrically. She saw him looking. “Space age cut. All the rage.”

Someone was in a rage when they cut it, Sam thought.

She must have read his mind because she put her hands on her hips. “Well at least it didn't cost two hundred dollars like Mia Farrow's, *and* it's a darn sight better 'n yours.” She reached out, about to lift a strand of Sam's hair, but he managed to dodge her hand. “You been cutting it yourself again? Why don't you do it properly?”

He tried to flatten it with the palm of his hand. “I t...touch...haven't touched it since I saw...last saw you.”

“That is blatantly obvious.” She marched off down the corridor.

“*Hair,*” Sam murmured to Pete. “*Is only found in mammals and is an outgrowth of protein projecting from the epidermis.*”

“Well,” Pete responded, running his hand through his own stringy locks. “Whatcha know.”

The first thing Sam spotted in the garden was the halo of bright blonde hair above the back of a wheelchair which was parked under a huge blossoming apple tree. He squatted just behind the chair and said gruffly, “There's a boogie on your shoulder.”

The girl in the chair barely moved, although her mouth in profile twitched and her right shoulder rose slightly. “What color is it?” she asked without turning.

“Blue.”

“Ah that's okay then. If it was green I'd be worried.”

“Boogies aren't *green*, dummo. Ever. They're always blue.”

“Right, I forgot. Is it still there? Has it gone?”

“Yep. It blew off into the doo-wop.” He rose and knelt down in front of the chair.

"Hello Sam. Where have you been learning about boogie and doo-wop?" She turned slightly, her smile as bright as the sunshine. He took her crooked hands, fingering the bird-like bones in the wrists and then studied her thin legs, so pale they were almost blue. Her feet, clad in neat white Mary Janes, were turned in more than the last time he'd seen her.

"I missed you and your barmy stuff." One side of her mouth grinned, the other remained horizontally static.

Before he could respond, Helen flung the door open. She was now wearing a short dress in some hot-looking material printed with tiny spinning astronauts.

"Hi *cherie*," she said to Amy in the same voice she'd used for Sam earlier. When Amy pointed at one of the astronauts, Helen brushed her hands over her hips, twirling to make the skirt rise further up her thighs. "This is right at the forefront of fashion. Like it?"

Amy nodded vigorously while Sam turned his head to one side, considering. "Like the l...legs best." He sneezed as her perfume filled his nose like cosmic dust.

"Well, thank you." She twirled for him again.

*"In matters of style, go with the current, in matters of principle, stand like a rock."*

Helen stopped gyrating and looked at Amy who pursed her lips and shook her head. "Some quotation," she said helplessly.

Helen eyeballed Sam, her hair catching the sun like metal. "You really weird me out sometimes," she said. "By the way, you said we'd go to the movies sometime. And since *Aliens From Another Planet* is on downtown..." She left the implied *a movie which would be right up your alley* unspoken.

I'd rather go shark wrestling. Sam smirked as Alex's expression rolled into his mind and to cover his amusement he said, "Question of em...emol..." He gave up.

"Wages?"

He tried again. "Emol..."

"Wages," Helen decided. "I can't go tonight in any case. I have *autre chose*." She patted first Sam's head and then Amy's. "If she has a seizure, call Joan, she's on duty. *À bientôt*." She headed for the door but before she reached it she turned back. "Listen, Sam, if it's cash that's the problem, the Seething copper mine's back in business." And with that parting shot, she left them to the birdsong.

“Emoluments,” Sam said and spluttered as Amy pulled his nose. “I thought the mine had closed down. Performing under its...”

“Yes, but it's reopened.” Amy settled back in her chair, her eyes bright as they rested on Sam.

“Someone's investing in it, and it's up and running again, ready for high-productivity.”

“Good for employment.”

Amy nodded her agreement. “Hope it works out. Silver Creek needs its mining community back again. Otherwise there's not much hope for the economy.”

Sam thought that coal had been the major player, but, hey, who was he to say? If they said there was copper down there, then there was copper.

He looked at the door Helen had just passed through. “What's with the funny language?”

“French. She's seeing the physical therapist now, and he's from Montreal.” Amy watched Sam through her eyelashes. “But she'd still go on a date with you like a rocket, poor dear. She'd stick a thermometer in him and then come and sort you out.” She studied him for a moment. “And if she tries to pull any phony foreign stunts, just tell her you don't talk stupid.”

Sam nodded at a nearby wooden bench. “Come and talk stupid with me there.”

“You know I'm not supposed to.” She tapped her wheelchair, meaning she was meant to stay in it.

“It's okay.” He lifted her in his arms, feeling she was lighter than ever and sat her gently down on the bench in the shade of the apple tree. He sat close beside her. “That's better. So. What's happening?”

She stared up through the thick branches. “Sky's so blue. Saw Doctor Knights.”

“Me too. He said you're going to continue on that new medicine for your seizures.”

“That very expensive?”

“You kidding?” As if nothing in this world was ever expensive. “What else you been doing?”

“Played Scrabble with Petey. He cheats.”

“He does?”

“He says, 'blowjob' is a word.”

“Hmm. I reckon I know a word for that young man.”



Amy giggled and snuggled against him. "Don't be mad at him. He's cute. But not as cute as my brother. Wish I could play Scrabble with you."

"If I could, at least I'd keep it clean. But you always was the cleverer buried-treasure sibling."

She spluttered. "Buried...? Where do you pull these expressions from?" She patted his cheek.

"And it's not me who's the clever one."

"Well, I'm just repeating what everyone said."

"And they'd know, wouldn't they?" She couldn't hide her sarcasm.

"Joe or anyone been up to see you?"

She nodded. "Day before yesterday."

"Uh huh."

"Still hasn't any money, so he says. Brought Joe Junior with him. Kid's growing, eight now."

"Your other brother."

"As far as I'm concerned I only have one brother. That's you."

He covered both her hands with one of his. "Do you want me to work in the mine?"

She considered. "You'd earn good money. And you'd be nearer. But I don't see you down a mine. Gee whiz, you'd be backassward in no time."

"More than usual you mean."

"Well you have to admit, you are a crazy little idiot."

"Someone else called me that. Except he said, son-of-a-bitch."

"Someone called you that? You tell me his name right now, and I'll go beat him to pulp."

"His name's Alex. He's the boss's son, lives with his uncle, wants to be a pop star."

"The uncle wants to be a pop star?" Amy gave him a wide-eyed innocent look then screeched as Sam cuffed the top of her head, sending blond curls flying. "Okay, okay, pax. What's he look like?"

"The uncle? I don't know beans about him. I never saw him." Sam returned her innocent look then dodged her hand that was aimed at his head. "Okay, okay, pax. Alex is...um...dark...funny color eyes. Tall."

"Pop star. Dark. Yummy."

"Wears leather. Guy's messed up. Wasted a couple of years. Hasn't the guts to tell the world to screw it."

"It's not always so easy. Not everyone's like you and can stand back, cross their arms and legs and say, *you just go fuck yourself*."

"Foul mouth sibling."

“Yeah, yeah—like you never do.” She poked him in the ribs and giggled.

But her laughter was cut short as she grew stiff beside him.

As bees buzzed in the trees, Sam watched her spirit flee, leaving her face vague and empty. She chewed rhythmically, and her arm muscles contracted, pushing against him. He put his arms around her so she wouldn't fall and held her firmly as she became limp, her eyes open but unseeing. After a few moments she raised her head, and blinked in confusion at him.

“Alrighty,” he soothed as he picked her up and put her into the chair which he wheeled to her room.

While she lay on her bed, he sat beside her, resting his elbows on his thighs and looking into her tired face. “You need anything, Amy-girl? Tell me what, and I'll get it.” He rubbed her temple.

“I'd like a camera.” Her eyes closed, and he waited for her breathing to become deep and even.

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When Sam left the home he debated whether to get a room for the night at the Y or whether to go down to the lake and sleep on the grassy bank. After one look at the rumbling sky he plumped for the Y.

As he drove into the smog-covered town he recognized the car sniffing his rear fender. He pulled over so that the poppy-red Corvair could draw up behind. A tall lanky man in his late thirties unfolded himself from the car and stood grinning at him, a canary yellow sweater down to his knees. The gusty wind pushed his sandy hair away from his sparse asymmetrical auburn sideburns.

“Sol.”

“Hey buddy. Surprise, surprise.”

Sam moved to avoid being enveloped into the musty sweater, but Sol didn't seem put out—it had been a half-hearted attempt at an embrace in any case.

“You...” Sam took a breath and pushed his hand through his hair. “You f...following me?”

“Sammy. Haven't seen you for a while. Been looking for you, buddy.” Sol side-stepped the question in the same way Sam had evaded the embrace. “Even hunted around your old bedroom, although I knew you wouldn't be there. Skid Row's moved to the warehouse area now. Not that

you need the sidewalk now, oh no, doing right well for yourself even if you could do better. Still, it's an improvement on selling cardboard I guess."

Talk of Skid Row, sidewalks and cardboard made Sam think of Itinerant who had shown him how to look into a pile of garbage and see diamonds glittering in it. "Cardboard, glass," he'd told Sam. "Grease the wheels of life."

Multi-faced Itinerant. Some days he was Crazy Itinerant who'd stand on street corners—possibly the one he and Sol were standing on now—and yell at terrified passers-by, "You're all outta whack! You're all over of the place like a dish of crazy peanuts." Other days he was Deep Itinerant who'd quote the philosophers at bewildered commuters. "*I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy—ecstasy so great that I would often have sacrificed all the rest of life for a few hours of this joy.*"

But Gentle Itinerant was the one that Sam loved most. "Hey Sam, my angel, my golden boy. Come on over here now, hooray, hoolay. That's right, give me your hand. Hoo, it's cold, cold—colder than a fish's twat. Rub, rub, rubbadub. So, my bright button, you tell me your yearnings, earnings, burnings. Whoa, skinned knuckles, my brawling boy. Now you *quit* being angry as a stray dog, you hear me? Or I'll have to *ground* you again."

"They...they *jump* me. Shout. Re...retard."

"You talking about them high school kids? *Three passions have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.* You remember that because you have that pity inside you, my pretty elf, oh yes you do I can see it. You're worth a million of them. Now, let's warm you up and melt you away somewhere before the parents come round demanding your soft little hide for duffing up their big beefy kiddos."

Itinerant. Sam sure missed his cracked advice, just like he missed the man himself with a hollow longing. And if it hadn't been for me, Sam thought sadly, he'd still be here.

Sol's cough brought Sam back to the sidewalk where they were standing beside their cars.

"Then I heard you were up in High Falls. Nearly took a trip up there to find you."

Heaven preserve me, Sam thought. He wracked his brain for something to say that would knock Sol off that track. "You still at The Bug...?" was the best he could come up with.

“The Bug? I guess you mean my illustrious journal. And, yes, I am still the highly regarded reporter on the Silver Creek Bugle with a nose for a hot story.” He lifted his hand which wavered in Sam's direction before it lost momentum and fell once again to his side. “You doin' anything? Listen, come and have something to eat.”

Sam considered saying no thanks, but he noted that the guy was pallid, almost haggard. More than usual. “You doing okay? Are you...um...sick?”

As if on cue, Sol's face dropped a couple of stories. “Well, you know...” He toed lethargically at a stone.

“You...you...um.” Sam paused to get his thoughts in order. “Getting help?”

Sol took a deep breath as if trying to muster up enough energy to talk, although, Sam noted, he'd had enough in him just now. Right up until I asked him if he was sick.

“I will. But there are just days, like today, when everything just seems so *hopeless*.” His voice cracked on the last word. “There are days when the problems are insurmountable and everything just seems *too much*. Can you understand that?”

Every day seemed that way to Sam, but there was no point getting melan...melon? Like a melon? No that wasn't right.

Sol took his silence for sympathy. “So could we...?” He nodded across the busy street to his apartment block. “Could you help me out here?”

There were three things Sam couldn't resist; firstly kicked dogs, then sick folk and finally the words *can you help me*.

In Sol's apartment, which was a study in monastic simplicity, Sam ate the Swanson Frozen Dinner of fried chicken and mashed potato that Sol had heated up and listened to what the guy had to say.

“You're talking to Sol the next contender for a Pulitzer here. A Serious Reporter. Not really an occupation that would suit you, though, would it?”

Sam decided to reserve judgment on that score.

“Story I have in mind now.” Sol chewed thoughtfully, “Is about the mine. An unknown investor has given it a valuable cash injection, and there are plans for new prospecting, they reckon there's zinc and God knows what down there. It all sounds hunky dory on paper, but, if you go visit the place it's Dante's Inferno.”

He went on to paint a picture of flattened forestland, sick trees, pricking gallows frames above cranking hoist cages that led down to old fashioned shafts, leaking roofs, unstable levels. The thundering underground explosions had miners on the upper levels diving for cover; the temperatures rose above a hundred, not only in the shafts but in the crusher sheds and even higher for those working at the smelter. Dust from the tailings mountain blew for miles in the wind, the chemicals leaked into the creek and a pall of reeking smoke lay over the town.

Sam had stopped eating and was concentrating on Sol's mouth, absorbing everything he said. "Contam...contamin...poison? It's not in...insp..." Sam's voice was high with disbelief.

"Inspected? It is. The line between legal and illegal is finite. And that's my point, the mine's legal. I tell you, those inspection certificates Seething Mines have either aren't genuine or some inspector's eating Maine lobster for dinner tonight."

"Isn't there a...a...*you know*...union?"

"Course there is, but their main concern is that the workers are well paid, and they are. I mean what's a little heat exhaustion when you're earning enough to take the wife and kids to the movies once a month?" Sol threw an empty packet into the sink. "And the farmers are complaining. Your old friend, Norman Kuller, for example. He says his cows are all open this year. They've been wintering up by the creek that runs from the mine, and he reckons they're being poisoned."

"That's bad...too bad. It's already h...hard for him with the dr...dr..."

"Drought. Yeah, sure. The local vet took some samples and the results are negative which Kuller can't believe. Guess the mine's pockets are deep."

Sam pushed the food on his plate around. "I can take some blood and ...*stuff*...and ask Doc...Doctor Trillium test...to test them."

"That's my boy, always ready for a fight. Remember that Peace Rally you and I went on? What a gas. When we made real noise and got arrested for disturbing the peace?"

"When I arrest...was. You sked..skedad... ran away."

Sol rubbed his chin. "I went for a leak and, anyway, what are you complaining about? I wrote about you in the paper, didn't I?" He waited for Sam's reaction, but Sam was thinking about the flak he'd taken for the two of them. He'd never forget the night he'd spent with a brawling drunk, in a tiny prison cell. Nor the discomfort of waiting nine hours to be fingerprinted with his right wrist cuffed to his left ankle. Sol's timing had

been perfect to go off to take a leak just at the very moment the cops rampaged down on Sam.

"I did pay your twenty dollar fine," Sol reminded him. But if he was waiting for any gratitude he soon gave the idea up. Instead he went onto another subject. "I heard old Norman Kuller laid you off, poor boy. So here's my proposal." He took a deep breath. "Work in the mine as my undercover reporter. A little subterfuge. How's that sound?" He peeled off a sliver of skin around a fingernail and sucked on the welling blood.

Sam couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You must be nuts to w...want me to w...work in the mine. Place is dang...danger... unsafe."

"Yeah well. It was just an idea."

"In any case, I earn. Scanty nuggets, but..."

"Scanty nuggets? You prospecting for gold? It's copper we're talking about here. I just figured maybe you'd be concerned about Silver Creek what with Amy here. How's she doing up there?"

"Not so good. Still has epi...epilep...fits."

"Her father still alive?"

Sam nodded again.

"Always confused me that—she's your sister, but she has a different father to you."

"Same m...mother."

"True. Who pays for her medicines?"

Sam indicated he did.

Sol looked carefully at the table. "They only subsidize them if they work, don't they? How're you managing to afford to pay for them?"

"Work on...um...those...*neighboring* ranches."

"You mean you work on the Pike Ranch, then the bar, *then* head off to other places? What's my Sammy done? Found thirty hours in a day?"

"Day off," Sam mumbled.

Sol whistled before he urged, "Say Sammy, if you consider my offer concerning the mine, you'll be able to afford anything Amy needs. Just think what a wonderful opportunity it is."

Sam knew perfectly well where Sol was really heading: prestige for Sol and his scoop when the mine scam hit town. I wasn't born in a tree, he thought.

## Chapter Eight: Sam

The dry August wind that had started up at ten eddied about Sam as he rode up to the cricket-filled meadows to round up cattle, herding them over the creek into the giant sage. Once the cows for culling had been corralled, Sam met Josh Pike wandering aimlessly around the barnyard.

"You okay?" he asked.

The old man shook his head. "It's all this moving about. I can't get round it. Moving the cattle."

"Thought you w...wanted to."

The old man sighed pitifully. "I don't get it. After all, if the Unseen Hand wanted man on the Moon, He'd have put him there in the first place. And the only way He's gonna be appeased is if we put black men up there, not proper white folk." Something shifted in his eyes, and he looked around as if surprised at finding himself there in the barnyard. He peered at Sam. "What are you looking at me like that for?"

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"You see...notice anything...you know...strange, odd about Mr. Pike?" Sam asked Mule Palmer later in the bar.

The large man wiped his brow at the effort of maneuvering his large butt onto a tractor seat which he engulfed. "He's getting' old. Why? Somethin' crawlin' up his ass?"

Since the incident with Alex, Mule had become a paragon of exquisite self-control. Least that's what Charlie the bar-owner had told Sam. "But only when you're around. When it's your night off, then it's one kerfuffle after another with him. Why, only last Tuesday he discharged a cowpoke through the swing doors followed by his hat for no reason I could see."

"He knows I put...don't...um...put up with no...you know...fuffle."

Sam now leaned on the sticky bar and asked Mule, "You w...want w...whiskey?"

"No, young Sam. I'll have a fried toad's leg."

Was that some kind of drink? Sam scanned the bottles until he heard the muffled plump of Mule hitting his thigh in amusement. "Course I want whiskey."

Seeing Mule reduced to a spluttering shthead wasn't the prettiest sight in the world, so Sam decided to head him off. "How's Jasper?"

Mule sobered immediately and shifted his eyes in every direction but Sam's. "He's okay."

"Can I...ride...c...come ride him again?"

"Yeah. It might do him good." He took his drink over to the pool table while Sam picked up beer nuts from the floor, blowing on them and putting them back in their little saucers on the bar. Retreating into a quiet corner, he ignored the customers for quite some time until he heard his name.

"Sam?"

"Sam? Yoo-hoo. Reckon we could send him to Mexico City in October? Gold medal in the star-gazing event."

"Is there a star-gazing event in the Olympics?"

"Course, dumbass. Talking about stars, look what I picked up from the Verdigris Herald."

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam saw him pull out a newspaper cutting and smooth it on the bar.

"Ah! Welcome back, Sam. Another beer, Sam, if you're breathing the same air we are. Thanks a bunch. Yep. What was it like up on Alpha Centauri? Cold?" The customer pointed at the cutting. "Article about Alex Finch," he explained. "Evenin' Mule, saw you working wonders on the pool table a moment ago."

"That young Alex Pike you're yappin' about? Big sap."

"Yep, or Alex Finch as he's also known, take your pick. Must be kinda complicated having two names. This article says he played at some college do, says here, *his tone is other-worldly*. Sure spooks me, that's for sure, but I guess he likes all the attention. College gals all over him."

"Hell, he likes everythin'. A tree with a hole in it looks good to him."

"Tell you something else, last time I saw him he looked half-drunk."

"Only half? Stop the world, must be tryin' to reform."

The customer left the article cutting with Sam who said he'd take it for Mrs. Pike to read. He straightened it out. Although the snippet was only three or four lines, he traced the words with his forefinger back and forward. He looked at the ceiling to clear his whirling head, and unbidden, words curled into his mouth. "*With equal passion, I have wished to understand the hearts of men.*" He would have continued, except Trillium was watching him curiously and Mule Palmer was mouthing, "A whiskey? For the sixth time Mr. Sam-I'm-floatin'-round-the-ether Barrowdale. Don't git yourself all worked up now, goin' on about passions. Git a hold a yourself."



Sam closed his mouth as firmly as a floodgate then handed Mule his drink. He returned his attention to the cutting until a cough made him look up into Trillium's gently smiling face.

Trillium was about to say something but Mule got in first. "Sam," he said in a voice no one ever interrupted. "Guess you can ride Jasper again. And what about castin' your young eye over seven Tom Haslan heifers in calf while you're there?"

"You w...want *me* to check...look at them?"

Mule shuffled one foot against the other and glanced first at Trillium and then at Sam somewhat sheepishly, an expression that didn't sit comfortably on his face. "Yes. You." He saw Sam's skeptical expression. "It's just..." He paused. "There's no problem, so you ain't gotta worry about nothin'. We do have veterinaries on Raw Pines. They're just givin' 'em vitamins, that's all, you know D and E to make the meat tender. Nothin' that'll pole-axe 'em. I *know* it's to test performances of pregnant heifers *and* part of a nutritional program. Look, we *are* an experimental farm." He glared at them as if they'd accused him of wrong-doing. "Problem is I ain't never seen vitamins the size of those they're feedin' 'em. And with all them injections, the animals just don't look right to me."

"Okay. I'll come see Jasper next...in a coupla days." The words were hardly out of Sam's mouth before he was rewarded with a blast of bad breath. He told Mule he was about to go down and see Amy again, but he'd drop by Raw Pines sometime next week. "H...how much do they pay?" he asked Trillium as Mule lumbered out through the swing doors.

"They won't pay, not unless Mule pays you himself."

"W...why don't you go?"

The veterinary shook his head, saying it was a long story, but, like Mule said, they had their own veterinaries on Raw Pines.

Sam turned his back on the bar and spread the newspaper article out in front of him again. He wasn't sure how long it took but this time he got through it.

*August 9 1968*

### *LOCAL TALENT SAYS HIS GAME IS ALMOST UP*

*Alex Finch, 20 year old local boy, has been serenading the crowds at the folk festival held this weekend at Verdigris College. An accomplished guitarist and vocalist, the moment he strikes up is unforgettable, his tone other-worldly.*

*Playing with his band WilAlBe, he says he's about to give up music for a more lucrative career in industry.*

Sam wiped his sweaty face on his sleeve—reading took more out of him than dragging a meadow, and he knew which he preferred. He looked again at the article. Alex Finch? He'd heard the guys call him Finch before. What happened to Alex Pike?

Trillium's dry cough interrupted his thoughts and the veterinary leaned forward across the bar as if to reveal a secret. Sam bent nearer to hear what it was. "Are you dyslexic?"

"Excuse me?" Sam jumped back as if Jasper had kicked him.

"You're dyslexic, aren't you?"

"No. Nope. I don't...don't *know* what is that, but that is one thing I never am, will be, ever. You're w...wrong."

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"Frog strangler out there."

Sam started at the sound of Mule's voice. He'd been looking in stunned silence at Jasper whose chestnut coat was as dull as his eyes and his neck hung limply as if the exertion of greeting Sam had been too much. "This is a young horse. He should be...jump...frolic...lively. W...what you feeding him?"

"We don't feed him nothin'. The veterinary gives him his food."

"Wh...what does he give him?"

"Not a clue. Somethin' from a bottle. Liquid."

"From a bottle? W...what's he eating when he's outside? In the...field...alfalfa?"

"He doesn't go outside," Mule muttered.

"He doesn't go outside?"

"Holy irritation, young Sam. Will you cut it out? You're pissin' me off, repeatin' everythin' like a parrot. He's not my responsibility. He gets taken care of by experts." He leaned heavily on a rail gate as Sam went into the tack room, found a thermometer, washed and lubricated it. As he inserted it into Jasper's rectum, Sam smiled to himself as he saw Mule wince. Then, while he waited, he pressed his forefinger under the horse's jaw and looked at his watch. He gestured at the other horses. "They all right?"

Mule looked around him as if he wasn't sure but then said they were. He stepped sharply back when Sam growled into his face. "His breath st...stinks, he's depressed."

"Like me," Mule grinned like a submissive chimp which made no impression on Sam.

"Good hay he needs. An apple. But g...h... good hay. Clean water. Three times a day. You hear me? Huh? You hear me?"

The older man gazed at him, speechless.

"You...you do all that when the *expert's* not here. Right? Right?"

"Okay," Mule muttered. "Bejezzus, talk about flashin' eyes."

Sam rubbed his hands down the side of his jeans. "I was going to take him out, but not...not in this w...weather. Listen, w...where is this vet? I want to talk to him. This is all at sevens and sixes."

"He's not here. His mother's sick."

"He been feeding her p...poison too? Then what about the boss? He's drugging that poor horse. I tell you, he'll sneeze though his ears when I meet him."

"He's not here. He lives in Verdigris."

Sam walked about in a circle and kicked up a pile of straw.

"Sam?"

"What?"

"Can you take a look at the heifers?"

They fought their way across the barnyard against the searing wind, relieved to get into the barn which housed the seven calf-fat heifers whose sides were straining their white hides to almost bursting point.

"Animals. So beautiful." Sam caressed a cow's flank. He lifted each tail. "Ligaments around the ... pelvis are very relaxed in this one. Imm...inent birth," he pronounced. "All of them."

Mule danced on the spot and not from joy. "You tellin' me they're in labor? That goddamn vet he said they were days off yet. Jesus Christ what we gonna do?"

"You can't...calf...birth a calf?" Sam was as incredulous as if Mule said he couldn't ride a horse.

"Not these, not these." Mule looked to be on the point of tearing his hair out. "They're the crown jewels these ones. We don't touch 'em. We keep to the longhorns. Know where you are with longhorns. Not these prize heifers. Somethin' happen to them, and I am hamburger." He leaned into Sam to impart impressive information. "And I personally don't reckon they're gonna birth anything *bovine*."

Sam ran his eyes over the animals. "Cut it out. You been w...watching some TV horror?" he scoffed. "Nothing bad's going to happen. They'll probably normal...birth normally, but call the vet."

Two hours later the heifers were still in labor and showing signs of distress when Mule finally appeared, his eyes burgeoning in fright. "I can't reach no vets. Not even Trillium." He looked at the restless heifers one by one. "Sam, I ain't touchin' these girls, no siree."

"Shit," Sam said, his arm inside a heifer's vagina. "B...breech."

"Don't kid me now." Mule's voice was low with menace.

"I can't feel the f...front feet, no head or...*you know*...shoulders."

"So whatcha fixin' to do?"

"Me? Fixing?" Sam stared at Mule, unable to believe his ears. Then he looked back at the stricken animals. "Guess, I..." He took a deep breath. "I need water...clean water and anti...antiseptic. Let's...let's start with her. You tie the tail up and w...wash her."

But Mule had already lit out through the barn door into the night.

Cussing Mule and everyone else he knew, Sam rushed from one animal to the next, his feet hardly touching the ground. For the next three hours he was Cassius Clay of the birthing barn as he lunged between seven cows, alternately pulling and pushing inside their vaginas. *What kind of bull did this? They're all fucking breech.* He screwed up his eyes in agony when his arm was caught in a contraction. One by one, he anchored chains to tiny hooves and, braced against a ladder, he levered small hips free of pelvises. He blew in snouts, rubbed slimy bodies while desperately looking around for iodine for the cords and antiseptic. Then he cursed Mule again.

As dawn broke, he wiped sweat from his face with a mucus and blood-stained forearm and leaned against the wall to catch his breath.

Just when all the calves had suckled, the door burst open and Mule Palmer leaped through it like Skippy the Bush Kangaroo. "Christ on a cracker." He beamed around at the cozy, peaceful scene.

"Eight goddamn calves from seven dams. Miracle worker, Sam."

"W...where the hell were...were you?"

Mule wiped his nose delicately on his finger. "The boss arrived. Unexpectedly."

"Didn't you...didn't you *tell* him I n...needed help?"

"He was a little crusty so I reckoned I'd wait until it was all over to tell him the bad news. Now I can tell him good news."

“He know how much this is going to c...cost him?” Sam rubbed his sore, raw arm. “And...” he paused for emphasis. “A problem with the mothers. None placenta...released their placenta. Now you do need a vet.”

A man in a white coat arrived with the sun and flitted about the barnyard with a clipboard.

“That's most interesting about simultaneous labor and all breech,” he rumbled. “And the retained placenta. Most interesting, most relevant.”

“You have 'til tonight. To...to get out them out. The placenta.”

The man looked horrified, and Sam grabbed his white-clad arm forcing him to stop pacing. “You a vet?”

The guy threw his chest out with an air of importance. “No, the veterinary's not here. I'm a biochemist, but I don't suppose you know what that means, sonny.”

“It means you know z...zilch about retained pl...placentas. What you been feeding these animals?”

“Feeding? Feeding? My dear boy. You wouldn't understand.”

“Try me, brainbox,” growled Sam.

“A little of this, a little of that,” the man said smugly and added quietly as if he thought it was beyond Sam. “Ergoline alkaloid.”

“Ergine? L...LSA?” Sam looked back at the cattle, his mouth a circle of surprise.

He returned to the barn, wondering how he could get to see this boss-man, this Finch guy and whether he could go back to his hut for a nap before work at the Thud. With one foot on a gate rail, he surveyed the calves and their dams snug in clean straw.

A rustling behind him told him someone had come in, but he assumed it was the brainbox. He climbed over the gate, groaning quietly from tiredness, and knelt down beside a calf, stroking it and letting it suck his fingers while he inspected its navel. “A h...hungry calf is a h...healthy one,” he said, not turning round. “They're all suckling well. This little guy's stiff and sore...pulling...from the pulling, but he'll be...*you know*...okay tomorrow.”

“Ah, here you are, Alex.” The voice came from outside the barn.

Sam got to his feet, holding the cow's back for support as he turned and faced the person he'd heard come in.

“Hi.” Alex gave him a brief lopsided smile which disappeared as he pivoted round to a man who was entering the barn—Alex in twenty years time, shorter hair, sprinkled with silver. They were related. His uncle, Sam decided, sure as eggs is...round.

Mule entered the barn. "Timothy, you seen the eight calves? Sam here is the one who made it all happen."

Timothy Finch surveyed Sam from head to toe but seemed to think there were more important grease spots on the barnyard floor. "Eight," he said vaguely, shot Sam another impersonal glance before he walked out the barn. Just as he passed through the door, he paused and asked Mule, "Who made the accusations about the horse?"

"Me." Sam curled his fists as he found his voice. "And, I'd s...sure like to ask you, or whoever's this...running this ...this...*thing*...why the cows were fed, *you know*, LSA. What kind of asshole gives cattle altering...mind...*that*?"

Timothy was inward-looking as if he only heard what he wanted to. "Alex? You coming?" With his hand on Alex's arm he led him away.

"Hey." Sam's voice was a gunshot carried on the wind across the barnyard, forcing uncle and nephew to a halt. When they looked back, Alex's eyes were wide with trepidation.

"Did someone call me hey?" Finch gazed in bewilderment at Alex who looked everywhere but at Sam.

"Question I asked," Sam tried again, frustration welling inside him.

Finch sauntered back. When he was six inches away from Sam, he took his time before saying mildly, "Oh dear. People don't usually question my practices, it's very strange."

"They're cruel, unnatural. You h...harm to feel important."

Finch laughed as if truly amused and rubbed his chin. "H...harm to feel important? On the contrary. I concentrate on drug discovery and analysis. Statistics are the biomedical applications that lead to breakthroughs. There," he said as if soothing a wound. "I'm sure that's cleared that one up."

"I u...under...got it, don't think I didn't. You can't use...those...that *stuff*." He wanted to say psychotropics. "On animals."

"Oh now. It must be difficult for you. What is your kind of disability? Hmmm?"

"You're horse...*killing* that horse."

"So that, in the end, humans survive, perhaps."

Sam wished he would quit using that *I'm-talking-to-a-nutter* voice. "Perhaps. That's the operat...ive word here. You can't experience...experiment unless you're *sure*."

Finch smiled almost pleasantly, his green eyes sparkling. "Come now." He turned away, his mind seemingly already elsewhere. "Mule,

where did you find this young man? Bob the Bean's Barnyard? Where does he live? Poor boy. Just look at the state of him."

"What about A...Alex's leg? Busted legs don't...come back...shorter." Sam took a dive off the deep end, his heart beating rapidly at what could be a grave mistake in the jigsaw he was putting together on who Timothy Finch was and his activities. Finch stopped, his body stiffening and when he turned to face Sam, his face was ashen. *I got you*, Sam thought. "Wh...what was it you used? Something to mend...broke...busted bones quicker?"

Finch licked his lips and his words seemed to flow automatically. "A mineral based calcium phosphate..." He checked himself and turned to Mule. "Mule, I'm so sorry but could you tell this young man I cannot understand a word he says. Is he foreign? Gobbledegook." He held Alex's upper arm and led him toward the main house, only pausing in his step when Sam called to him.

"You bread...owe me bread. Fifty bucks. Cash up front." He watched them disappear into the house and knew there'd be no money from that quarter in the near future. "Gooklede....gob?"

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Later that evening Sam handed Mule Palmer his change in the bar, just like any normal evening. As if a few hours before Mule hadn't had to watch as Sam got in his pickup and left Raw Pines, a mouthful of insults his only payment for the work he'd done.

"One good thing about young Sam," Mule yelled for the whole bar to hear. "He *gives* you the change, doesn't put it in a pool of rottin' beer on the counter for me to pick up, like some of yous." He glared at Charlie and then glanced at Sam who read abject apology in his piggy eyes.

"Don't worry," Sam soothed. "They're not your...you know...animals...cows."

"Jeez, he's crusty tonight," Charlie whispered to Sam, nodding at Mule's slouched back. "He hasn't forgiven me my little joke."

"What was that?"

"He asked for a double the other day and instead of whiskey I said to him, Timothy and Tom Finch. He didn't find it funny."

Sam considered for a moment. "It wasn't. Funny."

"They were twins," Charlie explained. "Identical."

"Was T...Tom Finch Alex's father?"

"The very same. And speak of the devil, or rather the devil's son." Charlie nodded at Alex who had come through the swing doors.

"Whiskey on the rocks," Alex asked, his eyes on Sam.

"He w...wants ice," Sam whispered to Charlie.

Charlie scratched his head. "There's some, 'bout ten years old in that old refrigerator. See if you can scrape some off the sides."

Sam knocked a couple of lumps off and rinsed them under the faucet before he handed Alex his clinking glass and then leaned on the bar.

"Listen," said Alex, looking into his drink. "I apologize for my uncle. I didn't like what he said to you. How's Amy? She still in Silver Creek? She must miss you. Why don't you bring her up here?"

*Two apologies wasn't bad going in less than an hour.* "Too much...too many...Amy? She's okay. She has...you know...um...Pete, and she knows I'll see her soon."

"Who's Pete? Your son?"

Alex waited with an unsure smile as Sam recovered from a choking splutter. "My *son*? *Pete*?" He wiped his eyes and drew in a breath. "He lives in the s...same place."

"Sam." Alex frowned into his glass. "Who is Amy?"

"My sister."

"Your *sister*? Jesus Christ, I been thinking all this time she was your wife or girlfriend."

Sam guffawed just as Mule Palmer came up and put a hand heavy on Alex's shoulder.

"Your uncle know you're here?"

Alex shuffled uncomfortably. "Hell, course he does." He raised his glass again, but it was empty and all he got was a knock on the nose from the ice cubes. He glanced at Sam to see his reaction but Sam kept his face impassive.

"Go home," growled Mule. "I don't want to have to tell your uncle you've been in here. He already told you he don't want you to start drinkin' again."

Alex slid off the tractor seat and after a quick, apologetic look at Sam he made his way out of the bar.

Sam watched Alex leave, thinking the guy was everything he despised: rich, spoiled, and related to Timothy Finch. He scrubbed at a non-existent spot on the bar. Yet, he thought, I've never met anyone quite like him before.



## Chapter Nine: Alex

I had five seconds watching him in that old birthing barn on Raw Pines, thinking I'd give my Fender for the Unseen Hand to put me into that little calf's skin for the few moments Sam stroked it, rubbed its portly body and let it suck his fingers. But then my uncle bumbled in and popped the bubble with his sharp rhetoric.

All that talk of Bob the Bean's barnyard, I mean, I ask you, what was I supposed to say to something like that? Guess I should've said, "Look, he's birthed you eight healthy calves, all by himself. And you say that to him? What kind of man are you?" Damned if I knew.

*I know* I should've backed Sam up when he started on about my leg, should've said Sam was right. But I didn't. Instead I let him down. Big time.

The next morning my uncle was chewing at the bit to go back to Verdigris. But I'd been mulling stuff over during the night and reckoned I might stay on a few extra days, just to see what I could scavenge from this sorry situation.

"What *is* this, Alex?" my uncle demanded when I told him. "Aren't you the same person who told me that High Falls is best seen heading away from it? Now get in the car and don't be ridiculous."

I got in the Chevy with my guitar for solace but he said, "Oh Alex, would you mind putting it in the trunk? That's it. So much nicer. Peaceful." Then he went on in his smooth voice to tell me that in any case, I wouldn't need it any more, since, according to my solemn promise, *I had given up that time-wasting hobby for good now.*

We started off through the treeless landscape, along the track that played havoc with the Chevy's suspension, past the Pike Ranch. But the next moment we'd swerved to one side, making the chauffeur cuss like crazy as Sam's old Ford pickup with its rattling tailgate peeled past us in a cloud of dust. For an old heap, it blew the doors off us. Then, damn me, he rolled down the window and gave us the finger as he went by. My uncle reciprocated with the evil eye, and I sank a little in the seat. Was that aimed at me? It bothered me like hell all the way back to Verdigris because I wasn't sure if he meant fuck me and Uncle Tim and the chauffeur too, or whether he was saying screw the world in general. I kinda liked the second option best, although I couldn't rid myself of the lingering feeling he just regarded me as a double dumbass who deserved a finger.

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A week later I was lounging about, pondering words to the music I'd played to Sam that night we ate trout outside his hut. I'd already come up with the title—*Perfect Score*—and I was jiggling to the rhythm of *Come gently over the stones, my love...* when my uncle walked in.

He watched me stuff the paper under a cushion. “Are you busy, Alex? I'm not disturbing you, am I?” Concern personified. “I canceled a meeting this morning just so I could fix for you to start the business course next month. Isn't it wonderful they had a vacancy? And I'd like you to wear your green tie this time when you go to college. You'll get a name for yourself if you wear leather again.”

Boy oh boy. I slouched into the kitchen. A vacancy on the business course next month. Please don't let me die in the meantime.

Auntie Vita was slurping from a jug. “What's that?” I asked.

She was always at her best when wasted. “It's a gimlet. Want one? Build your strength up.”

I declined gracefully, just to show I was not the alcoholic they thought I was. I knew things they thought they knew but thought I didn't know. How groovy was that?

She was at that whimsical stage I liked best when she'd wrap me into her warm bosom and rock me. The slobber I could do without, but I liked her warm body enough to ignore the eau-de-dead-mouse fragrance, a sure sign she'd overdosed on vitamin B again.

She patted my ear.

“You reckon I can't sing, Auntie?”

“Oh honey. You know I'm more a rock 'n roll girl myself. Can't get jazzed up over this folksy Beatles stuff. Oh those quiet ballads: Perry Como, now him I like.”

I grabbed her hands and sang, *Berkeley Square*

We waltzed around the kitchen, laughing fit to bust which showed she was fried because she never totally relaxed when she was sober, always watching what she said and whether she'd taken the pill for her weight and the one to stop her drinking.

She stumbled, steadying her bulky hips against the table, wiping her brow and puffing. “You don't sound too much like Perry Como, but it wasn't bad. Now, honey.” She took a long draft from the pint jug, “quit

riling your uncle up. You settle down for a while. Start at college. Be a good boy for a change. Make him proud of you.”

Sure I'd be a good boy. I'd go on the course and listen to lectures without sending up the z's or making too many inane remarks. But in the meantime I finished writing the words to *Perfect Score* and got real jittery, anxious to try it out. So I called my pal Wills.

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“Wills?”

“Alex, my man.”

Was I imagining it, or did he seem a tad less than happy to hear me? “So what's happening? Any new venues on the horizon?”

He made an exasperated noise. “What is this, Alex? Two weeks ago you say you're winding up, heading away from the bright lights, goodbye Wills, goodbye Bella, thanks it's been a blast. And now you're calling me to ask where's the next venue?” I heard a giggle and the breath souged in Wills's throat. “Hang on honey,” he said, not talking to me and rustling about like he was pushing covers back. “Hey, man,” he continued to me in a pissed voice. “Listen to me now and listen to me good. You told us it was over and I'll tell you this, we celebrated, we sure did, we were *pleased*. You gave us the break we needed, and it saved us from having to tell you.”

“Timmy, Timmy, Timmy, shimmy up the pipe to the top of the *ladder*.” Bella was with him. And she'd taken a few too many ludes again by the sound of it.

“You telling me you want to break up WilAlBe?”

He paused for a mere moment. “So? Is that any different to what you told us? You said you were going to the office every day in your shiny new car for the rest of your life.”

I couldn't believe what he was telling me. “You going to try and make it on your own?”

He spoke softly. “We're gonna give it a try.”

“Wilybell,” Bella's voice wafted down the line.

“Without me?”

“That about sums it up, jacko. Glad you got the message at last.”

“But I'm the one who gets the good reviews.” Pathetic I know but it was true. Why, just the last one said: *Alex Finch is blossoming, the others*

*merely bounce about as if lacking in gravity. The girl, although charming, is lazy.*

“We already reckoned you were holding us back with your mindless constraints—can't play too far from Verdigris because you have to get home, we have to crawl about like squashed bugs in case your uncle's within a twenty mile radius. You gotta grow up, Alex. Go with the flow, you know what I mean? And if you make a decision, stick to it. Don't come back to me saying you never made it.”

“Tell him he drinks too much.” That was rich coming from Bella who downed ludes until she dreamed all her dreams in one go, generally involving bunnies.

I was about to put the phone down, get out into the air, clear my tear ducts when something occurred to me. “This doesn't have anything to do with what happened last time, does it? I mean I was fried, Wills, you gotta realize that.”

“Yeah.”

“And I just figured it might be fun.”

“Yeah.”

“Dickhead,” murmured Bella in the background.

“Look.” He coughed slightly and his voice wavered like he was walking. “Get this straight. I don't like you that way.” His voice was low now. “Even if when we were kids we messed around. I'm different now, I've grown up.”

“Okay,” I said, my voice also low. “I know. I told you I was zonked, I didn't mean anything by it. Like I said, I thought it might be fun.”

“And Bella didn't like it.”

No, she wouldn't have liked it, sure enough. Not Bella who poured herself over me like syrup, and when we danced on stage at the end of our set, she jabbed her hips and pushed her breasts against me. It was her own fault for walking into the men's john, although I admit it probably wasn't the prettiest sight, me trying to get Wills's cock out of his pants and him clinging onto it, bug-eyed.

“Alex? You still there? Listen, I been thinking hard. I reckon there's something you should know. We weren't going to tell you but there was something else we didn't like last time. All right? A guy was there, he came backstage after the set but you were out of it by then and didn't see him. He left his card. He owns a nightclub where, he says, talent scouts often go.”

“Good for you,” I said coldly. Why didn't they like it? “What you waiting for? Get your asses over there now. Bang those drums, blow that flute.” Float around ineffectually and sing off-key.

“He wasn't talking about us, Alex. He said only you. On your own. He said if you wanted you could contact him. Bella said to forget it, you didn't deserve it, but I still have his details and I reckon you should know.”

*Just me?* Stunned, I took down the address he dictated. “Thanks, Wills. Listen, I'm sorry.” I didn't know if he'd gone or not because he didn't answer. “Wills? Listen, man, I don't like you that way either, you know that, don't you?”

I was hurt, devastated, put upon; they wanted to make a go of it without me? Well, okay, then I'd make a go of it without them. Yes sireee. But how could I do it without my uncle knowing?

If I wanted to get into the music business, I needed a demo tape to send to record companies. After all, the chances of A&R guys spotting me at a dive of a club in the boondocks were zilch. But my attempt to record something into a tape recorder sounded like TV static and a professionally made recording would cost a hundred dollars in a studio. I couldn't see my uncle meting out that kind of money into my outstretched hand like food to Oliver Twist. He'd tell me what a demo tape was, sure enough.

I looked at the details of this guy Wills had given me. I remembered him, I wasn't in much of a state to know what he'd *said* but I remembered him checking me over. He wore cool shades like pilots wear, a real badass type decked out in his black suit which fitted him tight, and black and white shoes like fuddy-duddies wore in the thirties.

You had to be careful of corny guys like that. I saw them all the time on the college gig circuit. They said they owned clubs and wowed the chicks and the guys with stories about how they'd make them famous, then they'd cop a feel, and before you knew it you were down doing the dirty before they said goodbye and thanks for the memories. I was no fool.

What kind of idiot could believe in a guy called Jimmy Labouche who owned a club called the Bluewomb up in a place I finally recognized as just south of Silver Creek? That was a long way off. Who was he kidding? I mean, who picks a musician up six hundred miles away from your club? Forget it.

A few days later I called him and fixed a gig in the Bluewomb just two weeks hence and then got as nervous as a glued-down bee. If the place had been in Verdigris, I could've bunked it, but it was in Silver Creek and I needed two or three days away from home.

Sometimes you reckon the Unseen Hand is looking at you and thinking *Okay-dokey I can fix that*. It doesn't do it very often, and usually when it does something goes wrong. But that evening Uncle Timothy said at supper, "I spoke to Iris when I was in High Falls. Old JP sounds like he's got a few burrs under his saddle."

"I'd like to go and check they're okay," I said with all solemn filial concern.

His sharp teeth tore into a chicken leg and ripped off the meat. "That's very nice of you but you stayed there just a month or two ago." He forgot to mention he'd sent me there to screw money out of them.

This needed careful handling. "That's true. But I didn't see them when you and I went up to Raw Pines this last time and maybe Momma was a little hurt I didn't go in and say hi. After all I won't be able to get up there so much once I start my course. And then I'll be very busy starting my career in Finch Industries."

He nodded as if this made sense then waved his fork at me. "I'm putting you in the lowest job I can find. A simple clerk. You're going to work your way up. Don't want anyone saying I favor family." Like that would happen.

"Great. I'd like that. So, I'm sure you agree, now would be a good time to go up to High Falls. And I'll take all my pre-course reading up with me."

"You aren't kidding me now, are you, boy? Liars need to have a good memory."

"If I'm lying, I hope to be kicked to death by grasshoppers."

## Chapter Ten: Sam

Sam stirred a mineral and vitamin mix for Josh Pike's calves and wondered how he could get a sack of it over to Raw Pines for the cows that had birthed yesterday. He looked up when Mule Palmer's pickup screeched to a dusty halt in the yard.

"Sam." Palmer got out, hitching up his pants. "I gotta tell you somethin'."

Sam put the vitamin mix on the ground, leaned against the wall and crossed his ankles and arms.

"Timothy Finch wants you off the Pike Ranch."

Sam uncrossed his ankles. "Why?"

"He must know somethin' about you. Somethin' dooobius. What you been up to?"

Sam felt the bite of anger at the thought of someone snooping into his business.

"Listen young Sam-in-the-shit, he's a powerful guy. He just picked up the phone and found out all about you, easy as that. Somethin' about you attending commie rallies?"

Sam scoffed his relief. Was that all? Not so powerful then, Timothy Finch.

But Mule wasn't laughing. "Disturbing the peace, was it? And I ain't kidding when I say he's powerful. He's got fingers in so many pies, it beats me he's got any left." Mule started counting on his own fingers. "The ranch, the pharmaceuticals—Gosling."

"Pharm...a.... He's in pharamceu...ticals?"

"Sure, Raw Pines is an experimental farm but drugs is the core business." Mule continued counting. "And I hear tell he's investin' in a mine in Silver Creek, though why he wants to go into minin' beats the shit outta me."

"Copper mine?"

"Yeah. He's everywhere like God. And he knows everythin' about you, he knows where your sister lives... Whoa!" He took a quick step backward into the barn wall as Sam turned on him, bouncing on his toes an inch from Mule's face, rage rendering him speechless.

"Wait." Mule put his arm out to ward off a thrashing, but it was batted quickly away. "Ouch. Look, don't go do the fandango on me, what's wrong? All I said was..."

Sam was in a red haze of fury. “He touches, he does...one...Amy. He’ll *beg* me to kill him. Inside out...I’ll turn him.”

Mule tried to press himself further into the barn wall, tried to make himself smaller than Sam who hardly reached his chest. “Stop a moment, Sam. Please. Quit freakin’ me out here and quit lookin’ like that. I ain’t lunch. Please?”

The second please penetrated Sam’s misty brain and stopped his leap that would have pushed Mule through the wall.

Mule breathed out in relief and sagged. “Hot damn! I just said he knows where your brother lives, your...”

“You said my sister.”

“Your sister, your brother, your granny Fardi-dardi. But that don’t mean he’s gonna harm them.

But if you don’t do what he says...”

Sam inhaled a slow breath. Mule had said sister by coincidence—he didn’t know anything about Amy.

“He wants you off the Pike Ranch.”

“Ask Mr. P...Pike first.”

“It has diddly pop to do with Josh Pike. Timothy Finch owns the Pike Ranch too—he just lets old Josh farm it, has done these past twenty-odd years. As a favor for marryin’ Iris, for bein’ a father to Alex who could care a damn, big sap. So don’t expect Josh Pike to defend you, he loves the ranch and wouldn’t risk losin’ it.” He pulled his hat over his face. “It’ll be better all round if you just pack up. I’m mighty sorry, son, it ain’t your fault, but then when it comes to Timothy Finch that don’t mean a dime.”

Sam considered the prospect, chewed his lip and focused on a falcon soaring way overhead, its talons already hooked, ready for a kill. “I’m not going,” he said quietly, almost to himself. He’d stay put and if it came to a siege, then so be it.

Mule studied Sam’s face and then shook his head. “Shit.” Options flickered over his face like clouds on a windy day. Sam could see him debating whether to use force but Mule would need a reinforcement army for that, and he knew it. He passed a meaty hand over his face, pulling his lower eyelids and lip down with it. “You know? You remind me of myself twenty years ago.”

“Jesus.”

“Your anger, young Sam, is an art form.”

But Sam wasn’t in the mood for compliments. “I’m not going,” he said again as he climbed into his pickup. It was time to go to work.



As he rattled through the gate he spotted a silver blue Chevrolet further down the trail so he stepped on the gas. He overtook the Finch family at speed, covered their shiny clean car with brown dust, opened his window and flipped them the bird before driving fast straight into High Falls.

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I'll just have to watch my back, that's all, Sam thought as he later leaned against the bar. Just like normal. He tried to pull his attention, which was bordering on inattention, around to Doctor Trillium who was talking.

"Sam my boy, I hear such things about you," the veterinary said. "I mean to say, getting that herd fasting—twenty four hours no food, just good clean water. Then Senna pods and garlic! Very radical treatment for toxic poisoning but it worked."

"Milkweed."

Trillium threw back his hands. "Ah. Hallelujah, so he is listening. Yes, too much milkweed as you discovered."

The veterinary waited while Sam served a customer. The juke was playing loudly and the doctor's fingernails rattled on the bar as he listened, his head cocked. "It's blatantly obvious there are no more song lyrics left," he said when Sam returned to his take-a-break position. "I mean to say, *yummy, yummy, yummy I've got love in my tummy* for goodness sakes. Does that make sense to you?"

"Tell me about the F...Finches." Sam didn't want to discuss music unless it was the kind that stimulated riotous sunbursts of colors. And that had only happened once.

"Totally unreliable, just like all the Finches." Trillium drained his shot and indicated he'd like another. "Never liked either—Tom or Timothy. No tolerance." He knocked back the whiskey Sam had given him and then spat it out. "Oh hell, Sam. There's a cigarette end in here."

"Sorry." Sam changed the glass.

Trillium downed his new shot and Sam poured him another. "They called me names. Just because...just because...well..."

"You were d...different," Sam supplied.

"Yes. I tried to be discreet." He glanced at Sam who looked neutrally back. "The twins got rich in the second world war flying little golden leaves back from Asia. All perfectly legal I understand. They started

Gosling Pharmaceuticals soon after.” He swayed slightly on his bicycle seat and Sam wondered how much more information he was reliably going to give.

“Gosling,” Sam repeated to encourage him.

“Indeed. But don't interrupt.” Trillium leaned sideways at an alarming angle. “The brothers subsequently bought Raw Pines.” He threw himself backward as if he was sitting on a chair instead of a stool and Sam grabbed his shirt-front to stop him falling into the spit-doused sawdust. “I am an old bubblehead, aren't I?” Trillium brushed down his shirt-front and then righted himself. “You know what I remember best about Tom?”

“No.”

“Terrible incident this, so do keep it to yourself. I was sitting here in this very bar with Professor Dolonski, a friend of mine. Well he wasn't a professor then, we were at college together but, you know what I mean. Having a peaceful drink together. Tom leapt up behind us, grinning like a fool. *Hey Veterinary*—it's what he always called me—*You know why it's always good to have a queer for a friend? Just so you'll never find him in bed with your wife!* I was terribly embarrassed. The insensitive clump. John—that's the professor—never got over it. Spoiled my life.” He grimaced into his drink and shook his head, swirling the last of the amber liquid in his glass. “Same color as your eyes,” he murmured before he added in a stronger voice. “I'll never forgive him.”

“So you b...blame Alex,” Sam said softly. “For something his Pa...father said.”

Trillium hummed into his glass. “No, I guess... Oh yes I do. None of the Finches are any good. And Alex is just a pusillanimous yowler. Ha! What do you make of that then?”

“I don't know,” Sam murmured. “pusill? Animous? Is that...bad...good?”

Without answering, the veterinary got up and wound his way toward the swing doors.

Sam watched his sad progress before he turned to Charlie. “How'd Tom Finch die?”

The bar-owner levered himself off a sticky patch on the bar. “Beats me. Short of breath, probably. In the end.”

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"Pusillanimous," Sam sternly told the gate as he returned to the Pike Ranch around midnight. "Don't be pusillanimous."

A silhouetted figure was standing in the barnyard, and Sam stepped on his brakes before he ran it over. He slowed to a halt beside Josh Pike.

"Morning Sam."

"Mr. Pike, it's not morning."

"How's life treating you, son?"

"To be honest, like w...what comes out the...*you know*...back end of a cow."

"Can I call you son? I never had one myself because the one I was given on a plate couldn't give much more than what comes out the back end of a cow either."

"W...what you doing out here, Mr. Pike?"

"Watching the sun rise."

Sam followed the direction of his eyes, then rapidly got back in his pickup and thundered down the alkali path. Within minutes he was standing by the creek, staring at the lodgepole and ponderosa stand, impotent to do anything to put out the blaze that had already consumed his hut, all of his belongings and most of the trees.

He flung himself into the grass and covered his head with his arms as his small gas stove exploded in a burst of metal that rained down around him, burning holes in the back of his shirt and jeans. He shook off a piece that scorched his hand, choking, not only on the acrid smoke but on rage building inside him, a volcanic inner fireball about to erupt. He punched the ground, sat up and ground his teeth at the sight of his destroyed hut. *I don't know how*, he vowed silently at the billowing smoke, *but I'm going to make you pay for this, Timothy Finch*.

He scrubbed at his face with sooty hands as another thought hit him, and it was like creek water had doused his inner fury. He choked again, this time on unshed tears, and his heart sank. *How am I going to help you now, Josh Pike?*

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He was parked on the roadside near Silver Creek at dawn when crimson stained the east so that for an ant's breath instant, Sam was silver on one side and orange on the other. Three hours later he stood in wind as sharp as needles at the edge of the forest and watched a group of miners waiting by a gallows frame as the cage was lifted, their bent bodies

leaning into the gale. The air vibrated with sound: the cranking of the lift, the crunching of crusher machinery, an explosion close to Sam's feet which sent vibration up his legs into his belly. A sharp gust of wind blew up a cloud of tailings from the dun-colored mountain and sent it in his direction. But instead of holding his breath, he took a deep one and continued down the slope to find someone to ask if they were hiring today.

## Chapter Eleven: Alex

No, I didn't get kicked to death by grasshoppers because I told my uncle the truth, I went straight to the Pike Ranch.

JP thundered at me as soon as I walked in. "There are elections in a month's time."

"Pretty darn tootin', old man," I said pleasantly. "Are you all right Momma?"

After she'd bestowed a kiss on me, I nodded at JP. "Is he okay?"

"Fine. He brushed his teeth with his right hand this morning." Her eyes and concentration hadn't wavered from the Colgate Comedy Hour on the TV. "The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau is on in a minute."

And that put me in mind of trout fried on an open fire.

Gee it was nice to be in High Falls. I couldn't wait to see Sam again. Once he knew I'd bamboozled my uncle, boy, he was going to be proud of me sure enough.

I chugged out of the house, past the barnyard where all was as still as a rat's ass after a strychnine diet, checked the barn that held nothing but three bored cow dogs.

I steamed down the path toward the creek, surprised I couldn't see him at work anywhere on the ranch. Perhaps he was napping in his hut, which was perfectly fine by me. Maybe he had a day off from the bar and he was fishing for trout and we could eat them hot off the fire again.

He'd told me if you were out in the wilds you could sleep on a bed of pine shoots and I had every intention of trying this out in the very near future, hopefully tonight after a dinner of sage hen with sage, if there wasn't any trout. The old hut would get real warm with that wood-burning stove thing he had. And I could sleep on the pine shoots while he slept on his bed if that's what he wanted, because, let's face it, I was ninety percent certain if I ever laid a finger on Sam, I'd be shitting teeth for the next three days. For the moment I was more than content just to be with him, to listen to his convoluted speech, to watch his graceful, fluid movements, to be in his sphere.

We'd cook up a breakfast in the morning on the fire, high on the hog, watch the sun come up, if I could get up in time, because it sure would be comfortable on my pine shoots.

I hummed *Perfect Score* as I neared the stand of lodgepole and ponderosa and skidded to a halt like a startled cartoon character. The butte was there, but the trees were black skeletons, leaning crookedly and sadly

waiting for a high wind to blow them over in a cloud of ash. Horror burning in my stomach, I ran the rest of the way, my bowels turning to water. Not even a burnt-out ruin was testament to where Sam's neat hut had stood, just a pile of cinders. All that was left was an acrid smell and the creaking of collapsing pines. "Oh Sam," I whispered. "Your posters."

"My Rockwell Norman posters," he had introduced them to me. The Four Freedoms.

"Is that you?" I'd pointed to the Freedom of Speech poster at an earnest working man who'd taken courage in both hands to speak at a meeting.

"You think I look like that?"

I didn't. The guy was older, bigger than Sam, but there was something about his honest look, his frank, determined gaze.

"Oh Sam," I turned my back on his tragedy and bitter tears ran unheeded down my cheeks as I sank to the ground by the creek. What happened to his newts? And his sleeping woodchuck in its straw-lined box? But more importantly, what happened to him?

"The place burned down," Momma explained as I rushed into the kitchen, wild-haired and spluttering.

"He wasn't in it, was he? He is okay?" Something in my voice made her take her everlasting attention off the TV.

"He wasn't in it," she confirmed but she didn't know where he was now. "He just went."

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Old Doc Trillium would know, the two of them were always yakkety-yakking in the Thud Bar together. I mean Trillium yakked while Sam just looked at him with those amazing eyes that seemed to hold the wisdom of centuries. Whether they did or not, I couldn't say, they just *seemed* to.

I knocked at Trillium's door, smiling like a heifer on heat. Then he opened it, looking older than God.

He put on a show of *Sam, who's Sam?* until I punched the doorframe, and then he said he wasn't there.

"I know that. But where is he?"

Trillium pondered the question. God, he was so washed out, he was the kind of guy who could be watching an atom bomb about to drop on him and he'd simply say, "Let me find my spectacles."

"Well just tell me when you last saw him?"

He considered very slowly. A sick animal must be either dead or have cured itself before he got around to looking at it. "I see you've come rushing up to see how your folks are. You missed your Momma's cooking, or are you collecting bible stories?"

"Okay, Doc. I don't need no comments from you just now. Just tell me when you last saw Sam."

"Day his hut was incinerated. Day after he got run off Raw Pines for simply doing a wonderful job."

"How did that damn fire start? He never left his stove burning when he was out. I'm certain it wasn't an accident."

"Most perspicacious," Trillium inspected his fingers.

"I'll kill Mule Palmer."

"Wrong, choose again. Mule didn't do it, leastways he says he didn't and claims he doesn't know who did, although someone sure wanted the boy out of that hut. You know that expression Sam uses? That roaches are never right when facing chickens, except he says chickens are never...never mind. Think about it because I know exactly what happened on Raw Pines that day, Mule told me. Which roach didn't like to be told a few home-truths? Which roach couldn't think up a decent explanation for the questions the chicken asked?"

"Uncle Tim?"

"Oh the very thought."

Why wasn't I surprised? I know my uncle wasn't there when it burned down, in any case I couldn't imagine him creeping about with a box of matches. But his staff was loyal, or scared.

Trillium cleaned his teeth with his tongue, checking out every tombstone before he continued. "So you're looking for Sam, are you? I'd like to know where he is myself because I have the results of the samples he took from that rancher's herd in Silver Creek—Kuller, I think his name is. High levels of arsenic, lead, mercury and cyanide. Lead, for example, was one point fifty." He shook his mossy old head.

"Is that bad?" As if I was interested.

"Very high. The Veterinary Services have contacted Kuller, but I'd still like to talk to Sam because he was keen to know the results. He has a very good sense of what's right and wrong." His milky old eye wobbled on me for a moment. "Do you know who he admires most?"

Bliss jagged through me as I wondered momentarily if the answer was, perhaps, me. Then I told myself to get real. "Martin Luther King?" I tried.

“Possibly. But he told me it was Abraham Lincoln. Do you know what he can also quote in its entirety?”

“The *I’ve Got a Dream* speech.”

“Possibly, but also?”

“Enough of the twenty questions. Chrissakes.” I was getting sick of his I-know-Sam-better-than-you face.

“No. Bertrand Russell’s *What I Have Lived For*. Amazed me he knew it. Do you?”

Course I didn’t know it, didn’t even know who this Russell whatsisname was and nor did I give a tinker’s damn. “Doc,” I said slowly as if I was talking to some kind of spaz. “I am looking for Sam, not taking a course in humanities here.”

He pulled his long lip, considering me. “Alex. I don’t want you to hurt him.”

“Why should I do that?”

Trillium’s eyes swiveled every which way. “You can’t fool me. I know why you want to find him, what you have in mind. And it’s so ironic, when I think about your father...” His eyes narrowed as something penetrated his mind block. “You’re a lowlife. If you hurt him physically or otherwise in any way...” He poked his finger into my chest, emphasizing every point.

Shows how self controlled I am because I didn’t poke him in the eye. I just pointed my finger back at him. “Lowlife yourself. I would never, ever hurt him. Just shows how much you know.”

Trillium deflated like a balloon, flapping his hands at his sides as if asking why he was bothering with a sorry loser like me. “Alex. You have the finesse of a salamander, the feelings of a fiddleback.”

“Doc. You got something to say, just say it. Christ.”

“Funny thing is, I can’t envisage Sam being interested in you.”

“Look, Doc. Just don’t envisage him at all and you’ll be doing everyone a favor.”

“You think you’re so with it, don’t you?”

“With it? With what?”

“How much do you really know about that young man you want to screw up? Huh? You’re even vain enough to believe he’s interested in you, but I can tell you right here he’s not. Think about it, he’s hardly awash with desire for you, is he? Fact is, I would bet my practice he hasn’t given you a thought since he last saw you.”

“Jesus. Could you be blunter?”



"It's because I know him, and you don't. I'll bet you didn't even know he has dyslexia."

I jackknifed. "What? What the fu...hell is that? Is he sick? Is it a disease?"

"See? You don't know the first thing about him, do you? You have your eye on him for nefarious reasons, yet you never asked him about himself. You never notice anything different about him?"

I considered. He was different sure enough, he was beautiful, funny, and I always had trouble keeping my hands off him, but the Doc was right, I didn't know a dime about him. I just yakked about myself all the time. "He looks at my mouth sometimes when I speak. I thought he was deaf at first. Look Doc, you never answered my question. Is he sick?"

"No. I'm not even sure it's dyslexia, I'm not a medical doctor and I don't come across too many bovine with the condition." He yukked at me as if he'd made a splendid joke but sobered up soon enough at my black look. "If it is, then it's a condition he was born with and he finds it very difficult to read or write. He looks at your mouth sometimes to be sure about what you're saying, it's not that he can't hear you."

His mouth moved too like he was repeating my words and he would come up with weird concoctions of phrases and what sounded like quotations. He sure was a weird one. "Does it hurt him, Doc?"

"Not physically. But I'd say he's had a hell of a childhood. Because no one has really paid much attention to this condition, so children with dyslexia are often just labeled stupid and unteachable. And he's far from both."

"Yes, he is."

"He's one of the brightest, most gifted people I know." Trillium gazed into middle distance with a dumb dreamy expression. Time to knock him off track. But he brought himself back, pulling open a musty drawer and taking something from it. "You ever see his writing? It's most curious. He left this once on the bar." He looked at the worn scrap of paper as if it was some kind of treasure, then he looked sourly at me. "How can you have the nerve to look for him? After what your family did to him. But then your family is not known for its sympathetic proclivity so I find it very hard to believe you have any either." He sounded exhausted all of a sudden. "Just go, Alex. And leave him alone. Let him get on with his life peacefully and don't be ridiculous."

He didn't notice that, on my way out, I palmed the piece of paper and put it in my pocket.

I wandered back to the Pike Ranch and sat at the kitchen table while I straightened out the paper which was dotted with what looked like sweat stains, or tears. *Ekoz of crys of payn...* It took me a while to decipher but in the end I came up with: *Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people. I long to alleviate this evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.*

I know Sam's as bright as a neon light, but even I wasn't so besotted to believe he'd made this up. I reckoned it was a quotation from somewhere, perhaps from that Bertrand guy Trillium was yakking about. But I could see why Sam wrote it down. It was just the sort of notion that would knock him out.

## Chapter Twelve: Alex

You won't hear me say this often, but I was worried about JP. The following morning I said to him, "Are your hemorrhoids better this morning? Must be nice to sit down." I didn't often get a rise out of him, but I thought that one might. Not a thing. Momma was in her element because, for the first time in *her* life, she was ordering him about, telling him not to drop crumbs on the floor, asking if he'd said his prayers this morning. And he'd answer her like a good little boy.

"Is he okay?" I asked.

She studied the old guy then said, "He's kinda mellowed in these last few weeks. It's true he thinks he's about four years old, but he soon goes back to his old self."

Back to normal? Halfway there perhaps. I tried to think what normal was for JP but, truth be told, I didn't really know. See, I never paid him much mind.

"Hey, honey," Momma's voice interrupted my thoughts. "You got Sam's far-away-on-a-summer's day look about you. You been drinking the creek water too?"

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On my way down to Silver Creek early the next day I decided what I was going to do.

Before I went to the Bluewomb Club, I'd visit Sam's sister and that rancher friend so I could find out a bit more about Sam. If I showed some interest, it might make him like me, and I had this overwhelming urge to make Sam like me. It's what I wanted most in the world I reckoned. But it wasn't until I was halfway between High Falls and Silver Creek, and stuck behind ten miles of haul trucks driving at thirty miles an hour in a convoy, that I asked myself, "Where are you going?" That had me stumped because I was damned if I knew. I didn't know where the farmer friend lived or the sister. "So where am I going?" I asked an old moose standing in a fork of the Raging River.

I had sufficient brain cells left once I got to Silver Creek to call Trillium and ask him if he could remember the name of Sam's rancher friend. First of all he said no. But then I told him I had a message for Sam from old JP and since I was going down to Silver Creek, I could leave the message with this friend. The old loser fell for it although he took a long

time about giving me the information—long enough I reckoned to go and make a sandwich and eat it before he came back with the name Kuller. He'd made a coffee and probably watched a game of baseball and possibly also softball before he came back with the address.

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Old Kuller was a dead ringer for Snow White's dwarf Doc with his big nose and wire glasses, and I bet he'd burst into "Whistle While You Work" with no encouragement. First thing I did was ask if he'd seen Sam.

"Saw him a while ago." Old Kuller was ready to gab, and I was ready to listen.

"Bout four months ago," he said, leaning on his rail fence. "He took samples from my cows and then, what did you say your name was? Alex? Then, Alex, he came over last week and took some samples from the water—it's the creek that flows right by the copper mine."

"How was he, Mr. Kuller? Did he look okay?"

"Not really. He looked very tired and a bit sick."

"Do you know where he's working?"

He shook his shaggy head. "He didn't say. Maybe down the mine."

"Down the *mine*? Sam? I don't think so."

"No. Guess you're right. Couldn't see him working down a mine either."

He took me in to meet his wife—a lady all bosom and apron and obviously someone who would not have hysterics, like Momma, when a chickadee lost its head because I threw a six pack at it. It was pretty cozy in their kitchen until, through the open door, I spotted a gloomy old house standing on its own in pasture land. Reckon you'd be pleased to be dead if you lived in that old sepulcher of a place all right. Kuller followed my gaze.

"That's where Sam lived," he said. "Moved there after his mother died. Must have been about seven years old, tiny little lad. He used to go and lie in the pasture grass, thinking we couldn't see him."

"Poor little boy," Mrs. Kuller said sorrowfully

"Why?" I asked. "Wasn't he happy?"

Mr. Kuller whistled as if I'd made an understatement. "He'd never say he was unhappy, mind. You could just tell. Sometimes you'd see him gamboling about in that old pasture stiff legged like a young colt. Always by himself. He used to peek at us from between that old grass. And you

remember the first time he ever ventured over here?" He looked at his wife.

She put her hands beneath her apron. "Never forget it."

Kuller stared down at his hands on the scrubbed table. "Couldn't have been more than a few weeks after he arrived. Walked in, pale and shaking. Leg all bloody. 'What have you done, son?' I asked. 'You hurt yourself?' His eyes were huge—like a frightened doe's eyes they were. 'It got accidentally trapped between the table and the wall, Mr. Kuller,' he said in a whisper and he put his hand in mine. Got accidentally trapped like hell. That damn man hurt him, I betcha that to this day. I'll always remember the look on that little face, an expression of inexplicable pain."

"Which damn man, Mr. Kuller?"

"Amy's father."

"Amy's his sister."

"Half sister." He looked at his wife with an expression of *should we be telling him all this?*

"Please," I put my hand on his arm, thinking rapidly. "I'm trying to help him. See, he's dyslexic, and I'm trying to piece his childhood together."

"Dyslexic? What the hell is that? Is it catching?"

"No. It means he can't read or write all that well. It makes him very special."

"Ah, that would explain a lot," Mrs. Kuller said. "He didn't stay long at school, but he was so bright generally. When he worked with Mr. Kuller he could treat the cattle better than any veterinary. He just sorta knew."

"He got the rudiments from me, but it was like he learned things from the living air. He soon went far beyond my knowledge. But write it down! That was a different bag 'a bones. And do you know?" He looked significantly at his wife. "I reckon it was soon after that leg incident he started to stutter, 'cause he was fine when he first came." His wife considered for a moment and told him he was right sure enough.

"Tell me about his real father," I asked.

"Oh now, I don't know about his father. That was before Amy's pa moved here. God knows what happened. All I know is Amy's ma had this baby, Sam, and it wasn't her husband's. Amy's pa divorced his wife and moved here, to that house in the distance there, and when his ex-wife was killed then Amy came to live here with him."

"Just Amy?"

“Well, he didn't want Sam, did he? Wasn't anything to him. I don't know where Sam went when his mother died, to an orphanage or foster parents maybe. But Amy pined for him something terrible, saying she'd die without her little brother. Meant it too, so the father eventually gave in and took Sam. But he didn't adopt him or spend a dime on the kid. Never got him proper schooling, clothing or medical care. Sam would lie in the pasture and even sometimes sleep in the barn here. Alex? You okay? You're awful pale.”

I took a deep breath. “Yeah. I'm fine. You let him sleep in the *barn*?”

“He refused to come into the house,” Mrs. Keller said. “In fact we had to pretend we didn't know he slept in the barn because if he thought we knew, then he wouldn't come. We put blankets and pillows down there and food and candy. The blankets and pillows would be put back in the same position in the morning, but the food would be gone. And there'd be a little hollow in the straw. I suppose he thought we believed the rats had been in, clean rats too 'cause they took the candy wrappers with them.”

“Jesus Christ.” I raked my hands through my hair. “I mean, how can you stand something like that at seven years old? Lose your mother, then your sister, and then have to live like that”

Kuller shook his head in agreement. “When Amy was about fifteen, and Sam would've been eleven or twelve, her father said he couldn't cope any more with her.”

“Why? What was wrong with her?”

“Don't you *know*?” They looked at me as if I knew nothing about Sam whatsoever, which was true. “I thought you were a friend of Sam's.”

“I'm sorry, but when Sam talks about her it's always with much love and affection. He doesn't say what's *wrong* with her.”

“The hell you say,” old Kuller muttered.

“See,” Mrs. Kuller took pity on me. “Amy is spastic. Her mother was left too long during labor and the baby was deprived of oxygen. She's very well, mentally, but it left her with slurred speech and partly paralyzed. Then, when she was fourteen or fifteen she started having epileptic seizures which meant she needed full time care and her father put her in a home. Not the one she's in now, but a state-care place. Little Sam was beside himself. Said he'd take care of her, but of course he couldn't. He was too young.”

“Joe—that's Amy's father—didn't have much money, he needed what he had for his new wife and this state funded place wasn't exactly spotless.”

“Downright dingy.”

“What happened to Sam then?”

“Sam's always been a wild one; guess life knocked him cattywampus one more time. Whether Joe threw him out or if he ran away I don't know, but he survived on the streets for quite some time. A reporter of some kind friended him. What was his name? Writes for the Silver Creek Bugle, Sol something. He came along one day and asked if I'd give Sam fulltime work on the ranch here. I jumped at the chance because he was about sixteen then, and I could employ him. We made a pact, his friend and me, never to tell Sam the friend asked for him. Proud little cuss, was Sam. He wouldn't have accepted if he thought it a favor. So I pretended to meet Sam by chance in town, and I offered him a job. He came and stayed until I had to let him go earlier this year. We're not doing so good down here.”

Could've fooled me, the place looked a darn sight better off than the Pike Ranch which was losing money like rockers fleeing a Peter and Gordon concert. It was just a question of time before the whole thing fell apart.

“And he slept in the barn?” I think I knew the answer.

“Yeah. We didn't have any room in the house then. And he didn't want to rent anything because he saved all his money so he could get Amy out of that place and up there.” He nodded at a building on the opposite hill. “Silver Creek Home for the Crippled.”

I thanked them, and shook hands but every cell in my body was screaming, *didn't you go look for him the three years he was on the streets? Get the kid some much needed help?*

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I made my way quickly down the cream colored corridor to Room 23, Amy's room, and as I opened the door a blinding light flashed that had me diving for cover, convinced détente was shorter lived than imagined.

“Gotcha,” said a beautiful girl in a wheelchair at a table, her hands, seemingly the wrong way round, holding a Polaroid camera. She stared up at me with Sam's wide eyes—the exact shape, except hers were blue. She had a dimple when she smiled like he did. *And* she had the same soft tufts of new growth hair around her forehead. She was a feminine, blonde, damaged version of Sam.

A slack mouthed man sat opposite her, alternating dewy eyed looks between me and a Scrabble board on the table between them.

"Hello," I said. "I'm a friend of Sam's."

"Alex!" she beamed at me. "You are Alex."

"Yes. I know. I am." My heart couldn't have been fuller that she knew who I was. Sam must have talked about me.

"I'm Pete," the slack mouthed man said. "And we're playing Scrabble."

"Oh. Sorry to interrupt." To cover up my amusement at having reckoned Pete was Sam's son, I looked at the board intently. "Are you sure you're allowed to put words like that down?"

"Tits is a word," Pete grumbled.

"So's erection."

I nodded. "Not sure whether cum is spelt like that. And not sure you two should be using it." I looked sternly at them and Amy covered her crooked mouth with a crooked little hand and giggled delightfully.

Pete looked wary. "You're not fixin' to tell Sam, are you? He blew me out the other day for puttin' down blowjob."

I could just imagine Pete being bowled over like Charlie Brown when Sam blasted him. "I think I should tell him, don't you? After all, Amy is his sister."

"*She's* the one who puts them words down in the first place."

"Hey. Not true." She pouted at him, or rather, half-pouted for only half of her mouth worked.

"*You* put balls down."

"That's plural of a normal word." He got up, groaning with hard done-by woe and left.

Amy fiddled with her camera and pulled a photo from it. A ghostly image gradually took shape until there I was looking like a frightened ferret.

"You like taking pictures, Amy?"

"I haven't been taking them for long." Her voice slurred like mine did after a heavy night. "Sam bought me this. It's cool. Cost thirty nine dollars, imagine!" We looked admiringly at it. "You want to see some of my pictures?"

I nodded and was honestly impressed by some of what she showed me. Even with a Polaroid, she'd captured swirls in a lily's petals and soft fur on a bee's back with an artist's eye for composition. "These are wonderful," I said.

She shyly passed others onto me and guffawed when I asked, "Is this Barbarella with her silver PVC pants?" A female, whose hair looked like it



had been cut with a ruler grinned out from the picture, her eyes barely able to stay open under the weight of heavy black makeup around them.

Amy laughed. "That's Helen. Sam's girlfriend."

"Sam's girlfriend?" My heart hit my big toe.

"Wants to be. You want to watch it, Alex. Soon as she knows you're a pop singer, she'll be in your pants quicker than you can say Jack Robinson." She crinkled her eyes at my speechless shock, and shuffled the photos. "Here's one of Sam. Hey, don't snatch, patience is a virtue."

He was fast asleep on her bed. I rubbed my thumb lightly over his quiet face, those long lashes.

"Took it a couple of days ago," she said. "Boy, he sure was sleepy. Normally he stays with me till I fall asleep, but he just flaked out. Slept practically the whole night through and then got mad I hadn't woken him up. Pete said he'd like to sleep like that with me on my bed, but I told him I'd rather have his mop sleep there first." She studied the photo for a moment before saying, "There's more."

I took the one she held out and nearly dropped it. "What the...?" Sam in white cotton underwear stepping elegantly out of his jeans by a lake. Jesus, I hadn't expected to see his perfect pale torso and long bare legs like that today, even in a photo. I looked closer at the snap to see what else I could make out and shuffled uncomfortably in the chair as I shot her a guilty look but she was studying other photos.

She glanced at the one I held. "That was a few months ago. We went to the lake. Look, here's another where he's swimming."

That one just showed his white-clad rear as he dove under water, but it was good enough for me and I eagerly took the next photo, hoping it was a full-frontal one of him coming out the lake all wet. It wasn't, but it was still pretty good; he was now dressed, fooling around, hanging from a tree. I laughed outright at the widest grin in the world. I never saw him look like that, so happy. Certainly not when I was around anyway, and I'd sell my soul to have been with them that day. I'd go as far as to say I'd gladly work as a copy clerk selling bridge poles and engines for the rest of my life. If I found him beautiful before, this was indescribable. Pain shot through my body, groin to guts to throat and stabbed me with such ferocity that my hands shook.

The door opened and a nurse put her head round it. "Okay baby?" I thought she was talking to me at first, because she looked at me.

"Okay, Helen. This is a friend of Sam's," Amy nodded at me. "He's from France."

It took me a moment to get my head round this revelation, and before I knew it, Sam's girlfriend was kissing my hand like she'd had no breakfast saying, "*Enchantée de faire votre connaissance.*" She bowed and headed for the door with a *come hither* look, not that I'd go hither with her anyplace, and I wondered why Sam did—I'd credited him with more taste. Still, it might be wise to get on the right side of her.

"How do you say, *nice to meet you too* in French?" I whispered to Amy.

"*T'as une tête a faire sauter les plaques d'egouts*"

By the time I got my tongue in order Helen was already outside, but I stuck my head out and shouted it up the corridor. She paused for a moment, mid step, then continued much faster and the temperature dropped to twenty below.

"What did you tell me to say to her?" I accused Amy when I went back in.

"You shouldn't flirt."

"You told me to tell her that?"

"Nope, I just said, you shouldn't flirt. Not with her anyway because I couldn't vouch for your safety, hear tell she gives terrible hick...pain...painful hickies."

"Oh hell, Amy. And quit imitating Sam."

"It's true." She gave me a crooked grin that for no reason I could see was, in a splinter of a second, turned off. She stared at her hands. "I wasn't imitating him. I love my brother," she said sadly. "When my father put me in that first home, the government one, Sam'd spend all his time up there with me 'til they threw him out. Then he had no place to go, so he slept on the streets. He was only twelve and just a little kid. God what a life, sleeping on the streets in all weathers. And I couldn't do a thing about it."

I still clasped the photos of him asleep and undressing by the lake and I glanced surreptitiously at her, thinking I might pocket them and have something to drool over in my dark hours. But her face shape was so like Sam's it was like watching him cry and that killed me. In any case, what kinda guy would kipe her photos of her brother? With more than a tinge of regret, I put them back on the dresser.

"He's not a retard, Alex," she said and I jumped, not expecting her to say something like that.

"What? Who the hell said that? Jesus, course he's not."

"You said I was imitating him." She pouted.

“No, I mean, he stutters a little doesn't he? Gets his words mixed. But I swear he's not...”

“He stutters when he talks to you, does he?”

“Yeah,” I said, bewildered. “He does around everyone...doesn't he?” I gave her a long look. “Doesn't he when he's with you?”

She shrugged and I knew the answer was *no*. Oh well, he didn't know me very well but, if all went to plan, I'd soon put that right.

“Don't ever tease him about it.” Her eyes were welling again, but she had a little of Sam's look—the pissed one that had people diving for cover.

I shook my head. “I never would. Guess he had it tough in his life already.”

“Too right. They exhausted him to the point of desperation at school making him copy texts out fifty times. Then when the spelling was different every time, they told my father Sam was doing it on purpose. My father's a big man, Alex. And Sam was such a little boy.” She tried to wipe her tears away but they were coming too fast.

“Oh.” My eyes brimmed over and I clasped my hands together tight so I wouldn't hit anything. If I ever met that Joe guy I'd stomp on him so hard he'd live the rest of his life under a mushroom.

I waited for Amy to get her smile back on before I asked, “Do you know where Sam is?”

“Ah, I don't know.”

“Where's he working?”

“Here and there. This place and that.” She was obviously not going to tell me. “Don't worry about him, he's okay.”

I stared across at the undershorts photo on the dresser. “Amy? He ever talk about me?”

She smiled gently but didn't answer so I had to content myself with the fact she'd known who I was when I walked in, so he *must* have said something. But I had a nasty feeling it might have been in conjunction with Uncle Timothy, in which case none of it would've been good.

Amy blew her nose, twisted the tissue into small pieces, took a deep breath and returned her attention to her photos. “Hey, you seen this one?” She held out a photo of Pete looking like a heifer after the bull's got at her. His wide old muzzle was pushed toward the camera and his usually slack mouth was pursed up like a cat's asshole. “He's blowing me a kiss,” she giggled, her tears drying. “Gruesome, isn't it?”

It was. Stunningly. So I changed the subject. "I'm doing a gig just south of Silver Creek tomorrow night. Will you tell Sam?" I gave her an old leaflet of a folk festival I'd been in last year to prove I did gigs.

"I'll tell him. That's a terrible photo of you." She turned the leaflet this way and that. "Come on, take me into the garden and you can model for me."

It was an unseasonably warm afternoon, some kind of flowers pushing up the dirt, things buzzing in the flowers, while I sat on the grass to pose in all the positions she requested. Undoing the buttons on my shirt, I said I drew the line at taking it off altogether.

"Aw," she pouted. "It'd be groovy. Jeez, you're just an old square."

When I'd gone through more contortions than there are in Karma Sutra, we sat under a huge apple tree, and the opening chords of a song came to me, just like that. *Blue eyed angel girl*.

I hummed and she giggled as she settled back. "Another friend of Sam's visited me yesterday. Sol. He's a reporter and he's writing an article about The Silver Creek Home for the Crippled, except he's going to try to get the name changed to The Silver Creek Rehabilitation Hospital. Let's see Sam get his tongue round that."

"Sol?"

"This reporter."

This was the same guy who'd got him work on Kuller's place.

"Uh huh. Known him since he was about fourteen, I guess. I'd never met him til yesterday, but Sam's mentioned him once or twice."

I was too yellow-bellied to ask if he'd said better things about that sucker than he did about me. So, Sam had a want-to-be girlfriend and a possible boyfriend. I could just about cope with that, after all I was hardly celibate myself. Although I'd bet my Momma he hadn't plumbed the depths I had.

I looked across the valley to hills of brush and aspen and saw a blot on the landscape, a large colorless patch of land. "Is that the mine?"

She nodded. "Lovely imitation of hell, that's what he called it."

"Is Sam working there?"

She looked at me with round eyes. "I don't think he'd be happy working there, do you?"

What kind of answer was that? I wondered as I got into my car. I was inclined to think she meant no because Sam, if I knew anything at all about him, wouldn't last two minutes down a mine shaft.

## Chapter Thirteen: Alex

The Bluewomb Club sure lived up to its name. Someone had overdosed on blue paint, it was like being inside an igloo. I'd come with the intention that the guy, this Jimmy Labouche, could think what he liked, but he wasn't going to get me up against the shithouse wall for the sake of a talent scout. I'd do the gig, then pack up my gear and scam.

A few shifty-looking characters were hanging out in the joint when I arrived but they didn't bother with me, didn't ask what I was doing on the small stage, didn't care that I sat for a while in a dingy room at the back that smelt like a thousand past orgies.

The few screwdrivers I downed had no ill-effects at all. The orange juice was the best I'd ever had and full of vitamins, as long as they didn't stint on the vodka.

I chatted to a guy who I think was called Flatchest, a guy who was going on stage before me. "You ever feel as if you've been whacked over the head with a bible?" he asked and, when I told him often, he offered me a prellie to keep going.

Shaking my head into my vodka I told him I didn't take anything chemical, just smoked the occasional Mary Jane.

"Drugs bring freedom, man," he said, his fingers rattling on the sticky bar, his eyes rolling, spaced out on wacky dust. "Take you into your soul."

"They imprison the soul, your very spirit." I quaffed my drink too quickly and it came back up again, fizzing. "It just brings on despair and longing for something you can't have."

"Ah, quit being such a sorry old shit. They take you away from reality, and we sure need that."

"I have a friend who can do that all by himself without taking drugs." My friend Sam who would be in the audience tonight, if Amy had kept her promise and passed on my message.

It seemed everyone in the place was as high as Silver Creek's airy mountains except me, even after the screwdrivers. I still had a thirst on me like a cow salt lick, and I knew if I couldn't quench it soon, I'd keel over.

"Hello Alex." A sweaty hand on my shoulder sent my knee jittering up and down as I turned and stared into black orbs. "Let's hope it goes well tonight." Jimmy Labouche grimaced a zombie smile as he took off his shades, folded them and put them in his top pocket.

Half-expecting him to pat my ass, I sidled past to go on stage with my trusty Gibson held in front of me like a shield. But my ass was pat-free as I settled in and concentrated on the opening bars of *Perfect Score*:

*Come gently over the stones, my love/Come through the moonlight to me/*

*Is that your step on the stair I hear/Is that my name you breathe?*

*My luck of the draw, my perfect score/Luck of the draw, I can't ignore. My perfect score.*

Looking out over the swaying crowd trying to spot the guy with flickering eyes, I rattled away a few songs while the crowd twitched and hummed. I ended the set with *Freedom*.

*Hey Mr. President, we have the right to choose,/ We don't wanna listen to your saintly views,/If I wanna love a person, if I wanna get stoned,/Then I'll do what I want, it's my choice alone.*

That satisfied the more revolutionary in the crowd. Jimmy Labouche at the bar in the blue distance gave me a thumbs-up but I skimmed over him and peered out into the murky smoke.

"Sam! They were for you." I shielded my eyes from the strobe and tried to find the figure I sought. "Sam! Are you here?"

"Yes. Here!" Feminine voices. Samanthas. I shook my head.

"Hey listen!" I shouted over the screaming. "Hands up if there's a brown eyed, kinda chestnutty hair guy standing near you."

Several hands were raised, people laughing and pointing.

"Ask him if his name's Sam."

The hands lowered, the laughing stopped and it went pretty quiet as I slouched off the stage.

Flatchest, who was sitting in the room at the back, gazed at me with twirling eyeballs and said, "To each his own, man."

"Alex," Jimmy Labouche's voice made me jump. "You did good. You got a good voice, warm, vibrant. It's smooth."

My stomach churned. It was payback time. "Were the A&R guys out there? Did you talk to any of them?"

He put his wet hand too familiarly around the back of my neck. "Didn't see any. There might have been."

"Shit," I kicked a chair. Fooled again.

"Vicious." He leered at me as if he liked it.

If this guy thinks I'm gonna blow him, I thought savagely, he can think again. I'll chew it off first.

His grip on my neck tightened so I couldn't move my head. "You been a naughty boy, Alex," he said softly. "With this Sam business."

"I wasn't causing no trouble."

"We're a straight club, dude." He stuck his skull-like face close to mine like he was going to kiss me. "You're welcome to come back any time, but no more of that again. Is that understood?"

I braced myself, knowing very soon his hand would start wandering south. But instead, he simply released my neck. "I guess you'll want your money." He patted his pockets as if he'd find it in there.

I took a step backward in surprise. "Is that it? You don't want me to...?" I glanced at his crotch.

It was his turn to look surprised, but then his mouth cracked into a grin that didn't reach his eyes. I don't know how all those teeth fitted in his mouth, to be honest.

He ran his hand down my cheek, his ruby ring catching my stubble. "Sure. Maybe we could meet up at the Cactus Motel later." His voice was soft. "And maybe, just maybe, if you're a good boy, I know a man by the name of Orville Johnson."

"Oh yeah?" I drawled.

"Oh yeah. A&R man at Clampdown Records."

I blew enough air out through my nostrils to destroy my sinuses. What a pile of crap.

He grabbed my arm as I headed for the door. "You're beautiful," he said, sorrowfully. "But so empty."

*Empty?* I kicked at a street lamp outside, the cold air making me dizzy. I didn't want to be screwed by the slimy rat. I looked back at the blue light of the bleak club. The hell I'd join him later and the hell I'd go back and play at his lousy club. The place was for losers. I looked around for the nearest bar.

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Who do you want when you're sick? Who do you want to hold your fevered brow as you're glued to the toilet bowl? You want your momma? Well, I know who I wanted. Staggering out of the scrubby motel bathroom I called, of all people, Trillium.

"Well, well, well," he said as if he couldn't decide which well he preferred. "Alex Pike in the best of moods."

"I want Sam," I crowed.

“Yes, and I'm sure your mother would like a more reliable son. It just shows you can't have everything you desire. Perhaps you'd better keep an eye out for your uncle instead. He's been looking for you. I told him you were in Silver Creek, and your ma told him you were performing some kind of concert. Is that what you call it in your vernacular? A singalong?”

Shit. I shouldn't have told her I was doing a gig.

“I'd be very careful if I were you. He looked about as happy as you sound.”

“Find Sam for me, Doc.” I fell to my knees and then dropped the phone because I lit a cigarette. I left the receiver dangling because I could only smoke two-handed, but I heard his tinny little voice in the distance as I put my forehead on the dingy nylon carpet.

“Alex?”

I squinted into the room. Was that a crocodile in the bed or what? A crocodile with a ruby ring? Scratched all over I was from that damn thing.

“Who you calling?” Jimmy Labouche asked, waving a pair of handcuffs at me. “You coming back to bed?”

Ignoring him, I concentrated on creating a perfect circle of scorched nylon.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jimmy Labouche, the douche, left me with a hundred dollars and a contact for Mr. Orville Johnson of Clampdown Records. Fingering them in my pocket in a way that might've appeared obscene, I called Momma from the Cactus Motel lobby.

“Honey?” she said. “You need to call your Auntie Vita. She's been bending my ear off all day trying to get you. And Josh answered the phone once and invited her up here, so please, just call her and uninvited her. And, Alex? Be delicate.”

“Okay Momma. I can be delicate.” Sure I could. It was my favorite thing to be when I had a head the size of a pumpkin.

Auntie Vita answered the phone, her voice an Arctic air mass. “You forgotten about us Alex?”

“No, Auntie...it's just”

“Now don't you go telling me any more of them fibs. What I do want to hear is that you'll help your uncle out.”

“What's wrong?”

“He has to be at a meeting with mine workers tonight.”



“Excuse me?”

“The mine in Silver Creek.”

“Which mine in...?”

“The Seething mine, Alex.”

“Seething? But Uncle Timothy's not involved with mines.”

“Alex, you live in your own little world, don't you?” Auntie Vi was in crescendo, so she must have been sober. “I know you're not interested in your uncle's business but you must at least have paid a smidgeon of attention a year ago when Finch Industries invested heavily in Seething Mines. And if you can put your mind into a high enough gear to think about something other than just octaves, then yes, he is involved with mines. You do disappoint me sometimes.”

“Auntie, I still don't get it. You want me to go to a meeting?” Hell, that'll be an excitement and a half. I'd need matches to keep my eyelids open.

She sighed the patience of Job. “No, honey. Your uncle doesn't need your help, he can do everything all by himself at all hours of the day. Of course he needs your support, you lazy timewaster. So stop riling him up any more than you can help it. Show him you're worth something, because, Alex, I tell you this, at this moment he wouldn't even put you in charge of your own pants. The meeting's at the Community Center in Silver Creek at seven. Be there.”

I'll be there right enough. I'll give him a mouthful about burning my friend's hut down and I'll let him know the worm has turned. I wasn't quite sure what I'd say, I mean *How dare you* and *What were you thinking of* and even his favorite, *I'm sure you'll agree* all sounded a bit lame. Still, I had a few hours to think about what I'd reply to his *do be quiet, Alex, I'm busy*.

## Chapter Fourteen: Sam

The overladen mine truck crashed its load of boulders into the sixty-foot primary crusher, sending up a cloud of brown dust, most of which got trapped in Sam's booth. *It's like working in pea soup*, he thought. *Or in the Thud Bar on a nervous night.*

Too many rocks were hurtling down the chute, so he pulled a lever to send the overflow along the screeching conveyor belt to a holding area. This should have regulated the surge but his sensitive ears picked up a glitch in what should have been a continuous thunder of noise. Picking up a sledgehammer, he made his way down the metal walkway, noticing for the fifth time that day that an electrical wire from an open junction box was broken. He continued on past the chute into the bowels of the grinding machinery to break up the heavy lump that was jamming it.

Black and sticky with dust and dragging the sledgehammer behind him because he had no energy left to hoist it over his shoulder, he returned to the metal walkway using the handrail for support. With a hiss he snatched his hand off and examined his tingling fingers. Goddamn loose wire. He'd told the super three times about it, but no one had fixed it. So he went into his booth to fetch a screwdriver to do the job himself.

Just as he was finishing up, cramp bit into his calf muscle. Massaging it did little to help and when he stood up his head swam as nausea sent him scurrying for the john. Except it wasn't the john.

"That's my fly-fishing trophy you just puked in, buddy," the mine manager was, rightly, unhappy at his office being invaded like this.

"Sorry," Sam said, wiping his mouth on the tail of his shirt. "It k..kinda...got...just got to me."

When he returned with a washed trophy, the manager handed him two pills. "Here," he said. "Take two. We're giving them to everyone with heat exhaustion. Go on home now and report back to me tomorrow morning on how you feel."

\*\*\*\*\*

"I feel too lousy to take tablets," Sam muttered as he rested his head against the cool steering wheel of his pickup. Wind picked up gravel and hurled it at his windshield forcing him to lift his head. There was no point sitting there so, with an effort, he crank into gear.

At the mine entrance he hesitated. Should he turn left toward the old stone barn he now called home where he could take a nap? "A nap?" he snorted. "I should be so lucky." As soon as Norman Kuller knew he was home, he'd be on his ass to wrangle up the cull cows. Last night, single-handed, he'd hauled a shorthorn bull out of a chokeberry patch where it had sullied down and got trapped. And how could Sam refuse when Kuller was letting him sleep in the barn for free? No, a nap was out of the question in any case because Sol was expecting him in town. Hell, Sam thought as he indicated right.

Stopping at a traffic light and still feeling sick, he pulled the tablets the mine manager had given him from his pocket. Maybe they'd help. He broke one up, swallowed a quarter and threw the rest out the window.

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Sol's front door had been painted yellow. Sam was pretty sure it hadn't been that color last time he'd seen it, which was a while ago now because their meetings had been held in the Bugle offices. Until now.

Sol threw open the door before Sam had a chance to knock. "Sam, Sammy. Welcome, welcome." He ushered Sam in. "Let's make a night of it, boy. A bottle of homebrew will hit the spot, and we'll celebrate our last get-together before the meeting. You do know the meeting's on Saturday, don't you? You do have that clear? Did you write it down?"

Sam let that one go because his eyes were being savaged by a mix of lurid colors. Did other people paint purple on one wall, lime green on another and bright orange on yet another? And if they did, did they like it?

"Good huh?" Sol nodded at his new decoration while he heated up Happy Chicken noodle soup.

Sam creased up his nose as he looked around. "Very s...soothing." Like being inside a kaleidoscope. "So...win...did you win the Pusillanimous....prize yet?"

Sol poured soup into two bowls and, placing them on the table, laughed louder than the joke deserved. "I guess you mean the Pulitzer prize. Not yet. But I will. When the scoop on the mine hits the stands, there'll be no stopping me, you'll see."

Sam picked out something black with a green middle from his dish and speared it on the end of his fork to peer at it.

"It's eggplant, dummy," Sol told him.

I wouldn't let that marry my chicken, Sam thought. "Good macaroni and cheese." He put his fork down as his nausea returned in force and checked out the direction of the bathroom.

Sol neighed again. "It's chicken soup. Just right for the two of us."

The two of them. Shouldn't there be three? Someone was missing. "Where's...?"

"The union representative? He's not coming, but I had a meeting with him today. We've set it all up, so take it easy," Sol soothed. "He has all your information. You won't have to say a word at the meeting, I promise. He's only an itzy bitzy concerned that we want the mine closed down. But I assured him that our aim is to get the management to clean their act up, that's all."

And I want to witness Timothy Finch's shame when the public knows what he's been doing, Sam added silently.

By now he couldn't even look at food so he retired to the window to watch the semis thundering along the thruway. Skid Row was in the distance, the place he'd spent three years trying to blend in with the shadows. He tunneled his hands against his eyes, scanning for something familiar.

The ex-rooming house where Itinerant had claimed a room for himself was no longer there. He'd been proud of this room: "My demesne. I propose erecting a post outside the door with the name Buckingham Palace."

Sam leaned on the window sill and rested his burning forehead against the cool glass, letting his mind wander back to a distant sunny day.

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Itinerant sat on the step, or the stoop as he called it, while Sam trimmed the man's hair. "That spurious scribe has been sniffing around here again, oh yes. He must learn that the only person permitted entrance to Buckingham Palace is my Sam Lamb. Careful, I need that." Itinerant flinched as Sam, using the blunt scissors he used to cut his own hair, nicked his left ear.

Sam stepped back to admire his handiwork. He tucked the grubby rag tighter around Itinerant's grubbier neck and, with his tongue at the corner of his mouth, set to trimming the man's beard. Three bugs fell out like mice from harvested corn and, as they ran up Sam's arm, he flicked at

them. They flew one by one into the broth boiling into a scum on a small gas stove.

“He h...here with cash?” Sam asked hopefully.

The old hobo burst into a body-shaking, rumbling laugh that bubbled up from his core.

“Oh my fairest star, you think he's going to pay you for that article he wrote on you?”

“He *said*...”

“Willy-nilly *said* it, did he? My little bud, it's against his religion to tell the truth.” Itinerant lifted his shirt to reveal a belly covered in insect bites.

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*Against his religion to tell the truth.* “Hey Sammy.” Sol's breath was hot on his neck, roping him back into the present. “You're shaking like a whore in church. You okay?”

It sounded like Sol was talking from the end of a long tunnel. Then he disappeared altogether.

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Sam swam in darkness. He neither knew if he was downside in or outside up. But there was sure something wrong with his pants. He raised his knee until his foot made contact with a soft object that expelled a *whoomph* as it hit a solid object.

While he groped his way back into consciousness Sam realized he was lying on the floor with his jeans unbuttoned. What the...? He checked out his nether-regions to make sure all was where it should be and then turned to Sol who slumped like a trembling rag doll against the wall.

Sam first got to his feet and arranged his clothes. Then, with hands on hips he regarded Sol who was shaking his head like a person with palsy. “You fainted,” he choked out.

Sam nodded. True enough.

“I was only taking your pants off...”

Sam's lips thinned.

“To make you more comfortable. I was going to put you to bed.”

And that gave him the right to poke about? Did Sol know that at this moment he stood on a fine line between breathing and not breathing?

Sol drew his legs in, perhaps for protection. "Look," he tried to sound rational. "You're not a monk. You need comfort, relief."

But not from you. Without warning, Sam folded at the knees and crouched in front of Sol who cringed at the sudden movement and tried to scrabble back through the wall. He hiccupped as Sam touched his tense shoulder and the pathetic sound acted like a brush to clear the anger out of Sam's mind. Pity filled the space where fury had been. "Alrighty," he said.

Sol sucked on a shaky finger, his teeth snagging a loose piece of skin which he peeled downwards as beads of blood welled beside the nail. "You shouldn't think the worst of me, you know," he said in a monotone as if he had no control over what was issuing from his mouth. "I was only helping you. Your problem is you never know when someone's trying to help. And you should, I've proved over and over how much you should."

Sam studied him for a moment longer before he got to his feet. Wiping his hands that felt too heavy down the sides of his jeans, he glanced through the window at the dark outside, thinking of the warm barn where he might now grab a few hours of undisturbed sleep. "Mine meeting," he said in a tired voice. "Saturday. I'll you...see you there."

He spent the next day with Amy who at one point mentioned something about Alex and gigs. But Sam's still-whirling mind couldn't equate Amy and Alex. In any case, it was more fun to race her wheelchair up and down Silver Creek Main Street until even she told him to stop.

## Chapter Fifteen: Alex

Oh boy. How can people listen to such depressing crap? Heat exhaustion; a hundred degrees in the shafts, levels and smelter; cramps, vomiting, fainting.

Sheesh.

Levels roofs about to collapse; bare electric wires; noise levels too high.

The gargoyles at the meeting gasped after every scummy point:

Contaminated groundwater and soil due to leaky evaporation ponds...*gasp*;

Tailings contain high levels of arsenic, mercury, lead, copper, zinc and chromium...*gasp*;

Drinking water in Silver Creek shows dangerous levels of arsenic. *Oh no.*

It all washed over my head until the constant drone of the whole sorry story took on a rhythm: *toxic dust in the levels, toxic dust in the shaft. And my lungs are full of cheeeeemicals.*

The hall was packed so I leaned against a pillar out of sight, just in case my uncle expected me to defend his scrubby mine. If this is what it's going to be like for the rest of my life, I thought, I might as well get the cut-throat razor out now.

The union nerd who was enumerating the mine's ugly side in a gravelly monotone finally ran out of gas. This was the sign for an old fuddy-duddy sitting next to my uncle at the top table to get up and begin his spiel which boiled down to maintaining the mine open during the updating process, keeping everyone on full pay, and increasing employment.

This was more like it. Just when you think the situation's all washed up, something comes along to perk it up. And the gargoyles agreed:

New skills for employees...*oooooh*, health benefits...*ooooh*; higher wages...*wow*.

My uncle sat at the front, at a long table, smoking a big fat cigar and looking for all the world like a ranch owner, a major shareholder of a mining consortium, a CEO of an uber pharmaceuticals empire or an uncle who'd put his nephew on a rack and turn the handle. Take your pick.

He observed his subjects with a tolerant air until he spotted a tall spindly man, late thirties, who looked like if he had a fight with a rabbit he'd come off worse. He had wispy ginger hair, uneven sideburns and a

sparse moustache Momma would want to wipe off with spit. He flitted about between the rows juggling a camera, notebook and pencil, his pasty face showing every indication that he was having a whale of a time.

But, judging from my uncle's expression, he was a pesky fly in need of a swat. "And you would be?" Uncle Tim asked as if he was at a WASP social gathering.

The guy lowered his camera. "Sol Arkwright," he announced. "Journalist for the Silver Creek Bugle. Sir."

I gasped in surprise and held onto the pillar. This was the famous Sol? This insignificant *rabbit fighter*?

"Well, sit down," my uncle said, and Sol did, next to the only person in the room I recognized—Nurse Helen in such a short dress that Momma would say you could see what she ate for breakfast.

My uncle took the cigar from his lips and prepared to get to his feet but stopped when the union guy who'd spoken before interrupted him.

As I peeked out to get a better look at what was happening, I gave my second gasp of the evening, louder than the first. There, hidden by the pillar but sitting right next to the union nerd and in front of Sol and Helen was the person I least expected, but most wanted, to see.

Sam.

He was intent on following my uncle's every move like a suspicious wildcat. An antsy wildcat. Yeah, I know, I tried telepathy on him. You hate being indoors, don't you? Being in this mass of humanity must be an utter nightmare.

"Forgot one thing," the union guy said. "The piles of tailings are unsafe and, it's considered that with heavy rainfall they could collapse." He hovered over his seat, uncertain whether to sit or not.

Uncle Timothy reached inside his jacket as if he was fixing to pull out a pistol and shoot him. Instead he withdrew his Montre Noble fountain pen which caught the light like a prism, unscrewed the cap and made a note of something on his paper. Then he regally rose to his feet.

"Thank you." He gazed around the room as if he was mighty glad to see everyone. "Most interesting." Except his tone said just the opposite. He set his sights on the union guy. "Now I'm given to understand that the information you have so eloquently provided today has been summarized from information you've received. Is that correct?" He waited for the guy's confirmation. "And where did this information come from, may I ask?"

The union guy nodded at Sam in a silent *from him*.



“Ah.” My uncle nodded. “Excellent.” He eyed Sam like a falcon sizing up a chick. Then he addressed him. “Now, your colleague—sorry, *comrade*—gave us some very interesting statistics about some kind of chemicals found in the creek water. I wonder if you wouldn't mind repeating them for our benefit.”

The union guy opened his mouth but my uncle halted him. “I'd appreciate hearing it from the horse's mouth, so to speak. The gentleman beside you. After all, he was the one who prepared the whole package.” He waved in Sam's direction.

Sol placed his hands on Sam's shoulders, and I was *this* much away from yelling, “Take your goddamn paws off him”. He whispered something in Sam's pink ear, but Sam shook his head and stood up. His dusty jeans bagged around his neat little rear, but his eyes gleamed with determination. He reminded me of the speaker in his old Freedom of Speech poster. Pushing his hair back from his forehead, he cleared his throat and consulted the ceiling. A hundred others looked up there too. He screwed his eyes so tight they crinkled white at the edges and his lips moved silently before he finally found his voice. After an interminable moment, “arsenic, lead, mercury and cyanide” came out so quickly the fuddy-duddy asked him to repeat them which he did, twice as fast.

“I see.” My uncle studied Sam. “Does he speak English?” he asked the fuddy-duddy and the gargoyles laughed while Sam gave a scowl that could curdle milk and sat down.

“I'm sure we all benefited from that,” my uncle went on heartily. He picked up a glass of water, sluiced his teeth and then continued. “Ladies and gentlemen. I would like to assure the general public that every effort has been made to ensure the mine meets legal specifications. We've invested heavily in this. The mine is safe.”

Sam half stood. “With all due r...respect, it isn't.”

“With all due r...respect, *sir*,” my uncle said through his teeth. “I have the paperwork to say it is. And I have to inform the meeting that if Seething is forced to close the mine during the upgrading process instead of maintaining it open and keeping full employment for employees on full wages as was our initial plan, then everyone will have to be laid off. I say again, the mine is safe. And we have the paperwork to prove it.” He shook a paper he held at Sam. “Perhaps you'd like to read this safety report and give us the benefit of your obviously expert opinion?” He handed it across and Sol reached out for it. “No.” My uncle's voice was deceptively soft

which sent a claw of apprehension through my gut. “I’d like your *friend* to read it.”

Sam stared long at my uncle as he took the paper, then he lowered his eyes to it.

The public shuffled, coughed and spluttered while my uncle observed him with a gleam in his eye that made me very suspicious indeed. “So, are you satisfied with it?”

Sam continued to scan the paper.

“Nothing to say? Perhaps you’d like to go to that board and write down those amazing chemicals you just fed us so expertly and succinctly, although just a tad fast for the more ignorant amongst us who are not familiar with arsemcury.” He laughed warmly but it didn’t melt the icicle in the air as he gestured toward a blackboard in the corner.

Sam didn’t move.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” my uncle announced. “I’d like to share with you the fact you’ve been fed seemingly scientific evidence this evening by an individual who cannot read nor write. Poor boy, a poor simple boy. He is unable to tell me the paper he is holding is not the safety report, but just a children’s bedside story. Goldilocks and the three bears, to be precise.” He opened his palms at the audience: *enough said*. “I have the real mine inspection report here.” He flourished another paper. “Which anyone is welcome to peruse. Anyone who can read, that is.”

Sam’s face first turned chalky then so red I thought he was about to explode. This unfairness was driving me fingernails-on-blackboard crazy. Wasn’t anyone going to defend him? Well, I would.

With my heart in my mouth, I stepped out from behind the pillar. I gave a little cough which made Sam’s head shoot round as did, I believe, my uncle’s.

I cleared my throat. “Um. He’s...” Jeez, what was the name of that condition old Doc Trillium said Sam had? Come on—I’d mentioned it to Kuller. Shit. Dysleazia? Dyslip? Die in the wool? Hell. “He was very badly treated at school.”

Sam wasn’t looking at me like the savior I believed myself to be, but with daggers he’d like to stab me with.

“Why thank you for that information.” My uncle beamed at me. “Ladies and gentlemen. That young man over there, who I stationed at the back in case of any troublemakers.” He glared at Sam. “Is my nephew, Alex.”

I tried to find an ounce of pride in his voice but it was beyond me. Boy, was he gonna get me, just as soon as there was no one to witness it.

The crowd first applauded as they cast admiring glances at my uncle who'd mind-zapped them into believing that their jobs were safe as was the mine.

"Ladies and gentlemen." My uncle clapped his hands. "I think, with that, we must wind up our meeting and not waste any more time." He began stacking the papers on the desk while his eyes ordered me to get my ass up there. Double quick.

Well, he could wait because I badly needed to tell Sam something. "Sam," I bleated.

"Show's over," he said, not looking at me and reaching down to pick up a canvas bag. "S...strange he picked the Goldi... story of Goldilocks. I'd sorta just got around to r...realizing w...when he ann...announced it."

I knew what he was referring to. I pictured us sitting on the log outside his hut and him telling me he broke into people's houses so he could sleep in their soft beds. I'd said he was a regular Goldilocks.

Sol was still seated behind him, staring into space as if stunned, but he shook himself into action when Sam started off down the aisle.

"Sam? Sammy? Hey, little guy. Wait." *Sammy? Little guy?*

"Clap trap, rat crap." Sam continued on his way, clumping down the aisle without a backward glance.

"Sam," I called. "I didn't know. I really didn't."

"I don't g...give a good goddamn." He threw this over his shoulder and then continued his way out, past the frowning landscape of the crowd who were now looking at him jeering, *pinkos* and *we want our jobs*.

As I watched him go I knew I was seeing a guy who didn't give two-bits for me; someone who considered that the only good Finch was an ex-one. He'd laugh and spit in my face if he knew about the crazy dreams I'd had about him. What was the point of stalking him like this? I wondered. Give this up. Let him get on with his life and don't make it any harder than it is.

To say my mind was a black pit would be an understatement, and if I'd been near a railroad, I'd have tied myself to the tracks. It wouldn't hurt because I was already dead.

I made my way out to the street where my uncle was talking to the fuddy-duddy. "As of this moment, his employment is terminated. If I'd known he was an employee, I'd have sent him down the abandoned shaft and left him there." He spotted me. "Ah. Alex. Shall we go?"

The night was full of echoed shouts and calls, but I felt removed from all forms of life as I opened my mouth to let the words out. “You burned his hut down.”

“I’m sorry, Alex,” my uncle inclined his head toward me. “I didn’t catch that. Who burned what down?”

I looked at my uncle’s wolverine smile and thought, *I know who you are*. Then I turned and walked, or limped, in the opposite direction. I heard him call me, but I headed down a narrow alley that twisted around trash cans and metal fire escapes, getting dingier the further I went until I realized it was inhabited by pimps and prostitutes. And, of greater interest, a dive of a sleazy bar. I bought just what I needed, headed to a scrubby motel, and wound up staring at a ceiling that hoola-hooped for a night and a day.

## Chapter Sixteen: Alex

*Do you miss me like I miss you?  
Does he kiss you as I'd kiss you?  
Do you cry my name in your sleep, my love?  
Do you wake in the dark and weep?*

*He can't love you like I can  
He can't do the things you need  
He can't drive you wild and crazy,  
What about me, What about me?*

*Come back! The night's too long without you,  
I can't go on without you. What about me?*

*Whose face do you see when he loves you?  
Whose name do you whisper on fire?  
Whose song brings rainbows of colors?  
Whose touch turns you wild with desire?*

The song started off real slow and easy, but gathered momentum until I was yelling the damned ceiling down. The guitar strings melted before the strumming slowed down and sizzled out and I was weeping.

“Jesus.” Orville Johnson of Clampdown Records, personally recommended by ruby-ring scratcher Jimmy Labouche, wiped his brow. On the wall behind his desk sat a webby portrait of a fat old guy who was his father, sure enough. Their teeth were in the same pitiful state.

“We'll sign up now, then.” His hair was artificially greasy and reminded me of that old Score Hair Cream ad in which the actor's hair looked better before he slicked it down. He waved a paper covered in legal-spiegel.

A contract. Bingo. Easy as that.

It was about time things started looking up. In the week since I'd seen my uncle he'd cleaned out my bank account, so I'd had to sell my car at a knockdown price. Thirty bucks? For a Mustang?

“There's still gas in the tank, buddy,” I'd told him the guy from Rodeo Wrecks who'd offered me the deal.

He stared at a pool of fetid liquid in the yard. “I got enough thanks. In any case,” he added. “That offer is already higher than a giraffe's ass.”

I replaced the Mustang with a once-white 1963 Falcon which made it to fifty without too much falling off, not counting the hubcaps which already had.

To celebrate—the contract, not the Falcon—Orville passed me a glass of champagne saying it was French and holding his hand over the label that said *Cook's Imperial*. Still, it had alcohol in the fizz and that was fine by me. “Here's to *Perfect Score* reaching the top of the charts.” He poured himself a glass from another bottle which he ferreted away behind his desk. “And here's to a successful tour.” He quaffed his drink back, and I tried to do the same but it came back out through my nostrils.

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### ALEX FINCH AND FANNY IN FOSTER

*Alex Finch, a talented acoustic guitar player and singer/song writer, is in Foster to promote his first album Perfect Score. He's making his debut performance tomorrow evening after a four week successful tour of the east coast. For the next three weeks he'll open the show at the Rock Music Hall where Fanny, famed for their unique psychedelic rock, are headlining.*

*Finch's first single, also called Perfect Score, is receiving rave reviews. His vocals blend perfectly with the guitar's sharp crescendos and punchy rhythm. His talent and charisma let him off playing the rules when he delivers his songs of verve and passion with almost soul searching intensity.*

*He is joined onstage by folk singer Liza Suggs on piano and together they are exploring new sounds.*

A young girl in front of the stage screamed shrilly, rolled her eyes and disappeared from view until two burly security guys eventually came along to drag her away. The singer on stage undid his pants and they slipped far enough to show the crack in his ass that wiggled at the crowd.

From backstage I had a good view, but I was getting downright pissed watching Fanny go through their nightly romp to a pounding beat and lyrics *How'd you like to kiss my grandma's dog's ass?*

Although a storm was raging outside, cracking the icy air with ozone, a crowd had thronged the huge hall. I guess some of them must have come to see me and not just to be mooned at. At least one had—my Uncle Timothy. He was like a statue in the front row surrounded by a rocking

mass of tossing heads and flying hair. I couldn't take my eyes off him, and when the lighting guy dimmed the lights, I could still see his immobile silhouette, his unblinking eyes burning like headlamps. *What a waste of time.* I swear you could hear him thinking. I swear.

I just managed to get through the set but then skedaddled off hell-for-leather without an encore, earning yet another impatient sigh from Liza at the keyboard.

I'd met Liza Suggs as soon as I started the tour. She went on stage after me, but I only got to know her one night when we went to a sleazy night club with Fanny's front man whose name was something like Werner Deiter but whose stage name was Wang Dang.

Liza was sitting alone at the bar when I joined her. She tended to float around the stage when she wasn't at the piano, long fizzy hair, gypsy skirts and homemade sandals. She sang bold Janis Joplin songs, such as *Ball and Chain* with long, stretched out lyrics. I tended to do the decent thing when she performed and tried to ignore her.

I whined about the groupies who wouldn't leave a body alone, and she said girl singers didn't usually have that problem. All she got was young schoolboys wanting to read her poetry and I told her how lucky she was. We sank a few Gibsons while the music spun a web around us. I was her twin spirit she said considering what we had in common: her hometown was Verdigris, she knew my uncle's house and also knew Wills who, she said, had joined the police force and married a girl called Bella who was okay except she tended to wander around Verdigris in a Benzedrine haze, telling everyone she was the new mayor. I told her about WilAlBe and she nearly fell off her chair laughing, saying she'd heard of Wills' rhythm and I said, "yeah, he's a real yo-yo".

I'd put away a few by the time we shared a cab back to the grimy inn and was nicely dizzy, but perhaps too dizzy because she had my pants round my ankles and the rest of me spread against the wall like a biology poster before I could smile. Then, before I could object, she was doing something athletic so I shut my eyes because I didn't want to look too close and off I went like a little squib which made her snort and say it was cute. However, it was comforting to have someone's arms about me in the dark, and it was novel to feel skin since I usually just treated myself to quick, don't-even-take-your-clothes-off fucks.

We also fooled around with my songs on the piano and found it nicely set off the acoustic guitar. So we amalgamated our talents, and I didn't have to listen to a poor imitation of Janis Joplin any more.

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"My uncle's been there three times this month," I hissed at Liza one evening after the gig. "In the front row."

She paused in back-combing her hair. "Then why doesn't he come backstage to say hi? Why just sit and stare at you? What does that prove?"

"He doesn't come backstage because...because." I wracked my addled brains. "Because he doesn't have a pass."

"As if that stops anyone," she muttered as she watched Wang Dang strutting around bare-chested like a pink flamingo. He poured a bottle of champagne over himself and shrieked as two groupies licked him. "You are just wacko," she said in a bored voice. "There was no one looking like you said in the front row tonight. And the security guys checked it out and said all was A-Okay. They reckon you must be looking into some kind of reflection."

"Reflection, circumflexion," I spat. If anyone else called me loony, they were going to get it.

The next night, sure enough, he was there again, staring at me with burning eyes. "He's there," I hissed at Liza, shaking so badly I dried up right in the middle of a number.

She squinted into the audience. "He's not. But if he is, why don't you go talk to him."

"No. I don't want to hear what he has to say."

"Get real, hotshot. What's he likely to say?"

"Stuff I don't wanna hear."

"Jeez, what a jerk." She raised her eyes to the ceiling as I hot-footed it backstage. "What the hell's the matter with you? You scared of him?"

Seeing as I was scared of most everything, I guess the answer was yes.

June 3 1969

### ALEX FINCH FAILS TO SHINE

*After all the hype about Alex Finch's performance, his concert last night was disappointing. It lacked the energy and verve that has been reported. He seemed distracted and underwhelmed making basic chord errors that made him twice stop and return to the start. He didn't finish his set, giving up before the end and letting Liza Suggs take over, which she did with professional aplomb more than making up for his deficiencies*



It got worse. One day I went on stage and stared out at the rows and rows of silhouetted heads bobbing and remembered how my uncle could mind-zap crowds. What if he told them to jump me? Would there be anything left to bury? I'd be like that saint whose heart's in Rome, liver in Paris, dick in a jar over some fireplace in Nebraska. I stared at the floor and sat on my stool which I moved backward away from the audience. I'd asked the lighting guy for a dimmer light, but lighting guys are paid not to do anything the artist wants and I squinted out into a bright spotlight that turned everything black and morose.

Someone yelled, "Who's proud a ya, baby?" and that's what finally broke the very thin string holding me together. I put my guitar down and muttered, "That's all they're getting tonight."

"Get back out there, Alex," thundered the promoter as I headed backstage. "They'll break the place up." But good old Liza saved the day yet again by starting up into a Joplin song, *What good can drinkin' do, what good can drinkin' do? Lord, I drink all night but the next day I still feel blue.*

I went next door to a bar for a Southern Comfort in honor of Janis Joplin and old Suggs. As I sat at the bar, the bartender scoped my leather pants and vest and floppy cotton shirt and quirked an eyebrow. "That back in fashion?"

I grinned into a fourth Southern Comfort and chattered at a beer or two. It was the only way I could forget that if my Pa was here, he certainly wouldn't be proud of me.

An eternity later I meandered back into the theater to pick up old Suggs but someone said she'd already gone home so I smiled benignly at Wang Dang who was strutting about like a lump of rubber with a hole in it. "Alex, my man," he greeted me. "You don't look so hot. You wanna try some of this?" He poured something that tickled into my outstretched palm.

"What is it?"

"Take them first for a nice dream." He pointed to something round and white. "Then the blue ones. They'll bring you down again."

I squinted at the pills in my hand with one eye, trying to focus and count them at the same time.

By the time I reached four, Wang Dang had disappeared leaving me alone in the room. I was about to tip the tablets onto the table when someone heavy-footed entered the room. When I looked up, ready to sign anyone's autograph, a guy in blue with a voice like a bullhorn yelled, "Put

your hands in the air. You are under arrest for being in possession of illegal drugs.”

## Chapter Seventeen: Sam

Sam knew the cattle weren't just watching him as he made his way past corrugated iron sheds. They were *expecting* him to return them to the trailer he'd just herded them off and take them back to Norman Kuller's hay meadows.

He glanced at them standing in the pen, up to their hocks in sludge. Better you look at me, he silently told them, than at that shed in front of you. The animals shouldn't be allowed to see how they were about to be stunned, their throats slit and their steaming blood drained into a drum. At least the skinning took place further down the shed so they were spared that sight.

"Afternoon Sam," one of the workers called as he herded pigs down a ramp. "You wanna go for a drink after I'm done here? What you say?"

Sam could've used a beer but patted his pockets to show he had no spare cash. Norman Kuller didn't pay enough to cover beer and Amy's bills.

"Too bad," the guy said, his voice rising over the whine of a saw. "Say, buddy—you need work, you'd do worse than here." He pointed two fingers at the pigs and pretend-shot them.

As Sam gave a non-committal wave, he caught the stink of dead flesh and old blood on the breeze. Reckon I could slaughter an animal if I had to, he thought as he trudged toward the parking lot. But prying blood and guts off the walls? No thanks—I'd rather work down the mine.

Not that the mine would ever employ him again, even though it was nigh on six months since he'd been escorted off the place by seven security guards the day after the mine meeting. Seven! He'd thought that excessive—after all he hadn't caused any trouble, just a minor brouhaha which could've been avoided if they'd sent fewer guards, or better, none at all.

Goddamn mine and Goddamn Timothy Finch, he thought. Polluting Norman Kuller's soil and air until his cattle were only good for culling. He hoped he'd got Kuller a good price for the cattle, considering they weren't in the best health. For the ninth time, he looked at the check in his hand, hoping the slaughterhouse manager hadn't messed up filling it out. Problem was, the guy had looked like he'd been hit by the stun gun when Sam spouted "*Pharmaceuticals with pepsin from hog stomachs have led to a line of non-meat products that includes tranquilizers and cosmetics*" at

him in the office and his eyes were still out on stalks when he wrote the check.

Ah shit. Sam slapped his forehead—he'd forgotten to tell the guy that Norman Kuller was selling up his operation and that this load of cattle would be the last.

Puffing his frustration, he hurried back but found that someone else was now in the office. Hoping to throw the message over the customer's shoulder, he mounted the steps but didn't reach the top because Sam recognized the guy talking to the manager.

Mule Palmer leaned his bulk on the desk while the manager waved a piece of paper in his face.

“Mr. Palmer, we can't accept the heifer carcasses. They have not passed the inspection and do not conform to standards.”

Sam wondered why Raw Pines couldn't take their livestock—or in this case by the sound of it, deadstock—to the local slaughterhouse in High Falls.

“Now listen here,” Mule bellowed, showering the man's face in spit. “I been doin' the green apple two-step all afternoon. I ain't got time for none 'a this lollygaggin'.” He belched to prove his point. “Them animals ain't been gone for more'n twenty-four hours so they're fresh. And you said on the phone you'd take 'em for animal feed. See? Simple. Ain't like they're gonna teach class in college, now is it?”

“The veterinary says preliminary toxicology reports some kind unidentified toxins. We can't risk taking them, not now we have to tighten up in accordance with government restrictions, and it's against policy...”

“Holy Mary and her mole. They were Tom Haslen heifers, on the brink of puberty, tender meat. Virus diddly-dot. They're as healthy as me or you, 'cept they're dead. You're lucky we accepted your hokey pokey knock-down price.”

Unidentified toxins? Sam was aghast. Tom Haslen heifers on the verge of puberty? *His* calves, the ones he'd birthed, were dead? He steadied himself on the rail as anger welled up in him like the sea threatening to spill over. And it would've done if the manager hadn't continued.

“We'll take the horse but only because it's still alive. But we're not taking the dead heifers and that's final. You tell Mr. Finch things have changed. And we won't pay for the horse what you're asking either. The animal's only worth a pot of glue, state it's in.”

“Holy hell. Look, it's only been on the giggle-glug and there's still plenty 'o flesh. Mr. Finch is gonna be mighty mad when he hears you won't take the heifers and not gonna pay proper rate for the horse.”

Horse? Sam didn't wait around to hear more.

He thundered through the yard and made straight for the parking lot where he spotted the white Raw Pines horse trailer. Gentle tugs wouldn't release the tailgate but several hefty wrenches finally got it open.

Trying not to breathe the stink of rotting that wafted out, Sam clambered inside.

Eight cream-colored dead heifers were in a haphazard pile at one end of the trailer but Sam was focused on the horse lying on its side without straw or water for comfort. “Jasper,” he whispered, kneeling beside the animal. The horse lifted its head and looked at him through milky-filmed eyes.

“Alrighty,” Sam murmured, his stomach turning at the smell of the horse's rank odor. The animal's coat was rougher, duller and even more matted than the last time he'd seen him. And the animal was so thin that Sam could count each rib. Goddamn Mule Palmer, he raged. He could've taken better care of him. “Alrighty,” he said again as the horse groaned with every breath and strings of green drool, mixed with flecks of blood seeped from his slack mouth.

A few minutes later Sam was reversing Norman Kuller's cattle trailer right up against the Raw Pines horse van.

“Come on, Jasper,” he urged the prone horse. “Good boy.”

After two failed attempts, Jasper proved he still had some spirit left and finally rose on shaky legs. But on his way down the ramp, he skidded and it took all of Sam's strength to hold the teetering animal upright. It was slow work and Sam scanned the lot every few seconds in case Mule Palmer appeared. He breathed easier when the horse was finally settled in Kuller's trailer on a pile of straw.

“Slaughterhouse is no place for you,” Sam told the horse, then slammed the trailer shut and hopped into the cab.

At the parking lot entrance waiting for a gap in the traffic, Sam checked his rear mirror and saw Mule Palmer heave into view. Without another thought, Sam jerked the steering wheel and sailed into the chaos of zig-zagging cars and honking buses.

Once they were home in Norman Kuller's dark, fragrant stables, Sam knelt beside the prone horse and rubbed its side. The animal seemed soothed by the strokes and even nuzzled the warm oats that Sam had

placed beside him. If the only other occupant of the stables—Norman Kuller's bay—was surprised at the new-comer, it didn't show it. It watched and munched oats with a faraway stare, its shiny hide rippling at nipping deerfly as Sam squeezed a sponge of water against Jasper's muzzle.

“Sam?” Norman Kuller came in through the stable door.

“Rub...rubbing him down,” Sam mumbled.

“Never thought I'd live to see the day you stole a horse.” The old man's words were harsh but his voice was soft enough.

*“The wagon rests in winter, the sleigh in summer, the horse never...”*

“Ah come on, boy. You quit doin' that now. You can't cover up that you done wrong here.” He breathed over Sam's shoulder and inspected Jasper. “He must've been a good specimen once upon a time. Poor beast. You sure he ain't got somethin' catchin'?” He glanced at his bay.

“Ch...chemicals did it. Gosling Chemicals.” Sam spread a blanket over Jasper. “He's no...gagger...lolly.”

Kuller harrumphed in his throat and patted Sam's shoulder. “No, I guess he wasn't in his day. Well, if Gosling and Timothy Finch had somethin' to do with this poor animal's state then you can keep him here, but you gotta remember I'm outta here one month from today. You thought about that?”

“I thought.” Sam acknowledged. He'd find a solution when the day came. “He's not...not seen...you know...grass...green grass for a while.”

The old man wiped his hand over his eyes. “You're a puzzlin' little scoundrel when you want to be, ain't ya?”

Sam couldn't see any reason for that observation so he ignored it and looked at the horse instead.

At Sam's last words, Jasper had pushed forward his ears and, if Sam wasn't mistaken, a glint had lit up the horse's eyes. He made a quick decision. “Let's g...get him *up*.”

While Jasper's hooves scrabbled in the straw, the two men struggled to get him onto shaking legs. When he was just about standing, Sam led him to the stable door. It was worth the effort because Jasper lifted his grey muzzle into the warm night air. He stretched his neck, giving Sam a chance to place his fingers under the horse's jaw to check his pulse. “It's too...too high,” he told Kuller. “I'll...I'll stay with...him through the night.”

“You do what's right, boy. Try to get some sleep though because you're working on old Todd's place tomorrow. They're starting cutting hay. Oh, and he asked if you'd take a look at his yearlings. The ones with the coats turning yella.”

"I'm seeing Amy's neur...olo...brain doctor tomorrow morning."

"Is Amy okay?"

Sam rubbed the horse's neck while he considered. "She's real tired. I'm kinda...kinda worried."

He was more than worried, truth be told. Especially after what he'd discovered yesterday.

He braced himself against the wooden door, taking the full weight of the horse. And while he waited—he'd wait all night if that's how long it took for Jasper to get enough of the night air—he thought about what happened yesterday when he visited Amy.

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He'd opened her door and found her still in bed.

"Hey." He knelt beside her. "You okay?"

She'd nodded, her eyes at half-mast. "Bit tired."

He picked up her vial of pills from the dresser. "You taken your medicine today?" As he held out the container, the logo caught his eye. It looked familiar. Two seconds later he flung open the door and dashed back down the corridor where he ran into Helen who was in her usual head to toes white. And from squint to chin in ill-will.

Before she could even mention dates and movies, Sam got in first. "Helen, are these Amy's epilep...sy drugs?"

"What does it say on the front of the packet?" she challenged, expecting him to say he had no idea.

He narrowed his lips with impatience. "They're called Oxi...Oxiprine and they're made by Gos...Gos...ling." The very name filled him with fear. "W...what I w...want..." He took a breath. "They safe?"

"Jesus." She grabbed the container. "They're on the market, aren't they?"

"I need to see her...sp...specialist," he told her firmly. "Now."

"You'll have to make an appointment then, won't you?" Indicating the telephone, she marched off down the corridor leaving him looking at the phone with the air of a man who believes the only good phone is a broken one. Thank God the receptionist took pity on him.

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Two days later, having spent a sleepless night with a weakening Jasper in Norman Kuller's stables, Sam's footsteps squeaked along hospital corridors, "Jack-booted, b...b...*baleful* black," he muttered his hatred of institutions at a startled passing nurse. He eventually found the neurological department and Doctor Lourdes, a mild-faced woman in her thirties who had Amy's notes on the table in front of her.

"So, you're worried about your sister?"

"I think she's too thin and I'm not happy about these drugs...Oxip... she takes for her...you know... her... ep...fits."

The doctor nodded. "Yes, she's thin. I've recommend a high carbohydrate and protein diet to build her up. She's due for some tests anyway. Now what's your concern about Oxiprine?"

"It's my belief...*um*..." He stopped and tried again. "I reckon they're...there...illegally. A corrupt corporation."

The doctor shook her head. "Ah no. Gosling is one of the major drug corporations. It's made remarkable advances in so many fields. This drug is legal, that means it's been thoroughly researched and patented, the toxicology reports have been approved to all government standards. It's considered a success."

He replied carefully. "Isn't there another drug she can take? From another pharma...pharma....."

"...ceutical."

"company."

"Is she having any side-effects with this one? They're well highlighted—sleepiness, double vision, nausea, tremor, dizziness?"

"She's real sleepy."

"Well, maybe she'd had some excitement. Nothing else? No? Then, I suggest you bear with us because there really is no other drug as effective as this one."

He stood up, wiped his hand on his jeans and held it out for the doctor to shake. "Okay."

"I'll be seeing her in a couple of weeks and, in the meantime ..." She handed him a paper which he barely glanced at before shoving it in his pocket. "I hope you don't mind me giving you that leaflet. I've seen your writing on the forms. Can I just ask, out of interest, whether perhaps you're dyslexic?"

"No." Sam put a spurt on toward the door. "You have the wrong...Thank you for your time."

"Mr. Barrowdale," she started.



Because it was only polite, he stopped but didn't turn around.

"I can tell," the doctor went on in her irritating *poor-sick-boy* voice. "Nurse Helen has mentioned your difficulties. There's nothing to be ashamed about. Do you want to talk about it?"

Sam registered that Nurse Helen had a big mouth—it was time to distance himself from her. But because this lady was Amy's doctor he'd listen to the latest pearl of professional wisdom and then reach his own conclusion. He turned round with exaggerated patience.

"Dyslexia," she took a deep breath and rolled a pen between her forefinger and thumb, "is found mostly in children and not in adults. And the reason for that is because children grow out of it." She could have been giving a lecture to a full auditorium.

"Very pleased to h...hear it," Sam said. That meant he didn't have it because he wasn't a child, so he must have grown out of it—if he ever had it—in which case why was she bothering to talk about it? "Thank you." He turned to the door.

"But..."

Sam paused again and looked over his shoulder so she continued. "Some children don't grow out of it." She pointed her pen at him. "Some professionals say if you can't read by the time you're twelve, you'll never read at all." She jabbed her pen like a knife. "But, all is not lost in your case. There are places that take people. Some use traditional means and others are developing methods for adults. Some are special places you can stay."

*Nuthouses.*

Sam turned the sides of his mouth up in what he hoped was a smile. "Thank you." His hand crept behind him onto the door handle. "Most interesting. But, you see, I am the most... p ... proficient...best goddamn reader you ever s...saw."

He slipped out the door and thundered out of the hospital, "Ten fucking bucks ... interfering ...little goose." He hadn't come to squawk about nuthouses and dyslexia, he'd come to talk about Amy. People stood back in the corridors to give him plenty of room so that he managed to spit his way out without harming anyone. Once outside and having torn the leaflet into small pieces, he lit up a cigarette and inhaled long and deep. All his life he'd been called names and now there was a new one, dyslexic.

Dyslexia, he said the word to himself. It rolled off his tongue and usually he liked to memorize nice-sounding words. But, in this case, he'd make an exception.

Why did everyone get him so wrong? He could read—if everyone left him alone to do it, if they would just go away and come back in an hour, then he could read anything.

“W...war and Peace in an hour,” he said to an elderly doctor who was smoking beside him.

“True enough, son,” the doctor replied. “Marriage can be hell.”

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Hoping to check on Jasper, Sam drove straight back to the Kuller Ranch. As soon as he reached the gate he knew something was wrong by the way the old man rushed out of the house with Mrs. Kuller close behind. “Son...” Kuller placed his hand on Sam's arm as he closed the truck door.

Blood roared through Sam's ears as the three of them stood facing each other in the muddy barnyard. “He's dead?”

The old man nodded. “He went soon after you left. He never woke up, Sam.”

With tears blurring his vision, Sam leaned on the railings of the pen where Jasper had spent his last night. Gosling, he vowed, aren't going to kill Amy like they did Jasper. He doubled over, the pain of realization hitting his guts like a blow to the solar plexus. My God. He choked on the thought. I've been paying for Amy to take Gosling drugs.

Through the stables door he could see the pall of yellow smog that covered the sky, thicker where he thought the mine would be. Oxiprine *had* to be dangerous. But who could he ask? He looked again toward the mine. The snake's mouth, that's who.

## Chapter Eighteen: Sam

June 1969

As soon as Sam jumped down from the freight carrier that had given him a ride to Verdigris, and started padding along the concrete sidewalk, he knew he'd never seen such a place: ten-gallon hat cowboys, smocked orange bearded hippies, garishly striped bell-bottoms, stiff miniskirts, and upright uniformed military personnel. And a carousel of hot odors: popcorn balls, chili, hotdogs and pretzels. Every store window held a fascination—lava lamps, black light, love beads and yo-yos. And buildings on all sides stretched to the sky, blocking the sun. Red lights flashed way above him stark against the sky at the top of a huge skyscraper of winking glass. His neck ached as he stared up until the alphabet soup righted itself: *Gosling Pharmaceuticals*.

He'd arrived. But, boy, no way was he going through those revolving doors that sucked people in and spewed them out again. He tented his hands so he could see through the glass: pinging elevators, jangling phones, a multitude of heels click-clicking on the marble floor. "A bustle and a hustle." Knowing he'd never find his way to Timothy Finch's office, he turned back to the street. He'd just have to find the man on his home ground, wherever that was.

An elderly lady in a fox collar and with a striking blue rinse to her hair walked an equally uptight blue poodle along the sidewalk. It struck Sam she might be just the type Finch would know. He cleared his throat, took his hands out of his pockets and stood straighter.

"Ma'am?"

She turned disapproving blue eyes on him. "I have no coins," she said. "But I can take you for something to eat if you like."

Sam took a moment to process this, unsure that he'd heard right. "Um...No. I'm...um..." He took a breath and tried again. "I need," he started slowly. "The Timothy Finch residence." She looked at him suspiciously. "I'm a gardener. The new one." He favored her with a gardener-like smile.

She raised her eyebrows until they disappeared into her hairline. "Gardener? You're not exactly going to be overworked."

He thought fast. "No ma'am. Temp...temporary." He was on ticklish ice here so he turned to the dog because the way to elderly ladies' hearts is through their dogs. He bent down and patted the poodle which grinned as if it had received an early Christmas gift. "Hey old fella." He noticed the

animal had a small brown burr in his ear so he shook his head at the woman and raised his eyebrows in query.

“Yes,” she acknowledged, reading him correctly. “He has been shaking his head more than usual.”

Distracting the animal by stroking it with one hand, he crushed the burr with his other. “There.” He brushed the remains off the dog's coat.

“Now, who did you say you were looking for?” the old lady asked in a warmer voice.

The directions she gave him were not complicated and he thanked her. But by the time he'd deciphered *Midnight Cowboy* from a flashing neon outside a theater and then lingered in front of a poster featuring a saddle horse museum, he'd forgotten everything the lady had told him. His mind was now a knotted labyrinth of *lefts* and *rights* and needed urgent straightening out. He spotted just the place for it—a park bench in a smart but peaceful residential street.

Two minutes after closing his eyes against the glare of the sun that filtered through the leaves of an old live oak, he opened them again as someone sat down beside him.

“Sorry,” said a girl with pink lipstick and a fluff of fizzy hair. Layers of skirt wafted around her slim bare ankles. She unpacked a sandwich which became tangled in her rows of beads and spent a moment unraveling them. “Want half? I can't eat it all.” She divided the sandwich in two and held one part out to him. “It's tuna salad on wheat toast.”

He smiled his thanks as he took it.

“You from outta town?”

It was that obvious huh? He saw her take in his grubby black jeans and her admonishing look at his unironed dark blue workshirt. He was about to say it was clean but somehow, “the Finch house. I'm looking for...it” came out instead.

“You want the Finch house?” She cocked an eyebrow at the house opposite. “Well, you're sitting right in front of it.”

If he'd been unprepared for the size of Gosling Pharmaceuticals, he was way off track when he'd imagined what the Finches called home. It doesn't not have anything, he thought, gazing open-mouthed at the white building as big as a palace with its complex of bays and gables. And now he understood what the old lady meant about the gardener having little work, because this house sat tight on the sidewalk, a fat oak tree growing at one side its only nod at nature.

"I'm here for that house too," the girl told him. "I'm looking for Alex."

Sam finished his sandwich and wiped his hands on his knees.

"You heard what happened to him?" the girl asked.

He shook his head.

"He was arrested for drug possession."

Sam choked on a sandwich crumb and she thumped him on the back. *Drugs?* He knew Alex enjoyed alcohol, but drugs? "I didn't...didn't...Is he...you know...in jail?" The idea of bright, crazy Alex incarcerated in a cell with a brawling drunk curled Sam's hands into fists.

"He *was* arrested but I guess his uncle bailed him because he's in there now." She nodded at the house.

Sam couldn't believe it. "Alex doesn't take...you know...chem.... drugs."

"Except for a toké every now and again, I agree with you. Truth is, I smell a rat. He was apparently arrested but no policeman I spoke to knew anything about it. Weird huh?"

Sam mulled this over. "Was he up-set...I mean set up?"

"I guess. And you know what? I reckon it was his uncle who set him up because Alex kept saying he saw him in the audience at gigs. But Alex is such a ditz no one believed him." She studied the house. "He's in there now," she confirmed. "I know that because once I called and the maid said he was there, but she wouldn't let me in even when I told them I was his wife."

His wife? Sam would never in a million years have thought Alex would marry. He'd always thought Alex homosexual, would've bet his pants on it.

"I'm Liza, by the way. Liza Suggs—you probably heard of me."

He hadn't.

"Alex and I play together."

Sure you do, Sam thought, his mind whirling with all this news. "Sam Barrowdale."

She hesitated before shaking his hand. "You're Sam?" She waited for his nod and then chewed her lip. "Thought you'd be a girl somehow."

"No, no. Definitely. Not. You w...want help—you know, getting to?" Sam nodded at the house.

"I'd like to."

The front door of the house opened and two workmen appeared dressed in dusty coveralls and carrying tool-bags. They walked to the truck parked by Liza and Sam's bench.

"I'll call the plumber then, get him to come over and take a look at the bathroom by the den," one of the men said as he opened the door and the other flung his tool-bag in the bed of the truck. Sam waited for both men to get into the cab then reached in and removed the tool-bag.

"Wow," laughed Liza as the truck pulled away. "Speedy. What you going to do with that?"

Sam hoisted the tool bag over his shoulder. "Stay here—I'll...I'll get him. You have transport?"

"No, I walked here. But that's Alex's car there."

Sam glanced at the Falcon. "Wh...what happened to the...*you know*...Mustang?"

"He had to sell it when his uncle cleaned him out."

The patience of the rich is easily strained, Sam thought as he walked up to the front door.

"I'm the...*plumber*," Sam said to the woman in a maid's uniform who opened the door. He held out the tool-bag as evidence.

"That was quick."

"Bathroom. The den?"

"Sure, honey. I'll show you." She led him through a dark entrance hall and into a room.

This is a *den*? Sam looked at the deep pile carpet and the velvet deep cushioned sofa which he wouldn't mind having a nap on.

"There's no pressure in the water," she explained once they were inside the bathroom.

He turned on the faucets and made a face at her to show that the trickle of water was real bad news.

"Long job, huh?" she asked. "Then I'll leave you to it. Take your time."

He waited until a door shut in the distance before he ventured out, back through the hall and up a dark winding staircase. The first door he came to was locked. The second was a huge bedroom decorated from light bulb to chamber pot in large pink flowers.

Peering around the door of the third room, the first things he saw were two posters on the wall and he wondered how often Che Guevara posed next to Captain America. He opened the door wider and spotted a figure in

a wheelchair by the window, his dark head lolling on pajama-clad shoulders.

“Alex?” Sam bent to inspect the yellow-tinged face, the dark circles around closed eyes, the drool dangling from his mouth, the rat-tailed black hair that used to shine. The sight of this ruined, once-handsome man made him think of Jasper, and his heart sank right through his feet.

He knelt down between Alex's pajama'd knees and slippered feet, and gently wiped the drool away with his shirt cuff. When he whispered, “Alrighty” Alex half opened his eyes, dull green like old wine bottles, unable to focus properly. “It's not you,” he whispered. “Not you, not you, not you.” His eyes closed again.

Sam got up, pulled a straight-back chair so he could sit opposite the wheelchair and interlink his knees between Alex's. He placed his hands lightly on Alex's shoulders. “Open your eyes.”

Alex muttered, his mouth slack. Sam leaned in so close they touched foreheads. “Come on. Open your eyes.” Once again, Alex tried to focus on Sam. “It's not you,” Alex whispered again.

It's me right enough, and I'm sorry I'm not the one you want, Sam silently told him. He gazed with mounting anger into the swollen face. How could they do this? The sooner he got Alex out of the house and into the hands of the person he obviously wanted to be with, the better.

Footsteps on the stairs made Sam leap up which, in turn, made Alex moan at the abrupt movement. By the time the person entered the room, Sam was shut in the bathroom. He waited until he heard the door close again, let two more minutes pass and then returned to the bedroom. Alex was groggily holding a glass to his lips and would've drunk if Sam hadn't grabbed his arm.

“Don't drink that. Give it to me.”

Alex cracked open his eyes and, with the obedience of a child, handed over the glass. When Sam tasted it, he grimaced and threw it away down the john.

He handed Alex a glass of fresh water, then light-footed downstairs in search of the woman who'd let him in. She was in the kitchen. “Hi,” he said. “Um. Bowl? I...I need it for the m...mess, water.”

“Sure.” She rummaged in a closet.

“Thanks,” he said, taking the bowl she offered. “Sh...sugar? I'm...uh,” he took a deep breath, “diabetic and I n...need to...thanks.” He pushed the packets she gave him in his pocket. “Umm. Coffee? Blood...low pressure.”

“Hell, honeybunch. Young guy like you and already you're a walking wreck.”

On his return to the bedroom, Sam shook Alex awake. “It's not you,” he muttered as Sam held the coffee to his mouth. Alex took a sip and grimaced.

“Throw up?” Sam had the bowl ready.

Alex puffed out two belch-ridden breaths but wagged his head as if it was too heavy for his neck.

Sam mixed sugar in water and handed him the glass. “Now drink this. All of it.” While he waited for Alex to finish he looked out at dusty trees lining the street. Liza was still down on the sidewalk, hiding behind the oak and he gave her a thumbs up before returning to Alex. Sam rubbed his temples in slow circles noting how soft his hair was.

When Alex shuffled uncomfortably, Sam held out the bowl again but Alex fumbled with his pants so Sam reached down, parted his fly and gently guided his flaccid penis to pee. Glad to see you can still piss straight, he thought. But I guess it'd take more than chemicals to alter that.

Then he hauled Alex to his feet. After having Jasper's full weight lean on him, Sam could take Alex's without a problem. First Sam dragged then walked him but it was exhausting work and Alex was not returning to reality as quickly as Sam hoped. It was also getting late. He lowered Alex back in the chair and glanced out the window to check that the Liza was there. He was just going to have to take him out like this and hope that Liza could cope.

He gently lifted Alex's chin. “Can...can you *do* this?” he whispered and swore that Alex's head nodded. Good boy, you're a fighter, he silently told him, his hand lingering on the stubbled cheek.

He didn't plan what he did next—it just happened and it surprised the hell out of him. He bent down and gently rested his lips against Alex's, marveling at how soft they were. Why did I do that? he asked himself as he straightened. Maybe I miss you talking zany stuff; maybe I hate what Timothy Finch has done to you; maybe I'm sorry for getting mad at you at the mine meeting. I didn't mean what I said, you know. I thought about it after, replayed every word and reckoned you were only trying to defend me to your uncle and that you didn't like the situation any more than I did—you looked like a scared white-tailed deer facing a wolf. You were real brave that night. He combed back Alex's hair with his fingers. I'm sorry I'm not the one you want, but you'll be with her in a minute. Guess you'd deck me one if you knew it was me touching you. Jesus, Sam



scrubbed at his face. I'm no better than Sol—taking advantage of a guy who's out for the count.

He flung open the closet, pulling out jeans and jackets, raking in pockets until he came up with cash and, more important, car keys. Then he peeked through the door. No one was about so he pushed Alex's wheelchair to the top of the stairs where he stopped. A door banged downstairs, and Timothy's voice floated up. "You given Alex his medicine?" Sam heard him ask. "Good."

Sam thanked his lucky stars that the man didn't look up the stairs but instead strode across the entrance hall and disappeared into a room, shutting the door.

Pushing the chair onto its rear-wheels and tipping Alex backward he carefully bumped the chair down the stairs, each step making Alex's head bob on the thin stalk of his neck.

They made it across the entrance hall but the click of the front door must have alerted the maid. Her head popped out of the kitchen. "Alex?" she called. "Honeybunch?"

The chair hurtled down the steps outside while Sam battled to keep it upright. They raced along the sidewalk to the car where Sam unlocked the passenger door. He tossed the keys at Liza who was waiting on the other side. But she missed and had to pick them out of the dust, all the while staring, stunned, at Alex who was folded double in his chair.

Putting his hands under Alex's arms, Sam dragged him up so he rested limp against Sam's chest. After pushing the door open with his knee, Sam stuffed and pushed him until finally, having banged his head on the door jamb, Alex slumped sideways in the seat. Sam lifted his heavy legs to swing them in.

"Sam?" Liza wavered, immobile as a statue by the driver's door.

"L...lots of liquid—water and *sugar*," he spat out. "He maybe will...you know...oh shit..." He made a vomiting face. "Tomorrow. For a while."

It was only when Timothy Finch thundered through the front door and started down the steps that Sam realized Alex was holding his hand. He gently levered Alex's fingers off and slammed the car door, shouting, "Go!"

The car failed to fire up the first time she tried. But, on the second, it jarred into life, lurching forward, almost knocking Timothy Finch over. He jumped to one side and watched the car swerve round the corner before it was gone in a cloud of exhaust.

When he turned back to face Sam, he brandished a baseball bat.

## Chapter Nineteen: Alex

*What a set-up, holy cow! They'd never believe it, If my friends could see me now.*

Whoa! Air biscuits.

*Here comes my nineteenth nervous breakdown.*

"Shut up, Alex." Liza watched from the door as her father swabbed me down in the tub with a scratchy sponge. Fair enough, I thought. You're allowed to be harsh. After all, for three days you've had to witness bucket-loads of vomit, squits, tears and snot—all mine.

*"Here it comes, here it comes, here it comes..."* Even my old voicebox was affected—it warbled soprano these days. Hell. I watched the multi-colored juices sluice down the drain.

"I reckon I had just about enough," wavered her old father, pulling his shirt sleeves down over scrawny chicken arms. "Your aunt's been hankering after a visit, so I guess I'll take a vacation."

He wasn't usually all that big in the conversation department, still I guess the occasion deserved it. He skedaddled quicker than Road Runner with Wile E Coyote on his tail, leaving me in the tub.

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"Just run that by me again," I asked Liza as I sat in my pee-jays in a sagging armchair doing nothing much.

She was tinkering something light on her piano—her father's piano, pardon me. Everything in the place was his—well, it was his house.

"Run what by?" she asked, fiddling with a piece of lint on the skirt of her granny's dress. She'd also taken to wearing granny glasses and looked just like a—yep you've guessed it.

"How you got me out."

"I told you." She sounded like a put-upon saint.

"Yes but how did you get me down the stairs? Start at the beginning. Please?" I gave her my pleading look, ready to put Plan B into action if that didn't work. Plan B involved saying I was about to puke, and she'd sing like a bird to take my mind off it.

She hit a bum note or two while she thought about it. "I went in and got you."

The spooky old clock in the hall that hiccupped the hours ticked a strange rhythm into the silence. Finally, she gave a deep sigh. "Okay. I'll tell you *again*. I knocked on the door and that woman answered it."

"Dolores."

"Dolores, right. No, before you ask, no one else was home, your aunt had gone out and I don't know where your uncle was. I told Dolores I was there to see you. So she showed me your room—yes you were in one upstairs, three windows along. When she went back someplace downstairs I found your car keys, wheeled you down the stairs and off we went."

She'd been very brave and I'd be eternally grateful to her, no doubts about that. It was just that...just that...whoa!

"Alex? Oh shit." Shit was spot on. She rushed out the room which was normal routine when I became what she called a full-blown barely articulate source of smells. When she was sure she was no longer a likely target for projectile vomiting, she returned with a cool wet cloth which, instead of placing on my fevered brow, she used to mop up the chair.

"I think it's getting better," I told her an hour later after I'd wriggled into clean pee-jays. "That's only the second one today."

"And it's only midday."

"Yesterday I'd had three by now, for sure."

She said nothing apart from a muttered, "Jesus it stinks in here," before she went back to the piano and began fooling around with something I began to recognize as Van Morrison's *Brown-eyed Girl*. She soon bounced into the calypso rhythm and even added a sprinkling of blues in the background that had me, fingers twitching, looking around for my Gibson to join in. But it was in the bedroom, and I couldn't get out of my chair. Instead I jiggled my legs and warbled about making love with my brown-eyed boy.

Liza's fingers on the keys skidded to a halt and she flashed me a look that was scary enough to send the roaches running for cover. "Girl," she corrected. "Brown-eyed *girl*." Then, closing the lid, she got up and left the room.

Where did that come from? Brown-eyed boy. A freckled face. A hand on my cheek. Sugar water and coffee. Arm around my waist, safe, secure and warm. He touched my cheek. Oh Jeez, and he touched my cock! I rubbed it through my pajama pants. *Alrighty*. His voice—I heard it, I swear I heard it. Get real, I tried to pull myself together. You dreamed it, like you dreamed your whole goddamn life away. It was Liza who got you out.

I spent sleepless nights because my mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and questions. Why had Wang Dang set me up with those drugs? *Ummm*, said the Unseen Hand in his annoying ticklish voice, *Could it be that he was paid to do it? By someone whose initials are TF, perhaps?*

It was very possible. But why? To this the Unseen Hand had no answer.

The vomiting fits began to dwindle with maybe just one or two episodes a day. But at night I still had bouts of gut wrenching pain that had me screaming. It sure set Liza's nerves on edge, and I found her early one morning crouched by the bed with her hands over her ears. "Tell me what to do," I pleaded, hunkering down with her and prizing her hands away. "Cause I just don't know."

"Maybe we could just get back to work," she muttered.

The following morning she handed me my trusted Gibson which I cuddled like a long-lost...Sam.

"And these." She passed over loose pages of songs I'd scribbled weeks before which I thought I'd lost.

"Thank you." I kissed her. "I don't know what I'd have done without you."

She patted my cheek. "I reckon now we can get back to business. Get working on some of those numbers." She nodded at the songs I'd scribbled.

"Yes. Let's get a musical miracle out on the boards. Whatcha say to this one?" I strummed the opening bars to a new song that had come to mind—*Once a day, Twice a day. Don't care what the neighbors say.*

"Hey, that's good." She sat at the piano and jammed with me until we put energy and volume into a fresh, punchy song. *Harder* I grunted on the chorus making her shout with laughter. *Faster*. Oh boy, I loved it—performing I could do without but this part when a song came together just blew me apart.

Exhausted and wiping her brow like a satisfied lover she sat on the arm of my chair.

"The birth of a new song," I grinned up at her. "A miracle."

She put her arm around my shoulders and leaned down, her lips against my ear. "We already made a miracle, Alex."

"Huh?"

"I'm pregnant. We're going to have a baby."

I slowly put the guitar down, pasted a smile across my face. "That's great," I said and tried to show I meant it.

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"I'm fine," I reassured her as the sun began to dip that evening "A walk will do me good—fresh air."

"Since when did you like fresh air?"

Since I needed to get out and think a bunch of stuff alone. "I just do and I feel fine. Fact is, a short walk to the liquor store will work a treat, and I'll get some champagne for us to celebrate."

"You sure you can drink?"

"It's only champagne. I'll get the good stuff and just have a sip. Something to wet the...you know...head."

"It's not born yet," she giggled. "Alex, put your parka on, it's cold out there."

I forgot the parka and wandered up the hill, in the opposite direction to the liquor store, just following my thoughts. A baby. Hadn't exactly been part of the plan. Still...and all...

I was going to be a father, sure as nuts is nuts. Gee whiz.

*You're gonna havta marry her.* A skinny black and white cat sloped along the broken sidewalk. I swear it spoke.

"Huh?" I enquired.

It paused in trawling the gutter to sit on its haunches, lift its leg and inspect its ass. It then licked its rubbery lips like it had had a delightful supper before it slithered down a drain.

Can you believe it? Some wiseass dopey cat just spoke to me and sent my world into a downward spin. Married? Now that was a whole nuther thing. Hell. I'd fried my ass this time that's for sure.

A kind of groaning or moaning—which didn't come from me—made me wonder where I was. A complete dump by the looks of things, littered with human and animal detritus. It was getting dark and there were no street lamps, just flickering pinpoints of light that made me think of lousy whiskery little faces. Shacks that had maybe once been buildings were silhouetted against the navy evening sky. They were falling down, dried up old things that leaned every which way and creaked in the breeze. A door that hadn't been nailed up swung on one hinge with a rhythmic half-hearted bang.

Not a nice place, no siree. This was, I reckoned, Notus Heights, a place no self-respecting Verdigris citizen would venture into—not if they valued their body parts, that is. Calling the place a slum was being polite;

the whole area was coated in a black sticky dust and sorely in need of help, in the shape of a demolition ball.

I needed to get out of there fast so, skittering around on one leg, I tried to get some kind of direction. The hair stood up on the back of my neck as I spotted zombies off to the left so I headed right, stumbling over piles of trash on the way. Didn't the garbage trucks ever come out here for chrissakes? Jeez, the air smelt like it had been breathed a billion times over.

As I lurched on, I saw I was headed toward an abandoned gas station where an abundance of weeds grew in the dust and up the walls. On the cracked apron a group of, I guess, humans sat around a glowing red brazier that made the shadows shift.

Someone hurtled straight at me from the left. It happened so fast I had no time to react. He grabbed me and snaked an arm around my chest all the while sobbing as if sorry for what he was about to do. "Hack," he cried, wielding a knife and stabbing the black air. "Wrench it." He dug the blade into my neck.

His breath was fetid on my cheeks as I flapped at my pockets. "You want...cash...?" I'm not sure I said that aloud because my brain was too busy yelling; *I don't want to die. I want to be a father to my kid and see all those corny Christmas and birthday presents. Don't let my kid grow up without me.*

He muttered deep in his throat like he was having a conversation with himself. I think I made a keening noise as he drew his arm back to plunge the blade up to the hilt. But right at that moment someone shouted. "Max!"

Max froze, mid-thrust, the switch-blade hovering in mid-air an inch from my goddamn neck. Both he and I turned to look in the direction of the voice. My knees gave way. I couldn't believe I was looking at the image that had filled my days and nights for as long as I could remember.

Sam.

I hadn't seen him for almost a year now and he hadn't changed a jot. He was behind the group at the brazier, hunkered beside some kind of bundle that moved. On one knee he balanced a dish which he put it down before he got to his feet, wiping his hands on the sides of his jeans.

Someone by the brazier moaned, "Suck me off, pretty boys."

And Sam was beside me in a second, reaching out to help me up from the ground. I took his hand and once I was on my feet he wrapped his arm around my shoulder, pressing me close to his side.

“Don't. Move.” He whispered to me before he turned to the guy with the knife. “Max,” he said as if admonishing a child. “What...what are you doing?”

The loony's eyes skittered from side to side. “Nothing,” he muttered, hiding the knife behind his back as he shuffled backward into the shadows which gobbled him up.

His hands now on my shoulders, Sam pulled me round and scrutinized my face, his bright smile flickering. “And wh...what are *you* doing? Here.”



## Chapter Twenty: Sam

(Ten days previously)

Sam faced Timothy Finch in the middle of the street and wondered, as the man advanced tapping the baseball bat on his palm with gorilla-like menace, if he intended using it.

But at that moment a Ford station bounced toward them, forcing the two men to step in unison out of the way onto the sidewalk like friendly neighbors passing the time of day. Finch recognized the occupants and raised his hand in greeting. When it had disappeared round the corner, he whirled round on Sam.

"I should kill you," he snarled.

You'll find a way one day, Sam thought, hating how the man devalued life, both human and animal. He looked Finch right in the centre of his blood-shot eye, a trick Sam had discovered often unnerved the toughest thug.

But the older man was immune to visual threats. "You have done Alex a great deal of harm." He tapped the bat against his leg. "Interrupting his therapy means he could now suffer delusions or even turn violent. It's imperative he takes his medication, and I will not take the responsibility for the consequences for what you have done."

Sam's heart plunged into a pit in his stomach. Had he done wrong? Had he harmed Alex in some way? He kept his face immobile, not wanting Timothy Finch to catch on that he was rattling him. But who was getting rattled, it seemed, was Finch.

"You needn't look at me like that," he growled.

Sam donned his mask of war. Good, he thought. If my look pisses him off then it won't take long for him to start shooting his mouth off out of sheer nerves. He waited while Finch ran his slender fingers through hair that a moment ago was slicked-back but was now mussed. The fingers then moved to his collar, tugging at it while he twisted his head in discomfort. The bat tapped against his leg, and he cleared his throat twice before he started to jabber just like Sam knew he would. "I would not harm my family any more than I would knowingly hurt a patient."

Sam pictured Jasper the skeleton horse, the pile of dead calves in the trailer, lolling drugged Alex, and tired listless Amy.

"Alex," Finch continued, "was taking a formula which has been the subject of study over a number of years. I was waiting to see the results of

Alex's toxicology tests, but I had every reason to believe that we were on the verge of a major breakthrough in treatment for drug addiction.”

Drug addiction? Sam didn't know Alex that well, in fact hardly knew him at all, but Sam's gut feeling told him that the musician merely drank too much. At least that's what they said in the Thud Bar.

“Your ignorance could have a dire effect on Alex. What you have done was downright stupid.”

Now that pissed Sam off. He knew up from down and had heard enough about being ignorant and stupid to last forever. His first reaction was to throw it back right in Finch's teeth but, thinking better, this wasn't the time for getting physical. No, he was here on a mission that seemed to have been forgotten. It was time to get down to nitty-gritty and hope that his gut feeling hadn't gone haywire.

He willed his mind to slow down so that the words would come out clearly. “Ignor...ignorance. Why'd...your ignore...you ignore the true facts about Oxiprine?”

At first Timothy Finch feigned puzzlement as if he hadn't heard right. But the shift in Finch's eyes told Sam that the man's mind was working fast. I gotcha, he thought. You're not sure how much I know. You're as guilty as all hell.

The baseball bat's steady swing wavered as Sam shut all facial expression down. Finally Finch nodded as if he'd reached a conclusion. “Sol Arkwright.” He spoke quietly but the name made the tendons stand out on his neck. Leaning closer to Sam and with a quick flick of the bat, he spoke with the speed of a machine gun, his voice harsh and rusty. “You didn't come here for Alex. You just got embroiled in the situation. I know what you really came for and if it's blackmail you're after, you're wasting your time.” As if the sight of Sam disgusted him, he looked away and spoke to the tree trunk instead. “Tell the reporter from me: if he writes anything spurious about Gosling or Oxiprine, I'll have him for libel, and he'll be out of his very lucrative job so fast his ass won't touch the ground. On second thoughts, don't tell him anything—I'll tell him myself. And as for you.” His eyes swiveled toward Sam again. “I'd be more concerned that there's a night in 1965 that wasn't properly accounted for.”

Sam's body stiffened as icy cold drenched him from head to foot. What exactly did Finch know about that? His thoughts went back to Mule Palmer telling him that Finch was powerful and could find out anything. As if on cue, a police siren in the distance sounded.

Sam was an expert at covering his feelings, but this had come out of the blue and Finch, with a twisted smile, picked up his shock. “I guess you had to pay the Scribe a harsh price for that alibi. Or maybe it wasn't such an onerous task—it's difficult to tell with such a flawed personality as yours.”

This was all hitting far too close to home. Sam tried to bite down his rising panic, tried to get a grip on himself but the sirens mixed with Finch's bombardment of words were turning his mind raw. He mustn't lose it even though he yearned to flatten Finch's head against the sidewalk to stop him spewing out more truths Sam did not want to hear.

“I think it's time a certain Silver Creek Police case that, I believe, was closed eight years ago is reopened and thoroughly investigated.”

Sam's heart thundered and his hands balled into fists. “You're a liar, a c...crook and...you *murder*.”

Finch looked amused as if he knew he now held the winning hand. “I think that, once investigated properly, we'll find that you're the one guilty of those three traits. And more beside. Shall we add *horse thief* to the list? Oh yes, you were seen by several people at the slaughterhouse taking the horse from the Raw Pines trailer on Tuesday. And since we're talking about theft, I'm sure the police will find your finger-prints all over the house.” Finch waved the bat at the white mansion behind him. “And do you know,” he added in a conversational tone which made Sam realize he'd lost this battle. “Do you know what the punishment for horse stealing used to be and possibly still is in some places? The same as it is for murder.”

Sam's mind whirled like a twister as he tried to keep up with Finch and find a way to regain his lost ground.

Finch's gash of a grin fell, and he lowered his voice. “I'll come to an agreement with you. Drop the Oxiprine story and get Alex back here to me, and the police files in Silver Creek can rest gently in their drawer for a while longer. How does that sound to you?”

Part of Sam's brain wondered why Finch was so keen to have Alex back when he didn't seem to like him all that much. The other part of Sam's brain told him to get out of there fast before the cops arrived. He glanced urgently to his left as if something had caught his eye. Just as he expected—because everyone did—Finch followed suit and that gave Sam two or three precious seconds.

Slipping into the shadows the way Itinerant had taught him, he folded into the contours of his surroundings and remained utterly still, relishing

Finch's confusion when he realized Sam was no longer standing in front of him. His eyes swept the area, and probably knowing Sam couldn't be far away he shouted, "Forget Oxiprine. Alex back. And soon."

Two patrol cars chose that moment to draw up.

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His heart still pounding, Sam stalked the teeming sidewalks of downtown Verdigris. The crowds gave him a certain sense of safety, but when he saw a cop on the beat in the distance he slid into a dark alley beside a Super Dollar grocery store.

Perched on an upturned trash can, his head in his hands, he tried to pull his jigsawing thoughts into some kind of order. Once he'd got his breathing under control it was easier. He put Finch's threats to one side and concentrated on his major concern: Oxiprine was dangerous. He was certain of it now, and he needed to call Amy.

Several minutes later he rested his burning forehead on the plexiglass of a phone booth as he slotted in his dime, picked up the receiver and pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket. After the third wrong number he slapped the plexiglass in his frustration, and, when someone tapped on it, he felt like punching them.

"Are you done?" A peevish-looking man in a tuxedo asked when Sam turned round.

Sam's eyes were riveted to a highway of festering zits across the guy's forehead. "It'll quick...be...quicker if *you dial*."

"You can't dial?"

If you use that tone of voice with me again, buddy, Sam thought. You're going to be eating that tux. He showed him the paper. "This number."

Zit-man made the connection first go. "Helen?" Sam shouted into the receiver. "I...I need Amy. Please? I know...I know. Wake...wake her."

"Sam?" The sound of Amy's voice was as refreshing to him as a mouthful of spring water.

"Amy?"

"What's wrong, little bro?" Her voice rose in concern.

"I'm good" He deliberately slowed his words down. "Listen, honey. Do you trust me? Do you know I'll never ever harm not even an eyebrow on your...head? Listen now. Don't take any more Oxiprine."

She scarcely paused before answering. "Okay. No more Oxiprine."

It was scary how much faith she had in him.

“But Sam?” she went on. “What do I say when they give them to me?”

He had visions of the doctor and nurses pinning her to the bed as they force-fed her. “Pretend you take them but ditch them in the john instead.”

When he hung up he hoped to God that he'd made the right decision. What if he'd misread Finch and he'd just made a life-threatening decision for Amy? And what if he had harmed Alex as Finch alleged?

## Chapter Twenty-One: Alex

A million dollars. I'd have handed over the cash in a second if someone had told me that's how much it cost to be with Sam today. A billion.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in his soft low voice.

Old ballads flowed through me with soppy lyrics, a rhapsody wandered around the backwoods of my brain, corny lines from old movies popped up like demonic sprites but when I opened my mouth all that came out was, "Nothing." And that in a voice not unlike Max's harsh holler. What a ditz.

He squeezed my arm, making my heart crank up a million. "You're c...cold," he said and guided me toward the brazier and the zombies around it.

"Why are they swallowing and chewing like that?" It's hard to believe, but for someone who was teetering on the edge of throwing him in the dust to make serious love to him, this is exactly what I said. But then I guess the knack I have at saying dumb things would astound the most proficient asshole.

I closed my mouth, the best thing for it, and concentrated on watching the shadows puddle in the little hollow at the base of his neck and lights glint on tawny chest hair poking through his open-neck shirt.

Sam glanced at the zombies and flashed me a smile. "I guess," he replied. "They're just..." He thought about it. "Like that."

But you're not, I decided. How do you manage to stay so beautiful? My hand moved all by itself, I swear, and caressed his cheek, just lightly. Oh man. I tensed, sure that he was about to send me to the Pearly Gates via the ugly route but instead he leaned into my hand, making me gulp like a goldfish. Talk about pole-axed. Was this the same guy I'd last seen stomping out of the mine meeting—the spitfire ready to eviscerate me just to see what I was made of?

"Are you warm...warmer?" he asked and nodded at the fire. "I like...love..."

I waited. What do you love, Sam?

"...the fire," he went on. "Like this. It's dying but just enough to...to...to simmer soup." He pointed to the empty dish on the ground by the figure he'd been kneeling beside.

"You made him soup?" I asked.

“Her. Rabbit. Trapped a jack...jack...rabbit in the woods.” He nodded toward a large pot standing beside the brazier and then looked back at me. “You...you okay now?” He took a breath. “I was w...worried.”

Ah ha. Now just how did he know I'd been sick? Could it be that the dream I'd had of him rescuing me from my uncle's house had been no dream? Had Sam really held me, kissed me, touched my...Christ.

He took off his green wool coat, which smelt deliriously of a school-boy's locker room, and draped it round my shoulders. “And everything's...um...fine, is it? You don't get...I don't know...strange things? Weird stuff happening.”

I gave a merry laugh. “A cat talked to me earlier.”

“A *cat*?” He asked in alarm.

“I'm okay,” I assured him to show I was kidding but the carefree *oh-I'm-so-happy* prism I'd been viewing life through these last five minutes cracked into splinters as I recalled what the damned cat had said. And, right on cue, a baby somewhere nearby started yelling fit to burst as if its father had forgotten all about it.

Sam released me to kneel beside the woman who'd eaten his soup and who was holding the screaming kid. He felt the child's forehead and neck, muttering something to the mother who rasped something back.

His business done there, he returned. “I'll take you. Escort. Out...out of here.” He turned to the spooks by the brazier. “Don't *steal*,” he said in a voice that would've made braver men tremble.

“Kiss my ass,” someone replied.

He took no notice and strode toward a scrubby wasteland while I stumbled after him. “Wait up,” I called and he stopped, glancing at my crumby leg. He squeezed my arm in apology, and we set off more slowly side by side this time.

“Feels pretty cutthroat up here,” I said to a background of muffled drunken voices.

“While the pros...prosperous city sleeps, up here there are th...thieves, drunks.” He paused, mouthing something or other before he came out with, “*A prosperous fool is a grievous burden.*”

“Crazy,” I laughed, remembering another time he came up with some weird and wonderful phrase. “Where did you pull that one from?”

“Itinerant.”

He was an itinerant? “Is that why you're up here? Because you're out of a job? Are you looking for work?” As soon as the words were out, I knew it wasn't that simple. Why would he come to Verdigris, a place he'd

never heard of a year ago, to look for work? If he wanted something closer to home all he had to do was ask old Doc Trillium who'd have him sweeping his dank surgery in a twinkling and running his entire veterinary practice within a day.

By now we were entering another atmosphere—I could smell pine instead of urine. Sure enough, the buildings we now passed were clapboard places with lights in the windows, places where people lived and ate supper together.

“Well?” I prompted.

He pulled at his left ear. “It’s a long...long...” He didn’t get any further.

“Okay.” Fair enough, he wasn’t inclined to tell me, so I tried another tack. “Thank you for getting me out of my uncle’s house.”

He snuffled a brief, almost inaudible, laugh. “It was...wasn’t *me*. I didn’t come...come for that. Liza...it was Liza. Outside...you know...your uncle’s place. She’s the one.” He paused. “I just helped.”

Call it what he liked—it was still *him* who’d gone in. “You took the risk. But, tell me, what were you doing at my uncle’s house in the first place?”

“Amy.”

“Amy?”

“Yes. Listen, can you...can you do something for me?”

“Just say the word.”

He pointed to a payphone further along the street. “Can you...can you...” Raking around in his pocket, he pulled out a scrappy piece of paper and spoke, or rather mumbled, at the ground where the toe of his boot made a figure of eight. “Call Amy for me? It’s difficult. Numbers are...they just t...tangle themselves.”

“Sure they do—happens to everyone.” I took the paper, dialed the number and handed over the receiver. Then I stepped into the street to give him privacy while he felt the need to yell into the receiver. When he wound up the call, no doubt leaving a deaf girl on the other end, he emerged with a face bright with laughter.

“She’s okay,” he said in a relieved voice, then gave a yelp of laughter. “She’s such a *naughty*...girl. They’re playing...um...strip...strip...”

“Poker?”

He nodded. “Her rules. When Pete loses, he takes something...off. And she. Puts it on.”



“Don't tell me. She's dressed up like the Michelin Man while he's butt-naked.”

We giggled at the image while I mulled over the idea that I might give it a whirl. Except I betcha Sam would, like his sister, be a might too expert at poker.

In our shared camaraderie, I risked putting my arm around his shoulders, half expecting rejection, but like the earlier caress, he leaned into it.

I was just plucking up the courage to wrap both arms around him when he drew back. “I'll take you home,” he said to my disappointment. “Back to Liza.” He raised his eyebrows as a reminder I didn't need. I hadn't forgotten. I'd just had a slight temporary lapse of memory, that's all.

“Sam?” I cleared my throat as I tried to compose myself and the words I needed to say. “About Liza...” I paused, unsure how he would react when I told him about the baby. If the boot was on the other foot, it'd tear me apart. After all you *assume* that people make babies because they love each other. Right? And you get married. Right.

“About Liza,” Sam continued the sentence for me. “She was *there*.”

I grabbed the change of subject like a life-raft. “I know. You said.”

That seemed to be just the right thing to say for he started off down the street again, bouncing along like a ball. “How's your music?” he asked in an old buddy voice. “Are you...are you well enough to start again?”

“I don't know what it is but performing in front of audiences freaks me out too much. I can't seem to function out there.”

“But in the past...”

“Something happened. I can't explain what but when I get up on stage, I freeze. I just lose it. I can't say for sure, but I reckon that I'm just about finished with music. Like it is with me.” I'd never admitted this before and it sent shockwaves through me to say it. “I just get this bad feeling about it.”

“Well.” He took a breath. “I get a...feeling...*good* feeling. So that makes us...” He spread his fingers wide. “Quits.” He tilted his head to one side to consider before suggesting, “Can we go somewhere? Before...*um*...you know... you go home?”

“Sure,” I said—I'd follow him to Reykjavik if he suggested it, Liza or no Liza. “Where we going?”

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The night air was chockablock with cricket-song as we turned into a narrow street of dim-lit nightclubs with lanterns outside. The place teemed with people, most of them heading in the same direction—a moldering hole in the wall in a rundown block with neon outside the door flashing *The Old Red Hen* and a peeling poster with Folk! Ragtime! Jazz! Bluegrass! Tonite 24/7!

At the smoky bar I ordered a couple of Buds and pulled a pile of change from my pocket. As I sorted the coins out from the lint a bent shiny disc caught my eye and I held it between finger and thumb to show Sam the old charred badge.

“Remember that?” I asked, certain he’d be impressed I had a memento of him, wondering what he’d say if he knew I polished it up and gave it a dumb kiss on a regular basis. “Found it in the ashes of your hut on the Pike Ranch.”

But he merely glanced at it and looked away—it meant nothing to him.

Feeling a tad stupid and not a little disappointed, I shoved it back in my pocket, vowing to throw the damn thing out later. I handed him his beer and changed the subject. “I’ve heard of this joint but never had the guts to come in despite its fame for excellent music. It’s a dead ringer for the Hang Up Bar, isn’t it?”

“Worse if anything.”

The place boasted a carpet of a hitherto undiscovered hue, grey linoleum showing through the bare patches. Against its bare brick walls and exposed pipes people were sitting or just standing around under the low lighting with an air of expectancy. Just my kind of place.

I took a sip of beer. “Jesus on a stick.” I spat it back in the glass. “That tastes like it should’ve been buried a year ago. Smells like it too.”

Sam took the glass, smelt it, sipped it and made an appreciative face that said it tasted fine to him.

I gave the stuff another go but spat it out again. “Can you beat that? Ten minutes ago I’d’ve killed for a beer. Should I try something else?” He said why not, and I ordered a whiskey shot which, like the beer, got spat back into the glass. “Jesus Christ. Reckon that stuff my uncle fed me worked right enough—if I drink alcohol I puke. Hell.” I looked longingly at the glass, gave it up and asked for a damn soda instead.

Sam watched in amusement while I drank it. “*Let me have a dram of poison. Will disperse itself through all the veins.*”

“Where do you pull this stuff from? Do you make it up?”

“Itinerant.”

“Excuse me?” He'd said that before and it hadn't made much sense then either.

“Itinerant Dan. He shout...yelled stuff at by-passers. Years ago. In Silver Creek.”

“He yelled this kinda stuff? Was he crazy or what?”

Sam's face tightened like I'd insulted him. “He w...wasn't c...crazy.”

“And you memorized it? Sheesh that's pretty good. Was this guy a friend of yours?” I waited for his nod. “Where is he now?”

Sam muttered.

“Excuse me?”

His eyes held such sadness I assumed the guy might be dead so I didn't push the point. In any case the clamor in the bar hushed right at that moment—something was about to happen.

Six rail thin farmers stalked onto the small stage at the side—two banjos, one an old guy with a stumpy tooth and lizardskin boots, a drummer wearing chinkers and a cowboy hat, a fiddle, bass guitarist and acoustic all with a liking for pearl buttoned shirts. They went at the music without warning like they were hacking trees down, finger picking and playing slide at full speed, turn-taking, fast and furious.

“Foggy Mountain Breakdown,” I yelled at Sam who was also rocking to the rhythm of the five-string banjo. “Listen to it, takes your goddamn head off.”

By the third turn the place was partying, old cowboys were hanging out with young kids, hippies were swaying with college grads and my fingers wouldn't stay still.

During a brief lull, in which I'd draped my arm casually around Sam's shoulder and gone into acoustic heaven, it dawned on me that the old guy with the stumpy tooth was staring in our direction. Can't old buddies put their arms around each other's shoulders? Guess not. I released Sam and pretended I'd never ever had my arm around him.

“Hey.” The old guy pointed straight at me. “Who's that boy?”

“Alex Finch,” someone shouted.

Hell, I thought. That's torn it.

“You come on up here, Alex Finch, and let's hear you.”

Sam clapped me, hard, on the back. “Go on.” He pushed and prodded me like I was a reluctant heifer right up to the stage where I held out my hands in submission at the old guy. “I don't have a guitar.”

“No prob.” The drummer reached behind him and came up with a Dreadnought which he handed to me. The body was deeper than I was used to, but it felt good to position it and get my fingers on the frets. I strummed, turned a peg and asked, “Can you give me an A?”

Since I was looking at Sam, he thought I was asking him and his eyes widened in confusion until I winked at him. I never took my eyes off him, not even as we started up: *Standing on the corner with the lowdown blues*. We wailed them instruments, going at them thick and fast with a rollicking rhythm. And all the while, the brown-eyed boy rested his elbows on the stage and his shabby boot tapped the beat.

“Hey boy,” the old guy asked me in the two second lull between songs, his fingers already flashing again. “Where'd you learn to strum so fast?”

“Just force,” I panted, trying to keep up, my eyes still on a delirious Sam who, judging by his skittering eyes, was in the throes of riotous starbursts and multi-colored explosions. “Hell, I don't even know my scales.”

“Well, you get delicate with the rough and gentle and was that a banjo roll you got there? Hey, the frails and finger rolls. How'd you do that, boy?”

“Real rich oomph,” I gasped, out of breath in an atmosphere thick with perfume, smoke and raw alcohol.

An exotic-looking girl had grabbed Sam who began kicking up his heels while the Red Hen dipped and pecked and rolled on the ground, its legs in the air.

“You play might fine, boy,” the old guy called as we reached the frenetic end of *Good Time Charlie*—the harmonica playing the weirdest harmonica I ever heard.

I wiped my brow and grinned down at Sam who was back by the stage. I don't reckon I'd had as much fun in years.

“*Come Back!*” someone in the crowd yelled and, before I knew it, the whole bar, including Sam, was clapping *Come Back* and I needed no more encouragement.

I'd never jammed with so many acoustic instruments but, boy, the sound we came up with nearly blew me away. The harmonica, who was barely hanging on by the skin of his teeth, added some nifty little runs that I was already planning to incorporate into a new version with drums.

Sam looked ready to launch himself straight at the tin ceiling but when I reached: *Whose name do you whisper on fire?/ Whose song brings*

*rainbows of colors?/ Whose touch turns you wild with desire* he looked straight at me, mouthing “rainbows?” with a small frown of uncertainty creasing between his brows.

“It’s you,” I told him and had to gulp down the urge to laugh outright at his saucer eyes.

What applause! I hid my pride by looking down at the guitar but when I raised my head again, Sam had gone.

“No, no, no,” I yammered. Handing the guitar back to the drummer, I jumped down off the stage into the bughouse, losing my footing twice from so many claps on the back.

“Real bitchin’ music there, man,” said a voice I recognized.

“Wills!” I couldn’t deny I was mighty glad to see him but not right then. I managed a passable *best-friends-haven’t-seen-you-in-how-long* routine, but if there was a quiz on what we said, I’d hit the dumb buzzer. I had half an idea he said Bella was doing a Ph.D. in Peace Love and Animal Sculpture, but I could be wrong.

“And I been promoted—Police Sergeant grade one.” He stuck his arm out, presumably to show me his stripes, which was difficult since he was out of uniform and wearing a t-shirt.

“Great,” I said, my eyes scanning the swarming crowd. “Listen, it’s great seeing you. We’ll catch up soon.”

“Right on, man. Maybe have our own jamming session. I’ll tell Bella. Be like old times and I betcha we’d give them old guys,” he nodded at the bluegrass farmers now sprawled akimbo at the bar inhaling beer, “a run for their money.”

Not even close, old buddy. My face ached from trying to look sincere. I gave him a quick chuck on the arm, right where the stripes should be, in farewell.

“Hey, why not come down the station one of these days? See me in action.” He mimed a quick draw McGraw.

“Sure,” I said, avoiding his line of fire. “Catch you later.”

“On the flip side. Hey, the precinct’s on Orchard Avenue. I’m on the desk from noon. Drop by, it’ll be a riot.”

Sure, sure. I headed into the crowd looking for Sam but there was no sign, not even outside where cold air slammed me in the face. I leaned against a grimy brick wall. “Sam?” I wavered. Where the hell had he gone?

## Chapter Twenty-Two: Alex

“Here.”

How did he do that? Appearing and disappearing like a magician's wand gone wrong. If I could do that, I tell you I'd milk it until I was so rich Henry Kissinger would be my butler.

“Where d'you go?” I asked as he tugged on my arm and transported me into a litter-strewn alleyway that smelt of piss.

“Cops.”

“Cops? That was just Wills.” Then I considered a moment. “Well, I guess he is a cop. But how d'you know that? He wasn't in uniform.”

“I can *smell* 'em.”

Pressure was building in my head, filling it to popping-point but, even so, I still had enough space in there to wonder why he was so scared of cops all of a sudden. I mean, I know he had run-ins when he was a kid but that was over and done with. Suspicion filled my mind. “Has my uncle done something? What did he do? Threaten you with breaking and entering?” Just the kind of thing he'd have done.

A lone breeze lifted Sam's mop of hair away from his face, revealing a vulnerable neck. Thoughts of leaving my mark on it pushed to one side for the moment, I chose my words with care. “Listen, I can go down the precinct tomorrow and get that charge dropped. I'll tell them you were in the house as my guest. It's not a problem, Sam. I'll sort it out. I'll go talk to my uncle if you like.”

“No.” His expression turned as fiery as a trapped hellcat. Now what had I done to make him so mad? His mouth worked like he was trying to get his thoughts in order. “You don't talk to...to...no cops. You don't go...go...” His stammer grew worse in his agitation.

I reached out to reassure him but he batted my hand away.

“Don't talk to...to the cops...to *anyone* about me.”

“Okay.”

He raked his hands through his hair, feathering it up. “I don't know how this...this happened. I *really* can't figure out what's... I must be crazy. You t...touching me.” He paused to scrub at his face. “You shouldn't be sending out s...signals, singing and...*stuff*...rainbows. You have L...Liza. It's wrong.”

If that wasn't an accusation then I'm a monkey's uncle and there comes a time in a man's life when he has to defend himself. “Look. We have to get this goddamn situation into some kind of perspective. Now,

listen to me, and don't look at my mouth, look at *me*. That's it. I'm sending out signals, am I? Just tonight or have you seen them before?"

He frowned and found the far end of the drab old alley fascinating until I gave a short cough which prompted reluctant eye contact again. "Before," he admitted.

"Right, I was sending them thick and fast last year in High Falls. You got them, didn't you?"

He mumbled something that sounded more an affirmative than anything else.

"Right. And just how did you react to those signals then, in High Falls?"

He had the grace to look abashed so I replied for him. "With indifference if I read *your* signals correctly."

"Not true." He stoked the fires again. "I sent them too. On the log. In the bar."

He did? What kind of lousy signals were they? But hold your horses there a mo—who else did he invite to share his trout, or even show around his cabin? Whose delight was palpable in that brief moment I appeared in the birthing barn on Raw Pines, before my uncle bumbled in? And who, the person I'd lay down a million dollars to bet would rather have teeth pulled than read anything, had, according to Trillium, plowed through a newspaper article about me? They'd been weak, tentative signals sure enough but maybe, just maybe, I'd been the one who was blind. Getting a clue sometimes was quite an experience.

I licked my dry lips because I hadn't quite let him off the hook. "And what about at the mine meeting? You decided, without a second thought or even listening to me, that I was on my uncle's side, didn't you?"

He pulled at his left ear, a little gesture of embarrassment I was coming to recognize. "No. Not after. When I *thought* about it. You were...*you know*...hiding out behind that pillar—even I could see that. And that stuff you...you waffled..."

"I waffled?"

He smiled. "You didn't know...*um*...what you were talking about."

I barked a mirthless laugh. "Ah, so when you finally decided I wasn't enemy number one, you came rushing to tell me you'd made a mistake, didn't you?"

Sam's eyes followed a ball of sticky tape as it bowled along the alley, gathering detritus like a snowball. He stopped it with his foot and kicked it against the wall. "I didn't have...the time. I had...have Amy."

"I know that. But you gave me nothing to go on. No encouragement. And I tell you this, if you had, I sure as hell wouldn't be in this fix with Liza now." And what a fix.

Sam swallowed and stared at the sky, his fingers entwining. "I thought about it. But I didn't know...um...how to...what to do. I've never...done anything like this..." He wound down like a clock and frowned at his hands, looking like he wished he was someplace else.

Oh my. This man, who was so full of grit that he could face down the four Apocalypse Horsemen was confessing what he thought was a weakness. Weakness, my ass.

He squared his shoulders to show he wasn't going down without a fight. That's my boy. "I *did* send you s...signals. Look." He gathered his anger about him again like a cloak. "That day on Raw Pines when your uncle sp...spouted that *shit* at me."

"The day you birthed the calves. I remember."

"I'd have...have given him a *fat lip*. Fat lip."

That was his idea of a signal?

"And the other day..." he went on as if it all made sense, "At his house, after you'd gone with Liza...Your uncle..." He paused. "He was nearly a human cannonball. And...and he *would've* been except..." He mouthed words, searching for what he wanted to say. "He looked too much like you." This final phrase was squeezed out like toothpaste from an empty tube.

My eyes misted and I reached for him but he stepped back. "You don't know what you're doing. You write songs—rainbows of..."

"Colors. They're all about you. You ever heard *Perfect Score*?"

"Yes."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes."

"I wrote that soon after we ate trout together outside your hut. I wrote it about you because I longed for you to come gently over the stones to me."

He pulled at his lower lip, pondering my words. "Perfect f...f...flaw more like."

"Ah no." I reached out for him, but, again, he evaded me.

"Perfect Score," he said with contempt. "You wouldn't write songs if you *knew*. About me. And what...what I did."

"Look, you didn't do anything. The cops have it wrong. Breaking and entering, my ass."



"It's w...worse than that." He lifted his chin in challenge, and I took it.

"Then what was it? Something else that happened at my uncle's house?" Had he killed him? Uncle Timothy *had* been very quiet now I came to think of it.

"No. It was many...many years ago. I was..." He thought about it. "Sixteen."

Working on old Kuller's ranch was a crime? Nah, can't be that. "What did you do?" I hoped my tone told him that whatever he'd done it made no difference to me.

"Worse than you can imagine."

I opened my mouth to say the right thing, but something very ugly was surging in my guts again and by pushing my throbbing head and heaving stomach to the back of my mind, I hesitated a moment too long.

His mouth twisted in defeat. "Yeah," he sighed, misreading my hesitation. "Leave me...be." He must have thought my speechless reaction said everything. "Guess I'll g...get going."

Not good. Not well. Sick. Oh hell. The temperature rose in direct proportion to what was building in my guts. *Please*, I begged the Unseen Hand, *not right here. Not now.*

*To hell with that* it responded.

As Sam turned to go, the inner pressure which I'd been holding in for too long doubled, tripled, quadrupled, rose up my throat and out of my mouth in a rush of green sludge that splattered the ground just missing Sam's boot.

He yelped as he jumped out the way.

I gasped. "Sorry. It wasn't..." I held my hand out to him. "It wasn't what you said that caused that. I wasn't feeling well before." Feebler than a runover cat, I doubled over as another spasm wracked my body. "Help me..."

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"Alrighty," he whispered as I dry-retched. He held my forehead with one hand, supporting me with his hip, and pulled an old bandanna from his pocket to wipe my fevered brow. I smelt like I'd been boiled with a skunk. He took off his coat again and wrapped it round me before sitting on an upturned trashcan and inviting me, with an outstretched arm, to join him. I nestled willingly under his arm and leaned my head on his shoulder.

"You need water," he said.

“In a moment.” My eyelids fluttered, and I believe I conked out for a moment. When I came to he still held me but with his free hand he rustled in his pocket and produced a wrap of grubby paper.

We stared at it sitting in his palm.

“For you,” he said. “I picked them about a week ago. Dandelion, milk thistle, goldenseal. After I saw the s...state you were in at your uncle's place, I reckoned you needed...um...something to take the poison out of your system.” He scrunched the packet between finger and thumb. “They're dry now. Make a tea and drink it. Then tomorrow drink water, ginger, maple syrup and vinegar. W...works on cattle when they eat too much...*stuff*...c...clover.”

I snorted. “Then it'll work on me.” I took the packet, making sure I gave his palm a good tickle which made him snuffle in amusement. I roused myself to sit upright and turned to face him. “It's all hooey.”

“Hooey?”

“That you did something so bad when you were a kid. Not you. It was a mistake. Just tell me what happened.”

It took some time while he gazed into middle distance, then he blinked and shifted away. “I have...have no words.” He sounded so tired. “It's worse than you think and...and it's a big part of the reason I stayed away. From you.”

His lack of faith in me was frustrating and this time it was me who shifted. “I'm really at a loss here, Sam. Normally I have no problems but you're just not making sense right now.” I waited for him to finish his scowling session before continuing. “Listen to me, and you'll see my difficulty. You're telling me that you want to stay away from me, right? *Then* you're telling me you've been hanging around Verdigris these last two weeks risking capture by the cops. You could've gone anyplace, in fact you *should've* done. But no, you stayed here picking herbs for me. Now isn't that a mite strange for someone who's trying to keep his distance?”

“I didn't know how I w...was going to see you.”

As usual, Sam's reply was more than a touch off. But I was onto him, least I hoped so.

“What changed your mind?” I insisted. “Was it seeing me sick that turned you on? Seeing me *drooling* into my chest made you hang around out of pity?” I was ninety five percent sure that this wasn't the case.

Sam swallowed, drummed his fingers on the trash can, followed the flight of a pigeon as it flew into a nook in the wall before he said, "I just wanted to *know* you were okay. I was w...worried."

Hooray Pee-Wee. That, ladies and gentlemen, was Sam-speak for *I like you*. You couldn't have stopped my grin, even by pushing the edges of my mouth together.

He moved in closer until his thigh touched mine. I didn't feel I should kiss him because the way I tasted would probably make him hurl. So I pulled his hand to my lips and kissed the back of that instead before saying, "My uncle knows about this serious crime garbage, doesn't he?"

"You sh...should get on home."

Of course he did.

He cleared his throat and shuffled on the trash can. "It's not like you find it very often. Doesn't grow on...*those things*...a...a...alder bushes, that's for sure."

The only good thing about following Sam's labyrinth of thoughts was that you could generally work it out in the end if you were prepared to backtrack and hit a couple of dead-ends first. After a couple of seconds I made it out of the maze—yessiree, we have lift-off: Sam just admitted again what he felt for me.

"Drink your tea when you get home. It'll help..." He stuck out his tongue and crossed his eyes, imitating I presumed me puking, although he was way off—I never looked such a schmuck.

"I'll drink it," I assured him and then hit for the home run. "Can I see you tomorrow?"

He ducked his head and toed the ball of sticky tape. "Okay."

"The Red Hen, say, at midday?"

"Okay."

And right now, I thought, I'm taking you for a decent meal.

"I'm not hungry," he said, although I swear I hadn't spoken aloud. "I ate rabbit soup and bread earlier. In any case you should...*um*...go home. Liza."

Jesus, the guy knew how to ram his point home. But he was right. "And you really do have somewhere to sleep, don't you? Somewhere decent. Not that abandoned gas station."

"Course not," he scoffed in a *huh-the-very-idea-I'd-sleep-somewhere-like-that* kind of voice. He held out his hand to lever me up. When I was on my feet, he brushed me down, rather too smartly in the ass department, and grinned up at me as his hand hovered over the front of my pants.

What's a guy like me to do when Sam's talking about Liza one minute and then tantalizing the tip of my self-restraint the next? "Don't tempt me," I growled. "Because before you know it, you'll be in the dust right here getting down and dirty." I was only half-joking, and to prove it, I tugged him closer. He moved in willingly enough. "And I don't want that," I whispered right in his face, uncaring now whether I smelt like a cesspool. And it didn't seem to bother him none because he didn't budge. "I'm not a *thanks-for-the-fuck-here's-your-hat* kinda guy, you know. Leastways, not where you're concerned, that's for sure. No, sir, I want to make slow, delicious love with you on a deep soft mattress in a bed full of feather pillows. Then I want to do it again and again." I tightened my hold and whispered. "I missed you. So much."

He raised his face and, having checked no one was about, I kissed him. For a moment he hesitated as if unsure of what to do but soon matched me, thrust for thrust, implanting his taste of vanilla, woodsmoke and childhood on me forever. God alone knows what I implanted on him.

With a strange combination of lust and innocence, his body shuddered with animal urgency as we deepened the kiss until it became so full of desperate need our teeth clashed and I tasted metallic blood mixed with saliva. This was no time for gentle tenderness—we needed to take the edge off our frustration after waiting too long—and we ground against each other, frantic that our time together was for now almost over.

Seeing Sam's perfect face as his eyes glazed sent me straight over the edge and my legs were no longer supporting me when the air cleared. "Coupla pre-teens," I chuckled, half ashamed at what we'd done.

"That didn't count, did it?" His soft words tickled my ear as he held me upright.

"Nowhere near," I assured him even though he'd just turned me inside out. I ran light kisses over his eyes, nose and down to his mouth where my lips stayed on his, barely moving.

It was Sam who pulled away first after touching his forehead and then his nose to mine. "Let's go clean up."

As we walked toward the Red Hen men's room, I told him, "I'm not letting you go again, Sam. Not now that I've found you. I'll fix things with Liza."

*Oh no you won't.* That goddamn Unseen Hand—or maybe it was the scrawny cat—couldn't keep its mouth shut. *Tell him now.*

It wasn't like I needed the voice of reason to bite me in the ass before I'd recognize it. I knew it made sense and that I wasn't to string Sam along any more.

*Yessir, it's time to play Truth or Consequences.*

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While we were in the john I planned my speech: I'd start off slow, beg his understanding and help, then when I had his sympathy I'd get *bang* straight to the point. If he started getting ticked off, I'd very mildly remind him: *Where were you Sam when I needed you?* Yep, I'd tell him she was pregnant, but that I'd work something out. Just didn't know what, and just hoped he wouldn't run like billy-oh.

We were back out in the night air by now, and I hadn't noticed the time passing, pre-occupied as I was with my spiel which was as eloquent as the shortened version of Roosevelt's Inaugural Speech.

"Alex," Sam said out of the blue, his face serious, a small furrow creasing his brows—a sure sign, if I'd come to know him well enough, that something was bothering him. "When were you going...going to tell me?"

"What?"

"That Liza's p...preg...expecting a baby?"

Now that *is* scary. Could he smell that too, like he did the cops? Or was it like knowing if a heifer was pregnant just by looking at it, but in this case by looking at the bull, excuse the analogy?

"It was your *eyes*," he explained. "They kind of...I don't know...skittered every time you or I said her name."

What the hell did my eyeballs *do*? Outline the letters for *she is pregnant* in the air? I exhaled in a go and tried to salvage a little diplomacy. "I don't know how it happened." Boy, what a lame Roosevelt.

Shouts in the distance, a police siren wailed, brakes squealed and, *I don't want to be hurt /By a part-time love affair* peeled out from the Red Hen. Shitty lyrics. "I made a stupid mistake," I reached for his hands but he drew them away. "Look, I'm not putting this well because I'm still sick." A pathetic tone never hurt anyone. "You must understand that I'm in a mess here. Help me out, Sam. Say something."

He licked his lips and let more than a couple of beats go by. "Well, ain't that the squeeze?"

"Yeah," I admitted, trying not to laugh at his response. "Ain't it just?"

"It was a mistake?"

"More than you know."

"A baby's never a mis...mistake."

“Not the baby itself. No.” My heart went pitter-patter as he watched me like a cat assesses a mouse.

After an eternity he came out with something I was—as usual—least expecting. “You know? You're gonna make the best...proficient...best father ever.”

I didn't know whether to feel relieved that he understood, proud at what he'd said or just damned scared he was saying that being a good father was what I had to concentrate on. But now wasn't the time to sort out tangles because all this emotion was sending my head and guts into turmoil once again. And the effort at keeping the air biscuits in was just too much, so I let rip.

A cab which Sam must've waved over during the cherry bombs pulled up beside us. I looked at it gratefully, unsure how much longer I could stay upright and sadly because I was going to have to leave him for a few hours. As he decanted me into the cab, I felt like I was being shipped off to the battlefield for a few decades.

He squeezed my arm in farewell. “See you tomorrow.”

The cab pulled away and I watched him through the rear window getting smaller and smaller. It was only then I realized he hadn't told me exactly where he was going to sleep that night.

## Chapter Twenty-Three: Sam

Sam waited until he could no longer hear the cab before he strolled back along the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the diamond-dotted sky. He reckoned, and not for the first time in his life, that he'd been born on one of those stars and kidnapped by Earthlings. Because he sure didn't belong down here. Not in this place where, at the best of times, he stood at the outer edge of bewilderment.

He headed away from the opulent avenue of manicured mansions where he didn't feel much at home and back into a streetscape of disrepair where a group of scraggy kids were hurling stones at a lean cat.

"Hey," Sam yelled and they scattered to the four winds. See? He was an alien that scared the living daylights out of little kids just by looking at them.

Those kids should be in bed, he thought. It's midnight. He put a spurt on because he'd promised the woman with the sick child—he thought her name was Celeste—he'd pick her up at the gas station and take them to the shelter, a place that could be pretty scary if you'd never been there before.

Clammy fog billowed up from the distant river, cloaking the wasteland that would lead him back to Notus Heights. He hadn't lied to Alex when he told him he didn't sleep there. Hadn't slept there once. Counting off on his fingers, he thought of the places he'd bedded down in the last two weeks: the bunkhouse on the ranch where he'd found a day's work roping and branding; the shed in the rich guy's back yard he'd cleared; the abandoned woodman's hut in the forest where he was planning to go after taking Celeste and the baby to the shelter.

Babies. He shuddered at the thought of what you had to do to make a baby. Even the idea of having a wife...well better not think about that. And he'd thought that Alex was like him, but, hey, what did he know? Everyone's different, that's what Itinerant had said many years ago.

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"Celebrate your diversity, oh yes," the older man had told him late one evening as they sat together on the stoop of Buckingham Palace. "After all, no two people are the same, no two faces." He drew his calloused hand first down Sam's cheek and then through the knots in his hair. "No two haircuts—look at the state of this one, oh my. How do you do it?"

"Takes talent." Sam cut potatoes in half and threw them in a large tin pot that was brewing restaurant leftovers.

"But, remember," Itinerant smacked his lips as he stirred the bubbling hodgepodge, lifting out a spoonful of what could have been pig's innards, "in the words of the philosopher, *Collective fear stimulates herd instinct...*"

*"...and tends to produce ferocity toward those who are not regarded as members of the herd,"* Sam finished for him having heard it before.

"Exactly. And you, my vulnerable one, must keep your befuddled differences under wraps or you'll be trapped in that ferocious quagmire, oh yes you will."

Sam had no problem remembering that he was different—he'd learned that lesson long before Itinerant's time.

*Flawed. A retard. You're as sick as Amy, except your problem's mental which is considered far worse. You'll end in a home too, except it won't be like hers—yours will be a lunatic asylum. Or, as they're calling it now, a long term psychiatric facility. Can you say that, kid? Let's hear you say it without a stammer, go on now, repeat it after me, a long-term...*

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A rat rustling in weeds to his left brought Sam back to the present. He closed his eyes against the hollow memory of Amy's father's malevolent voice. Think about something else, something pleasant. Alex.

No one had ever got under the fence and rocked his world like Alex had. And Sam had never kissed anyone like that before—never kissed anyone before, period. Making love with him would be a world apart from working his own sex until he hunched over in half-relief.

Was he flawed to want a brief time of love? And he had no doubts it would be brief. Because of the baby and Liza. She'd no doubt get real riled up if she knew what Sam was thinking; he would in her place. But, just one night? Would that stir up a storm in the pot of worms? Course it would. You didn't make love to *married* people.

His stomach rumbled with hunger. It was a while since he'd eaten the rabbit soup, the only food he'd had all day. "Crapdash, baldershit," he said aloud, focusing on a dim light on a hill in the distance, his face speckled with droplets of mist. He shouldn't be thinking about Alex.



Ah, he mentally shook himself. Get your ass on home to Silver Creek. I've spent too long on Alex. It's Amy's turn now and in any case, her fees are due. Get. Back. To. Silver. Creek.

Back where no one would ever touch him or look at him in a way that made him blaze inside; back where he'd miss Alex like an amputated hand. *Bladder...dash!* He couldn't *stop* these feelings that were running riot after years of suppression. And he *had* to stop them. But I don't think I can, he mouthed into the mist. Self-doubt gnawed at him like a rotted tooth: he'd always made wrong decisions. Just look at the fatal one he'd made four years ago.

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He saw himself at sixteen years old, trying to survive and scared stiff he wasn't going to. The only thing that kept him sane and calm was his wood whittling which he did as he sat with Itinerant on his stoop.

That evening, with his rucksack full of pieces of wood he'd collected, Sam returned wondering if Itinerant would enjoy the melted ice-cream he'd been given by a restaurant. He heard the harsh coughs from afar and found the man barking hard enough to burst his already wracked body.

During a lull and with his chest bubbling like a simmering pot, Itinerant first greeted him, "My garrulous boy," but then mumbled a string of incoherent words as he shrugged Sam's hand away from his forehead.

"You're sick," Sam said, trying to hide his panic at how hot the man felt and how dark his face was as if his blood had gone rotten. "You need a medic."

Itinerant stared into space, his eyes aflame with fever, and muttered.

"What?" Sam asked.

"I said, yes I do, surely I do. Any idiot can see that, oh yes."

"I'll take you to the sh...shelter."

Itinerant shook his shaggy head. "The clinic's better." He glanced down at his arm which was ridged and scarred from being pierced hundreds of times at that very same place.

"Ah no. Not again. In...in any case. You...you're sick."

Itinerant spat a shiny brown gob close to Sam's feet. "The clinic takes anyone. Sick, rich, mostly poor."

"It's a...a...lab...laboratory. Not a clinic."

"It's a clinical research laboratory where they'll cure this." He fisted his chest with a squelch that made him cough.

“They gave it to you in...in the first place. You went in well, you came out like this.”

“One day they'll find a lion in an igloo, a polar bear in a pyramid. Nothing is predictable.”

“Go...go to the *shelter*. They have proper medics...”

Itinerant turned on him as if his patience was at an end. “But they don't pay in the shelter, do they, Mr. Smarty-arty pants?” He wheezed through his pinched tubes.

“Why do...do you need money?”

“Heavens to Murgatroyd, do you think I live on air? Do you? Do you?”

“I'll give you...give you the money.”

“You'll give me...” Itinerant spoke in a gentle, enticing whisper. “Come here.”

Quicker than Sam would ever have imagined given the man's weakened condition, Itinerant pulled Sam toward him with the strength of a madman until Sam was pressed up against Itinerant's chest. “You'll get cash, will you?” he snarled, no longer gentle, spattering spittle on Sam's upturned face. “That's a fine one, oh yes it is. A fine one.” He shook Sam like a terrier shakes a rat, his face convulsing in a fury Sam had never seen in him before. His lips curled over yellow teeth, froth forming around his mouth like a rabid dog and addressed the damp wall. “Let me see, how is my destitute boy going to get it? Is he going to steal it, like he stole the reporter's watch?”

“I g...gave it back.”

Itinerant's voice cracked with fury. “Only after I threatened to whomp your ass, oh yes and hard. But then the reporter did more than that to you, didn't he? And you liked it, oh my. Didn't you? Diddling cock-sucking reporter.”

Sam wasn't expecting it, never dreamed that Itinerant would raise his open palm against him. So he didn't evade the slap that, when it landed, rocked his head. During his life he'd experienced cruel beatings, abuse and verbal insults but none of them came even close to the hurt that welled in him at the slap and Itinerant's accusation. He gave an involuntary whimper as he realized the one person, besides his sister, that he loved and respected held nothing of those sentiments for him.

Itinerant was oblivious to Sam's distress, or maybe he just didn't care. His rant now mere mumbled words and his face dripping with sour sweat that reeked of insanity, Itinerant pushed at him with a force that told Sam

the man wanted no more to do with him ever again. It was as if a door slammed closed on him and the world, once more, shut him out. With a heavy heart Sam looked up at his old friend and debated walking away into the night but he couldn't leave someone as sick as this. So he pointed through the door hanging off its hinges to Itinerant's pallet that lay on the rotting floorboards inside Buckingham Palace. "Come...come and lay down...rest."

Although continuing to mutter, Itinerant did allow Sam to lead him over the threshold.

Encouraged by this compliance, Sam tried once more to convince him not to go to the research clinic. "I'll...come with you to...um...the sh...shel...ter."

But Itinerant had rage in his depths that he hadn't even tapped yet. Saliva dripped down his jaw like acid and his face darkened further. The only word sizzling out of the man's gaping mouth that Sam could make out was *clinic* and his manic face made Sam back away, terror clawing at his gut.

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The horror of that image never left Sam, even now, five years later. He just managed to switch the memory off before it reached its dreadful end and for that he was grateful, but it would probably recur in his nightmare tonight.

By now he was standing, trembling, in front of the old gas station where he'd met Alex earlier. A flickering light at the window meant that Celeste was in there sheltering from the cold with her baby, and he was relieved she'd waited for him.

Before he entered he paused to inspect a Ford Bronco which was parked outside and which hadn't been there before. Curious, he turned to the gas station and peeked round the creaking door, the draft making a candle flame splutter and right itself as a cloud of bugs danced around it.

Celeste watched him from a rickety chair, her dark eyes glowing in the light, looking too beautiful, Sam thought, to be on the streets. But with those bruises and the deep cut on her forehead, she was safer here than at home with a violent lover. And even safer in the shelter.

He wondered where the baby was as he stepped inside, the old floorboards shifting in a way that reminded him of the floor in Itinerant's rooming house.

“Cielito,” Celeste murmured.

“Good evening,” a voice said.

Sam whirled round to face two people who had been hidden by the door, a man and a woman in green uniforms leaning against a windowsill piled with dead yellow-jackets. The woman held the baby.

“They came to fetch me,” Celeste explained.

Fetch her? The shelter never picked people up, not even mothers with sick babies. And since when did volunteers from the shelter wear green uniforms and drive Broncos or look like this hefty pair? The man was hairless and powerful, his bulging muscles visible under the thick green uniform. The woman was just as wide, her flesh barely kept in check by the material.

“This your husband?” The woman rocked the slumbering baby in her fat arms. She eyed Sam as she would a bullying husband and her lip curled in contempt.

He looked back at Celeste. “They’re...they....*not* from the ...you know...shelter,” he told her.

The bull-head addressed Celeste in a bored voice. “You ready to go? Let’s hit the road. And you, buddy,” he pointed at Sam, “you stay well out of it. If you want trouble, I can show it to you.”

Sam ignored him. “Celeste,” he said not taking his eyes off the man. “Do you...*um*...*know*...these people...? Who they are?”

The uniformed woman sniggered. “He say something I missed?”

The man made no effort to keep his voice down. “Which would you rather have a conversation with? Him or a duck? Quack quack.”

The woman’s breasts shook with her laughter. “Quack quack! Least it’d be in the right order. Or a pig—grunt grunt.”

Sam heard Celeste move behind him, probably getting up from her chair. “They’re from the clinic, Sam. They say they have doctors there who can help us.”

The clinic? Verdigris had a research laboratory clinic like they had in Silver Creek?

“You’re not wanted, buddy,” the bald man told Sam before he could form words. “So don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

Sam planned his strategy. They were still leaning against the windowsill and would lose balance when he made his attack. He’d snatch the baby but be ready with a well-aimed kick if need be. The woman would prove no problem as long as he could keep his eye on the bull-head. The key was to be quick. He calculated that he needed a sudden spurt over

the rug that separated him from the couple and then he'd have them. But he'd barely taken two steps when Celeste's voice cracked out from behind him. "Be careful, Sam. Don't..."

Sam hesitated, scanning for possible dangers but he could see nothing apart from his targets. But when he stepped onto the rug he discovered exactly what Celeste was warning him about. There was nothing underneath it.

Two surprised faces flashed in front of him, a scream from Celeste and then they were gone.

He fell into a void, twisting in midair in an attempt to grab onto something, anything. Two seconds later he crashed side-on against a tall metal object and heard rather than felt bone splinter first in his arm and then his ribs. Pain jagged from his toes to his head. The jolt of his collision dislodged a large piece of heavy metal which smashed full on his face. He tried to find a handle or a foothold, anything to stop his descent but he slid down the slippery surface until he was in free-fall once again, gathering speed. When he smashed onto rough rocks his body bounced on impact so that his head cracked twice on hard, sharp objects.

As the dust settled around him, he tried to move but couldn't. He was numb and not sure where he was. It was very dark. A woman shrilled in the far, far distance. "I covered the hole with a blanket, there was a draught."

"Jesus," a man said, his voice high with panic.

Sam's mouth was full of dirt. Warm liquid trickled from his ears and nose.

Heavy footsteps trod way above him and faded far far away. *Alex?* A tear rolled over his ear into the dust.

## Chapter Twenty-Four: Alex

"I was worried." Liza poured herself a glass of milk. Her calm gave me the jitters. I could handle fury but not this.

"I'm sorry I took so long," I told her. "I went for a walk, and then I was sick."

"You smell like gunk," she agreed, sounding as if she was discussing a new eau-de-cologne. "I'm going to bed."

But she didn't go. She didn't realize I could see her reflection in the kitchen window while I made my tea of Sam's herbs. She stood there with as much expression as if she was watching a stranger stack shelves in the supermarket, and she rubbed her hand over her chin like men do when feeling their stubble.

I made a huge production of making my tea, warming a big pot, swirling the water around, sticking a slice of lemon on the rim of the cup.

"You sure that stuff's safe?"

I jumped because it was expected of me. "Oh I didn't know you were still there. Yes." I nodded at the cup. "They said in the store it would hit the spot. We got any ginger and maple syrup?"

"Dunno. I'm going to bed." This time she went.

As I sipped my tea, the hot liquid soothing my belly, the window creaked and then flew open on a breeze that smelt of harvested wheat-fields. The curtains were sucked into the kitchen as the movement of air touched my cheek in a caress. I laughed and leaned out of the window into the sound of owls hooting in the distance. "You little imp," I cried at the thick darkness. "You out there?" A frog whirled in reply.

After a moment or two I shut the window. "Okay. Have it your way." I couldn't wipe that dumbass grin off my face, not even when I settled beside a clocked-out Liza and whispered up at the ceiling, "See you tomorrow, my love."

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"Four hours to go," I checked my watch for the tenth time the next morning. "Now, what was I doing four hours ago?" I mulled it over. "Sleeping. Okay. Not long to go now then."

"What are you muttering about?" Liza yawned at me.

“Just some music I got in my head.” And that was true. Stuff had been rattling around my noodle like trapped wind since I woke up. I glanced at my watch again.

“That’s good.” She pinched my cheek and planted a kiss on the top of my head. “You get that written down and polished up so we hit the big time again. Which reminds me. I’m going to call Orville later on, see if he has any gigs lined up for us. Time to get back on the road, Sunshine.” She pinched my cheek again, and I had to stretch it from the inside with my tongue to straighten it out.

The tune that wouldn’t leave me alone wrote itself and I’m not kidding. I settled in with my guitar and a notebook. When I’d set the chord it meandered into a melody as if it knew what it was up to. After noodling and returning to the beginning, elaborating on each turn, it began to segue into a pace, adding layer upon layer until it hammered itself out.

By eleven it was there, down on paper and hot off the guitar. I gave it one more go.

“Wow,” Liza cried, coming in from some chore or other. She listened with her head on one side as my fingers danced lightly, seducing the strings, tantalizing, playing with them. The volume increased with a series of jerks and false starts before it settled into a long hard rhythm, back and forth that ended in a pounding crescendo before dropping into a sweet heartfelt ending, sleepy and dreamy.

“What’s it called?”

“*Fierce Lamb*,” I replied on the spur of the moment since I hadn’t given it a thought, least I reckoned I hadn’t.

She put her arms around my neck. “Instrumental, huh?” She waited for me to nod. “It sure doesn’t need lyrics something like that. Blatant sex.” She put her lips close to my ear. “Is that how you see me?”

*Tell her the truth*, ordered the Unseen Hand.

“Hey, don’t choke me.” I unwound her arms from my neck.

“If you do write lyrics—just you make sure you put in a pronoun or two this time. It occurred to me a while ago that none of your songs ever have a *he* or a *she* in them. Weird, huh? You ever wondered why?”

“No.”

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Midday, noon. Twelve o’clock. The Red Hen was pretty quiet at that time of day. A couple of old boys inside stared over their beers at the litter

drifting by on the sidewalk. I didn't want a beer. Nope. Nope. I paced the alleyway outside.

Twelve thirty. Now what could be keeping that young man? Hope he likes chili. 'Cause that's where I'm taking him first. Down to the Chili Café. It'll make his eyes water. *Oh Mary don't you weep, don't you mourn.*

Twelve fifty nine. "I'll have a beer," I told the bartender, my leg jiggling on the stool so hard I had to place my hand on my thigh to stop it. I sipped. And spat it out. Not much changed there then.

"You got Four Roses?" I'll try whisky again and hope for the best.

The bar guy smirked. "A romantic, huh?"

"Just give me the goddamn drink and quit the wisecracks." Presenting roses to Sam would be a real trip—they'd be half way down my throat before you could say thorny. Where the hell was he? I spat out the whisky, put a handful of change on the bar and got up.

One fifteen. Give me a goddamn *break* for Chrissakes. I turned a morose face to the grey sky. Can't you even get the sun to come out? Nope.

Two. "If a guy called Sam Barrowdale comes in, can you give him this?" I handed the bartender a paper with my address on.

What's changed? I pleaded with the sky, my hands open palm upwards. I pictured his face yesterday, his eyes dilated, his face cloudy with desire. "What's *changed*?" I hollered at a pigeon that fluttered away in panic. I felt dead inside, and I wanted to fall to my knees to sob my misery into the dust and garbage.

*Nothing*, the Unseen Hand told me, having waited a tad too long to reply. *Something's held him up, that's all. I mean, it's not like he's able to call you even if he had your number, now is it? He'll be round later when he gets your address, you'll see.*

Right. Then we'll laugh about it, sure enough, me waiting here in the alley with that old ball of sticky-tape still stuck on the wall. Just hoped it wasn't the cops or any trouble that had held him up. Speaking of which...

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"Alex! My man."

"Wills."

The police station on Orchard Avenue was one of those red brick places built in the year dot. It had dim green lights over the door which made you think of murderers and Dragnet. *Ladies and Gentlemen, the*



*story you are about to hear is true, only the names...* although I wasn't sure old Joe Friday would've approved the TV set on a plastic rack which couldn't be heard over the cacophony of cops and robbers. I was scoping a Most Wanted poster to check I wasn't on it when Wills caught me.

"So this is police business, huh?" I eyed a detective who hovered over an old lady. I swear he was saying, "Just the facts, ma'am."

Wills looked a real boss kickass cop in his tightly buttoned blue uniform, leaning over a ledger on the desk with his pen poised. "This where they brought me?" I asked.

"When?"

"When they busted me."

"What they get you for? Lewd behavior in a public place? Rubbing up against young gentlemen in the john? Driving blitzed?"

"Ha-de-ha. No. The other day. The cops hauled my ass almost off the stage on a trumped-up drugs charge."

"You takin' drugs? Never saw you with much more than a Mary Jane, man."

"An MJ once in a while isn't a drug, it's a fact of life. You didn't hear about my arrest?"

"I heard you were sick, that's all and canceled your last gig. But, well..." He scratched his head with his pen. "Were you charged?"

"Don't reckon so, least I don't remember much about it. One minute I was getting bundled into a truck and the next..." The next? Liza was holding a bucket under my mouth. I'd lost a week of my life, and I had no idea where it had gone.

He leafed through his ledger. "Which day was this?"

"Twenty ninth."

He shook his head. "June? Nothing down for that day. And I was on duty that night. Where'd they pick you up?"

"At the Roxy."

"Right. That's under our jurisdiction. And you say they took you off in a truck? We don't have trucks."

Curiouser and curiouser. Just as I thought. The whole thing had been masterminded by someone. Now who could that have been?

I leaned closer over the counter. "Since you have that book open, could you just check on the..." I added the dates up on my fingers and took away the number I first thought of. "Twelfth, yeah, July. Park Street," I mentioned my uncle's street, "comes under your jurisdiction too, I guess.

See if there's anything about a breaking and entering at my uncle's place that evening.”

“I'm not supposed to do this, man,” he grumbled, but flicked through the pages nonetheless, glancing up to check no one was eyeballing him. “Nope. Breaking and...hold your horses. There's something. *Public disturbance on Park Street*. But it wasn't your uncle that called us, it was some neighbor. Said that Timothy Finch was in the street attacking a guy with a baseball bat.”

My knees gave way and I held onto the counter to stop me falling. Ah Jeez, no. A baseball bat? Sam? I tried to inhale but could only take shallow breaths.

“But nothing happened,” Wills went on, unaware of my hyperventilating. “Coupla patrol cars went up there, talked to your old man—sorry, uncle—who said there'd been an intruder and he'd seen him off. But didn't press charges. And that was it.” He shut the book with a bang.

A baseball bat. Think of the damage something like that could do to a guy, even a tough guy. And he hadn't defended himself because Uncle Timothy *looked too much like me*. I took a deep breath to try and stop feeling so giddy. “Listen,” I leaned in again. “I need some more favors.”

“Okay,” he looked at his watch. “But I don't want to hear them here. Unless you've graduated all of a sudden in law and have the right authorization, I'm not supposed to give this kind of information to the general public. I'm on a break now, so if you want we can talk in the diner down the street. Unofficial, off the record.”

“I don't wanna bug you,” I told him as we slipped along the red vinyl seats of a booth in the diner. I took a gulp of coffee that didn't taste half bad nor half good and watched him eat something that looked like a fern frond. “But I need to know some things, and you're the guy who can sort it out.”

“I love it when you sweet-talk me. What do you want to know? The secret of successful rimming?”

Was it my imagination or did his leg just touch mine? “Asshole.”

We sniggered at that little unintended quip.

“No,” I continued, hoping the leg incident was a one-off. “I want to find out if the cops in Silver Creek have any record on Sam Barrowdale and if so, what it is. I'm talking here about something that might've happened in 1965. Also if there's a connection with a guy—I don't know

anything about him but he was probably homeless and his first name was Dan or Daniel. And I think he died.”

“And that's it? I mean, you can't tell me *when* in 1965? A month would be helpful. No? Jesus. And what about this guy Dan's surname? Boy, thanks for all the information. You don't want me to find the Holy Grail while I'm at it? Alex, man, I don't have access to files in Silver Creek, and, even if I did, they're confidential. I'd lose my job if I told you something...”

“Okay, okay. So I'm not a lawyer, just a crummy member of the public who's concerned. There must be some way to find out this stuff.”

He drummed his fingers on the table in an erratic rhythm not unlike his drum skills. “Look. I can't snoop into records, someone will find out, and I don't know anyone in Silver Creek. But there might be other ways...” He examined a spoon and polished it with the corner of his paper napkin. “You know, I never told you this, but I always wanted, after being in a rock band, to be a PI.”

“A what?”

“A private investigator. And if you tell anyone, I'll have to kill you.”

“You mean a dick,” I grinned at him.

“Whatever.”

“You giving up your budding police career?”

“No. I can do both. I'd just do the PI stuff on the side and make sure no one finds out. And, you know?” He gave the spoon an extra rub. “This sounds like an assignment that would, you know, *suit* a dick. And I never had an assignment. You'd have to pay me.” He looked me in the eye, and I looked straight back.

Just my luck to find a virgin dick. Or maybe I should put that another way...” Sure.”

“Boy, it'll sure make a change from listening to complaints all day of dog shit on the sidewalk, checking parking fines, escorting funerals.”

“I thought you were a desk sergeant.”

“I do everything. I'm very flexible, and I'm good at handcuffing.” He winked and I ignored him while trying to look like a huffy spinster aunt. It must've worked because he removed his mind from the gutter, took out a notebook instead, licked his pencil and tried to look important. “So this guy did...”

“His name is Sam Barrowdale. You need it spelled out?”

I waited with growing impatience while he dotted his i's and crossed his t's but when he'd got it down to a masterpiece I asked, "How long's this stuff going to take you to find out?"

"I'll cruise the books, maybe visit the library see what I can dig out. Don't sweat it, I'll do what I can because PIs have contacts, you know."

"I thought you weren't a PI. Listen, don't get into trouble or do anything illegal. After all, isn't the law...oh, I don't know, represented by cops?"

"Very funny."

I held out my cup to the waitress for a refill and asked something I'd been trying to push to the back of my mind and not think about. "Wills. Do you know if anything happened in Notus Heights last night? Off the record of course."

"Something that didn't involve murder, unexplained death, fights and general vagrancy?"

I jack-knifed in my chair and spilled coffee in my lap. "Shit." I dabbed at the burn with my sleeve while he sniggered. "There was a murder last night up there?"

"Nah. I was kidding. You need a hand there?" He raised his eyebrow at my crotch, but I ignored him. "Let me think. I wasn't on duty but I read the roster this morning, and I don't recall anything reported up there. Not last night anyway."

"And what about elsewhere in the city? I'm talking about accidents with...you know...people...guys not identified. John Does."

He shook his head. "Don't remember anything. It was pretty quiet last night. If you want to find out if someone's had an accident you have to call the hospitals. They'd know. Who have you lost? This Sam guy? You're really into him, aren't you?"

I ducked my head into my coffee cup. "Yeah. I am."

"What if it turns out he's some hardened criminal?"

"I don't care."

"You're just full of surprises today."

"Full of them. Now if you've scarfed all the ferns you're going to, I reckon that just about wraps us up."

As we stepped onto the street I thought about my uncle threatening Sam with a baseball bat. "It's strange," I mused. "I really thought my uncle would've pressed charges against Sam. Caused as much trouble for him as he could."

“He probably had his mind on other matters. That mine business for example.”

“What mine business?”

“Is it in Silver Creek? Doesn't he own a mine down there? Yeah, thought so. Didn't you read about the accident? Must've been about ten days ago now. It rained hard and the pile of tailings collapsed and flowed into a shaft.”

Just like Sam said it would. “Ah hell. Was anyone hurt?”

He considered, trying to remember what he'd read. “No, don't reckon so. Couple of miners were trapped but they got them out. I read some statement from your uncle that said...I don't know...some primo crap about none of it being the mine's fault.” He glanced at me. “Didn't you read about it? I know it was headline news one day. Alex, man, where do you live?”

“On the dark side of the moon.”

“Funny. Didn't see you there.” He shot me another look. “You owe me.”

“I know. You'll get paid.”

“Not that. I'm talking about the gig we're gonna do. You said last night we'd have a blast you, me and Bella.”

“I haven't forgotten,” I lied. “We'll get together soon.”

“And of course—we have other unfinished business. You and me.” His voice softened as he nudged me in the ribs.

I shivered. Did he mean what I thought he meant? Judging by his smirk, he did. He was telling me he wanted a repeat performance of my inept attempts to get into his pants in a filthy john? I don't think so, buddy-boy. I gave a short laugh. “So you're going to risk your job by doing PI work on the side. And, if that's not enough, you want to play Mr. Peepers and his boyfriend? Get outta here.”

“Look, we're nearly in nineteen seventy. They don't string you up any more.”

“They will you—you're a cop.”

“Who cares, Alex? As long as you don't wear Tom Jones shirts and hip-huggers...”

Oh the very thought. This was becoming serious, and it was time to put the lid on it once and for all. “What about Bella, won't she object?”

He grinned a snag-tooth smile. “What she doesn't know won't hurt her. You understand what I'm saying here?”

I understood all right. More than I wanted. “I reckon you need to forget about my splendid physique, that's what I'm saying here.”

## Chapter Twenty-Five: Alex

*High expectations. I got hiiiiigh expectations.* I jiggled into the Red Hen on my way home and came face to face with the same guy who'd been at the bar earlier. "Did you give my note to my friend? You know, Sam Barrowdale?" Nonchalance is my middle name.

He wiped right where my arms were resting on the bar with a filthy cloth and chewed on a wad of tobacco before spending a helluva time wedging it into his cheek. He looked under the bar and pulled out the paper I'd given him earlier. "Guess not," he said and spat on the floor.

"Did anyone drop by for me this afternoon?" I asked Liza as soon as I flung the door open.

"Nope. You expecting someone?"

*How's he gonna come by if he doesn't know where you live, dumbass?*

Thanks Unseen Hand. Any more unreliable conjecture while we're about it?

The sweet notes of a Chopin concerto, in e-minor if I wasn't mistaken, sang from the stereo while Liza ran her fingers up and down using her thigh as a keyboard. "You talking about your uncle? I have to say I half-expect him and the first battalion to descend on us any day now."

She wasn't the only one. I padded into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, stared at the beer, closed it again and returned to the lounge empty-handed. "Don't kid about stuff you don't know."

"I'm not kidding. He had the Acorn Boys out the night he carried you off on a trumped up drugs charge."

I lit a cigarette, thanking the Holy Moly I could still enjoy some of life's meager offerings. "You knew it was phony, didn't you? That drugs charge." I slumped down on the couch beside her.

"I guessed as much when Wang Dang was back on stage the next night behaving like nothing had happened. And he wouldn't look me in the eye, not even when he pissed on his guitar, and he always stared at me when he did that."

I drew on the cigarette again and let the swaggering Allegro vivace take over my mind. When it was over in an avalanche of melody I said, "You don't need to worry about my uncle. He's in Silver Creek just now. There was an accident at the mine."

"That's your uncle's mine? I read about it last week. Gee whiz, all that garbage running down the mountain." She sucked on her teeth. "You know, it's weird."

“What is?”

“It was splashed across the front page one day, and then there's been nothing in the papers since. I know because I've been looking.”

“Money silences anything important.” The loony clock in the hall chimed fourteen as I got up.

“Alex?” she asked and I paused on my way to the kitchen. “Will you come with me to the doctor tomorrow?”

“Are you sick?”

“No. Just to check. You know.” She rubbed her stomach. “On the baby. I'll have to see someone soon.”

“Oh.”

My hesitation didn't please her. “You don't have to, you know.” She picked up a magazine from the table beside her and tossed the pages from side to side. “I can always sort the problem out myself if you're not going to support me in this. There are ways to get rid of it, as you know. Wouldn't take long.”

*Well that would be a way out.*

“Oh,” I repeated, sweat gathering under my arms. Sure it would be a way out. But get rid of it? It? It wasn't an it—it was a baby. “No.” I blew my cheeks out. “No. Course I'll...um...support you. In any way you like.” I thought about that little kid, raveling together in her womb. Did it know that for a brief moment there its life hung by a thread? That I'd been on the point of sending it to the firing squad?

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*What kind of guy are you? One minute you're cozying up to Liza and the next you're up here eager as a horny dog.*

It was that damn scrawny cat again, sneaking along in the gutter, dogging my steps. Jeez, it was bleak up here, even in daylight. The cab would only bring me to the outskirts of Notus Heights and no further, mister, so I trudged along the broken sidewalk, aware that furry bods skittered along the slant. “Go catch those mice,” I told the cat.

*What's brought you back again?*

“I want to see what's happened to Sam.” Check that he's okay. Thank him for his tea which had cleansed both my innards and spirit.

*Asshole.* The cat slithered down its drain.

“I said, Asshole.” A hobo wrapped in so many layers of clothes he looked as wide as he was tall emerged from a black cavern. At first it



seemed that his leg creaked as he walked but when I looked closer I realized the noise came from the wheels of the old baby carriage he pushed. It was piled high with garbage and possibly a dead baby, I didn't look.

"Asshole to you too," I muttered. Jeez, these people just thought they could ooze into my private sphere whenever the whim took them. And talking of oozing, was that wet-dog smell coming from him? Oh man, it was. I let out the throttle and limped up to the abandoned gas station while the damned creaking came right along.

No bright brazier lit the forecourt this afternoon. No one except me and the dead baby carrier seemed to be about. I glanced at him. "You know Sam Barrowdale?"

He rubbed at a limp felt cap that was pulled down over his head although strands of grey hair protruded from it at dramatic angles as if they were trying to run for their lives. "Don't reckon I do," he said.

"Shit."

"Or maybe I reckon I do."

"You do?" I would've grabbed his grimy lapels but my hands would've slipped off.

"Don't reckon I do."

"Oh for Chrissakes." You can't have a decent conversation with a crazy.

"Then maybe..." He broke off to poke at a black stump of a tooth with a finger caked with...something.

"Do you or don't you?"

His finger raked around further inside, located some nugget which he drew forth and inspected.

"You got a sick dog?" he asked.

Right. So he did know Sam. Well, two can play at his little game. "Maybe I have."

"Or maybe you haven't," he said before I could and sucked the prize on his finger and gave it a good chew. "Cause if you got a sick dog, he can help."

"Okay. Did you see him yet today? And don't start with the maybe you did and maybe you didn't because you can just cut that out. Did you or didn't you? Go on, give it a whirl."

He stared into the depths of his baby carriage and, without warning, dived in to rummage around with the same enthusiasm he had for his tooth. After churning up the stew, he pulled out a cracked ceramic pot

which he twirled. "You don't get it, do you?" He hurled the pot into the distance where it shattered and then turned back to me with a triumphant stubbed-tooth grin.

I wasn't impressed. "Okay, Sandy Koufax. Just answer the question."

"Best goddamn pitcher ever. No."

"No, you didn't see him yet today?"

"No." He scratched under his rat-colored cap again, and I took a step backward in case of flying shrapnel.

"You don't know where I might find him?" I asked.

"He sure as shootin' don't stay around here much."

The breeze picked up and brought a refreshing smell of pine on it, reminding me that Verdigris Forest wasn't far from here, a place where jack-rabbits can be trapped for soup. "What about there?" I nodded to the distant tree-tops. "Is there a place down there he might stay?"

"Can't say for sure."

I pulled out a handful of cash from my pocket and jingled it.

He eyed the money and rubbed his nose before reaching a decision.

"There's a woodman's hut...something along them lines."

"How much to show me where it is?"

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Oh boy, this wasn't the wisest of moves heading down a muddy trail with a chaotic crazy as a guide, even if he had left his baby carriage behind. And the dark dense forest that lay ahead was famous for witches and evil tree spirits that parceled out unlimited mischief on unwary trespassers. I cursed like the wicked witch of the west as the trail petered out into a gunky swamp and I sank up to my ankles.

We negotiated our way through undergrowth of dwarf spruce and brambles that grabbed at my pants. I tripped. "Goddamn roots. Aren't they supposed to grow *down*?" Something—a vulture I reckoned—swooped out the trees and I cringed.

"Blue jay," the hobo muttered.

I yelped as something—a warthog I reckoned—scampered over my toes.

"Chipmunk." He stopped and held out his hand which I eyed for a horrified moment. Did he want me to hold it? "Pay time," he said.

"No. Hold on a moment. You can't leave me here. You said..."

"It's *there*." With a grunt of impatience he gestured under the trees.

I peered into the moving shadows where I could just make out a pile of wood. A shack. "This is it?"

Because his hand smelt of an open drain and because he growled like no human should, I paid up, and then watched him lurch off in a direction I was sure we hadn't come in.

The shack was nothing like the neat place Sam had built himself on the Pike Ranch. I peeked round where a door should be straight into a faceful of cobwebs. Slapping at my gummed up cheeks, I took a look around. The back wall was falling down, what roof was still left had holes in it, and the glass had fallen out of the window. A bird had built its nest in one corner and had stuck its ass over the edge to defecate on the floor riddled with termite holes. He couldn't sleep here, I told myself in disbelief. And yet. A neatly folded blanket lay on the floor in the corner with a pillow on top and a duffle bag next to it. Scared something might bite me, I opened it with care.

I'd seen him wear the button-down, heavy cotton work-shirt which smelt of washing powder. Don't ask me how he'd done his laundry but the jeans in the duffle were clean too. Toothpaste, toothbrush, comb, still with one or two brown hairs which I picked off and wound around one of my fingers, turning it purple. And something heavy at the bottom, something smooth. It was dark in the hut so I took it outside to get a better look. Warm as a kitten in my hand and hewn from a single piece of honey-whorled wood was the figure of a guitar-player. His head was bowed, his hands perfectly placed on the instrument, and he was sitting on a log. With trembling hands I turned the figure over to find that scratched on the back was: Axel Finsh.

"I'm Axel Finsh. I'll be anything you want me to be, Sam," I whispered at the cloud of mosquitoes hovering in the doorway. I'd wait for him the whole night to come home if necessary.

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Moonlight crawled across the floor which I swear shivered with swarming roaches and a rat or two bounced in and out of the gaps. A spider fell on my shoulder and I flicked it off fast. Trying to get comfortable against the rough wooden wall, I drew my knees up and held the carved guitar-man in my lap, my thumb running up and down the smooth surface like I was rubbing a security blanket. Cold wind gusted from any number of holes, making me shiver, but Sam's blanket was wet so I hugged his pillow instead, burying my nose in it, seeking vanilla, wood-smoke and childhood. "Please come home, Sam," I pleaded. At

some point I fell asleep to the sound of creeping undergrowth and some animal yipping outside—pretty noisy considering I was in the middle of nowhere.

Sunshine warm on my face woke me in the morning, but the hut was like me, still cold, sad and lonely.

I looked at my watch. Oh shit. Liza's doctor's appointment.

## Chapter Twenty-Six: Alex

Coffee. Its special fragrance filled the empty house and shot me straight in the taste-buds. The liquid was still warm from Liza's breakfast so I drank down two cups one after another without resorting to the creamer. She'd already gone for her appointment and since I had no idea where the doctor's office was and so couldn't catch up with her, I made phone calls instead. It almost killed me to make them, but they had to be done.

After four hospitals said no, no one had been admitted fitting Sam's description, there weren't any more listed. That was the easy part over. I still had the morgues to try.

"Thank you," I whispered in relief half an hour later holding the receiver against my hot forehead with shaking fingers. The calls were done.

"You bastard."

I leapt a mile in the air. Jeez, I didn't know she was there.

"Where were you last night?"

"Sweetheart, I slept out in the forest." Trembling I lit a cigarette and waited for whatever she was about to dish out.

When nothing came whizzing within breathing distance I risked a look and saw that the only thing she was dealing out was concern. It was plastered all over her face as she walked toward me. "What's wrong?" she asked, framing my face between her hands. "What's wrong, Honey? Were you sick again?"

*Go on, say yes. And then you won't have to face the music for a while longer.*

Sound advice. I swallowed. "I don't feel too good." And that was true enough. Pent up emotion had wrung every ounce of energy out of me.

She didn't question me further, just held my head against her breasts. "Poor baby."

Call me a jerk, call me a coward, I just couldn't handle her any other way right then. So shoot me. "How was the doctor?" My voice was muffled by her right breast.

"Everything's fine. I'm having some tests in a week or two." She pressed me closer and ran a finger down my shirtfront. "He said we don't need to be celibate during this time, you know—and it's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

“Guess you didn't sleep too well last night. You want to take a nap?”

“No.”

“Sure?”

“I'm good.” I moved down and rested my cheek against her stomach. It was still a mystery how I'd got her pregnant.

*Well, dummy. How d'you think?* That Unseen Hand. I was sick of the shit it doled out.

I *know* that, I responded silently. It's just it didn't seem *powerful* enough somehow, like I didn't have it in me. And I was pretty much out of my head most of the time. I patted her stomach. Poor kid's going to be born blitzed if my seed had anything to do with it. “Thought you were taking the pill,” I murmured.

“It made me fat.”

“Gonna make you more'n fat now.”

She wriggled away, her mouth twisted in irritation. “The forest,” she spat. “What a bunch of...of...” She waved her hands about for the word. “*Bull*. You never would have the guts to stay in a forest all night by yourself.”

I fitted one finger-tip onto its opposite on the other hand—pinky to pinky, thumb to thumb. Liza's anger was like coffee—it took a while to brew but when it did it was spectacular and bitter. When all ten fingers were joined together, I said, enunciating each word to show I wasn't lying, “I was in the forest. By myself. In a hut.”

“Alex Finch,” she scoffed. “In a hut. Gee whiz. The guy who takes a dive if a chickadee flies over. The guy who thinks fresh air's bad for his health.”

“Believe what you like.”

Her laugh had a mocking edge and her face turned red and blotchy. “Whatever it is you're doing, you'd better stop. I'm going to have this baby.”

“Good.”

“And it needs a father. And to be a father to this child, you are going to have to marry me because there is no way I'm telling my father I'm having a baby outside wedlock. That means you'll swear to love, cherish, honor...”

“I'm not getting married in a church.”

The words were no sooner out of my mouth than she cracked a smile and all the tension that had been bubbling in her fled. Only then did I realize what I'd said. “Okay,” she said, satisfied, her voice clotted with

emotion. "Nothing wrong with a civil ceremony. I'll get the licenses." She turned and walked out of the room.

"What *now*?" I wailed at her rear view in the hall.

"Dork." She stopped, but didn't look at me. "I'll see about them tomorrow. And you know," she spoke over her shoulder. "We can get married almost as soon as they're issued. You'll need a blood test first though." She said this last part in a voice that conveyed she had no doubt I'd fail the requirements dismally.

"So will you." I padded from the dark, over-furnished lounge into the dark, cluttered kitchen where I looked at the beers in the refrigerator again. With a sigh, I reached for the milk and was drinking from the carton when she re-appeared.

"Alex? Honey? What's this old stuff?" She held Sam's duffle that I'd brought from the hut fearing it would get stolen if I left it there. I'd stuck a note on the pillow to tell him I'd taken it, and I left my address and telephone number.

"And what's this?" She held up the guitar man and turned it over. The name scratched on the back made her snort in derision as she slammed the statue on the table.

"Careful," I said, my hands clawing at it to protect it from damage.

Her lips tightened over her teeth and her chest heaved. "You'd better get over this. *Honey*."

"Over what?"

"This guy." She jabbed her finger at the carving. "I know who made this. The guy who can't talk straight. What is he, a retard?"

"Now you just shut up about him," I snarled.

She looked surprised at my harsh words then squared her shoulders, ready to take me on. "You say his name all the time," she hissed.

My jaw dropped. "I don't say his name."

"You do, all the goddamn time."

"In my sleep?" I hazarded.

"And not only."

Did I wander around muttering his name like a crazy all day long?

"You're wasting your time, you know, reckoning he's your hero. I was *there*. At your uncle's house. He just happened to come along. And he sent you off with me easy as pie, no arguing about it. He didn't want to keep you, mop up your..."

"Ah, so now you're admitting he was the one who rescued me."

“*Rescued* you.” She gave her mocking laugh again. “He just went in and got you out, that’s all. It was no big deal, anyone could do it. Alex.” She lowered her voice to a furious hiss again. “You’re obsessed.”

“Me?” I looked about, angling for an escape route, but she stood by the door. I eyed the window.

She huffed with exaggerated patience. “Okay, I see how it is. You’ve got some hang-up about him, some weird hang-up but, knowing you, that doesn’t really surprise me. Listen, you just get him outta your system, and we’ll be happy. I know it.”

“What makes you Miss Fix-it Shrink all of a sudden? What do you know?”

“Because he didn’t strike me as queer, that’s what.”

Oh boy—she said the q word. “And I do?”

“You could be anything.” She pulled at her hair until it stood out in a bee-hive around her head.

“Why do you want to marry someone like me?” I asked wearily. I hadn’t planned on getting into this just now but she’d given me no choice. “To prove I’m not queer?”

“Because we’re having a baby together, and there’s no way I’m telling people or the child that its father is a fag.”

Oh boy, she said the f word.

“Alex, I mean it, you have to get over this...this confusion you have.”

I tutted in derision. “You make it sound like there’s a cure.”

“Well there just might be, honey, in your case.” She was back to concern personified. “There might be something you can take to sort you out. You should ask your uncle.”

“You have to be kidding.”

“I am not, so don’t look like that. I don’t want any scandal or gossip surrounding my child. If you want to be his or her father, then you do the right thing. And that means *not* holding onto another guy’s hand like you’re drowning. I saw you when he pushed you—and not too gently I might tell you—into the car outside your uncle’s house. It was pathetic. And dangerous too, out there in public view. Talk about fey.” She was as relentless as a ten ton truck.

“Next you’re going to be telling me I won’t go to heaven.”

She barked a laugh. “You won’t.”

“Well if heaven’s like that I don’t wanna go there anyway.”

“Ah hell, Alex, you don’t get it, do you? Let me try and spell it out. Okay, Stonewall made an impact but the press still talks about slim-



waisted freak-creeps without a qualm.” She put her face close to mine, and you could see the effort she was making to be reasonable.

I stepped backward. “You sure know how to get a guy where it hurts.”

She gave an impatient grunt. “It’s the only way to talk to you. Do yourself a favor, and you’ll be doing that Sam guy one too. Honey,” her voice softened further as she brushed my cheek with her knuckles, “I don’t think his rickety mind knows what he’s doing. I don’t think he’s all there.”

In my mind I saw Sam staring in dumb fascination at an empty space in front of him, saw the way he went ass over tip when he heard music. It made me smile. “Sweetheart, he’s more normal than you or me.”

*Then where is he?* The Unseen Hand wasn’t going down without a fight.

Where indeed?

Liza’s hand was still on my cheek and I pressed it, more for comfort than anything else. “I think I lost him in any case.” As I spoke my fears, longing for him lodged in my throat like a peach stone.

“Good,” she said, taking her hand away, and sounding business-like. “Then make sure he stays lost.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven: Alex

It was nearly dusk, and the light on the row of houses I was passing on my evening walk was rosy and peaceful. Tranquil. But it couldn't stop me feeling like a pumpkin with a lit firecracker inside.

Liza kept hankering after getting back to work. "We could make a pile of money, you and me with the stuff we produce."

I produce, but I let that one go and replied, mildly enough. "Go talk to Orville then." I didn't blame her for wanting to go back on the road so I hid from her that the thought of performing again was about as appealing as drinking snake venom. She said we needed new material and, again, I didn't tell her that after the brief frenzy of *Once a Day, Twice a Day* and *Fierce Lamb* inspiration had dried up.

Something in my expression, though, must have made her suspicious of my true feelings because her face reddened and her voice became hard. "Alex, you have splinters in the windmills of your mind."

Here we go again. My face was burning but I didn't want to get into another fight. "Did you hear from Orville Johnson?"

It worked because her face, which had been tight as a tick, opened as she told me that Orville was delighted to book us supporting Wang Dang and Fanny again. My lips were still zipped, even though the prospect gave me a helpless feeling I was back on the road to a place I hoped I'd left behind. She said the concert would be down south in a baseball stadium seating five thousand. "It'll be a blast," she cried. "We need a crazy new set. What was that new instrumental you started the other day called again? *Angry Cow*?"

Five thousand? That was a helluva crowd. Give me the cozy Red Hen any day where I could knock a brown-eyed boy beside the stage for six.

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My efforts at keeping peaceful harmony nearly came to an end when I scratched her Chopin concerto number two, opus six million record. I didn't mean to. I'd taken it off the turntable to play a bitching new LP, "Fruit Tree". Nick Drake's bleak melody about the sadness in life could have been written just for me. I turned the volume up.

When I saw that my gentle handling had gouged old Frederick C, I hid the record in its sleeve behind the bookshelf. "I'm going out for a

walk,” I said when she came into the room and before she could ask me why her concerto wasn't playing.

“Don't be late, Honey. *Lawrence of Arabia* is on TV tonight. And I know you like war movies.”

War movies I could live without. Peter O'Toole wasn't bad though.

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I yawned enormously for the fifth time, trying to fill my lungs with air as I continued my solitary walk. I passed identical orderly back yards, each with its own swing set and water sprinkler. It was dark now, the stars were out now, hundreds and thousands. “What the hell you shining for?” I glowered at them. A car pulled up beside me.

“Alex, my man. You talkin' to yourself now? Bad sign, man.”

“Wills.” He must've been coming off duty since he was in his own old Chrysler and still in uniform.

“Get in,” he invited. “I was going to call on you. But this'll save time.” Once I was in the passenger seat, he reached behind him for a briefcase and opened it. “Speedy Gonzalez, huh?”

“Huh?”

“Fast worker, that's me. This PI work is easy peasy. You want to take a look at what I got? Let's see now.” He leafed through papers and handed one over. I peered at it, and he leaned in, his breath feathering the hairs on my arm as he spoke—it's kinda weird have a cop come onto you.

“A guy I know has a friend in the sheriff's office in Silver Creek, and he phoned through this information. He thinks I'm some kind of detective because I told him I needed it for a case, and he came up with the goods, no questions. In any case he owes me one.”

I'll bet he does.

“So,” he continued, squinting at the document I was holding. “Samuel Barrowdale is indeed known to the Silver Creek Police Department. Mostly, as you can see,” he ran his finger along the top line on the paper, his arm resting against mine, “when he was younger. There you can see—nineteen fifty six—he ran away four times from that orphanage.”

I moved my arm away from his. “You realize he was seven at the time. Christ, it's unbelievable—where do you go when you're seven?”

Wills couldn't answer. Like me, he'd never been in, nor thought about, that kind of situation.

“That orphanage was closed a few years back—I remember the scandal. Child abuse and a whole bunch of stuff you don't want to hear about. So maybe the kid found life more agreeable on the streets.”

My gut clenched and I shivered with cold.

“Then there's more of the same...Here he was a couple of years older, caught for vagrancy, handed over to Welfare and returned to his foster father. Says he bit a desk sergeant but was only cautioned because he was so young. If he'd been older they'd have thrown him in the slammer and thrown away the key. Six months later the school reported him missing again, but it doesn't say how long. The school isn't mentioned again so I guess they gave up on him. Alex,” he glanced up. “We have a typical portrait of a real loser here. You see them all the time down the precinct. No-hopers. You do your best to help then in no time they're back mugging old biddies, stealing hot rods.”

“Sam didn't do that.” I studied the paper.

“He probably did. It's just not listed. Look, it just goes on. Ran away, picked up. In a fight, picked up, returned to foster father. A vicious circle.” He rubbed his hand through his blond curls. “What I can't get is why he was never formally charged, never spent time in juvie. I tell you, it would've done him some good. Knocked some sense into him.”

“I don't think so,” I muttered, scanning the page for more. “In any case, maybe he never did anything so bad. You don't lock a kid up for being scared.”

“Scared my ass. The kid was a delinquent. There's a report that in nineteen fifty nine he was picked up the day after running away from his foster home. The kid had a smack round the head coming to him. Boy, he sure was a runner.”

He still is, I thought.

“Then there's nothing until three years ago when he was taken in at an SDS anti-war rally for disturbing the peace. Again, he wasn't charged but, like most of these trouble-makers he was thrown in a cell overnight to soften him up. And it was about time.”

I wiped my hand over my face trying not to imagine Sam's torment at being locked up. He wasn't comfortable being indoors, so in a cell he must've been like a caged-in tiger, climbing the walls by morning. I groaned, and Wills looked at me in surprise.

“And you see?” He couldn't disguise the triumph in his voice. “It worked. Look,” he pointed at the paper, his blue uniformed leg rubbing mine, “he's been clean since then.”

“Let me see.” I took the paper from him and ignored the leg I'd have found sexy once upon a time. My finger hovered down the page, looking for nineteen sixty five when Sam was sixteen. But Wills was right, Sam was clean between sixty and sixty seven. I folded the paper and put it in my jacket. “Thanks. I owe you one now.” I reached for the car door handle.

“Wait.” He placed his hand a little too warmly on my arm and my stomach lurched. “I have a coupla other things for you. I am a PI pro, you know, not wet behind the ears—I do my job proply. I took a look in the library because it has old newspaper cuttings dating from the late fifties. Nearly blinded myself wading through them. But I came up with something. Here.” He handed me a Xeroxed copy.

*Silver Creek Bugle*

*April 12 1965*

*Body Identified as Homeless Man*

*SILVER CREEK—Police say a body found last week in a condemned rooming house is that of a homeless man.*

*A police spokeswoman said the man has been identified as Daniel Connelly, 40, aka Itinerant Dan.*

*The body was found Thursday morning after part of the rooming house collapsed but couldn't be recovered until Thursday evening because the structure was unstable. Connelly had fallen twenty feet through the broken floor into the cellar and it took firefighters 8 hours to recover the remains.*

*An autopsy showed that Connelly, a known alcoholic, died from injuries caused by the fall.*

I had to read it twice to make sure I was getting it. The date was the fateful nineteen sixty five; the guy, this Itinerant, was certainly the one Sam mentioned. Was it a coincidence or did it have something to do with Sam's crime? But what crime? The guy died an accidental death.

“Thanks.” I wanted to take it all back home and chew it over by myself. But Wills was eyeing me.

He shifted closer and my nose twitched at his cloying cologne. “You're too handsome for this place,” he growled.

Christ, what a lousy come-on line.

He studied me. "Hair's too long." He reached over to run his hand through it, but I dodged because, in my book, there's only one guy allowed to do that. "Wonder you can see through it."

"Oh, I can see through it right enough. Eyes everywhere." Nerves always made me jabber.

He laughed and put his finger on the ignition. "You want to find someplace to go? A motel?" His handcuffs jingled on his belt.

Once I would've run the whole gamut with him, including tricks with the nightstick. But now? Now, things had changed. "I can't stay," I burred. "Not today. I have a gig fixed at the end of the week. Big one, in a stadium with a bunch of guys and there's rehearsals and stuff for the new set. Here, tell me what I owe you." I reached for my wallet, and I caught a flash of his downcast eyes and pouty lip. "Look," I said, trying to make it all sound a little less harsh. "Liza's waiting and...well, let's just say it's complicated just now."

"Who's Liza?"

I hesitated. "She's, *um*. Well, she's like Bella. She's what Bella is to you."

His jaw dropped. "You mean she's your *wife*? Get outta here. You can't be married."

"Why not? You are."

He laughed. "Yeah but I'm not as queer as you."

With all the dignity of a crackerjack queer I levered myself out of his car just as he reached onto the back seat. "Here." He threw a newspaper at me. "I found this for you. Last week's paper which gives the story of the mining accident in Silver Creek. Thought you'd be interested."

"Thanks." I bent down and looked in. Eyeball to eyeball we clocked each other until we both grinned at the same time. "You're a piece of work, you are," I said fondly and hit him on the head with the newspaper. "I'll catch you later." I chucked him under the chin.

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So there are different levels of homosexuality, are there? Well, well, well. Knock yourself out, I silently told a lady unloading her grocery bag from a van advertising lawn-care products. You got a real-live tootin' homo walking past. A water-sprinkler started up, *chukka, chukka, chukka*.

I wondered what grade Sam was. Top grade. Prime. "Oh my love," I whispered. All those times he'd run away from hell, only to have the good-hearted authorities plant him straight back into the middle of it.

*He's a runner*, Wills had said.

*He still is*, I'd thought at the time. But was he? Sam wasn't the kind to retreat from conflict. He faced it. And he wouldn't run from me, even if he had changed his mind about meeting me. No, he'd have the balls to tell me straight up. Ah hell. I stopped and lit a cigarette with a trembling hand, then stared at the darkening sky until my eyes strained. Something had happened to him. Something that was too big for even him to handle.

I don't know how long I stayed petrified on that old sidewalk, my hands rigid by my sides. Only when the cigarette burned my lips, only then did I move—first to toss the cigarette away and then to take Sam's crime record from my pocket. I scanned the paper until I stopped on two words: foster father. Of course. Amy's father. Amy. If Sam had contacted anyone it would be her. I looked around for the nearest phone booth.

"Alex?" Amy's slurred voice was as I remembered it, even though she was in a cut-throat mood.

"Alex Finch, I swear I'm going to take a knife and slit you from gullet to groin."

"What? Why?"

"Where is he?"

Hell. My heart took a dive. She doesn't know where he is either.

"He was with you," she cried, her voice climbing octaves. "He told me last time I spoke with him. And he said he'd call me again the next day—that was almost a week ago. He never goes back on his word. For *Chrissakes* if you've hurt him I'm going to make you wish you hadn't been born. *Three times over!*"

"Amy."

There was silence. From that one little word, she knew all I needed to say. I heard her breathing. Then she let out a tortured bird-like cry. I'd never heard anything so chilling and my mouth went dry as I tried to form comfort words that wouldn't come.

"Alex?" Her voice shook. "Don't tell me. Please don't tell me he's..."

"I don't *know*. I saw him that night, the night he spoke to you. And I haven't seen him...I've looked. I called hospitals."

"No!" She screamed.

"It's okay, sweetheart. It's all right. He hasn't been admitted to any of them. I checked with the cops and they don't have anything on him either.

I don't know where he is. I've tried everywhere and I just don't know where to look any more. I'm so sorry." Tears ran down my cheeks as I know they did hers.

After a moment her gasping sobs calmed. She snuffled and blew her nose. "Alex," she said, rallying. "I'm sure he's okay. This is Sam we're talking about, he's a survivor. I'm sure he'll call."

"I think so too," I told her, more to convince her than myself but it didn't work.

Worry crept back into her voice. "He's never done anything like this before. He always finds a way to call."

I tried to keep my voice even. "Maybe he found work on a ranch—you know roping and branding. Wrangling strays miles out on the range. He could spend nights out there."

"Yeah. Sure."

After she took my number so she could call me if she heard from him first, I hung up and trudged toward home, preparing to face my grief alone. But before I took more than two steps something else occurred to me, and I returned to the booth to redial her number. When she answered, her voice was clotted with tears.

"What about your fees for the home and your medicines?" I asked, hoping they might've been paid in the last day or two.

She sounded like a scared little girl as she answered in a tiny voice. "He didn't send any money this month."

I breathed in to calm myself. "Okay. Just tell me how much it is."

"Why?"

"I'll pay it."

She was silent for a good while and I could hear her unsteady breathing. "Why would you do that?" she asked softly.

"Because I love him. And I miss him. With all my heart. And I reckon he'd do the same for me."

"Yes," she said in her soft voice. "I think he probably would."

Once outside the booth my legs finally did what they'd been threatening to for the past ten minutes. They collapsed and I folded in on myself, head in hands, rocking on my heels unable and unwilling to believe what might have happened to Sam. I raised my streaming face to the sky. Please, I begged. Please don't let him be hurt. Or even, aw hell, dead. "Sam," I cried aloud into the dark.

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When I entered the lounge, Liza's face nearly sent me out of my head. I can't do this, I thought. I'm barely holding myself together as it is. I can't handle a fight now.

The TV was off. Her eyes were circles, dark and solemn as she got to her feet and came over. She took hold of my quaking hand.

“Liza, I can't...”

She cut me off with a little wave, and I wondered if she was about to punch me on the nose for being late home.

“Honey,” she said softly. “There was a call while you were out.”

Oh, Jesus, no. Not a hospital to say they'd got him. Or even a morgue. My heart raced as I looked at her wordlessly.

“I'm sorry to tell you,” she went on, squeezing my hand. “That Josh Pike has passed away.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight: Alex

You grow the grass, they eat the grass, they crap the grass, you spread the crap, the grass grows, they eat... Sunshine and pitiful dribbles of rain—squalls that had come too late for most ranches up here in High Falls.

It was good to sit alone and think. By the creek which bubbled sluggishly into eddies and backwaters where brown trout wallowed in the shallows. Brown trout sizzling in a pan over a sage brush fire on a red-sky evening with lightning bugs dancing in the air.

Where are you Sam? I asked for the umpteenth time that hour. Just tell me where you are, and I'll come to you. Wherever. Give me a sign.

A breeze rustled the leaves of the cottonwoods above me bringing with it the lingering scent of early morning frost. I shifted one butt-cheek off the log, damn thing was full of ants. I scratched my head. Reckoned I'd have a few cooties lurking there if I stayed on the ranch much longer.

The sun shone on the south face mountain slopes in the distance revealing grey peaks above the timber-line, stately and turreted. Across from the creek, the wind brushed the prairie grass into waves. Jeez, I thought as I got to my feet. Why am I waxing lyrical, as if I could give a damn about the sky being so vast, blue and unbroken? "Because it stops me thinking, that's why," I yelled at a chewing cow. It watched me with the concentration of a scientist observing a new life-form, except I was a dead-form.

I moseyed back to the farmhouse wondering what was for dinner. If there wasn't anything decent then I'd shoot one of them dopey cows in the field and eat its leg. A breeze wafted up and ruffled my hair. "You reckon that's funny, do you Sam?" Don't ask me why I was talking to the wind.

In the kitchen Momma whistled a tune of her own making but said, as soon as she spotted me, "I made a cake, although I shouldn't have done on account of it being Thursday but as I made a lemon one, instead of a chocolate one, that should be all right." She wiped her hands on a dishcloth. "Pot roast for dinner," she announced. "With plenty of gravy for the biscuits to soak in."

I leaned against the stone sink wondering what was missing, and I didn't just mean old JP. Then I knew what it was—the TV wasn't on.

"Hey, Momma. Marshal Dillon's on CBS."

"He's too fat."

"Well, what about Chief Ironside? He too fat too?"

“No. He can't move. He can't do *anything*.” She bent down and peered into the oven, her linty old housecoat rising up the back of her bare thighs.

I looked away. “Okay. The ol' Ponderosa ranch is on the other channel. Ol' Hoss there in his hat.” Personally I had a hankering after Little Joe and his tight pants.

She shook her head. “I'm dishing up in five minutes.”

I meandered into the lounge and slumped into JP's armchair with the faded armrests and the dip in the cushion. It sent up a waft of his musty smell mixed with the familiar whiff of coal dust that always filled the house. After I'd lit a cigarette and looked around for something to do, I spotted the three-week old newspaper Wills had given me which I hadn't bothered to read yet. I picked it up.

Blahdeblah. *Seething Copper Mine—an Accident Waiting to Happen. Tailings. Yakkety-yakkety. State troopers came to the rescue. Owners warned months ago. By a beautiful boy who knew exactly what he was talking about. Turn to page two for an interview with Timothy Finch, CEO of the mine, in which he explains the situation further to reporter Sol Arkwright. Whoa, old rabbit fighter. Turn to page two.*

*Timothy Finch: The tailings piles were deemed safe just one month ago by officials of the safety department. However, the firm we contracted for the regular removal of the tailings has been hit by severe strike action by its workers over the past few weeks which meant they made fewer collections than normal.*

*Sol Arkwright: And it was because of this strike action that the tailings accumulated to a higher level than you would normally accept. Is that correct, sir?*

*T.F. Absolutely. I hope to give you further information once I've received a full report and explanation of who is responsible. In the meantime, once the tailings have been cleared from the shaft and the miners affected completely compensated, the mine should be back in full production and in accordance with union rules.*

I whistled in disbelief. I somehow thought you'd have to pay Sol Arkwright somewhere in the high zillions for him to portray Uncle Tim in a decent light. But hey, who am I to say I know anything about that cotton-tail wrestler?

A photo under the interview text caught my eye. *Co-founders of Gosling Pharmaceuticals: Timothy Finch and his late twin brother Tom in New York during happier times.* I'd never seen a photo of my uncle and pa together before—snapshots weren't something my uncle went in for. In

this picture, their arms were about each other's shoulders and both wore grins the width of the Nile. My uncle looked younger but—I stared long at my father. He looked odd, somehow, different.

I fetched an old photo album from the bookcase which I knew held the one picture my Momma had of him. I didn't need to flick through because I'd looked at it so many times, especially when I was a kid, the album opened naturally on the page. Brown and beige, the photo had been taken just after I was born, a month or two before he died.

Comparing it to the newspaper photo, there was no doubt. My pa looked older in the newspaper one. I tried to get a clue about when it was taken. There was some kind of theater in the background with posters on a wall announcing a new show opening.

I picked up the phone. “Liza? Everything cool? Dodge get you there okay?”

I'd paid through the nose to get her a spanking new Dodge Charger. I tell you, after springing for that *and* the six months fees for Amy's place, I was pretty stretched for cash right now.

“You got your set fixed? That's good. Yeah, sure you can do *Perfect Score* as a finale.” My voice caught as I said this because that was really my personal song, but I guessed I owed it to her. “You got the middle eight worked out? Don't forget to give Wang Dang a punch on the nose from me.” I took a breath. “Listen, you must know this. When did *Gypsy* open on Broadway?”

“What is this? Twenty questions?” she asked. “Well now, let me think. Poppa loves Ethel Merman. He's seen *Call me Madam* six times. And I remember when he and my mother made a special trip to see *Gypsy*. I'd say...end fifties. Probably fifty nine?”

“Momma?” I asked a few minutes later between mouthfuls of juicy pot-roast. “Pa died when I was a baby, didn't he?”

“Mmm,” she murmured, spreading butter thickly on a slab of bread.

“A tiny baby?”

She paused, her knife in the air. “No, you were older than a baby.”

“How old? Ten, eleven?”

“You were a bitty kid. I don't know. Kinda lost touch with him, but I know he died. We told you when it happened.”

I swear, I swear right down the line that no one told me a bean. You don't forget something like that. I fetched the paper and showed her the picture. “That's him in fifty-nine.”

She gave the photo a brief glance. "Probably. Although it might've been sixty."

I'd have been ten or eleven then. "What did he die of?"

She swallowed and took another bite before she answered. "I don't rightly recall that. Accident? Or was he sick?"

I inhaled a fine hit of nicotine after dinner and tried to come to terms with the fact that my father had been alive at least until I was eleven.

The boy the father forgot.

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Feeling disconnected and needing human company, I wandered upstairs and found Momma half inside JP's closet hurling clothes onto a pile on the floor; dungarees, worn jeans, flannel shirts each red and white like he favored, one good suit. All churned together in a mess. She burrowed amid the wreckage of old shoes, brushes and hurled them over her shoulder as she tunneled further in. I dodged a flying one-eyed teddy bear. My old teddy-bear. I picked him up and held him to my chest. Why had JP kept him? A shoe horn, a shoe-polish tin and an old bone joined the growing pile on the floor. I picked up the bone, recognizing it immediately. A turkey wish-bone from Thanksgiving more than ten years ago. JP and I had pulled it, he'd won and I'd sulked.

Never did hear what he wished for.

Momma looked over her shoulder. "Josh wore that at our wedding." She nodded at the suit, now stained by the shoe polish that had burst open.

"Did you marry my father?"

She took her glasses off to get a better look at me, leaving a red mark at the bridge of her nose.

"Honey, you are scaring me. You know I didn't."

I didn't know anything of anything it seemed. I guess I must've been the kind of kid who wandered about with his fingers in his ears going, "la-la-la. I can't *hear* you" although I'd swear I never did. I held my teddy bear close to my chest. "Why not?"

She turned around fully, a pair of black dress-up shoes in her hand. "You can't force someone to wed you. That would be like living in permanent frosty silence, or something along those lines, I guess."

"But you were pregnant by him. Didn't that count for something?"

"Not to him." Her eyes took on a dreamy look as she studied a tall swaying hackberry outside in the yard and for a few moments the creaking

of its branches was the only sound in the room. “In any case, I wasn't short of suitors.”

Despite the hollow that was growing deeper in my stomach the more I learned about my old man, I was impressed. So she had 'em sniffing around? Not bad going for a gal already up the shoot.

A pair of worn plaid bedroom slippers sat by the bed like two landed fish, their heels flattened and a hole where JP's big toe had stuck through. “So you picked JP.”

“Yes, I picked Josh.”

There was something in her voice that made me ask, “Are you sorry? That you married him?”

She looked over at the lumpy marital bed and studied a pair of nail clippers on JP's bedside table next to a glass of filmy water in which his false teeth still resided. “We never had children, did we?” Her front teeth rubbed over her lower lip. “He loved his ranch, though. And I came to love it too. 'Specially in the spring.”

At least they loved something. Poor Momma. I hugged her tightly, her rose scent tickling my nostrils. She was such a clean woman, probably the cleanest I knew. I counted twenty heart beats before I teased, “Who else was after your hand then? Let's hear about them old Lotharios.”

She blushed and giggled like a schoolgirl. “Ah well. There were a few. Guess old Mule Palmer would've given it a shot. But I chose Josh because he liked my southern mud pie, and he had a King Midget he'd made from a kit so I reckoned he was good with his fingers.”

Richard Nixon had a private plane but I wouldn't marry him for it. Then her words soaked in. “Mule Palmer?” I dropped first her and then the teddy bear. “Oh Jeez, Momma. Him as a stepfather? I'd have been dead in a week.”

“Sweetie, he only teases you. He's never hurt you, has he?”

“No, just scared the living shit out of me at every turn since I was knee-high.”

“You exaggerate. He just felt you needed a father's firm hand, that Josh wasn't tough enough on you. Said you were growing up a *girl* even though Josh said you fine as you were.”

A girl? Boy, that made me see red. I wasn't a *girl* and never had been. “And Josh was right on,” I said, my voice as petulant as a child's. “Because this *girl* has made a baby. There now.” I folded my arms and could have, but didn't, add *yah boo sucks*.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine: Alex

“What a blabber-mouth. You can't keep it shut, can you?” I slapped the steering wheel the following day as the old Falcon strained up the grade toward Raw Pines and sank into potholes big enough to drown in. I needed a break from Momma who was wearing me down waltzing and la-la-la-ing through every room, raining plump kisses on my head. If Liza hadn't been in the middle of a gig last night, Momma would've called her up right then and ordered her to take an iron tablet with her hot milk and honey.

Why I wanted to keep the news about the baby from Momma, its grandmother, I couldn't say. Except, I guess, the fewer people who knew, the less real it was.

I was on the point of running a stake through my heart when she said she needed spare beds for some ancient cousins coming to stay for the funeral and that Mule Palmer had some—beds, not cousins.

Never figured I'd ever go seek out the old brawler but it was a chance to get away, and I might even get him to gab about my father. Although his idea of a conversation was to leap out on Main Street and yell, *hey you. I'm talkin' to you, dirtbag.*

I passed small spreads along the trail which this time last year had been working farms. Now they were boarded up, their corrals empty. Rusted mail boxes, old wooden pallets and rolled up chicken wire were strewn across the abandoned yards.

And if that was bad then Raw Pines was the place the Unseen Hand emptied his trash can.

As I drew into the yard, Mule Palmer squeezed through his porch door. “Hell and a bungler, it's Alex Pike.” He was still the bulky old hoodlum I'd always known except what little hair he had left looked like it wasn't long for this world.

He advanced with the force of an M48 tank and didn't seem about to stop until I pushed at his massive chest. “Back off,” I told him. It was time to show him that this *girl* wore leather pants.

“Don't crowd me here.”

And, hey, it worked. He did step back, but still managed to growl, “So what do we owe the pleasure, Pikey boy?”

“Alex Finch, Mule. Finch. What happened here?” I glanced around the place that had once been a hunters' paradise and now looked like a parking lot.

“Finch Industries is enterin' the food processin' industry, halleluiaah.” He must have been messing with his medication that day, because he sure as hell couldn't have felt as merry as he sounded. He'd have continued his comfort and joy sermon if he hadn't been interrupted by a group of people emerging from a prefabricated steel structure that had replaced the stable block.

“Who are they?” I asked him.

“Mister Almighty-it's-my-ranch-so-I-kin-do-what-I-want-with-it Finch invited them up. To see his new pro-ject. And Mule-I-have-to-do-everything-he-says-otherwise-I'm-stuffed-in-a-jar-of-formaldehyde Palmer has to be nice to them. I told him I am the nicest goddamn cowpoke you ever did meet.” He yawned wide, and I looked away, reluctant to see what he'd had for dinner.

“Jesus on a hotplate, look at him.” He nodded in disgust at the lanky figure following the group out of the hut. I craned my neck to get a better look.

“Limp-wristed *homoseashell*.” Mule spat on the ground and then simpered at me. “Present company...”

“Sol Arkwright?”

“Finch Industries new Pee Arrr man with direct links to the meeeedia.”

“He works for my uncle? Since when?”

Mule mulled it over. “Seems a helluva while.”

You gotta hand it to my uncle. What better way to deal with a pesky reporter who writes disagreeable stuff about you, than to give him a high-salary and tuck him away in the middle of nowhere?

Sol and his buck-teeth soon spied me. “Well, as I live and breathe. Alex Finch. How ya doin' Bullfinch?” His white bellbottoms and vest the color of bad teeth were not the clothes someone entering their forties with wispy hair, asymmetrical sideburns and phony Howdy Doody face should wear. “Your uncle didn't mention you were coming up here. If I'd known I'd have given you a better welcome.” He rattled his bracelets at Mule as if to say he'd have kept *him*, for one, well out the way.

“Guess he forgot,” I said, realizing that my bust-up with my uncle was not general knowledge and I could play it to my advantage.

“I was just about to give these distinguished ladies and gentlemen of the press a tour of Raw Pines. You'd be welcome to join us if you haven't seen the new developments yet.”

“Sure,” I agreed.



“Why don't he talk proper?” Mule grumbled as he trailed along beside me.

As we gathered at the first of a sea of wooden pens, Sol threw out his barrel chest. “This is the feedlot, or as it's known, a factory farm for beef cattle. As you can see, there is plenty of space.”

“Space, my Aunt Fanny,” Mule muttered in an undertone. “There's goin' to be two thousand head of cattle in here, penned in so close they'll be nose to backside. Cranky idea.” He coughed on a deeply-lodged ball of phlegm.

I looked at Mule in surprise. “You telling me that for once you don't agree with my uncle's project?”

Mule snorted. “Don't agree, don't disagree. It's *him* I can't stomach.” He indicated Sol.

“There's no grass,” a woman with a notepad and pencil observed. “What will they eat?”

Sol pointed to a shining grain tank. “Something better than grass. They will be given a specialized corn diet.”

Mule grinned his Uncle Fester rolling his eyes at the chance of a worm lunch grin as his voice increased in volume. “They'll eat somethin' that fattens them up quick, some brew Timothy Finch is at this moment stewin' up in his cauldron. And the main ingredient will be bits from the slaughterhouse no one else wants and, believe me, there ain't much of a cow the food industry don't want. Inside or out.”

“Won't there be a lot of waste?” someone asked.

“It'll be efficiently taken care of using up to date methods,” Sol replied.

“It'll be piped into the creek,” Mule muttered to me. “Causing a severe bout of e-coli in the under-twelves.”

“Which Gosling will find a cure for double-quick,” I added.

“And you ain't kidding.”

“Over there,” Sol flung his arm out indicating a long concrete block without windows in the distance. “Is what our cousins down-under call a freezing works.”

“He's a piece a work, ain't he?” Mule said loudly. “It's a rinky-dink *slaughterhouse*, for Chrissakes. Somethin' Raw Pines could sure do with, considerin' how much business it gives to the local ones.”

“Thank you, Mule.” Sol showed his teeth in a parody of a grin. “You're a regular entertainer.”

“Yeah, I do a fearful rendering of *Git Along Little Dogies*.”

Sol pointed again at the concrete block. "That will be where the animals are processed.

"Humanely." He glared at Mule as if he'd like to send him in there.

"It's where the animals twinkle-toe in one door and come out another a hamburger," Mule told the group.

Sol scowled at him as he pointed in the opposite direction. "Then, down where the lake used to be, that's the meat packing plant. You can't see it from here, or, rather, you can just see the tip of the chimney."

"The smell of burnin' bones and hair from this place once it gets goin' will sure make your mouth water."

"So Ladies and Gentlemen," Sol continued, trying to summon the group's attention off Mule.

"I'm sure you'll agree that Finch Industry's new venture will create hundreds of badly needed new jobs."

Mule grinned like a maniac. "So this is where all them bankrupt ranchers and cowpokes, the buckaroos and the wranglers, the general and feed store managers and everyone else in the unemployed hokey cokey will pass their bleak days."

"And you? Where do you fit in?" someone asked.

He laughed mirthlessly. "I don't guess I'll fit in anyplace. But maybe I'll be the guy aimin' the bolt pistol."

With a baleful glare at Mule, Sol herded his group back toward the prefabricated barn. "Mule, I need you to get the coffee machines on. But," he added in a low voice, "just set them up and turn them on." He turned to me. "I do wonder when he's ever going to learn how to make decent coffee."

"How about never? Is never any good to you?" Mule trudged off in the direction of the hut.

Sol looked at me like a dog expecting a pat. "Enjoy it?"

"A riot," I answered and then called toward the retreating back. "Mule?"

He stopped. "What?"

"Can I talk to you?"

"Talk?" As if that didn't make part of his vocabulary.

Sol flapped his hands in nervous agitation. "Alex, if you don't mind...Mule's a little occupied just now." Was he worried Mule and I were going to gossip about him? The idea.

"Yes talk," I called to Mule. "But in the meantime, Momma needs spare beds. Two. You got any?"

He nodded. "I'll take 'em over to her later. And I'll be in the Thud around six. If you want to...*talk*, we can do it then."

"Good idea." Sol beamed from me to Mule. "We'll be there at six."

As I drove back along the trail, it didn't seem such a bad idea. Yes, I *would* like to meet up with Sol. And now I came to think about it, I'd like to meet up with him more than Mule who, if he had anything to tell me about my father, could wait.

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Unlike the rest of High Falls, the Thud Bar remained much the same, except it was emptier than it used to be.

"The drought and closures are hitting home," Charlie the bar-owner told me as he jabbed the juke box with a straightened coat-hanger. "Folk are just biding their time until they can get employment on Raw Pines. Now what can I getcha, Alex? Usual barrel of whiskey?"

"For now I'll have ginger ale." Ginger ale made part of my stunning plan to get Sol to unload about Sam.

Old Doc Trillium sat hunched up on a tractor seat at the bar, knocking back his second shot of Wild Turkey. He snorted when I asked for ginger ale. "How about I buy you a nice beer, Alex?" You could cut his pleasant tone with a knife.

"Doc, you can buy a beer and then just throw it down the john. 'Cause that's where it'll end up."

Charlie rooted around behind the bar, under it, peered into boxes that hadn't been moved since Custer's time. After an eternity in the stock-room, he returned holding two Canadian Dry bottles in triumph. He blew the cobwebs off and rubbed at the dust with his hand. "Only two," he said.

"Don't get much call..."

"That's more than enough." I bent over the counter and hid them under the bar. "When I ask for a shot for me, fill the glass with this." I rattled the bottles.

"Where do you think you are?" Trillium scoffed. "The Ritz? Who drinks ginger ale from a shot glass, I ask you? Gained some class, have we, in the time you haven't bothered to come visit?"

I ignored him and sat back on a bicycle saddle, checking the joint out. About the only light in the place filtered down over the pool table. "Not much changed in here," I said to Charlie. "Although you got new stuff on the juke now."

“Some of the old regulars miss the old tunes.” Charlie leaned on the bar. “They still like to get busy singing Jim Reeves, off-key and the words all wrong: *Stalking in the rain, all black and blue...*”

“Isn't that how it goes?” Trillium asked looking puzzled.

I sniggered. “I guess everything changes. The only place I recognize in High Falls is the Pike Ranch.”

Trillium harrumphed. “And that's thanks to Sam. He's responsible for how the Pike Ranch is now. He was the one who told Josh Pike not to over-pasture, to move the cattle on after ten days, to let the natural grasses recover and old Josh listened. Now they're reaping the benefits of blue grama and buffalo grass, abundant clover and purple sedge. Sam said don't kill off the rattlers, coyotes, badgers, gophers, let the cattle benefit from natural challenges. Make them strong and they are.”

“Rattlers, coyotes, badgers and gophers? Reckon I'd call a cop if I saw that lot together.” I took my own shot-glass full of fizzing ginger ale together with a beer and a regular whiskey over to a barrel and waited for Sol whose entrance was announced by Trillium.

“Oh joy, it's Solo Mio.”

“Alex,” Sol greeted me like a best friend. “Tell me, what news of your uncle? I hear he's left Silver Creek and is now back in Verdigris. Hoped he might have dropped by Raw Pines on his way, still, I guess he sent you instead.”

“He's busy, busy.”

“Oh sure he is. He's saints Cosmas and Damian rolled into one.”

I did a double-take to see if he was serious. But he sat there wide-eyed, exuding sincerity.

“So that's why a million white folk are walking about with one black leg in Verdigris.” Trillium sounded like he'd had an epiphany.

I scratched my head. Was this conversation half-crooked or was it me? Is this what happened when you drank ginger ale? Speaking of which—“Drink up.” I downed mine in a gulp, suppressing a burp. He did the same with his beer and shot, and I went to the bar for a refill.

“You're not working for the Bugle anymore?” I enquired when I returned, throwing back my drink and encouraging him to follow.

He obliged. “No. You have no idea how tiring it was when the editor censored every damn word I wrote. But now I have free rein, and I've already had honorary mentions in several journals for my articles on the food production industry. Didn't your uncle tell you?”

I twisted my face into an expression I hoped conveyed *sure he did, all the time* and went for another refill.

“What are you doing, you goose?” Trillium hissed at me as I passed, and I hissed back just like a goose.

When I returned to the barrel, Sol had lit up a joint. I glanced at Charlie. “It’s okay,” Sol said. “He doesn’t mind.” When he offered it to me, I took a weak puff but exhaled it immediately. All fine and dandy for Sol to get stoned but I wanted a clear head.

And by now, Sol was well on his way, the dope and the alcohol making him languid and, best of all, talkative. He took another hit, his mouth puckered around the joint before he said, “I’m sure glad to hear you say that your uncle’s pleased with my work.”

Did I say that?

He swallowed his shot and wiped the corners of his mouth with his finger. “Because there was a little *incident* just over a month ago, and your uncle was mad at me.” He leaned forward at an alarming tilt and said in a low tone, “You remember that guy I was with at the mine meeting?”

I looked at the ceiling. “Now let me see.” I drummed my fingers on my lips.

“Sam Barrowdale. He caused me trouble. He told your uncle that he knew Oxiprine was unsafe. And your uncle accused me of telling him.”

He was losing me here. “Oxiprine?”

“Oh, some anticonvulsant his sister was taking. Thing is, there *was* some problem with the drug but it was being kept hush-hush. Someone died of heart failure, and there was a teeny-weeny hint that it was caused by Oxiprine.” He waved his hand as if to dismiss the idea. “God, if the drug companies made a public announcement every time aspirin killed someone, just where would we be?”

Without aspirin I guess. But I’d learned something. I now knew that Sam went to Verdigris to confront my uncle. “If you didn’t tell him, how did Sam know about this problem of Oxiprine?”

Sol shrugged and nearly fell off his stool from the effort. “Search me. I didn’t know anything about it and it took me a helluva time to convince your uncle I didn’t tell him. I’m not even sure he still doesn’t *quite* believe me.”

“I’m sure he does,” I sympathized. “After all, he’s grateful for that information you gave him on Sam.” I know I was sticking my neck on the line here—but the odds were on my side. Who knew Sam when he was

sixteen? Who knew both Sam and my uncle? Who was a double-crossing slimeball?

“He told you he was grateful to me?” He looked at me with hopeful sheep-dog's eyes that I wanted to slap off his face. Two minutes in this guy's company and he was like a mouthful of sand you can't spit out no matter how hard you try.

“Sure. Boy, that was a story and a half.”

Sol giggled through his wet nose. “It was a while ago now.” His eyes went distant as if he was remembering the event. “Sam was easy to fool.”

“Was he?” I rearranged my face to try and look only half interested. “Run it by me again. I feel like a laugh.” I raised my eyes to the ceiling. Oh Sam, forgive me. Please understand I just have to know because maybe it'll help me understand where you are now.

He hiccupped. “Okay. You'll enjoy it—you being what you are.”

And what do you think I am? But, worse, what are you? I gritted my teeth and came out with something I swear I'll never say again: “Bet he was something else when he was sixteen, huh?”

My stomach lurched and disgust sucked the wind out of me. To stop myself hitting something I took the damp joint and pretended to take a hit before I handed it back which made him give a loud laugh for no reason I could see.

He looked around for another drink. But I'd given him enough. I wanted him to sing like a bird, not collapse. “Oh boy,” he murmured, almost to himself. “He was something else right enough. Sixteen? You should've seen him when I first met him—a fourteen-year-old little angel with the cutest...” He stopped and grinned lopsided at me.

I was *this* much, *this* much from tipping the asshole off his stool.

As Sol rounded his hands to illustrate his point he knocked his beer over, spilling the dregs over old Doc Trillium's shoes. He was on his way out but this sure stopped him in his tracks. He peered down over his glasses. “Dear, dear,” he said. “Looks like we've been visited by the clumsy fairy.” He shot me a look that said he'd like to hang me from the nearest tree. “You, young man, have some explaining to do,” he muttered out the corner of his mouth before flat-footing toward the exit.

I guess old bat-ears would pick up our conversation. Well, that was okay—Trillium couldn't think any worse of me than he did already. I turned my attention back to Sol and gave a faux-merry laugh. “My uncle didn't mention you'd told him *that*. Your version sounds much more interesting. Go on.”

Sol looked pleased to have an audience. "Right on. I'm a story-teller, I am." He squeezed the last hit out of his toke, fiddled with his empty glass and then began. He talked just like a stoned drunk, backtracking and correcting himself but, in the end, perhaps because I was an expert in such language, I pieced his ramblings together into something more coherent.

The boy fascinated him, and for two years Sol stalked the warehouse district of Silver Creek, where most of the homeless lived, trying to catch sight of him. On lucky days he even managed to talk to him. But Sol took his time about luring the kid away, not because of the boy's innocent look but because he had a reputation for being a fighter often caught between street gangs who'd pick on him because he wouldn't join any of the clans. And that may have been the key to his survival for, although he was small for his age, he'd grown tough and wary.

"He could blow me away with one punch," Sol asserted.

Sol had once ventured to touch him—the day he'd pretended to be mad that Sam had stolen his watch. Sam *had* stolen it, but Sol wasn't mad. He didn't care about his lousy watch.

"I told him if he came back home with me I wouldn't tell the cops. I only wanted to protect him, Alex. Give him shelter and food. And I only touched his shoulder."

Sam had dealt him an upper-cut that knocked Sol clean off his feet. When he'd recovered his senses, Sam was nowhere to be seen and Sol's watch was resting on his stomach.

"I couldn't understand it. How could he prefer that sleaze-ball's company to mine?" He slumped lower over his empty glass. "A flea-ridden, crusted, diseased *bum*. *Itinerant*. Dumb name." He wagged his head. "I saw the two of them every night together in front of a derelict building, sometimes cooking up a mess, sometimes chatting like old *buddies*, sometimes just sitting side by side staring at the stars. And this *hell in boots* would *touch* my Sammy. Made me sick to my stomach. Touch his hair, touch his arm. *Smile* at him with those teeth. Makes you shiver, huh?"

Not as much as you do, I thought, my stomach churning.

The night Itinerant died, Sol was lurking as usual in the shadows, waiting his chance. From Itinerant's hacking he knew the guy was pretty sick and it surprised him when Sam and the sick man got into a loud argument because he'd never heard harsh words between them before. He was even more amazed when Itinerant picked Sam up by his collar and whacked him hard enough to send his head rocking.

The violence excited Sol. He considered charging in like the cavalry but the crazy filthy hobo looked too insane. "And Sam just took it."

When Itinerant calmed down he allowed Sam to help him into the derelict building. Sol followed and as he approached the door he heard more shouts and violent scuffling inside as if the fight had flared up again. A noise like a body hitting something hard was followed by a sharp crack. A cloud of dust billowed out making Sol wonder if there'd been an explosion.

As the dust settled he heard Sam crying the hobo's name. Gathering his courage, Sol looked inside. A wall had collapsed and the weight of the falling rubble had caused part of the floor to give way. Sam was levering himself over the side of the hole and would've fallen if Sol hadn't grabbed his arm to haul him back out. Probably realizing it was too far to get down to the fallen man, Sam sat beside the hole and trembled. He looked up at Sol. "He f...fell."

"Oh Sam. This is terrible. They're going to think you killed him." Sol began to see some kind of opportunity here, and he let exaggerated shock enter his voice.

Sam reared back in terror and confusion. "I didn't not..."

"I believe you, Sam." Sol now softened his voice to show what an understanding, sympathetic guy he was.

Sam shifted a little closer, perhaps sensing comfort, and side by side they peered down into the hole. "C...can we h...*help* him? Please?"

It was too dark to see anything but Sol picked up a flashlight lying beside a filthy mattress. In the light he could see the strange angle of Itinerant's head and his open dead eyes.

"Oh dear." Sol, continuing his pantomime, loomed over Sam. "The cops'll say you were trying to rob a sick old man. After all, you do have a reputation of stealing." He looked sternly at the boy who was staring at him with huge, terrified eyes, no doubt thinking of the watch.

Sol hunkered down next to him, Sam's friend once again. "Problem is, Sam. There was a bunch of guys outside just now saw you arguing. They're witnesses to the violence, and they might tell the cops that you pulled him in here and punched him."

"I d...didn't *pull*. It's his *bed*." He pointed to the old mattress.

"Sam, they're not going to believe you. You have a history of violence too." He saw from the boy's face that this was true enough. "They'll say you murdered him. Take you into custody."



Sam gave a shrill cry and hugged his skinny knees to his body, trying to curl into a small ball.

Sol got up and stood over him again, the picture of authority. "Come with me and I'll show you why they'll say that." He held out his hand to help Sam up but the boy got to his feet without assistance, his face white and hollow, his arms wrapped around his thin shaking body.

Sol ushered him out through the door and pointed to a notice pinned on the wall outside. "Can you see what that says?"

He waited while Sam's lips moved until he spelt out each letter. "Con...de...m...d. Condemned?" He stared at Sol as if realizing the word for the first time. "But I...I...did...didn't..."

"Who's going to believe a big boy like you can't read? They're going to say you knew the danger. That you took a sick old man in there and *pushed* him over the side."

"*Stop*," I cried and put my head in my hands to stop them smashing the glass and burying the shards in Sol's flesh. My innocent little boy. I knew you then, I'd already seen you. Where the hell was I when this nightmare was happening to you? Wasting time in useless *fantasies* that went nowhere.

"I didn't tell any lies," Sol said in his defense, perhaps seeing some of my anguish. "That's exactly what the cops would've said."

My head and ears filled with rushing blood and he took my silence for acceptance.

He burped gently and relaxed. "He was quaking in his sneakers. He wanted to call an ambulance, but I told him they'd trace the call to either him or me."

"So you pretended to give him an alibi," I said, forcing the words through clenched teeth.

"You and I think alike, Alex. Yes, that's exactly what I did. I told him if he came home with me and if the cops came looking for him, then I'd tell them he'd been with me all evening."

"And there never were a bunch of guys out with you to witness anything, were there? You made that up. It was an accidental death and the cops never came looking."

Sol's face puckered around his grin and he looked at me as if I'd passed a test. "No. But I told him they did. I told him that they came to my office the next day asking if I knew where he was. And I told them he'd been with me all evening. And night."

You bastard, you...

“And he still believes that today. Makes him eternally grateful to me for providing an alibi because there was no way he could explain his story, and he knew it.”

I'd have liked to have smacked his smug expression into his teeth.

“And I told the gist of all that,” he said with the air of finishing a good tale. “To your uncle.”

Lightning jagged through my scalp and I wiped at the sweat that was pouring down my face. I needed to hold on just a moment longer, just to find out something else. I stiffened my lips to stop them shaking. “So you took him home. Go on.”

He gave a smug smile. “Your uncle doesn't know any of this part.”

“Go on.”

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Halleluiah, Sol inwardly cried when they entered his apartment, and he closed the door. He still didn't touch the boy because, although he was still shaking with shock and cold, Sol knew that any wrong move could turn the boy into a lit tinderbox. Sol would have to wait for the right moment to deal out the comfort he proposed.

“Look at you,” he said as tenderly as he could manage. “Dirty and bruised. Go take a bath, wash up, and I'll make us some hot supper so you feel better. Does that sound good?”

Probably nothing sounded good to Sam at that moment but, robot-like, he went into the bathroom. Sol waited outside, his ear at the door. He tried the handle but Sam had locked it from the inside. So Sol was resigned for the moment to concentrating on preparing a meal of ground beef, mashed potatoes and gravy. When Sam emerged, he was wearing one of Sol's robes.

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“This young elf.” His tongue snaked over his lips at the memory. “I knew he was naked under that robe. I couldn't take my eyes off him.”

My hands curled into damp fists.

“I touched his hand.” Sol's face flushed.

This will be the moment I throttle him, I thought, glaring into eyes hazy with filthy memory. But, before my hands made their move, he deflated as the air he'd been holding came out with a whistle. “And it was

as if someone had opened the window and let the frigid air in. This little kid, half my size, stared at me until I was left in no doubt that if I made one false move, if I ever touched him again, I was dead. Dead and gone.” The shine left his eyes, and he shivered.

It was my turn to let out the breath I'd been holding. Sam *would* know how to kill the mood, that's for sure. “What did you do, throw him out?”

He gave me a hurt look. “What do you take me for? Heartless? No he stayed a few days. Two days. On the floor. I watched him sleep, but I never got near him, not even the next day when I told him about the alibi. I told him there was a hunt out for him, that he was the prime suspect until I stuck my neck on the line and gave them the alibi. I thought he'd be grateful but he just nodded when I told him. I mean, he was grateful, in his own way...”

Just not in the way you wanted. I imagined his fruitless, frustrating attempts to get near Sam and every time he did the glint in Sam's eyes would warn him off. “And he still shows that gratitude, doesn't he? Even today.”

He was wrapped in his own drug and alcohol haze and didn't notice, or ignored, the contempt in my voice. “In his own way.” He sniffed and looked longingly at his empty glass. “Sometimes needs a little persuasion like when Norman Kuller offered him the job. See, he was planning to get on an open boxcar heading east, go seek his fortune he said. And, you know Alex, I just need to have the little fella close by. Still do. I haven't seen him for a while lately and I feel like something's leaked away from me. But he'll turn up, he always does.” He looked blearily at my face and saw something of my true feelings. “Look.” He rocked backward on his stool. “It's not like I *blackmail* him, Alex. I only use this cop story when I need his assistance with something.”

“Needed a little persuading to go to that mine meeting, did he?”

“A little.”

I remembered Sam's humiliation at the meeting. “And what else have you persuaded him to do?” I growled.

He rubbed his hand over his face, thinking. “There was an SDS meeting we went to a couple of years ago. Needed to write an article on police brutality.”

SDS? Sol was the cause of the hellish night Sam spent in jail? SDS? The charred badge I'd found on the Pike Ranch which Sam said wasn't his? Fury bubbled up in me again, a red curtain came down over my eyes

and I smashed my hand on the barrel top. “You burned his hut down. You dirty lousy son of a bitch. I’m going to tear your fucking head off and...”

His eyes were frozen in shock, transfixed on my face as he muttered, “You don’t understand. The mine. If he didn’t have a place to live, then he could come to work in the mine...He *owed* me.”

“He *owed* you,” I snarled, my hands clawing at his throat.

“Alex?”

My head cleared a little at the voice and, for some reason, I thought it was Mule. It wasn’t. Instead, Charlie beckoned, crooking his finger at me. “You don’t know how sorry I am to interrupt ‘cause I reckon you’re about to knock his head off, and I don’t honestly give a rat’s ass about Mister High Falutin’ there. But your mother’s on the phone. Says it’s urgent.”

## Chapter Thirty: Sam

“Okay, can you hear me?”

“Give him 5ccs.”

“Should we intubate? He's hypertensive.”

“We're going to have to go to surgery.”

“We're losing him. BP's eighty and crashing.”

“Okay, 20 ccs of...”

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The tree scratched the window pane. A woodpecker creaked in the branches. It would be good to rest his cheek against the rough bark and listen to the whisper of new leaves. He moved his head too quickly, and pain stabbed through him for six seconds of agony.

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The tree was still there. A squirrel scampered up the trunk. Imagine climbing into the canopy to watch the world from the tree-tops. He moved his head, and pain stabbed through his body until his face creased in agony, leaving him sweaty and breathless. This time there was no blissful oblivion. With care, he lifted his head and surveyed his body with a grimace.

It took him an hour to reach a decision. First he pulled off the wires stuck to his chest and held his breath as the machine beside the bed gave a high whistle. When no one came to investigate, he pulled the IV out of his hand and made it bleed but the pain was nothing compared to removing the catheter from his penis. When the room stopped spinning he tapped the solid plaster-cast on his left arm with his right hand and left a smear of blood on the clean white surface.

He lay back against the pillows until the tree told him in branch-language to get up.

A bout of nausea hit him as his legs untangled from the blankets. When the world righted itself, he placed one foot on the floor and his tongue between his teeth as he concentrated on not toppling over. Keeping his eye on the tree for guidance, he slowly brought his other leg down and gasped as pain thundered once more from his feet to his head. He sank back onto the bed and waited for it to pass. He needed to piss and eyed the

sink. Climbing a mountain might've been easier, but he tottered there in the end, lifting his dumbass paper gown, and strained out a couple of drops. A draught on his backside meant it was hanging out so he swayed up the tilt of the floor to the closet where he found his boots and jeans but no shirt or cash.

He returned to the sink to drink from the faucet and when he lifted his head he caught sight of himself in the mirror. Black, puffed up eyes, skin crimson and shiny around the scabs, eyelashes crusted, hair matted in thick wads. Now he understood why the inside of his mouth felt like chopped liver.

The antiseptic smell out in the corridor reminded him of something but he couldn't think what and he didn't care much—he just knew he wanted fresh air.

The door next to his was open. Inside, an old man lay flat out in the bed and didn't move even when Sam opened the squeaking closet door to take out a white button-down shirt. Slipping it on, he hissed as if scalded when he touched the taped wound on the left side of his abdomen.

Feeling giddy from his efforts, he rested against the wall until he got his wind back. Then he ventured out into the corridor but stopped when voices sounded in a room two doors down. He pressed himself to the wall and slid along until, through the crack in the open door, he saw a man in a white coat talking to a guy leaning against a desk.

“I am so beat.”

Why was that gruff voice so familiar?

“Take a load off, Timothy. Just a second, let me sort these papers out. His file's in here somewhere. Here it is. Do you want to take a look now or later?”

“Now's fine.”

“You do look tired, Tim. Are you feeling all right?”

“This accident at the mine has been a headache. I'm thinking about pulling out, it's not worth the trouble keeping it going.”

The man in the white coat made a sympathetic noise. “The clinical trials haven't been very conclusive, have they?”

“That's an understatement if I ever heard one. Data feedback is continually inconclusive. The only certainty is that miners are an unwilling bunch of time-wasters. Now,” Timothy leaned forward and took a file from the other man's hand, “let's take a look at my other nemesis. Jesus, how he found himself in here, I'll never know.”

“The pick-up crew's to blame. Their instructions were to collect the woman and child and bring them back here. In their defense, they didn't expect anyone else to turn up. And when he fell through the hole in the floor—which they didn't know was there—they were as surprised as he was. They felt honor-bound to call in for back up. Just as I felt honor-bound to do what I could. I am a doctor, after all.”

“He has some pretty extensive injuries. What caused the coma again?”

“He was semi-comatose. He had an allergic reaction to the antipyretic. It hasn't happened before.”

“Was it one of ours? Then it's worth noting.”

“Of course. We've been pumping him full of Bemmyne, and he's been more aware of things in the last few days, although confused.”

“Confused just about sums him up in general. Make sure the results of Bemmyne are recorded as well and let me know when he comes out of it because you'll have to be prepared. I guarantee you'll have trouble with him. My best advice is to keep him under for as long as you can.”

“But we'll need him fully conscious to get reliable data on the dynamic properties of his brain waves.”

“You're right. Sorry. I'm not thinking straight. You'll just have to restrain him then.”

“You think that's necessary?”

“You don't know this guy—he's aggressive as a feral mutt.”

“Aggression could be part of his condition so restraining him would affect the tests.”

“Well, you'll just have to find a way to make him compliant to your methods.”

“Would money help? How much should we offer him?”

“I'm not giving him any money. I just want to know why he's not wired up straight. If we can find out how his brain works and why it's different, it could be a major breakthrough for us”

“We're planning to start on the frontal cortex first. I assume he's expendable, in case there's a slip or two?”

“Pretty much. No one's come looking for him these last ten days and I don't think anyone will now.” The man called Timothy groaned.

“Tim? Let me give you an injection now.”

Finch waved his hands. “I'm good for another day or so—we're so low, save it until I really need it.”

“You might just be tired, I guess. It's been a hard month for you—having to cope with a loved one's passing is difficult. But it's vital you find Alex and soon. Why's he being so difficult?”

“Alex, as you know, has never been easy. But I heard he hasn't dropped off the planet—he's up in High Falls and I intend to go up and get him back, it shouldn't be a problem. I'll be back with him by Wednesday, Thursday latest. Can you have everything ready?”

Sensing that the two men were about to leave the office, Sam checked for escape routes. The only one available was a door to his left which, he discovered, led into a storage cupboard. Once inside, he helped himself to a clean blanket then, pressing his ear to the door, he waited until the two men's voices and footsteps dwindled into the distance.

Back out in the corridor he found a window that had been left open so he hauled himself over the ledge and dropped to the ground outside, a jolt that caused him to sit back on his heels and rock to try to ease the pain that consumed his body.

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A hot-air grid was a tempting place to spend the night but it was right on a busy main thoroughfare so he opted for a urine-smelling dark building instead. It took him an age to make his way up the staircase and he had to stop halfway to get his second wind. When he reached the top he opened a door that led onto a rooftop bathed in silver moonlight. *Come gently over the stones, my love/Come through the moonlight to me/Is that your step on the stair I hear?* Was that really music he heard? Or was it in his head?

It played over and over on a loop as he sank down against the parapet. He hunched his knees up into the most comfortable position, wrapped his blanket around his sweaty body and blew into the night air that smelt of chili.

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The sun on his face made his skin itch under the crusts of scabs. He brushed away a fly that sucked at a wound, and the movement made his head hurt. He was also thirsty, so, trying to save himself from pain and giddiness, he crawled over to a rainwater puddle and lapped at it like a cat. As he wiped his mouth with his sleeve he wondered if it was quite normal



for his mind to feel like a wiped-clean plate. He was obviously sick but he didn't know why. And now he needed some kind of direction –everyone did, didn't they? So, using the parapet for support, he got to his feet and sniffed the early morning air that now smelt of coffee.

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He'd been trudging along the asphalt road for more than an hour with his thumb out, getting slapped with rainwater by passing trucks. His steps were dragging and his chin sinking lower toward his chest in weariness when, at last, a long trailer pulled in.

“Holy hell, young fella!” the burly driver cried when Sam gingerly levered himself into the cab. “Whatcha do? Have a misunderstanding with a bulldozer?” His forearms were as wide as Sam's thighs.

Sam watched the wipers scraping the dirt off the windshield and hugged his blanket to his chest.

“Which way ya headin?”

Sam sucked in breath. He said something but no sound came out so he coughed and pointed straight ahead.

“Fair 'nough. That's the way you want it.” The man crunched into gear and hit the gas.

“Whatcha say your name was?”

Sam mulled it over and opened his mouth again. This time he was luckier. “Alex,” he said. So his voice *was* working. “Falls...H...High Falls.”

Lurching in the swaying cab, he watched fog filter through the trees until he settled into sleep, only coming to when the vehicle pulled off the road and stopped on the soft shoulder. The driver looked at him. “This is as far as it goes, Alex. I'm heading east now.”

Why's he calling me Alex? Sam wondered as he pushed his door open. He yelped as newly awoken pain shot through him with a violence that doubled him over.

“Hey, Alex,” the trucker called. “You wanna do something about that. Go to a hospital.”

Sam drew in his breath with an effort. “Thanks,” he muttered.

“And you can have this. You look like you need it.” The trucker threw him a wax-paper parcel which Sam caught one-handed.

“Thanks,” he said again.

“You're welcome. And thank *you* for the stimulat<sup>i</sup>n' conversation.”

Sam stood ankle-deep in mud and watched the trailer's rear lights disappear over the hill. He held his breath, hoping it would take his pain away, but only succeeded in making his lungs hurt. With a grunt of impatience, he squared his shoulders thinking he'd better start feeling right again soon because this sick business was downright tedious.

It was around seven o'clock if the sinking sun was anything to go by, and there was a run-over deer in the road. The still-pink innards spread over the asphalt were attracting a pack of crows and the sight made his stomach rumble. Thank God for the trucker's sandwich, he thought, glad he wouldn't have to prize off a piece of deer gut off the road and eat that. A dense clump of trees off to the left seemed a safe place to spend the night and he headed into it, his feet silent on the thick, springy leaf fall which gave off a faint reek of mud and rotting vegetation with every step.

Resisting the urge to pick up an interesting looking piece of fallen maple, he instead examined a small plant with a hairy stem and downy leaves. He avoided the daisy-like flowers and broke off a stem, spangling the air with citrus. Feverfew. He chewed on a leaf and wondered where exactly the hell he was in these isolated backwoods. He couldn't sit out in the open like this, it was getting cold, and he needed to find shelter for the night so, looking around, he chose a pine overhang as a good place.

Within minutes he was wrapped in his blanket and settled into a pile of gathered pine shoots. *"He has legs from here to San Antonio. And that black slinky hair! When he talked about you, you'd think he'd hung the moon and you should've seen him looking at those photos of you in your drawers. Kept crossing his legs he did, but I saw."* He barked a laugh, wondering where that had come from. As if in answer, a firecracker exploded in his head revealing an image of a beautiful girl with a halo of blonde curls. Amy! He threw back his blanket in agitation. She must be worried out of her mind about him. Just how long had he been lost to the world? A week? Two weeks? What about her fees?

He half rose, his hand clutching a tree trunk but then sank back down. There was nothing he could do right now, not here in the middle of a forest. He'd rest up tonight, and tomorrow he'd get to High Falls. High Falls? Why in hell was he heading there? Now the picture of black, slinky-haired Alex flared in front of his eyes and it was quickly followed by the sound of Timothy Finch's voice. *I'm going to High Falls in the next few days. I'll bring Alex back with me. Have everything ready.*

Sam leaned back against the tree trunk. Two minutes ago his mind had been a clean slate, now it was just a jumble of worry and concern.

What should he deal with first? His stomach growled in reply so he opened his sandwich.

## Chapter Thirty-One: Alex

“Call Liza,” Momma told me as I watched Sol’s ass blunder out through the Thud Bar door. I’d have kicked it if I hadn’t been on the phone.

The air smelled tainted like someone was frying liver as I wandered up the Main Drag and sat on the boardwalk outside the bankrupt feed-store. I crashed my fist onto a broken wooden plank making it splinter, then I wandered back and called Liza.

“I’m fine,” she said after hello. “How’re you?”

“You on a downer?”

“No.” Women have this uncanny knack of packing a helluva lot of sentiment into one word.

Problem now was to find out which part of her life sucked. Let’s take a stab at the gig. “How’d it go?”

A pregnant pause, and then in the same dismal tone, “I reckon I captured the spirit of the music.”

Not too well, then. “Great.”

“But, you know, with just the piano you can’t really achieve the depth of *Come Back* and *Once a Day, Twice a Day* or the emotion of *Perfect Score*. You need the guitar to help with those funky tempo changes.”

I didn’t quite agree. I often figured that the pristine sounds of the piano caught the penetrating hooks perfectly, and, if thumped hard enough, could beat the strings hands down. My fingers itched to get at a piano to prove it. “Right,” I said to fill the silence.

“So the sooner you and I are back on the road, the better. Huh?”

“Right.”

“I knew you’d agree.” Her voice took an upturn. “Orville Johnson is at this very minute planning our next tour schedule. The two of us, Alex Finch and Liza Suggs, or Liza Suggs and... Together.”

“Uh huh.”

“I told your mother that you’d be coming back to Verdigris after the funeral. That is when you said you’d be coming south again, right?”

“Oh, right.”

“She’s great. Your mother.”

She sure was. Turned out that after their one phone conversation, Liza was now the apple that hit Momma smack in the eye. “They play together,” Momma told the celestial twins—the cousins who’d arrived for the funeral and not their own, although they looked half-dead and I just hoped the pastor wouldn’t bury them instead of JP.

“Fancy,” they said, huddled together in a shroud of grey silk up one end of the couch where I usually rested my feet.

“That's right,” Momma affirmed. “Liza told me that she and Alex are, what did she say? Hin and Y...Yang and Hin or Yin and Yang. Something along those lines, and he's the shady one and she's the sunny one. And, what did she say? Oh yes, they make a symphony together, a consonance of sound.”

The cousins looked blank, and Momma shrugged to show it didn't make much sense to her either.

“Imagine a clash of cymbals,” I explained and they all nodded knowingly.

“You have made your mother very happy,” the cousin with the cough as ripe as cheese intoned.

“What?”

“I didn't say anything.”

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After flicking through my well-worn *Andy Panda and Pesto the Pup*, I lay in my virginal narrow bed that night and watched branch shadows play on the ceiling while I thought about my future. I imagined a sagging bed that Liza and I would share in our frame house standing on a hill in Verdigris. It would have wide windows giving it a surprised look with beige shingle and an off-white peeling clapboard fronting. The backyard would have a swing with a dusty scuff mark underneath and when I crept home late at night my pork chop supper would be congealing in cold grease in the kitchen.

I shifted in my little bed. What was the point of thinking about the future when there was enough present to get through? Such as a funeral.

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The prairie beyond the cemetery fence jellied in the last wisps of morning mist. Old JP's casket that had sat under a Lucite cross inside the old white church now lay in a dry hole in the ground waiting for someone to throw the first sod.

Momma obliged and intoned, “I did what's right by Josh.”

Now there's a fine thing. How would it feel to know that, during a lifetime, this was the greatest emotion you'd aroused in your chosen partner?

I looked down at the pinewood casket with its single handful of earth scattered over the top and pictured old JP's dead face inside.

I wondered how they knew he was dead—he always looked that way to me. Jeez, I'd always been mean to the old guy, and he didn't deserve it. He used to go to all my school sports events—don't reckon he ever missed one.

“You're pretty good at baseball,” he told me once after he'd yelled fit to bust in the parents' stand when I ran out a ground ball. When I walked to the home plate he'd call, “We'll see you in major league, Alex” and I wished at the time I could take a swing of the bat at his grizzled old noggin because I hated that he was the only one who could give me a ride to baseball practice. And I hated the way he cheered, and I hated him because he wasn't my pa.

Aw hell. Tears welled up and I wondered how JP would feel if he knew the only one who cried at his funeral was me. Maybe he'd have been, I don't know, kinda pleased. In a way.

The wind whipped Momma's black hat off and bowled it along between the headstones so I chased after it. It stopped tauntingly for a moment and then tore off again as if playing a game before coming to rest against a pair of well polished shoes, so shiny I could see my reflection in them.

“Mule,” I said as he bent his bulk to retrieve the hat. “I thought we were going to meet up at the Thud last night.”

He straightened with difficulty, squashing the hat to his wide chest and made a sound resembling a cow with poor digestion. “When your uncle arrives, no one has a private life.” He propped himself up against the pedestal of a huge stone angel with wings widespread, her face staring miserably downwards like she didn't like Mule's news either. So Uncle Tim's less than a mile away. Isn't that just fine and dandy?

Aloud I asked, “You know if my Pa's grave is here?”

He wouldn't have looked more surprised if I'd enquired about the color of his underpants. His eyes bulged and his mouth opened but nothing came out. After a helluva time he muttered,

“Don't reckon so,” out the corner of his mouth.

“What did he die of?”

“Guess his heart stopped beating. In the end.”

I fastened what I hoped was a steely gaze on him. "Listen, don't go warbling that old folderol song no more, because I'm sick of it. Now, get real. What did he die of?"

His tongue snaked out over his lips. The worm had turned sure enough and he knew it. "You tryin' to tell me you don't know how your Pa died?"

"No one ever told me nor Momma. She says she doesn't know."

"She knows sure enough, just never had any reason to be interested one way or another 'cause that lil' ol' gal's got pride. She weren't much more than a soft pumpkin to your Pa, and she knew it."

"Oh." I know I should've been expecting this, but even so his words still sent a frozen shiver down my spine.

"You gotta realize your father had no time for a little country farmgirl like her. He and your uncle were chemistry whiz-kids and that's mostly what they were interested in. They were always distillin' stuff that looked like slime which, for all I knew or cared, they ate. You know, like that old guy Jekyll and the one who hides, always tryin' stuff out. Until one day Tom Finch sampled their combined hodgepodge and came out in this purple rash-type disease with yellow festerin' pustules all over him. Hooooeee."

I grimaced, not wanting to picture it. "And that's what killed him?"

"Sure was. Poisonin' in the blood, they said."

"And that would be around nineteen sixty?" I waited while he did his mental math.

"Fifty nine."

So I was ten. "I don't suppose my Pa ever came up to Raw Pines? You know, when I was a kid."

Mule spent over-long trying to clear his throat of an obstruction which he finally coughed up and spat out. Maybe he was hoping that by the time he'd done all that, I'd have forgotten my original question, but he was plain out of luck. "Did he?" I insisted.

He rummaged obscenely in his pocket and pulled out a handful of jellybeans which he vacuumed, pocket garbage and all, into his mouth. He said as distinctly as anyone can with that pile in his mouth, "He came up. But, look kid, don't you go kiddin' yourself you were a product of some wild passionate love affair. 'Cause I tell you your pa was so high on the stuff they brewed that night he could've been fuckin' the family hog for all he knew or cared. No disrespect to your ma meant." He grinned, revealing teeth obliterated with red gum.

“Oh God.” I crumpled back onto a slab of marble and swallowed down the bile that had risen in my throat with the image he conjured up.

Mule shuffled, perhaps touched by a smidgeon of conscience. “Look kid, your Ma was very brave. She kept you didn't she when she discovered Tom Finch couldn't even remember her name? And when you consider that the alternative was easier...” He left that part unfinished. “But she wanted the kid, you, so the twins offered Josh Pike the little run-down, nobody-used farmhouse on their land as well as a pretty useless field or two if he'd marry her and get her out of their hair.”

“I thought JP already had the ranch.”

“No, he worked on Raw Pines like me. They gave it to him on the understandin'.”

On the understanding my Momma would have no more to do with Tom Finch. And she kept her side of the bargain, to the letter.

“What else you wanna know while I'm aveelable and at your conveeenience?”

I was beyond words but managed to grunt, and he understood that I'd got all I needed.

“Then I'll go give your Momma a hand.”

I sank down on the flat grave stone, feeling the cold seep into my ass as I watched him leave the cemetery looking like an extra in *Night of the Living Dead*, all stiff-limbed and bloated.

The ancient pastor, who'd kept the service mercifully short and was now locking up the chapel, called to ask if I was all right. I waved to show I was. I wasn't going to collapse in a quivering mass of Jell-O, weeping and beating my breast, *Oh my father didn't love me*, no siree. This was the moment to channel my inner Joan of Arc, grit my teeth and just stand it.

I put my head in my hands and wished everything would just leave me be, including the wind which was the kind that battered your nose with the acrid smell of dry sage. And something else. I lifted my old snuzzle and took a good sniff. That sure as shooting was the stink of *heavy* cattle shit and, kill me if it wasn't wafting over from Raw Pines. “Timothy Finch, your time has come,” I decided, slapping my hands on my knees and getting to my feet. “You need to do some explaining and I need to hear it so look out 'cause here I come and I am *smoking!*”

His new eggplant Eldorado was parked in the yard. I cupped my hands to my face to peer through one of the front windows then followed the sweet smell of roast meat round the veranda to the back. And there he was. Asleep in front of a whole side of brisket that steamed on the dining



table. Except he wasn't asleep because his hand moved to crumble a piece of corn-bread onto a white lace place-setting.

When I pushed my way through the open window and untangled myself from the curtains, he looked up. "The mountain comes to Mohammed. It cheers me to see you."

Bigfatphonyliar. He'd never been cheered to see me. And he certainly didn't look it now. Instead, if his pale lined face was anything to go by, I'd say he was about to drop off his last legs.

"You okay?" I asked. But before he could answer, the door swung open and Aunt Vita swept into the room, her face flustered and blotched and her hair a mess. She gathered me to her bosom in that age-old way she had when the mood took her.

"Sugar pie," she greeted me with fumes that could stun a horse. "We're only eatin' fixins' for dinner." She waved at the loaded table. "Now you just help yourself. There's black beans, beef brisket and cornbread." No *hello Alex, how are you? Are you feeling better?* But then, when you've been hitting the tequila, cold turkey's not on the menu.

I quirked an eyebrow in my uncle's direction but he had his eyes closed. "You okay, uncle?" I asked him again.

"Course he's not, honey." Aunt Vita answered for him, steadying herself against a Queen Anne chair. "As you well know."

"That is a high-corn lie. I don't know. Anything."

"Too right," my uncle murmured without opening his eyes. "The sheer load of what you don't know could flatten the Statue of Liberty."

We let that gem rattle in the air until it settled.

"What's wrong then?" I asked.

Aunt Vita faced me, her hands on her hips, her mouth a thin line of glittering irritation. "You just *swan* off." Her spit hit me in the eye. "With that girlfriend 'a yours without a care who you leave behind. Those who took care of you since you were a bitty little nugget of a kid, all sweetness and nos? You don't care a diddly," she waved unsteadily in the general direction of my uncle, "that he's sick."

"He is?" I peered at him.

"Vita." My uncle opened his eyes and sat up straighter. "You know, I kinda hanker after some fried chicken. Maybe some hot biscuits. You reckon..." He didn't finish his sentence because the call to kitchen was like the call of the tequila bottle, and she lit outta there.

"What's she talking about?" I asked as the door closed behind her.

"It's not always easy to know."

A little humor might make him feel better. “Well you don't need me to tell you what'll help her little problem: it's called the dope-her-up-until-she-doesn't-know-her-ass-from-her-elbow cure.”

He gave a wry grimace, pushed himself up from the table and hobbled to a red plush sofa where he lay back on the cushions, his ashen face emphasizing the dark rings under his eyes. “How are you?”

“Just peachy.”

“I mean in terms of the drugs.”

“Drugs?” What the hell was he talking about? I guess he must've been confused because instead of answering, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

I moseyed into the kitchen where Aunt Vita was in a frenzy of food. She looked up from frying chicken when I entered, and I noticed she'd shaved off her eyebrows and painted new ones just below her hair-line. It made her look like a surprised Lucille Ball.

“No one to help you, Auntie?”

“Sent them home. Only like Dolores in my kitchen.” She rattled the chicken roughly in the pan, hot fat splashing on her blue satin slippers. “You rile him up, Alex, that's the problem, plowing up snakes like you do. You're not a good boy. You're a very ungrateful one. Now you just get on down to Verdigris and do like he wants.”

I knew what he wanted sure enough: slap a visor on me, snap the shirt garters in place and have me pushing a pen twelve hours a day in a dark office.

“You should be mighty proud. I would be.” She took a gulp of what she called her swizzler. By my reckoning, she should be about to pass through this snarking into the realm of slobber. “It's not like he needs much,” she went on. “Half a pint. A pint. You make it up in a few days.”

Half a pint? “He needs my *blood*?”

“Well, of course he does, honey. You know he needs blood.”

I ran my hands through my hair. What was he? One of the undead? I wasn't even a virgin.

“Auntie, I don't know. No one ever told me about this.”

“We told you. Over and over.”

“Jesus, Auntie. Maybe you did. Maybe everyone went around telling me everything at all hours of the day and night for years and years. Maybe I lost my hearing or my memory or something. But I don't know *anything* about *anything*. Auntie, I'm sorry, but so help me God I don't.” I rubbed knuckles into my burning eyes.

She stared at me, jaw hanging open a mile. “Well.” She shuffled from one foot to another and took another drink. “Maybe we forgot to tell you.”

“Then tell me now, Auntie.” Bitter tears of frustration rose at this befuddling *we told you, no we didn't* routine that everyone had perfected for some reason. “I’ll do what I can to help him. You know I will. Just tell me what’s wrong.”

Her face, except the eyebrows, crumpled as she changed mood, just like I knew she would. “You’re a good boy. A good good boy.”

“He needs blood,” I prompted. “Does this have anything to do with how my Pa died? Didn’t he have some kind of blood disorder?”

She plumped down onto a chair where she flattened out like an inflated cushion. “It dates from then.” She twirled her glass by the stem. “Tom died and Tim nearly did except the clinic found just in time that if they did something to someone’s blood and injected it, then he recovered. Same thing happened six months later.”

“And my blood does him good?”

“Yes. Yours does. Mine doesn’t.”

My mind worked like the little dust devil I could see through the kitchen window twisting up a miniature storm in the yard outside. “So it wasn’t because of the color of my eyes that Uncle Tim came for me when I was twelve.” I wasn’t really talking to her, I was thinking out loud.

Her snort turned into a hiccup. “Color of blood more like.”

I was still puzzled. “I don’t remember anyone ever taking blood.” And this time I was prepared to rise above the now-familiar, *of course they did Alex. All the time. Don’t you remember?*

“No, they never took a full donation,” she said, surprising me. “They tested you, that’s all. Just a little prick, excuse my French.” She sniggered. “To see if it was good or not.”

“But...but...” My old noodle was on overdrive here. “If they never took my blood before, whose....?”

She was morphing into the baleful, chin on chest stage. “Who’d you think? His *regular* donor. Who just died.” She raised her eyes to the ceiling as if by dying this other donor had let her down badly. “And they’re running very low on supply now. Because you, you naughty boy, kept getting drugged and that’s no good for blood.”

Okay, so I got the story now. Elementary, my dear Watson. If I died they could write this on my epitaph: *He was never the first choice. We kept him on standby, just in case.*

“What happens if I don’t give this blood?”

"He dies." Tears welled up into her blue eyes.

I whistled and then patted her shoulder, "It's okay, Auntie."

I left her sniffing into her swizzler and went back to my uncle who was now sitting on the sofa rubbing his eyes.

"You didn't need to go through all this song and dance. You could've just told me about the blood. And by the look of you it's time to get cracking." I knelt beside him. "Tell me what I have to do." I had some idea we could ask old Doc Trillium to splash it into a bucket in the cowshed, add salt, and then he could pump it into my uncle.

His eyes filled with hope. "As we need it urgently I think we should go to Verdigris tonight so tomorrow you can do what's necessary at the clinic."

"What clinic?"

He shot me his *where's your brain? On vacation?* look but I was honest injun here, I really didn't know. "My clinic," he explained. "The Gosling clinic in Verdigris."

I still had no idea what clinic that was but never mind. "Okay," I agreed.

My uncle threw me a skeptical look. "Is it as easy as that?"

"Almost," I said, getting to my feet. "In return I'd like you to apologize to a friend of mine." I still held out a hope that Sam would be waiting on my doorstep in Verdigris. Call it instinct, call it what you will but I'd cling onto that hope until my fingernails dropped off. "I want you to tell him that it was all a bunch of hooey that stuff you dealt out. About murder and the cops being after him."

He swung his legs onto the floor with a violence that belied his sickness. "Are you talking about Barrowdale?" He saw in my face that I was. "I'll see him in hell..."

"Then *screw you*." I started toward the door.

"Someone's been blabbing where they shouldn't," he said, barely above a whisper although in that tone of voice that meant someone—a certain person whose name began with an S, was three letters long and ended in L—was going to be very sorry indeed. "Again."

I half-turned to give him a second chance. "So, what's it going to be? Blood and an apology, or nothing at all? Tough call, huh?"

He glowered at me. "I always knew it would be like this. Two minutes after you entered my house, I knew exactly how you were. Why do you think I only wanted to use your blood in an emergency and not all the time? I *knew* you'd want something in return." He slapped his thigh,

mad at the situation I'd placed him in. But he had no alternative—there were no more donors.

“Okay. I'll apologize to him.”

Now, don't ask me what it was, but there was something in his look, something that said *I'll promise this, but I'll never have to keep it.*

I crept toward him, fear and suspicion swamping me. “What is it? What do you know about Sam?” His eyes slid left and I *knew*. “What have you done?” I whispered, terrified of the answer.

He shot me a wide-eyed innocent glance. “Why should I have done anything? On the contrary, he owes *me*. I didn't push him down the hole.”

“What?” I was shaking badly now, unwilling but at the same time desperate to hear more.

“He fell down a hole in a rotted floor in an abandoned gas station—a place he shouldn't have been in anyway—and was badly hurt: ruptured spleen, broken bones, arm, ribs, cheek.” He counted off the injuries on his fingers. “We had to perform a splenectomy.”

“No,” I cried. Not my Sam. Not down a hole. The Unseen Hand wouldn't do that, not to Sam, not make him fall like Itinerant. He didn't deserve that. Please. Everything I'd heard that day, about the blood, about my father paled in comparison. This hurt big time.

“We fixed him up. He had the best treatment, and expensive I may add, and he still owes us.”

A small dot of light penetrated my black misery. “*Still* owes you? Where is he?”

“He's just come out of a coma. And without money...”

“Where is he?” I repeated and grabbed his lapel until he stared at my hand so I let go.

“I have no idea. He ran off.”

“When?” I wrung my hands to try and stop them shaking. “When did this happen?”

“Couple of days ago.” He shrugged his disinterest. “Just went into the night. Evaporated.”

“And this was from where?”

“The clinic. Gosling clinic. For Chrissakes Alex, why are you getting so agitated?” His eyes narrowed in suspicion as he studied my face. “What is it with you two?” He grimaced and turned away. “I've had my suspicions ever since he broke into our house and that peculiar way, that *desperation* he had when he talked about you. Please God don't tell me that on top of everything else you're also a ...” He couldn't bring himself to

say *queer* or *homosexual* or whatever he was about to say. Instead he looked at me as if I'd grown a grotesque second head.

Well, he could be as disgusted as he liked, I had more urgent stuff to worry about: Sam was hurt, he was in Verdigris and could be looking for me right now.

I inflated with defiance as I turned to head for the door. "I'll pack my stuff, say goodbye to Momma, and then hit the road. I'll be at the clinic in the morning and don't take too long with whatever it is you have to do because I have important stuff to do right afterward. Unless of course," I looked over my shoulder at him. "You think my blood might contaminate you. Might turn you into a queer?"

But then, goddamnit, I had to poke my head back round the door and ask where the clinic was. So much for a dignified exit.

## Chapter Thirty-Two: Sam

The sun was warm on his face this morning and there was no fly. Sam opened his eyes and stretched his stiff limbs, grunting with pleasure because the pain in his side was less than it had been the night before.

After checking that the embers of his fire were well doused, he chewed on a couple of feverfew leaves and then headed through the dappled shadows toward a clearing ahead.

The flat land of brown brush with little to disturb it except snaking roads, the towering butte and the green flanks of the mountains in the far distance all looked familiar. High Falls was just an hour or two walk away.

He scooped up a handful of lip-puckering cold water from a rippling creek, and within seconds, he'd stripped his clothes off. Kneeling on the slippery bank, he sprinkled water first over his head and shoulders before dousing the rest of his body. Refreshed, he lay back while the weak sun dried him and cleared his throat to try out his voice. "I'm..." It sounded rusty. He coughed. "I'm going to the *Pike Ranch*." That was a relief. He might look like the south end of a north facing mule, but his voice at least worked. "I'm going to find Alex," he informed a red-tailed hawk perched on a juniper branch. "And I'm going to call Amy."

A slice of sky showed through the clouds and a beam fell across him as he trudged through the spiky brush, his eyes on the range. He wished he was on that peak—the one at the far end toward Silver Creek, the tallest one which must be fourteen hundred feet high at least. Wouldn't be anyone except him and the solitary beasts that venture up there, creatures he never had difficulty understanding. He tapped his plaster-cast. Maybe another couple of weeks, three at most and he'd be fit enough to make his way by raft into the mountain forests from the river in Silver Creek. Logging season had started and paid good money.

When the creek widened to spread around the beaver dams and was deep enough for trout to wallow in the shadows, he knew the Pike Ranch was nearby. There was the burnt pine stand on the other side of the creek where his hut used to stand. Without hesitating, he balanced across the creek on slippery boulders and once again stood under the rustling willows and cottonwoods.

There were even lilies in the creek. Lilies in the creek? He looked closer. They weren't lilies, they were dead fish.

His eyes followed the creek upstream and from there to the havoc that had been wrecked on Raw Pines. Curious, he clambered to the top of the scorched hill. From there he surveyed mile after mile of white pens filled to bursting with bored black and white cattle standing in mud in stark contrast to the shiny ebony coats of the cattle grazing freely on the Pike Ranch.

There was something down by the cow water hole in the summer meadow, and he slithered down the hill to investigate. It was a dead beaver, belly distended and its body curled into a final agony that only poisoning could've inflicted. The irrigation ditches that fed this cow pond flowed from Raw Pines and were filling the pond with foul-smelling, poisonous liquid. I'll be damned, he said to himself. Raw Pines just doesn't let up, does it? He wondered if Mr. Pike knew about this, so he turned toward the farmhouse to go and find out.

Two people he didn't recognize were wandering about the yard so he melted into the shadow of the barn. Two elderly ladies tottered past, holding each other up. They leaned into the breeze, taking one plodding step at a time, as if on an expedition to the Arctic.

Behind them the house was alive with laughter and clink of glasses. If he wasn't mistaken, that was the long thin figure of Doctor Trillium standing by the window while, filling the doorway with his bulk, Mule Palmer looked resplendent in a button down dress shirt that bulged to ripping point over his stomach. Sam wondered how Alex was faring in Mule's company and whether he needed any help.

"I would have liked to have talked a little more to young Alex," one of the elderly ladies said as she lifted her leg in a high arc to step over a cow pat. "Shame he had to go. What?" Her foot landed smack in the middle of the pat.

"Yes," the other lady replied. "I'd have liked to have heard more about his darling wife-to-be and his darling new baby."

Sam's heart rose in his throat. Alex wasn't married?

"It's not born yet you know."

"What?"

"Iris says that when his uncle calls, then Alex always goes."

"And now he's gone."

"And now he's gone. Shame."

Sam's stomach now lurched. Gone? He'd gone with his uncle? Sam was too late? He slithered down the barn wall until he was sitting on the ground. God damn it all to hell. All this way for nothing. He hunched



over, clutching his stomach against a sudden sharp pain, a corrosive burn of disappointment that was just as sharp as the one he'd had since he woke in the clinic.

How the hell had he missed him? He'd *known* that Alex would be here, he'd never doubted it. He rested his head on his knees and bit down hard on his already split lip.

Something wet and warm pushed against his arm. When he looked up three Pike Ranch cow dogs performed helicopters, their tails drumming against the wooden wall. They whirled and he watched as if it was some native dance he needed to respect and in that time he came to a decision: he'd make some use of his wasted journey up here after all.

He gave the barn door a savage kick as he entered. "Goddamn it all to hell," he muttered again, but it didn't really make him feel any better. Only by rubbing the velvet nose of one of the horses that blew steam at him did he begin to calm down. He found a pot of cow rub on the shelf and, lifting his shirt-front, rubbed some on his bruises. Then he picked up a sack by the barn door and hoisted it with a grunt over his shoulder. "So," he asked the panting cow dogs. "You ready to kick ass?"

## Chapter Thirty-Three: Alex

It was getting late when I came downstairs from collecting my stuff.

"Momma?" I called from the foot of the stairs and she waltzed in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. Mule Palmer stood in the background, his meaty hand on the door frame.

"You off, honey?"

"Oh," cried the two spooks brought back from the boneyard—the celestial twins. "Alex, dear.

We thought you'd gone. This gentleman here said you'd gone." They indicated Mule Palmer as if producing a rabbit out of a hat. Gentleman?

"Gone off his rocker, more like," Mule muttered as he excavated a filthy thumbnail and put whatever he found in his pocket for later.

"I have gone." I humped my bag and Sam's duffle down the steps and into my Falcon before I went back to smack a kiss on Momma's cheek. "You gonna be all right, Momma? I'm sorry I gotta go so soon."

"Fine," she assured me, rubbing my cheek. "You go on back to your Liza who needs you just now."

"And git a haircut," Mule's voice followed me down the drive.

I took a right at the Pike Ranch gate and juddered along the trail toward High Falls, the old Falcon rearing back at every stone. Just hope it gets me to Verdigris, that's all, I thought as I slowed down by some aspen where a scrawny butt was stuck in the air.

I stopped and called through the window. "Hey Doc. Need help?"

Doc Trillium emerged like an ancient tortoise from under the hood of his old Chevy. "Ah Alex. I wondered when someone would come along. Feels like my finger-nails have grown three inches while I've been waiting."

I wasn't sure what reaction I was expecting, but gratitude might've done nicely. However, I was not one to hold a grudge. "Can't you fix it?"

"I am a highly qualified veterinary. I am not a mechanic."

"Highly qualified?" I murmured. "I reckoned you just make it up as you go along," then added in a louder voice, "Well you lost out here if you want a mechanic but I can give you a ride into town."

Without a word of thanks he folded himself into the passenger seat and said, "I'm not certain who has the bigger bag of bolts—you or me."

Insult my car, would he? I stepped on the gas hard enough to stamp on a snake. Nearly took his head off and left him wordless all the way

along High Falls main drag which was just fine until I saw that instead of scaring him to death, I'd rocked him to sleep.

I screeched to a halt outside his house so that his head almost hit the windshield. "Oh." He woke with a jump. "Careful. My, my. I must've fallen asleep. What a booby. Your mother mixes very strong whiskies."

"Yeah, yeah, you been at the old dynamite." I was anxious to get rid of him and be on my way.

But he was anxious for reasons of his own to prolong our little sojourn. "I needed it. Because it shook me up, I can tell you."

I gunned the motor to show I was in a hurry. "You talking about my driving skills?"

He snorted. "Well they do leave a lot to be desired. No, I put it all down to that strong whiskey and the fact I cannot forget that dreadful scene with you and that *fiend* Sol last night. Dear me, Alex. If you have a clear conscience then you have a very short memory."

I looked pointedly at my watch. "Thanks Doc, I guess this conversation's going someplace but it beats me where. Now, I have to roll—I should be in Verdigris..." I was getting as nervous as a psychotic yellow-jacket to be off.

"Just tell me it wasn't that boy you were talking about."

"Which boy?"

"The one you were drooling over with that chattering chimp. The one I thought was a ghost."

I gave him a double-take. "Excuse me?"

"Yes, a ghost. That's what I thought when I saw him through your mother's window just half an hour ago. He was going off down the path, just like he always did, carrying a sack and with the dogs following like he's the Pied Piper of canines. Brought back such memories to see him again there, I can tell you." He gave a winsome titter. "Oh I guess I'm just an old hooplehead who's drunk too much." He put his hand on the door handle, but I grabbed his arm and stopped him.

"Why did you think he was a ghost?"

He considered. "He didn't look right. At first I thought, *that's young Sam* but when I looked closer I decided it wasn't. You see, he looked a little worse for wear, seemed to be favoring one side when he walked and his face was, oh I don't know, all *wrong*."

He hit the asphalt with a splat and I reckon he thanks to this day whoever he thanks that I didn't squash him flat when I hung a sharp louie and peeled off in the direction I'd just come. I sideswiped his abandoned

Chevy on the way, gunning the Falcon like a spurred horse until, in a fifty foot skid, it wound up, hot, steaming and skewed outside Raw Pines. I jumped out and scanned the land, hoping I hadn't got it wrong. See, old Trillium saw Sam going down the path on the Pike Ranch. That's the way you take if you don't have wheels and you want to get onto Raw Pines land. You can go across the creek.

I couldn't see anything special. My uncle's Eldorado had already left. But then through the gathering twilight and the haze of murk over the cattle pens, I made out a group of people gawping at a silo. I followed it to the top and the sun came out. Bingo!

Sam.

He was tucking an empty sack under his arm as he balanced at the top of the silo on a ladder which he then slid down like a monkey—a one-handed monkey because his left arm was in a cast.

“Sam,” I whimpered as I headed toward him, trying to pump speed into my lame leg. “Hold on.” I didn't like the look of his one-arm descent nor of the farm-hands clustered in a crowd below him.

As he slithered to a halt at the bottom he swung off to one side and balanced on the top rail of a cow pen. Looking down on the crowd with a steady gaze to show he was afraid of no one and with his legs astride, he looked magnificent.

“What did you put in the silo?” someone yelled.

“S...salt and....” He clenched his teeth with an effort to get the words out. “*Min...erals.*” He pushed his fist into his side as if in pain. I put a spurt on.

“Raw P...Pines,” he continued when he got his breath back. “Is...is *polluting.*” He wiped his hand over his eyes, bruised and dark as a raccoon's. “Manure run...off...off run.”

A tough-looking runt holding a cow prod sniggered and started, “What in dang's name he yapping about?” but stopped and pretended to cough under the weight of Sam's glare.

“Sam,” I bleated and he swung his head in my direction, his expression running a gamut of surprise, disbelief and finally, I swear, downright relief.

Breathless, I stood below him and stretched my arms out but he rejected a public embrace by simply resting his hand on my shoulder as he jumped down. “What in hell's name you done to yourself?” I murmured, reaching to touch his bruised, battered face.

His face hardened as he evaded my hand. "Don't...don't moddle...colly me," he warned.

"The very idea," I said with dignity, my hand now by my side but itching to get at him. "As if I would."

Someone from the mob repeated, "What did you put in the silo?"

*None of your goddamn business*, I was on the point of saying before I took a double-take. This was no farmhand, least none of the kind I'd ever seen. This guy held a notebook and wore a tweed sports jacket. He was one of those visiting journalists on Sol's brainwashing program or I was a six-legged horse. And, now I looked, there were more of them, outnumbering Raw Pines employees by...by a lot.

"Let's run it by them one more time," I whispered to Sam who rewarded me with his full-wattage smile. "He put in..." I started loudly and then looked in askance at Sam.

"Min...mi..."

"Minerals and...?"

"*Salt.*"

"Exactly, salt," I said, looking in the know. "Why?" I whispered to Sam.

"They can't *eat*..." He gestured at the animals in the pen.

"They can't eat mud," I told the journalist with an implied *dummo*.

"No, not mud." Sam's smile slipped a tad. "Too much...You use only c...corn, you'll...you know...get *bloat*."

"Bloat," I raised my eyebrows at the journalist. "Can't just eat corn." Everyone knows that. I turned back to Sam and added in an undertone. "What was that about manure?"

He waved toward a circular tank and spoke directly to me. "The run-off. Pump...pumps aren't working. Either they need to d...dig the...*things*...p...pits deeper or..." He took a deep breath. "The Pike Ranch is...getting it."

"You hear that?" I yelled at the crowd, indignation filling my voice. "My Momma's land—that's the Pike Ranch next door—is being polluted. You got that?"

"Got it," shouted a woman scribbling it all down.

"Sammy?" The reedy voice I'd have been happy never to hear again made us both turn in its direction. Sol was pushing through the throng, his shaggy fetlock wagging in the breeze. He looked a little red-eyed which may have been because the day had recently descended on him like a

Russian missile, in other words, my uncle. "Little guy? Mellow-out now boy."

"His name's Sam," I growled.

"Touchy is he?" someone asked, and Sam scanned the crowd to locate the wiseass but he'd gone to ground.

Sol glanced around the journalists and spoke as if talking to five year olds, "He's a little unclear of his facts, fellow scribes. And that young man with him is Timothy Finch's valued nephew, very much a part of his uncle's business." If he was still on my uncle's payroll, then he must've donated some body part to science in recompense for what my uncle called *blabbing where he shouldn't*.

"Are you kidding?" I yelled back at him. "Very much part of the business? Bullshit! This set up is all part of the vitamin racket you ask me."

"Is it?" Sam asked.

I didn't know, I just made that up. "In any case, if I have to choose between my mother's well-being and my uncle, then it's no choice at all. I tell you again," I turned back to the journalists who were mostly scribbling, "the Raw Pines food processing unit is polluting the farms around here. Not only the Pike Ranch but all of them. And you gotta remember that half the ranchers up here are suffering already from the drought. It's inhuman what Raw Pines is doing and you," my eyes swept the journalists, "are the ones who can do something about it."

Sol shot me a puzzled look but simpered at the people around him. "I think he's a teeny-weeny misinformed. Raw Pines has a state of the art anaerobic lagoon treated with chemicals... Good God, Sammy, what have you done to your face?"

Sam was cannonballing toward Sol, homing in on his target with a glint in his eye that I, personally, would never like beamed at me. Sol just managed a twitchy *let's keep the welcoming reunion for later shall we?* type of smile when Sam grabbed his collar and wiped the grin clear off his face. "You son...son.....*bitch*." With a dexterity most people with two good hands didn't possess, Sam let go of the collar and twisted Sol's arm behind his back. "B...break this arm and...and then the *other* one."

Wishing that he'd do just that, but thinking perhaps he'd better not with so many witnesses about, I stepped forward. "Hey."

Sam lightened up on the arm, but only a fraction. "He b...burned...my *hut*," he told me. "You showed me that... *you know*...badge. In the Hen Red...Hen. I thought before it might be him and hope...hoped it wasn't. But

then I *knew* for sure.” He gave a final arm twist before dropping Sol into the mud where he sat with his feet askew.

“He did, Sam. And that's not all he did.” I lifted Sol up by the front of his shirt. “Tell him,” I shook him like Momma shakes a pillow. “Tell him about how you hoodwinked him all those times. All that bullshit about cops.”

Sam placed his hand on my back where it melted a hole. “It's okay, Alex. I know about the cops. I'm not a d...dope. Just don't say any...any more with them around.” He meant the journalists who were leaning forward, eager to catch the action. Sam eyed Sol who was again sitting on the ground looking dazed. “Wh...what's he doing here?”

“He's a proud employee of Raw Pines. Loyal to the firm,” I told him.

It was difficult to know exactly what Sam was thinking as he traced his lips with his finger and studied Sol. Then he turned his back on him and said to me, “Tell him...”

“No,” Sol cried, scrabbling in the mud trying to get a foothold. “Tell *me*, Sam. You've always talked to *me*. Not him.”

Sam ignored him and continued to me, “Tell him not to....” He cleared his throat. “Tell him he's a snake...in the...” His eyes flashed as he tried to find the expression. “Icing on the...”

“Cake!” someone in the crowd supplied and guffawed.

But Sol wasn't laughing. By now he was on his feet. “Sam, let me explain. It's all a game.” His hand swept over Raw Pines. “I'm just biding my time, waiting for the big story that'll blow the whole place apart. And I have it, I have it. I know I have it.” Each time he said *have* his voice went up a hysterical octave.

“Jeez,” I murmured to Sam but loud enough for the journalists behind me to hear too. “What a trip. Move over Norman Bates, there's a new boy in town.”

“And what kind of story would that be, Sol?” a woman asked from the back.

“Well. Well.” His eyes darted every which way as he thought fast. “How about...Oxiprine?”

“No!” Sam jumped like he'd been stung. “Don't...don't...”

“Don't even *mention* her name,” I said in a low voice for only Sol to hear. “He'll kill you if you do, I swear. And then I will.”

“No, no, no,” he reassured Sam. “I'm not going to talk about Am...It's not about *her*.” He braced himself for a public speech. “Ladies and gentlemen, I believe it's time for the world to know. The Gosling drug for

convulsions, Oxiprine, should have been taken off the market months ago when it was found to have a detrimental effect on the heart. However, Gosling chose to withhold this information from the authorities even though the drug has killed at least a dozen people. Including his father.”

“Whose father?” I had an uncanny feeling I didn't really want to know.

Sol ignored me. “See Sammy-boy? See? This story is *dynamite*.” He rounded his thumb and forefinger. “See how much I care for Raw Pines? *Zilch*.” He reached out to Sam which was a bad move. But his hand stopped short and it was obvious why: Sam's look that said *you touch me you're dead* not only froze Sol but turned the air frigid and smelling of ozone. Many in the crowd twitched and shot nervous glances over their shoulders, probably without knowing why. Even the dogs looked like they had business someplace else.

“Whose father?” I asked again.

The man in the Harris tweed looked up from his notebook. “Are you saying, Sol, that Timothy Finch's father was taking this drug and it killed him?”

Although my world tilted I did notice that Sol now had the air of someone who wished he'd kept his big mouth shut.

“I do believe I read somewhere recently,” the blond woman at the back piped up. “That Anthony Finch died a month or so ago, is that correct?” She looked around at her colleagues for confirmation and one or two nodded their agreement.

“Timothy Finch's father?” My voice wavered like an old lady's but when Sam's fingers touched mine, energy shot up my arm and into my body so that I added in a deep-brown voice, “My grandfather.”

“Our condolences, Alex,” someone said. “Would that explain why you missed the concert the other day when Liza Suggs performed without you?”

“Uh, no. I was here for Josh Pike's funeral.”

Sam gasped and I realized, too late, that he hadn't known about JP. “Sorry,” I whispered, my fingers touching his this time, and he turned sad eyes to the mountains which were wearing the final slivers of sun like a halo.

“Ah, your step-father.” A journalist looked up from writing something down. “It must be hard on you to cope with two deaths at the same time. And you've had to deal with other loss during your lifetime, haven't you? I



mean, losing your father when you were eleven. Did that affect you much?"

How come the whole world knew about this except me? Should I tell him the event entirely passed me by or would that put me in a bad light? Out of the corner of my eye I saw Sam's head jerk round and I felt his eyes boring into my mind to gauge how I was feeling. "I don't remember," I muttered to my boots.

"You must miss your grandfather."

This was getting tough. I juggled two answers: "How the hell should I know, I always thought I was grandfatherless. Well, I guess I am—*now*," and, "Uh. Sure. Great old man. Full of life, well, he was until a month ago. Famous." The second won out because I reckoned any grandfather of mine would've been famous for something. Stands to reason.

"Famous?" someone who'd left his tact in his other pants laughed. "What for? His bantams? Didn't he have a small farm somewhere around here until a few years ago?"

Great. Even my grandfather the chicken farmer was too highfaluting to acknowledge my existence. Anthony Finch, father to Timothy and Tom, grandfather to no one. And—realization slammed into my brain lining—blood donor to Timothy Finch. The final piece had been slotted into the jigsaw of my life although now, with the whole sorry picture spread out in front of me, I wanted to jumble it all up again.

"And full of life?" someone else gagged, interrupting my thoughts. "I heard he was a stroke victim and had been at a clinic in Verdigris for the last five or six years."

Enough already. For Chrissakes—how much more of this?

Sam must've been watching my face because he murmured, "Alrighty" as his hand encircled my wrist. "He...he doesn't want to *talk*...anymore," he told the crowd in a voice no one ever would argue with. We marched in synchronized steps, shoulder to shoulder, through the crowd that parted for us but then closed ranks on a desolate voice. "Sammy?" We paid no mind to it.

Kicking up clouds of midges, we made our way through the swampy light in silence and as we neared the barnyard I said, "Sol's convinced you still think that the cops are after you."

Sam snorted. "He lives in...in *cuckoo* land. Two days after...after..." I knew he was debating whether to say *two days after Itinerant died*. "After..." He took a breath. "I ran across Officer C...Crombie in the

street.” He put on a goofy voice, no doubt imitating the cop. “Hello young Sam. You keepin’ your nose clean?”

“Not the kind of thing he’d say if there was a manhunt out for you. Or any kind of suspicion.”

He shot me a wary glance, probably wondering how I knew about this secret of his. I didn’t want him to think it was a big deal for me so I talked as if it was an every day event. “So if you knew the bastard double-crossed you, why not knock him into kingdom come like he deserved?”

Sam gave his thousand-yard stare while he organized his words. “I guess he...he was just someone.”

I got it—filthy dickshit that he was, Sol gave my lonely boy some kind of company: it might not have been very healthy, but hey, it was company.

Raw Pines ranch-house loomed into view. And he stopped by the door. “I need to call Amy.”

*Allakazaam!* Within two minutes we were in the house and I was asking the sad-sounding girl who answered the phone, “Amy? Guess who’s standing here breathing down my neck?”

Fearing for my eardrums, I left brother and sister to their high decibel endearments and went into the kitchen to get Sam some of Auntie Vita’s fixin’s. As I loaded a plate I heard him bellow, “Don’t cry, don’t cry. I’ll be there tomorrow, promise. I’m fine. I’m with Alex.” And that filled my heart to bursting point. Sure he was fine with me. More than fine.

The table groaned under the weight of brisket, cornbread, fried chicken, biscuits, black beans and two whole pies, one pecan and one shoofly, not forgetting a beer or two. “You hungry?”

No reply.

In the hall, the phone was back on the hook and the porch door wide-open. Making dumb yips of panic, I darted half-way up the staircase, down again, into the yard and by the time I ended up crumpled limp against the porch door, I feared the very worst.

But life hadn’t crapped on me, not this time. Just as I was pinching the bridge of my nose in disbelief, I heard his whistle, the almost silent one that he always made at the dogs. The next moment, as if returning from a merry day at the beach, Sam and his furry followers sauntered around the side of the prefabricated barn. Blissfully unaware of my anguish, he paused halfway across the yard struck by the urgent need to take his non-physical self on a trip across the prairie.

During those quiet minutes while he mentally hid away in the mountains, the dogs and I watched him like he was a spectacular firework display.

I swear it wasn't me who disturbed the show—it was the canine version of dance round the maypole. They whirled about until he emerged from his dream and bent down. “Git,” he told them and having no flashy comeback such as *git yourself*, they got.

“There's food in there.” I pressed back against the door in case he flattened me in his rush for the kitchen. But instead, he ambled up to me and ran his fingers up my arm. His warmth and proximity just about undid me, and if he hadn't slid his arm around my waist, I'd have melted in a lake at his feet. He buried his nose in my neck, just under my ear, where he took a long sniff and nestled like a baby seeking a mother's nipple.

“Thank you,” he said when he drew away.

“For what?”

“For paying the f...fees...Amy's fees. Six months. That's a lot. I'll pay you back. Every cent.”

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Man oh man, it sure was neat watching him eat.

By the time he'd messed with the food, placing it in strict color-order from light chicken meat to dark black beans, his mouth must've been a *pond*. He caught me staring and with an impish grin he loaded a fork with black beans and shoofly pie and waved it in front of me. Oh well, why not? I leaned over to slurp but instead snapped up thin air. Crowing his delight, he dodged the fork about as if he'd never played that old kid's game in his life before. He even let me grab his wrist so I was forced to gobble up the disgusting mix. His little tail was in knots as the stuff came alive on my tongue, and I had to swill my mouth out with spit to get rid of the taste.

He was on his last mouthful of pecan pie when he said right out of the blue, “Stay away from your uncle. He...he wants you in his ...*thing*... research clinic.” He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and pushed back his chair.

I moved my chair so we faced one another, our knees interlocked. “Tell me.”

While he told me how he'd woken up in the clinic and what he'd heard, his hand on my thigh curled, stretched and splayed like a starfish. I

sandwiched it between my own and squeezed, hoping that the pressure would wring out all the pain he'd been through. But it was my uncle's neck I wanted to wring when I heard how they were planning to experiment on Sam. Front cortex my ass. Red lights jagged over my eyeballs. "I feel like killing him," I snarled. "And I know how, too."

"No. You couldn't...shouldn't. You...you did enough. Today." He nodded in the general direction of the silo and scribbling reporters who, hopefully, by now had Sol under a bright light prizing out finger-nails for the Oxiprine story. "Any case," Sam went on. "He did cure...fix me."

He rubbed his side. "Now it's your turn." He clasped my hands. "Tell me about stuff. Father, grandfather." He watched like a lip-reader while my words flowed out. When I finished, he continued to study my mouth and I half-expected him to say: *you mean you've lived twenty years and never twigged? Not even about the blood? What kinda guy are you?* Instead he rubbed his finger over the callous I have on my thumb and then clapped his hand on his knee, got to his feet and reached out to me.

## Chapter Thirty-Four: Sam

"Here?" Alex's voice pulled Sam up short.

Sure. Why not? He tugged on Alex's hand and their arms stretched like rubber. Sam wanted to distract him from looking back across the yard toward the house they'd just left. He didn't want Alex to think about a Goldilocks bed in the ranch-house which had too much of Timothy Finch in it. The abandoned barn was just fine.

Whoa! Was that a finger that had just grazed down his nose?

Alex lowered his finger and whispered in Sam's ear, "This is perfect." After a moment's hesitation Alex parted the ivy that curtained the collapsing doorway and stepped through just as a mouse scampered out from under a pile of white Gosling chemical sacks. He eyed it, his mouth a downward curve, as it disappeared through a hole in the wooden wall.

Sam was still reeling from the tingling nose-graze. When was the last time someone had done that to him?

"Where're we going?" Alex's voice came from the dim interior. He brushed something brown that must've fallen from the roof out of his hair and he leaned on the broken rail of a cattle pen.

In answer, Sam clattered up the ladder to the hay loft and sat in the glow of the oil lamp that he'd lit earlier. Alex crawled in beside him on the nest of fragrant hay and gazed around. "Bedroll, lamp, blanket, pillow. Where'd you get all this stuff? You were only gone three seconds. And

your duffle.” He glanced over at Sam's bag in the corner. “It was in my car.”

Well, he'd been passing...and all... Sam shivered, his senses on high alert, more than ready for whatever Alex was about to dish out. Except he wasn't dishing out anything. Motionless, he sat with his legs folded under him, facing Sam. More worrying was Alex's silence—the only sound was an old pane rippling in the wind, and Sam's breathing.

God darn it, Alex, come on, Sam mentally urged him. This is no spring peeper here, you know. Tuck in. You know what to do. Like...like.... How about another nose-graze? His eyes dropped to Alex's clasped fingers—fingers, strong and fluid that danced over the strings of his guitar. Sam imagined them playing him the same way. He shifted and remembered their kiss in Verdigris, Alex's mouth over his. How excited they'd become. The strength of it. How had that happened? Well, he'd just gone right ahead and done it, hadn't he? Done what felt right and good. Okay, then. Time to give it a whirl.

He rose onto his knees, but, before he could make his move, Alex intercepted by first stroking Sam's plaster-cast. Then he picked up Sam's good hand, turning it over palm up, palm down. “Look at these fingers,” he murmured, pulling each one gently. “Pickpocket fingers, yes they are.”

They were? Sam inspected them in surprise then gaped, mesmerized, as Alex raised the fingers to his lips and sucked the forefinger into his mouth. Oh my. Sam leaned forward and replaced his finger with his lips. All his pent-up longings flowed into the kiss, and he rejoiced as Alex responded with his own high sounds of yearning. The pain in Sam's side as Alex dug into his muscles was overshadowed by an exquisite ache and the promise of release. But then Alex drew back, his lips swollen, his eyes dark and cloudy with desire. “Are you here with me, Sam?”

Where else would he be? “Right here. S...smack bang.” He ruffled the dark mass of Alex's hair to prove it and prepared to dive in to continue where he'd left off, a flash of longing running through him.

Again Alex drew back. “Easy now, we have all night. Problem is I'm scared shitless I'm going to hurt you. Let me take a look at you.” He reached for the top button on Sam's shirt.

“Not much of nothing,” Sam murmured. When was the last time he'd let someone take off his shirt? He looked down, seeing himself through Alex's eyes. Gee, he was a sight: he wouldn't touch him, that's for sure, not with a chest all blue and violet, nor smelling of cow rub.

He squeezed his eyes shut, disappointment burning bitter in his throat as he reached for his shirt to put it back on. But a butterfly was fluttering at the hollow of his throat and down his chest. A wet butterfly.

Alex traced every bruise with his lips, with his tongue. "These are mine now," he murmured, following Sam's hairline down to his navel where he stopped and looked up. "Can I?" Without waiting for an answer he unbuckled Sam's belt while Sam held his breath as he anticipated what he'd only dreamed about before. But when his buttons were undone and cool air brushed over him, he felt a sudden heat of embarrassment, and he tried to cover himself.

Alex gently moved his hand to one side. "You're beautiful."

Someone thought he was beautiful? But someone else must be beautiful too and this bare-assed business was a little too one-sided for his liking. Snuffling his amusement he struggled to get the flimsy shirt that couldn't keep a gnat warm over Alex's head without ripping the ridiculous material and then jabbed at the belt which was of a kind he'd never seen before. And getting those tight boots off wasn't easy when someone had one hand on your cock and the other around your balls, doing stuff that darn near took your head off. And were these things called boxers?

Alex's teasing grin was replaced by a look that Sam thought for a moment might be pain. Had he been too rough? But within seconds he found himself wrapped in warm arms, their bodies slotted together.

"Sam," Alex whispered into his hair, holding him so close Sam could feel his heart-beat as they swayed together like twin saplings. Alex clasped him tighter against his chest, seizing him in a moment Sam would remember for the rest of his life, an embrace so true that he thought no force on earth could break.

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When they lay face to face, sweaty and sated, the length of their bodies pressed together, Alex asked, "You ever do that before?"

"Not willingly," Sam replied, cotton-mouthed with emotion. Wrong answer, he thought as Alex's face turned dark.

"Who did it? Who made you?"

Sam didn't want to remember a long-buried memory so he combed his fingers through the long dark hair and whispered, "Was...um...that okay?"

"You need to ask, magic boy?" Alex's face softened before it tightened again. "Who did it to you? Tell me." His fingers gripped Sam's arm. "Was it Itinerant?"

For a moment, Sam had an idea he was like a goldfish opening and closing his mouth. "Itinerant?" His voice, when he found it, was high with disbelief. Him with Itinerant? "It wasn't like that."

Alex loosened his grasp. "He never did anything bad to you?"

"Never. Not ever."

Alex relaxed. "Then...who? Jeez, to get anything out of you, I have to squeeze." He gave a rueful grin. "Let me put that another way..."

"Squeeze," Sam agreed, positioning himself so their cocks were aligned.

Alex yelled his deep-belly laugh which was cut short, a clear sign, Sam knew, that something serious was on the horizon.

"About Itinerant. You didn't kill him."

Sam dropped his gaze. Jesus, what was all this about? Was this what you had to do after glorious sex? Take a reluctant trip into the dark recesses of the past?

"It was an accident," Alex insisted.

Sam mumbled a sound he hoped would put an end to this kind of talk.

But Alex wasn't put off. "Just like your fall was an accident."

Sam pressed his lips together. Of course his fall was an accident but they were two different things, events.

"And you didn't push Itinerant down the hole." Alex now sat with his legs either side of Sam's hips so there was nowhere else for Sam to look except at him. Under other circumstances that would've suited him just fine.

"I didn't push," Sam agreed. "He...." He deflated in defeat. Okay. Like it or not, his mind was going back to that fateful evening in the ex-rooming house. He relived the horror he'd felt as Itinerant, just a hair's breadth away from landing his sledgehammer fist on Sam, suddenly halted, choking as if he couldn't breathe and tumbled back against the wall which collapsed through the floor. "He...he *fell*. And he was gone." Sam shuddered at the memory of Itinerant's surprised face a second before he fell.

God. Sam put his hand over his eyes. If he'd been quicker instead of rooted, petrified, to the spot, he'd have caught him. Or, more to the point, he should never have forced a sick Itinerant against his will back into the unsafe dump in the first place, should never have riled him up to the point

of choking. Alex could talk himself purple in the face but there was no escaping the fact that Sam had killed Itinerant. Pure and simple. And devastating.

“Hey, car fifty-four where are you?” The look on Alex's face told Sam that the pointless discussion was far from over. But for Sam it was and he knew just how to knock him off track.

He rubbed his rough face against Alex's like a cat and stretched out in full nakedness. It didn't take any persuading to draw Alex, who was now breathing in quick gasps, down on top of him.

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Alex had ten toes. And each toe was...

“You done being Scott of the Antarctic?” Alex reached down and guided him up, humming deep in his throat as Sam's boneless body slid along his.

Sam could withstand any rib pain if he could be cocooned in Alex like this, deep in their own world where, for a while at least, Sam could rid Alex of the demons that Timothy Finch had implanted. If Sam could absorb them through his fingers into his body where he could fight them, he would.

“Hey.” Alex's whisper penetrated Sam's smoldering brain. “You can't take on the world.”

Sam hugged him tighter. Strange how Alex knew what he was thinking and good because it saved having to speak. Okay, he might not be able to fight the world, but he could try to improve it a little. “We need to talk.”

Alex nestled against Sam's chest. “No prob. I like to hear you talk.”

“And I...um...like to hear you listen.” Sam mulled over the words he needed to say. “The baby.”

The effect on Alex was instantaneous. He pulled away, his eyes flaming. “I *know* there's a baby, goddammit all to hell.” His hands were clasped in a white-knuckled grip.

Good, Sam thought. We're on the same wavelength, so there's no more to be said. Shortest but neatest discussion of all time. “I need a...” He got to his feet, donned his pants and descended the ladder.

The night air was filled with cricket chirps and there was a slight whiff of burning apple wood from someplace. He took a leak then lit a cigarette while the bones of the barn creaked behind him.



Returning to the loft he found Alex asleep on hay that smelled of summer sunshine. Sam sat cross-legged on the bedroll and studied the soft, peaceful face. Sweat had damped his hair and made his eyelashes spiky. He looked as vulnerable as a child.

Sam smoothed Alex's hair back and basked in the comforting warmth that filled him. He'd never felt such a glow and would've been content to sit there forever. But that was impossible. You're going to love your child, he told Alex silently. No one's going to take him, or her, away from you. No one's going to accuse you of, what was it called? Corrupting influences? And no one's going to call you a...a...frutti-tutti and say you're outside the herd. He brushed away a mosquito that was hovering over Alex's face. That way you won't get trapped in the ferocious quagmire.

"Are those pants you got on?" Alex had cranked open an eye. One hand shot out to grab the waistband and Sam tumbled into Alex's embrace, tight enough to hold him but not enough to hurt.

But it didn't last long and Sam swore under his breath as Alex cut the kiss short. What was coming now?

"What am I going to do?" Alex swallowed hard as if pushing something down. "I'm so scared someone else is going to come along who can give you what you need. Someone who's free." He shuddered as he sat up and scrubbed his face with the backs of his hands. "I can't stand thinking of you with anyone else."

Sam's chest ached at the desolation in Alex's voice.

Alex sniffed. "And how can *you* stand it? Huh? How does it make you feel thinking of me with Liza?"

Sam replied without hesitating. "It kills me inside." But he'd just have to stand it.

Alex shifted and wrapped one arm around him, maneuvering his plaster-cast until it was snug between them. "And tomorrow I have to go to Verdigris while you go to Silver Creek. Pulled in two different directions like always."

"Take Liza with you to the clinic. And don't let them...*you know...* give you anything. Like coffee. Or water. Nothing to eat or drink."

Alex gave a humorless huff and looked past Sam toward the window. "You're going into those woods out there, aren't you? I've seen you looking at them."

"Not tomorrow."

"I know. But later, after. You're thinking of those woods."

"They're hiring loggers."

Alex's body tensed. "*Goddamn*, why do you have to choose something that's so dangerous and so far away from me? Why?" He glared at Sam for two seconds before tears spurted from his eyes and he buried his face in Sam's hair. "Oh," Alex sobbed, rocking him. "I'm not mad at you. How can I be? None of this is your fault. Just don't get lost in them old woods, that's all I ask. Don't get lost like me. Come back to me. Sometimes. Please." His voice fragmented on his last word.

# Epilogue

## I

My father's Alex Finch. Yes, *the* Alex Finch.

Greatest pickup line in history. Piece of cake, works every time. Now the trick is to keep a focused mind and see how the land lies. If the blather goes on like this: *then your Mom must be Liza Suggs* and streams into: *Can I have his autograph and maybe a photo?* then you know you can cut to the chase.

"Sure. Come pick 'em up on Saturday. We'll have our own pool party."

"Cool! You have a swimming pool?"

"Bring your bikini." Which (said bikini) should be off within three minutes if all goes to plan.

"Will your Dad be there?"

God darn it, there's the catch. I just wish for once they'd say this in a *I-hope-he's-not* tone of voice, but they don't. I mean he's old enough to be their father for God's sake. Still, I plug on.

"No. My folks are on a gig this weekend."

To her credit she looks contrite. "Oh right. Well you do look a lot like him, you know." So I'll do. Thanks a bunch, sweetheart.

You know, people reckon that being the son of a famous pop, rock or whatever they are duo means I've won the lottery of life. But it's not all it's cracked up to be. We do not hold one long alcohol and drug-fueled party with chicks on demand. Far from it, because my parents don't do much of anything. They don't even swear because I'm an innocent soul who is easily influenced. Groupies sometimes throw their panties over the gate but instead of laughing it off or, even better, handing them (the chicks, not the panties—although now I think about it...) to me, Dad reacts as if we're being infested by ravenous flesh eaters. I tell him not to worry because I'll go see if they're the lip-locking type, but by that time he's already called out Verdigris's Finest. Yeah, our place is about as exciting as an Amish gathering on boogie night.

You can see our house from downtown—the big white one on the hill and sometimes the sun glints on the poolwater. Probably if you look up from there now you'll see Mom's fluorescent bikini shining like a beacon. She's sipping wine as she works on her tan, her red lacquered finger-nails tapping on the side of the lounge as if the sun's taking too long about it.

Dad's in the shade. He's in a pair of sweats like he's scared of the sun or, more like, a journalist catching a photo of his gimp leg like they did once. These two are schitzo about the press: Dad runs like crazy while Mum courts them.

“Dad?”

Takes him a moment to see I'm talking to him. He first lowers his shades and then does something to his ears. Oh Mr. Cool has his Walkman plugged in. Probably listening to that guy Santana or some lulu no one else has ever heard of but he likes so much. And please do not ask him why he likes him because I've heard it a zillion times.

“Dad?” I say again as he unplugs his ears and I recognize the distant, tinny guitar mangling of *Samba Pa Ti*. And I only know it because he plays the record, like, all the time. “I need some photos of you for this girl at school.”

“Sure.” He gets up and plods across the deck, stopping to smell an orange rose here and some kind of purple thing on a bush there. He swats at a bee and finally makes it into the pool house where he keeps his stuff. I give him a moment to recollect what he went in there for so that by the time I saunter in he's sifting through pictures. “She wants just you. Not Mom.”

“Well...I don't know.” He flicks through them, stopping now and again. They're all of him and Mom. And, in every single one, he's looking the part of a 70s icon, all shoulder-length hair, sideburns and black leather. I keep saying they have to change their image and go punk but I am only kidding—can you see Dad with a purple mohawk?

In the end we plump for one that's of them both, except he's sat further back and you can't see him too well. But even so, he still looks like the guy who's been poking around in the basement and woken the Silent Threat. He told me once that he wasn't crazy about performing, and he wasn't freaking kidding.

I turn the photo he's given me back and front. “She can cut Mom off if she wants.”

“Oh, don't do that,” he says in his vague way, looking around as if he can't remember why he's there.

“And,” I continue, flapping my hand in front of his face to get him to look at me. “You still got those free tickets they gave you to the Ramones concert on Saturday?”

He frowns and scratches his head.

“They're in the den on the table.”

“Oh. Right. Sure. Take as many as you like. You're going to take this girl are you?”

“Yep. Judy Chamberlain. It is said that all the tenth graders have lain in her chamber and now she's starting on the ninth, with me on top—of the list, that is. Gabba-Abba-Hey!”

“Right,” he says, pulling on his lower lip as if contemplating the wonders of the universe. He's actually studying the few things he has on display here. There's a newspaper cutting about *Perfect Score* reaching the top ten on the Billings and another of when *Once a day, Twice a Day, Harder, Faster* hit the big time. He huffs on his framed platinum disc of *Fierce Lamb* and gives it a little rub with his knuckle. “Right,” he says again, but he's talking to a wooden figure of a guitar-player that Mom says some fan once gave him. He picks it up, runs his thumb over the face then smells it. Sheesh.

“And after we've been to the concert I'm going to bring her back here, get naked, smoke a couple of tokes in the pool and then I'm going to fuck her right into the mattress of your bed and it has to be your bed because she'll think that pretty cool.”

“Good.” He looks around the place again. “As long as you behave yourself.” He waits by the door for me to leave.

It's a white-hot sun out there but Mom's sitting smack in the middle of it without a drop of sweat on her. “Whatcha doin' honey?”

“Dad gave me tickets for the Ramones concert on Saturday.”

“Oh Alex.” She frowns at Dad over the top of her shades. “You know he can't go to that. You booked him into camp for the weekend.” She sighs with impatience at Dad's lost look. “Remember? Teen Leadership Camp at the Lake?”

I put my hands on my hips. This is the first I've heard about it. “I'm not going to no stuffing camp.” Not when there's a better alternative on the menu.

“Oh God, yes.” Dad slaps his forehead and nearly knocks himself backward.

Mom swings her legs so abruptly as she swivels on the lounge that one of her stilettos flies into the rose bush. “I thought you'd told him. It is all your idea.” She shakes her magazine to tearing point while I scratch myself to pieces retrieving her shoe. “Thanks, honey. You're a good boy.”

She smiles at me and then switches to a scowl when she looks at Dad. “See what you're doing to your son?” She often comes up with stuff like this. *Can't you see how you're affecting your son?* And that's half-crooked

you ask me. I mean, Dad doesn't do anything to affect me, one way or another.

But something has stirred Dad this time. His hands clasp and unclasp by his sides and Mom's got this smile as if she's enjoying herself. "Don't worry, Jamie," she says to me. "You don't have to go." And there's a silent *ha-ha-Gotcha* smirk that she aims at him which is a mystery to me but it makes Dad look like Dorothy being presented with a dish of burst Toto parts after the Iron Man sat on him.

"Okay," I raise my hands in surrender. "I'll go." He obviously wants me to go real bad, and it's not such a terrible prospect. This camp is mixed-sex and might be fun just as long as they don't expect me to play a guitar around a camp fire. And Judy Chamberlain can be put on the back boiler for a while. She'll keep. "Are you two planning something for the weekend then? I thought you had a gig on Saturday."

"He canceled it." Mom buries herself in her magazine although I reckon she'd rather bury an ice pick in him. "And Alex?"

Dad looks at her warily as if he's thinking about the ice pick too.

"Get me another Blonde Moment, will you?"

Probably glad of the diversion, he limps into the kitchen and I follow to find out what a blonde moment is and if he's going to serenade us in a yellow wig. It does occur to me that if they've canceled the gig then they'll probably stay here over the weekend which makes the prospect of camp more attractive.

He busies himself pouring equal amounts of lemon rum and Curacao into a jug. When he's mixing in grenadine he asks, "So how's school?" like he hasn't just seen my report card. "When's the next sport's day event?"

Oh no you don't. Not again. I would give my Atari 5200 to anyone who can make him stay away from that. Mom doesn't go, so why does he have to? I mean, if he enjoyed being molested by hormone-fueled menopausal teachers who should know better, then I'd understand it. Last year he played *Born for Me*. You know the one, it was a hit a couple of years ago. It goes: *You were born for me / My lover of lost words / Backwritten in time / you were born to be mine*. At first I gritted my teeth and pretended I couldn't hear him but then even the kids I hang out with, who on normal days are heavily into INXS, began rocking so I hid in the men's room until he'd done and the screaming died down.

"I don't think there is one," I mutter. Time for a subject change, methinks. "Oh look." I point through the window which, like the

swimming pool, has a great view over Verdigris. "Auntie Vita's home. There's her Olds in the driveway."

As if it's going to burn his eyeballs off, he reluctantly looks toward Uncle Tim's mansion which you can just make out from here.

"When you going for the next donation?" I ask, more to keep him off the subject of school sports day than out of real curiosity.

"He's good for another month or two."

"Uncle Tim told me that they're almost ready with the new medication. They're going to call it Sangolin and he asked me what I thought. I said it's a pretty neat name. So once that's ready, you won't have to give blood any more. Just think! You won't know what to do with it all."

"I'm surprised he's risking experimenting again after the other prototypes nearly killed him."

"This one's different. It's been purified by differential centrifugation. And the biocompatible material is titanium."

He's speechless just for a moment. "A robot," he says as a grin spreads over his face. "My son's turned into a robot."

"Ah shut it." God, he does embarrass me sometimes. "This is just a guy with a solid A in Chemistry speaking." I only say that because I know it's slipped his memory and he needs reminding.

His grin has spread. "And what did you get in music studies?"

"Dad, I dropped music, like, two years ago. Sheesh."

Instead of cowering in my blinding light of chemistry brilliance, he gives me that *well-as-long-as-you're-healthy* look and pats my head. Proud papa act over, he takes the cocktails out to Mom and leaves one on the counter. Who's that for?

I stick my head out the door to ask him but I see the temperature's turned to ice out there. Mom's got her pursed-up look and, without a word of thanks, holds out her hand for her drink which he gives to her before he eases himself onto his lounge again and switches on his Walkman. If their fans could see them at home, they'd never believe it was the same couple they see on stage when Dad wraps Mom in his arms for a public smooch. Mom says it's to camouflage his shaking, but it still looks pretty hot.

I look at the yellow drink in my hand. Perhaps it's for Grandpops. But Dad gives Grandpops about a zillionth of the attention he gives anyone else in the house, so I doubt that he'd make him a cocktail. I asked once if he didn't like Grandpops, but he said he did, he didn't have anything against the old bastard. I wonder if perhaps he's jealous that Mom's dad

lives here while Grandma—Dad's mom—doesn't. So I suggested, how about she comes here too? Plenty of room.

“You have to be kidding,” Dad replied. “I mean, course she can come if she wants but it's who she'd be dragging that I object to.”

“You mean Mule? He's fun, 'cept he overdoes the *Scooby-doo*, *where are you?* gag. I've grown out of it. And he calls you a pussy, so he must like you.”

“Yeah, he's a real animal lover, that guy.”

I look again at the yellow drink. Maybe he made it for me. In that case...I down it in one.

Two seconds later Grandpops shuffles in. “You seen my drink? Alex said he'd make me a cocktail.”

“No.” I cover my mouth. God what a terrible taste. I'd rather gargle broken glass.

“Gee, that boy's going to forget his own name one of these days.”

Got it in one, Grandpops.

He goes about collecting up the rum and Curacao but adds tomato catsup after the grenadine and turns the liquid brown. Maybe he knows something Dad doesn't because he makes an appreciative face as he takes a sip and looks out the door at the cozy scene by the pool. “I am of the firm opinion that your father is going off his rocker. Again.”

“Again?” I'm pretty surprised by what he's saying. After all don't you—oh I don't know—tend to keep stuff like this from your kiddy-winkies so they don't worry their little heads with unpleasant aspects of family life? “It happened before?”

“It was touch and go.” Grandpops takes another sip and balances himself on a stool while he reminisces. “There was you bawling in your crib and him bawling in his chair. What a mess-up.”

“Dad was crying? When I was a baby?” Crying with happiness perhaps.

“Just born. And he couldn't stop. Your Mom asked me to take him because she couldn't cope but I didn't want him in my tub again, puking up the tiles. She was at the end of her tether. In the end they came and took him away.”

“Who came? The Loony Farm?” God. I know my Dad's sometimes a little weird, but...God.

“I don't know who it was. Some short guy. Took him away in a rust bucket. Then brought him back a week or two later and he was as right as rain. But.” He takes another sip and shakes his head ominously before



swallowing, "it's happening again. I went into the den a week or so ago and nearly fell over him. There he was sitting on the floor, kind of rocking. I tell you..."

"Yeah, don't tell me: he's going round the bend." That's pretty scary and I'm pleased I'm going to camp this weekend so I don't have to witness his total collapse. In any case it's a holiday weekend and at such times Dad tends to occupy every second with fun-filled family activities that wind up being a picnic with him sitting in a cow pat and Mom whining about the yellow jackets and me moaning I'm bored and Mom finding yet another way to call Dad an asshole.

## II

Saturday morning. One of the neighbors is taking me to camp so I've said goodbye to Mom and Grandpops but not to Dad yet. I hang around in the drive waiting for him and when he appears, he's carrying a holdall that he puts in the back of his Cherokee. Where's he off to?

"Have a good time, Jamie. See you Tuesday."

I dodge the kiss he's about to smack on my ear and hold out my hand instead which he play-slaps. "Bye," he yells into the house but no one answers. "Where the hell is she?" he mutters as he goes back inside.

I hesitate by the car. Where's he going without Mom? It's a spur of the moment kind of thing but when I hear his footsteps I jump into the Jeep and snuggle down behind the driver's seat. Stuff camp.

Four hours into the journey I'm hit with this awful idea that maybe he's taking himself off to the loony-farm. Jesus, then what am I doing in the back here? I need a pee so badly I'm about to do it in my pants and I'm on the point of sitting up and telling him to take me straight back home when, right on cue, he pulls in at a truck stop. I watch him limp toward the café. He looks okay, pretty perky all in all and not like someone heading toward a strait-jacket. He must be going somewhere to relax, and I am just the person to help him do it. Just hope there are a lot of chicks there. And a pool. I unfold myself and take a leak onto the tires of a semi parked next to us.

I'm starving so I head into the store. Dad's in the café having a coffee and doesn't see me buy a box of Twinkies and a Dr. Pepper.

Back on the road, he sings something I reckon he's making up on the spot. *I have done my best to stand it / But now it's on the line / Close your*

*eyes, can you see me?/ I can see you here real fine. / Close your eyes now, can you hear me?*

Another two hours and we start jolting over rough ground. Are we going to Grandma's on Raw Pines? I risk a quick look out the window but instead of those acres of sheds that they have at Grandma and Mule's place, it's just a load of trees whizzing past. I'm disappointed because I enjoy visiting Grandma and helping Mule pick out which steers should go to the feedlot and which should go into the research sheds and then which steers should go into *which* research shed.

Jesus, I don't reckon I can stand lying in this position any more. I am about to get royally screwed. But we stop. Dad hops out, flings open the passenger door and grabs a couple of sacks of groceries he picked up at the Seven Eleven. I give him a couple of seconds and then sit up.

We're on the bank of a wide river that's as calm and picturesque as a glacier lake in a cheesy forties movie. Dad's heading toward a boat, or a barge I guess, 'cause it's long and thin, green with a yellow stripe around the...bottom part. He passes a parked motorbike—a Honda, I bet.

Whistling loudly, he skips up the gangplank and, at the top, gives a loud, “Whoop!” He might've said *Opensezame* because the cabin door opens and out shoots a brown furry, I don't know, huge rat, I guess. It lollops its way across the deck right up to him, but instead of taking a dive which I'd've expected from my Dad, he just stands there and they clock each other. He's come all this way to look at a potential Hasidic hat? The rodent gives him a final once-over before it slithers over the side into the water with barely a plop.

“And a good afternoon to you too.” Dad doffs an imaginary hat before he disappears inside the cabin and shuts the door.

Well, I'm not going up there. Shit. I get seasick.

Which is all very well but it's getting hot inside here. I crack the car door open an inch and lie down on the backseat so I can conk out while I wait for him.

\*\*\*\*

Jesus. I sit up and rub my eyes. It's getting dark. There's a glow at one of the windows so he must still be in there—he's been in there *hours*.

I haul myself out the Jeep because I'm scared I'll be stuck all hunched over forever. This is turning out to be a real bummer of a day. I look back

at the creepy black forest—I'm not going near it so I stumble toward the bottom of the gangplank instead. "Dad?"

No answer. I check out the bike. Course it's a Honda, I knew it was. A CBX1000 if I'm not mistaken. Six cylinder. I wouldn't mind burning the rubber on that. Shit! Was that an octopus, sucking itself out the water? I'm up that gangplank certain I'm in the throes of a heart attack. I try to inhale but take only tiny shallow breaths. "Dad?"

The door opens easy enough and a warm fragrance of woodchips and varnish wafts out. I take a quick peek inside. Heck, it's chocka-block with lumps of wood on every surface and planks piled up to the ceiling. A bench is heaving under the weight of curly wood chips, wooden blocks and all kinds of tools: knives, planes, chisels. *And* a full-size statue of that animal rat-thing. Maybe it's a beaver.

I'm shivering like a bastard. It looks warm in there so I take another step forward and nearly hit my head on a skeleton guitar hanging from the ceiling.

"Next we slid into the river and had a swim, so as to f...f..." The voice, deep and unfamiliar, makes me jump.

"Freshen." That's my Dad's voice.

"So as to freshen up and cool off. Then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about ....k..."

"Knee-deep." My Dad has got this dumb smile on his face as he looks down at another man lying against his chest on a couch. Naked, at least to the waist because their lower halves thank God are covered with a counterpane, the man holds *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. I hurtle down the gangplank faster than I came up. Blinded by tears and running madly, I crash through the thick choking undergrowth I swore I wouldn't go near. The sound of my panting fills my head. Roots come out of nowhere and trip me while grabbing brambles scratch my legs. I swear the trees hiss like snakes in the wind. I have to stop. Get some kind of direction. My chest heaves and my lungs hurt. Tears pour down my face. There's a lighter area over there, but it's difficult to get to with these damn hanging tendrils pulling on my hair.

Oh! I shriek like a girl as a bird tears out of a tree, and I overbalance smack into a patch of nettles.

Is your heart supposed to be in your brain? If only I could stop crying but these nettles sting so. Maybe if I crawl out. Jesus Christ! I scramble backward. There's a goddamn...a goddamn...a fucking *rabbit*. I don't want to look. But I do. It's all hunched over and its eyes, oh hell, are all swollen

and glazed and *blue* and...oh shit...those are its intestines all pink and...I retch up Twinkies and, oh Dad, help me, I wet myself.

“Dad,” I whimper, sitting with my hands around my ankles, my head on my knees. Jesus I stink. The tree trunk's very hard against my back and I don't think I ever felt so lost in all my life.

What was he doing in there with that man? And, like a flash, it hits me. I know him. I sure do. I've seen him. He's a roadie or a sound-guy. That's right. I saw him at one of my parents' gigs swinging around the rigging like a chimpanzee. It looked fun and I decided to give it a whirl but didn't get far. Two rungs up the ladder, a hand grabbed my collar and pried me off like a scab. I tell you, that guy had elastic arms because I swear he was twenty feet away but the next second I was dangling in mid-air by the scruff of my neck while he clocked me from top to bottom. The indignity! Didn't he know I was Alex Finch's son? I punched and kicked but no matter how hard I tried never made contact and I reckon to this day he let me swat about like Jerry Mouse just for the sheer hell of it before he finally put me down.

*Whippoorwill*. Christ, doesn't this forest ever sleep? I cover my head with my hands. Any minute now the Alien is going to drop from the tree and attach itself to my face or puncture me with its ribs all turned inside out.

A twig snaps close by and I open one eye. It's not a slimeball of drool but a pair of scuffed boots, scruffy jeans, a stained flannel shirt, a mop of brown hair and a pair of eyes that bore into me with the same intensity as they did all those years ago when I tried to swat him.

As he hunkers down, warmth gusts over me. It's coming from him like he has a storm of energy inside. He sits there. I sit here. His hands are clasped between his knees, and he doesn't look any different to when I saw him years ago. And, surprisingly, he doesn't seem as tough as I remember. But, then, I don't know...I shoot him another glance. I guess he does have this street-fighter air about him. Like, if the Alien did drop out the tree right now, it'd be darn sorry about its timing because this guy would take one look at it and say, “you mess with this bull, you'll find he's got *horns*.”

I do my best to laugh in a nonchalant I'm not scared kind of way. “See. I don't even know where I am.” I sound like Minnie Mouse.

“Silver Creek,” he says, except it doesn't come out like that. He spends an eternity over the “s” and swallows a couple of times between Silver and Creek. Takes him ten times longer to say it than a normal person.

He turns his head to the left as if he's heard something I haven't. Without another word he gets up and starts off in that direction, pausing to take a look at the dead rabbit by the nettles.

"Wait!"

He doesn't look back, just keeps going.

"Wait," I cry in my Minnie voice and scrabble in the loose leaves but can't get a footing. "If you leave me here, I'll tell my Dad. I will."

This time he stops, slowly turns round and pads back while I cringe against the tree. He looks more dangerous than any face-hugger as he stands over me, his hands on his hips. But then a faint smile flickers and his eyes crinkle at the edges. "Alrighty," he says in, like, twenty seconds before he's beamed back to the Mother Ship.

I wrap my hands around the trunk, hating the way my pants feel cold, watching the empty space where he was standing a second ago. "Don't go," I whisper. "Please."

But then he's transported back, this time towing my Dad whose hair's standing every which way like he's had an electric shock. "Oh Jamie," he says, his palms held stiffly out as if he can't believe that he's really seeing me. And his voice goes down as if he doesn't really *want* to see me.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I snivel which makes his face soften.

I snuggle under the arm he holds out and we make our way back through the snarling undergrowth that parts for the guy in front. "Scared you being out here, did it?" my Dad teases.

"No," I pout but like the way he gives me a little squeeze. "Not at all."

Soon as we're out of the forest Dad releases me, and he and the other guy head toward the boat.

"Wait," I say which makes them turn round. "I'm not going on that boat."

And I see it—a fleeting look flashes across the guy's otherwise immobile face: a small frown, his eyes darken, his lips turn down. Disappointment? Dismay? Difficult to say because it's gone as fast as it came. He licks his lips and turns to Dad. "I'll go make you something for the journey," he says, fluent as you or me. Who's he kidding with this stammer business?

"No." Dad's face has hardened and he turns to me. "You have two choices, Jamie. You either stay with us on the boat. Or you sleep out here on the bank. You decide. I'm not taking you back to Verdigris tonight."

What the...? What kind of tone is that to take with me? "I'm not getting on that boat."

"Then I'll bring you something to eat and a sleeping bag down here." He turns to the gangplank again.

A chorus of frogs starts up as if orchestrated, you know the kind—it sounds like they're regurgitating supper. I'm not too fond of frogs outside the dissecting room. And if they're blood squirting toads, well..."Wait! You can't treat me like that. What would Mom say?"

Dad looks at me cool as a dude. "I didn't ask you to come here. No one invited you. But we are now, so you can either take it or leave it. Your choice." He's *never* spoken to me like that and the shock of it leaves me speechless.

They carry on up the gangplank and don't look back while I saunter along way behind, at least two or three steps. They go into the cabin and I stay out on deck. "I get sea-sick," I yell after about ten minutes of being there alone. "And I itch." I scratch at where the nettles got me and got me good.

I drift about and am on the point of going in to see what they're doing when the guy comes out and hands me a mug of something hot and brown and fragrant enough to make my mouth water.

"What's this?"

"For sea-sickness," he says, except he really said, "F...for sick...sick...sea..."

"I'm not drinking that," I say and put the mug down on the wooden deck.

He makes an up and down movement with his shoulders and then hands me something in a bottle.

"What's this?"

"Calamine. For the nettle stings," he says, except he really...oh for Christ sakes. I tell you, when you're around this guy you wonder if you don't speak English. At least not his kind of English. And what is this *bull* of stammering at me and not at my Dad? Huh? And reading following the lines with his finger and lying in my Dad's arms and having my Dad look at him in that way... And...and laughing in the cabin. Dad doesn't laugh with *anyone* except me. Fact is I don't even recognize it as his laugh but it must be. I swipe away tears and am glad he's gone so he can't see them.

The next second, though, he's back. I tell you, I'm going to start calling him Scotty, although I think his name's Sam. Or maybe it's

Saaaaaaaam because that's what Dad just said in the cabin, in a stupid low voice. This time he has a pile of clothes on offer.

“What's this?”

But I guess he reckons I can figure that out for myself because he puts them down on a carton without a word and goes back into the cabin. I check the pile out—they must be his clothes because Dad's would be too big and not as scruffy as these. I'm not wearing his stuff. I smell them. They're clean. I smell myself. I'm not clean.

There's no way in hell I'm taking my clothes off out here where anything can get me so I go into the cabin, making a scraping and knocking noise on the threshold just in case they're...you know. But they're not. Sam's sitting at his bench, gouging a piece of wood and Dad's perched on the bench watching him. Pretty innocuous I guess. Except Dad's foot is between Sam's knees and, for a moment, Sam puts the wood down and runs his hand up Dad's calf, sending up a static crackle.

They hear me and Sam picks up his wood again as if he never put it down, but he's not kidding anyone. With great dignity I ask where I can change and, without a word, Sam leads me out on deck and into a john. Phew! Jesus. A bucket? That makes a *grinding* noise when you've done your business? Boy, what a dump, excuse the expression.

When I go back, Dad's on his own in the cabin washing my jeans in the sink. Splashing everything in a twenty yard radius, he says, “You're going to have to call your Mom in case she's worried where you are.”

It's not me she should be worried about. “Okay.” I look around for a phone.

“Sam's waiting outside. He'll take you into town.”

### III

He's already on his bike surrounded by a cloud of dancing moths and looking ready to kick some bad guy's booty, or maybe the forest's booty because that's where he's looking. “The f...fo...”

Ah hell, forget it. This is the summary of what he tries to say: “The forest's sick.”

Big deal. I get on the bike, pillion. I guess there's no point asking him to let me drive because the explanation why not will just take too long.

“You saw the rabbit?” he asks.

“The one with its guts hanging out?”

“Sick,” he says as he fires up the motor.

Boy, it was past sick, I'm tempted to say but we roar off in a cloud of exhaust that sends first my hair and then me horizontal. I was planning to hold onto the seat but as he swings around trees I'm not crazy about falling off so I clutch the sides of his shirt.

Gee whiz. He's stopped, or rather, *skidded* to a halt which nearly sends me over the top of him. I wonder, I do wonder if he didn't do that on purpose, and I wonder even more when he shoots me a glance that contains an industrial sized dose of cheek. I'll have to remember that look and practice it in front of a mirror.

He steadies the bike with his feet but keeps the motor running. "S...see that?" He points into the undergrowth that's as dark as, but possibly less interesting than, the inside of a cow. He keeps his finger steady and after a moment I see what he's pointing at. A rabbit. A live one this time. It's chewing and contemplating the meaning of life.

"Bear's weed," Sam explains.

"Excuse me? A bear's weed somewhere?"

He shoots me a glance now that says *douchebag*. I'll have to remember that one too, it's pretty neat.

"B...bear's herb. Except it's not."

Uh huh. Three out of twenty for clarity there, Sam.

"I d..don't know the name. It...um...it acts like a...like a...prot...ection."

He kicks the stand down and leans toward a tree, his hand on the trunk. "And the insects," he murmurs. "They carry...carry..."

Yeah, I know what he's talking about. The plants, which act as natural cures, are eaten by the forest animals and the insects are pretty bright too because they process the leaves and transport the result into the bark of sick trees. It would be interesting to study the herb's phenology, analyze its leaf chemistry and check out its defense compounds. Maybe I'll talk to my chemistry teacher or even Uncle Tim when I get back, because if this guy Sam doesn't know its name, my instinct tells me that the plant must be pretty rare.

Before I can get off and collect a sample, though, he's upped the gas and we're off again. If I didn't know better I'd say we were on a horse, galloping over the bumps, rushing and swerving but never once missing our target.

We've hit town and he's expertly negotiating city streets and *Drive Friendly* signs, dodging cars with a finger flipping attitude. If there's a fence, he'll jump it I bet with me on the back and all. Whoa! He's just



heard a police siren, and we're off down a narrow alley, our knees missing the walls by inches.

By the time we stop by a pay phone, I am so tanked up from the rollercoaster ride that I don't care if Mom chews my ear off. She doesn't because she wouldn't—every time I screw up she blames Dad. “He's an irresponsible schlub.”

I do the honorable thing and defend him. “It wasn't his...”

But she doesn't give a toothpick for honorable. “He should've known you were in the back seat. Any fool looks to see who's hiding in the back before they start out on a journey. I tell you, he's lost it. And I bet he's forgotten we're being interviewed for *Rolling Stone* on Tuesday. Remind him we need to give them dates for gigs and details of *new songs*. They want to know about our new set. Let me talk to him, Jamie.”

“Mom...”

“What?” Suspicion grows in her voice. “Where exactly are you Jamie? You are in a motel, aren't you? With your Dad?”

It all goes quiet for a moment before she says, all breathless. “Who are you with?” Her anger's slithering like a row of worms down the wires and when they come out my end they're going to roar.

“Mom,” I waver so she reels the worms in, sucking them back down the line.

Her voice shakes as she says, “Tell your father I want you back home now. And if he won't bring you, then you get on a train or a greyhound. Charge my account. And if I don't hear from you in precisely two hours with details of what you're doing and when you're arriving then I'm calling the police. What he's doing is illegal.”

I whistle as I hang up. Talk about meltdown. I wonder why she's so mad, I mean it's not like Dad goes off the rails on a regular basis—he doesn't have time for one thing because he spends every waking moment with us.

But is he going off the rails? It's not like there's anything *really* going on. I mean, I know Dad was...um...you know...lying on a couch. But they were *reading*, or trying to. Maybe Dad's coaching him, I don't know. And, okay, so Sam ran his hand up Dad's leg. Maybe Dad had cramp. Guys touch other guys' legs all the time. Don't they.

And I betcha when we get back Dad'll say to me, “Come on, let's scam” because by then he'll have taken a good look around and seen the place as it really is. He's not such a total tool that he'll want to spend any time on that stinky old barge with only one bathroom. And what a

bathroom. Did you see the *shower*? Jesus. I mean, when push comes to shove which would you choose? The Jacuzzi in Dad's bathroom at home or the bag of cold water stuck on a stick?

Sam's propped against his bike talking to an older guy with grey hair that's swept back in a coiffeur that must have taken the barber hours to get right. Well, let's be accurate here, the old timer's talking to Sam. His hand's on Sam's shoulder, and Sam fidgets as if he'd like to shrug it off. "So I'll see you tomorrow night," the old guy says. "The rest of the crowd's going to follow me—they seem to think I know my way through the trees. If we don't appear by eight, send out a search party."

Sam looks at his boots. "No p...problem," he says.

"Because I don't want to miss a crumb of your famous chili, and I do hope you're putting chocolate in it again. Is Amy going to be there?"

Sam nods. "And Pete."

"Good." The guy gives Sam's shoulder a pat. "See you tomorrow then. Should be a blast." He shoots me a curious look.

Sam takes a deep breath and says, "This is...um....Jamie. Alex's s...son."

The old guy opens his eyes so wide I'm scared his eyeballs are going to drop out. Then he pastes on a cheesy smile. "Excellent! Excellent!" He gives Sam a pat with every excellent and looks at me. "I've heard so much about you. See you tomorrow. And bring your guitar. Let's see if you really can play as well as your father."

I don't know what he's heard, but I've never picked up a guitar in my life.

"Oh, and tell him," he goes on. "Everything's going to plan so we'll talk financing jazz tomorrow. Financing jazz!" He guffaws like he's made a huge joke and we can still hear him when he's two blocks away.

"What's happening?" I ask Sam as we get on the bike.

"Just a...you know..." Okay, here's the gist: there's a party on the riverbank tomorrow night. First he says, "We're having a party." Then he corrects himself. "Well, I guess now *I'm* having a party."

At least he's got something right. But, even so, I can't rid myself of a nagging feeling. The old guy spoke about Dad as if he knew him well, but how often does Dad come to Silver Creek? Just once before, if my memory serves me well. And, while we're on that subject, I ask, "Who's Amy?"

"My sister. You remember her."

Yes, I have this niggling idea I do. There's something in Sam's face...And, like a blast from the past, I remember Amy. "She's your sister?"

"Yes. You're too...too big now to...you know...sit in the wheel...wheel..."

Too right. It's all coming back to me now.

My Dad and I were walking along a sidewalk—in Silver Creek, I now reckon. I was holding my Dad's hand, and I was at that age when an adult sitting in a stroller pushed by another adult seemed just a tad odd. But it was her hair that really got me. White cotton candy, just yummy enough to climb on her lap to taste. Next thing I knew we were thundering along the sidewalk doing at least a ton while a one-legged guy staggered along behind crying, "Wait up, wait up."

"Aw, old Pete just can't stuff the snuff. He doesn't have a freaking clue!"

"Old Pete doesn't have a freaking clue," I yelled back into the jet-stream, hanging onto the sides of the wheelchair. The man who'd been pushing her had disappeared and so had my father.

"Where's my Dad?" I gasped as we veered past a wall on the back two wheels.

She pulled up short, fished in the side of the chair and came up with a Ho-ho which she shoved in my mouth to gum it up. "Give 'em a moment. They haven't seen each other for a while."

Yeah right. Sam had been the one pushing the chair.

Sam and his sister share something besides looks—they both drive like maniacs. To anyone of a more nervous disposition than me, the ride with Sam back through the forest would send them into neurotic freefall. I swear the trees jump out of our path as we charge straight at them.

Once we're back on the riverbank, I shakily get off the bike. In the distance a loon replies to a duck's call, but there's no welcome back from Dad. Instead he calls from the deck, "Sam, I think it got the fish."

"What got the fish?" I mumble as I go up the gangplank.

"Otters," Sam says from behind me. "Are semi-aquatic creatures, members of the Lutrinae family. Their whiskers help them navigate and locate prey in the dark."

"What the...?" Talk about loopy as all hell. I goggle at my father but he's doing something to a line that runs over the side and pays no mind to the walking, talking encyclopedia. Otters?

Sam takes over from my Dad and reels in the line until two fish thump onto the deck and look scummy.

"I don't like fish," I mutter at my Dad.

"He's got Tater Tots," he tells me as if that makes everything all right. Well it does. I guess.

"I don't think it went too well," Sam tells Dad who looks at me for an explanation.

"She said if I'm not on my way home in two hours she's going to call the cops."

Sam looks at his boots and Dad looks at Sam. The air's so thick with consternation you could cut it with a knife. When Dad's shoulders sag, Sam rubs his back in small circles. "You have to go," he says as if Dad needs persuading.

Dad straightens his shoulders. "No, I just got here. And I waited...so long." His voice cracks and he struggles to clear his throat before he continues in a firmer voice. "In any case, she's not going to call the cops. She does that then it's the end of Finch and Suggs the dramatic duo, and she knows it. She'll never have a new song to perform ever again, and she's not going to risk that. It's what she lives for and always has." He studies the deck, seemingly interested in an oil stain, before he continues in a resigned voice. "But I will take you home. Just in case. 'Cause I don't want the cops coming here, bothering you." His face and voice soften as he says this last part to Sam. "And I don't want her saying stuff." With a deep sigh he picks up the fish and goes into the cabin, trailed by Sam.

While they're inside, I stay out on deck wishing I smoked so I could blow rings at dancing bugs and play the part of a moody, disturbed teenager. They're rattling pans and talking in low voices.

Dad gives that belly-laugh I never heard him make before, and it really flips me out. How can he be one way here and another way at home? It's like he's two people. I can't get any of this straight. Okay, after remembering the Amy incident, I do realize that Dad and Sam have known each other for a while. But what *is* the scene here? Are they just good buddies or what?

*Good buddies don't lie naked in each other's arms, goof-ball.*

But they weren't doing anything—he was *reading*. With his finger following the lines like a moron.

*Sure, like they'd been reading for two hours. And your Dad was gazing at him like he was a precious diamond. And morons don't get their heads kissed in that way.*

Oh Christ, shut it, I just don't buy any of that stuff. You got it all wrong. Look, if it was me and some chick I fancied, I wouldn't be able to keep my hand out of her pants. We'd be making out, draped over the furniture like there was no tomorrow. But just look at them in there—Sam's cutting up a fish and Dad's mixing something in a bowl. I mean even me and the kids I hang out with get more intimate than that.

*Dumbo. You think they're going to leap on each other while you're around? And you have your head in a bucket or what? Can't you see their fingers touching? Like all the time. And have you listened to what they're talking about? Go on, take a peek. Well? What were they saying?*

Sam growled at him.

*He did? What did he growl?*

“Quit looking at me like that.”

*And how did your Dad react?*

He laughed that stupid laugh.

*So you can read into that whatever you like.*

Yeah. I guess... But where does that leave me?

*Haven't a clue.*

They return to the deck with the whole supper caboodle which they place on a gas stove where it sizzles. Dad hands me a root beer Snapple and then sits on a carton, legs wide apart. He even *sits* differently here. He takes a sip of his beer, puts the can on the deck and says to me, “We have to talk.” He glances at Sam who's poking the fish with a fork.

Dad scratches his head, lights a cigarette and squints at me through the smoke. “I'm considering a career change.”

What the hell's he going to tell me? I'll think about something else so I don't have to listen.

*...rock opera, got the idea fourteen years ago with Fierce Lamb, it'll be about a disabled girl...*

Okay, this doesn't seem too life-threatening. “You're talking about Tommy. God, Dad, that's so old.”

“No it's different. This runs a whole range of jazz fusion with reggae, rock. Even samba.”

Yakkedy dah. *The girl has intense relationship with music. Falls in love.* “I might,” he flicks his finished cigarette over the side, “no, I'm *going to* end it with an accident—a drug accident. You know, a prescribed drug incident.”

“Oh that'll please Uncle Tim. Like he's your number one fan already.” I can't understand his preoccupation with pharmaceutical products. The

way he goes on, you'd think they're only invented to kill you even though I'm always telling him he's wrong and that people like Uncle Tim are there for society's own good. Look, I'll give you an example: Uncle Tim's about to launch this new wonder-drug that's called Kiddycold which cures colds in children. It's been in trials for yonks, and yet he's never tried it out on a child. Now if that's not being public-spirited, I don't know what is.

And you know what Dad said the other day when I told him Uncle Tim had been nominated President of the Community Health Committee? "I think it stinks," he said. He shouldn't be like that, he should be *proud*.

Something rocks the boat, and I see that Sam's gone. "That's okay, Dad. I don't care what you do. If you want to compose go ahead and do it I won't disturb you. You've got a perfectly empty study upstairs no one uses. I don't know what Mom's going to say though. She might be a little ticked off..."

"She knows. She's known for a long time that this has been on the cards. It just hasn't been the right time. But, now it is. And don't look at me like that, I know she lives and breathes being on stage and performing but there's no reason for that to stop—there'll be a part for her in the show if she wants it. If she doesn't then I'll just keep her supplied with material she can use on her own. Because that's what she'll be—on her own, unless she teams up with anyone else. See, I can't...I just can't..." A muscle works in his cheek and he looks about him, probably looking for Sam.

He leans over and turns off the gas stove which is a pity because those Tater Tots are almost done. He sucks in his lips and then changes tack. "Sam told me you met the Prof in town. He's my financial backer. I pestered and pestered him, spent hours in his office here. And you know what convinced him in the end?"

"Your stunning talent?"

"No. He only agreed to back the production when Sam guaranteed that the orchestra guitars and violins would all be Barrowdales. Barrowdales," he repeats when I look puzzled. "Sam Barrowdale. He's a trained luthier now. You've seen my guitar. It's one of his. The Prof says he's potentially the finest this side of the equator." He looks sheepishly at me, and if he's expecting praise or wonder, then he's not going to get it.

"Isn't it a little damp here?" That must be the understatement of the year. I can smell and taste the dank river from here which must affect the wood.

“He doesn't do much on board. He works from a large workshop in town. You should see it—a musician's paradise. Each instrument sells for nearly a thousand bucks these days.”

“So when's all this going to happen? This rock opera.” I stretch out and yawn, feeling more comfortable than I have all day. Now I understand what all this is about. Sam and Dad are in cahoots with this show they're putting on. I snigger when I think of the couch incident. So Dad was doing some experimenting, that's all. He's a little late for it, but I guess there comes a time in every man's life—well, *some* men's lives because it won't in mine, no way. But I hear kids at school sample it before they go back to the straight and narrow. It's a guy thing, and I won't tell Mom.

“I was going to meet the Prof tomorrow,” he goes on, unaware of my thoughts. “We were planning on holding a party here on the riverbank with the production company. A hootenanny. They're good guys, it would've been a blast.” But now I can't, his eyes say. Because I have to take you home.

I yawn again. “Well, Sam can probably handle it on his own.” Course he can if he's worth anything as a business partner. And if he can't then Dad should be shot of him.

“I just...” The light has gone out of Dad's face and I wonder if he's sick. He's started fiddling like he does when he gets jittery, plucking at his sleeve and his pants while his leg jigs up and down. He takes a breath. “Jamie. I want to say something else.”

I jerk. Oh no you don't. I've heard all I want to hear, thank you very much. I start to get up but he clutches my sleeve. “Please.” His voice cracks and his eyes plead with me to sit down again.

I suck my teeth but remain standing, looking down on him while my stomach churns.

It takes a while for him to probe the inside of his cheek with his tongue while he thinks. Then he gets up too, leans against the cabin wall and folds his arms. “I was going to leave this a while. Probably another year. But events have caught up with me. First this financing business has come quicker than I expected and now you finding out.” He coughs into his hand and takes another look around. But I don't care too much where Sam is, my heart's beating like crazy, and I do not want to hear what's about to come.

“Jamie, I want to be with Sam.”

I guess I was half-expecting it, but even so, it's a shock. “What? Why?”

“Why?” He looks truly amazed at my question.

“Yes, why? I mean, what is this? Why would you want to live with a roadie or a guitar maker or whatever he is?”

He frowns for a moment before his face opens in amazement. “A roadie? Did you see him at the gigs? Did you?”

“May have done. Once or twice.”

He raises his eyebrows in surprise. “Boy. Then count yourself privileged because I don't reckon you'll find another person at those gigs who ever saw him. If you saw him, it was because he let you. And just what was he doing at those gigs?”

“Once he was up in the rigging.”

Dad gives a belly-laugh, a true one, the kind I've never provoked before. “Crazy little... Yeah, he'd find something dangerous to do sure enough in the moments I was otherwise occupied. I'm glad I didn't know about that. But I'm thinking about during the concert. Where was he?”

An image is forming and I see Sam in my mind. “In the wings. And in the front row. Watching you. Freaking out to the music.”

“Yeah, he does tend to do that.” He laughs again. “And what was I doing? *Think* now Jamie.”

“You were,” I start slowly while the memory returns. “You were watching him! Yeah. All the time. You couldn't take your eyes off him. I went to stand beside him so I could pretend you were looking at me.”

He was grinning but at my last words he becomes serious. “Oh.” He brushes his hand down my cheek. “I didn't know.” He lets a couple of beats go by. “It was the only way I'd get through those concerts, knowing he was there. You say you saw him once or twice, but he's been there many times. He missed some—once when Amy was sick—well, I guess you remember what happened then.”

I sure did. The time Dad scared the life out of a packed stadium by turning bright red and shaking so much everyone thought he'd had a heart attack and he got hauled off stage on a gurney. Another time he threw his stool at the audience and skedaddled off down the road straight into a group of waiting fans who really gave him something to be scared about.

But he's not thinking about that, his mind's in the here and now and his eye's on the back end of the boat. “He makes me human, Jamie.” He says this in such a low voice I have to lean in to hear.

That's it. I've had enough. “So you're telling me that Mum and I make you inhuman.”



He shakes his head violently. “No. *You* don't stop making me human. It's everyone else. I'm proud of you and love you...”

“Oh come on. If you love me you won't let this guy...this...*retard* who...whose mind sits down whenever he stands up. He can't even *talk* properly. And now he's trying to take you away from Mom and me.”

I think he stops breathing at that point for at least a minute while he gazes at the dark horizon as if he can't bear to look at me. Just when I think I'm going to have to do something, he inhales, stretches his gimp leg out in front of him and speaks through stiff lips. “Thank you. I think I've now decided for certain. I'm going to rent an apartment in Verdigris where you can stay with me whenever you want during the week. I'll spend the weekends here until full production starts and then I'll be most of the time here. Sam has said you're welcome on his barge but I suggest that you only consider that option when you know you can be civil about and to him. Because,” his face is like stone now, “there's something that I should be very clear about. Sam is not taking me away from you. Sam *gave* me to you years ago. And it's time I gave something back. More than time.”

My mind works hard but keeps sticking on one thing he's said. An apartment eh? An apartment that would be empty on occasion. On plenty of occasions. *Come to my pied a terre*. This is pretty exciting news. Pretty liberating news.

But there's something important I want to get straight, as they say. “I don't ever want to hear people say you're gay,” I tell him, looking as fierce as I can. “People find out...” By people I mean jocks at school—if they find out they're going to skin my hide.

“I'll do my damndest. I promise. And it'll be easier once I'm out of the spotlight and my name disappears from the public eye, which it will because no one pays much attention to the rock opera's composer or principal guitarist. It's the lead singers that hit the big-time, if all goes well.”

I'm only half-listening because my mind's on the apartment. Maybe I can get him to put a mirror on the ceiling over the bed. And a big Jacuzzi in the bathroom. And silk sheets. And even better—since he's going to spend so much time in Silver Creek, he won't turn up any more at my school events. Jesus wow!

He gives me a puzzled look, probably because he can't figure out what my reaction really is, pushes off the cabin wall and looks to the back of the boat again. “What's he up to?”

Because I'm curious, I follow him along the narrow walkway that runs along the side of the cabin. On the small triangle of deck at the rear, Sam's lying belly down, fishing about in the filthy gurgling old river through an open door in the side. He's taken his shirt off and is teetering on the brink there.

"Hey," Dad calls in warning, speeding up as we balance along the edge of the boat like a circus act.

There's a rush of dripping water as Sam twists round holding a huge lump of sodden timber that soaks his pants. He crashes it onto the deck and then gives such a satisfied grin you'd think he'd discovered buried treasure. But only for a second because the momentum of dropping the heavy log has destabilized him. With a comic look of surprise, and before either my Dad or I can shout a warning or grab him, he wobbles, and then falls backward out of the door. The last thing I see are his up-turned legs before there's a tremendous splash as he hits the water.

Dad and I rush to the side and peer over. He's sunk, leaving no signs except a few bubbles which slowly clear until only a slight swirl remains.

"Jesus," I cry at the calm surface. My hands go to my shirt, ready to take it off. Should I dive in after him? What if he's caught in weed down there? Can I really get in that filthy water? Why isn't my Dad panicking?

Why indeed. He's grinning like there's no tomorrow. "Stupid little son of a..." he says, and he can't break his eyes from the water. "Here he comes." He nods toward the still water where I can't see a thing.

With barely a ripple, something breaks the surface, and I let out the air I'd been holding. But it's not Sam. Not unless he's grown a brown furry face and whiskers. I stare in horror but suddenly get this sneaky feeling I'm here on my own. I turn round. "Dad?"

He's speeding back along the edge of the boat. I follow but much more slowly because the idea of going ass over tip in the drink holds zero appeal. By the time I reach the cabin, Dad's coming out of it with a towel in his hand, but he's hardly put one foot on the deck when a geyser of water gushes up from the river with more force than Old Faithful. It pours in over the side and splats right between our feet, splashing each of us with mud. Dad's howls then yells into the night. "I'm gonna getcha for that."

As he thunders toward the gangplank, I peek over the side, half-ready to flee at the first sign of another water eruption. Sam's down in the murk floating on his back through water as thick as melted chocolate while, following right on behind, as if it's mimicking him, is a shiny bullet-

headed otter with a giant snail on its furry belly, happy as Larry. Until, that is, Sam threatens to pick the snail off and then all hell lets loose. Even Dad stalls half-way down the gangplank and hunches up like Chicken-Licken.

The river becomes a storm of a whirlpool, sending up the stink of wet earth as Sam and the otter dive, surface and dive again in a royal battle for the snail. The water froths and crashes as they tumble through it in a game of capture and escape while Dad stands on the river bank holding out the towel like a bullfighter. "Watch out, he's behind you," he yells at the otter.

I turn my back on the tug-of-war to stifle a giggle and spot a package on the couch in the cabin. When I go in to investigate I find a paper bag, so I sit on the couch which goes *twang* while I look inside. It's one of those herbs that Sam pointed out earlier, the rare one that's supposed to save the forest. Bear weed's cousin. I fold back the wrapping he's put round it and admire his handiwork. It's a perfect sample: fat serrated mature leaves and tender new shoots, a long stem topped by open yellow flowers and closed buds. And plenty of soil around the roots to play with. I feel like I've received a much longed-for Christmas present. I can just see the newspaper headlines naming me as the person who discovered the magic medicinal herb that saves mankind.

But just when did Sam go into the forest and get it for me? Gee. He's a rare one right enough.

Outside, playtime is far from over. The water's beaten into a broth by squawking flapping ducks, and Dad's joined in the pandemonium.

"Goddamn, goddamn beast." He sounds pretty desperate and so would I if I had a wet, muddy otter weaving in and out of my legs. Dad stamps, slips in the slimy mud but manages to keep on his feet.

Sam, looking like the alien from the brown latrine planet as he wades out the water, intones, "*Next we slid into the river and had a swim, so as to freshen up and cool off. Then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee-deep and watched the daylight come.*" He picks up a handful of mud which he lobs at Dad's chest where it spreads like a starburst in reverse.

"I'll give you a sandy bottom," Dad roars, swiping at his shirtfront. He makes a grab at Sam who could easily get away if he wanted to but he doesn't and why? Because it's much more fun to rub his mud-caked body against my Dad's. "Hey," Dad yells, "You think leather likes mud? Huh?" If he's mad, then squirming in closer is a weird way of showing it.

I take time-out to look back at my plant on the couch but am summoned back by a squawk of discontent. The otter's attacking Dad's pants cuff, pulling with sharp white teeth, its claws scrabbling for purchase, panting pig-like snorts.

"Hey, reptile breath, cut it out and you," he points at Sam who has a handful of mud that's hovering in the general direction of Dad's waistband. "You have exactly three seconds to put that down." To give Sam credit, Dad doesn't stipulate exactly down *where* so, in a twinkling, the mud's been shoveled down his pants. "Jamie!" Dad calls, grasping his belt. His wide grin is beamed right at me like warm sunshine. "Come and help me son. Come save your old Dad from these two hoodlums."

My throat and stomach hurt from trying not to laugh. I swipe a couple of Tater Tots off the stove and head into the fray, pulling my shirt over my head as I go. "Don't worry, Dad. I'm coming."

"That's my boy."