

PROLOGUE

Today had been the hottest in a series of unbearable days. Temperature in the nineties, humidity somewhere around two hundred percent, sweltering and steamy, predictably sunny, and generally speaking, just plain damn uncomfortable. A typical June day in Savannah.

For the locals, it's uncomfortable. For the visitors, or in my own particular case, revisitors, it's intolerable. As I headed west on I-16 with the afternoon sun in my eyes, I realized how exhausted I was, and how little I was looking forward to what lay ahead.

As my customized Hurst Olds settled in around 60, I switched on the cruise control, switched off my brain, and settled back for a few minutes to collect my thoughts and relax before the last stop. The earlier calls to friends and acquaintances were merely the preliminaries. My friends were still here, but changed, the city still here, but different. This was the main event, the important one . . . the real reason I came at all.

No, there was nothing for me here now except memories neatly catalogued and filed away like keepsakes in Granny's hope chest—all but one. I was on my way to face this last unfiled memory in the only way possible—head on!! Whether the resulting impact would be as gentle as a newlywed's first kiss, or as violent as a mid-air collision, I had no way of knowing. I only knew that it had to be faced. Eighteen months had passed since my last duty-forced visit. And so I was returning. Maybe to atone for the past, maybe to learn to live with the present, or maybe . . . just maybe . . . to justify my future . . . and my very existence.

That last thought stayed with me as I guided the car off the interstate and onto Denner Road. Eighteen months ago, the guilt had been extreme. Death follows life as surely as spring does winter, but in this case, it was different. I knew!! And for the false echoes of dignity and honor, I'd kept silent, and as a result, a man had died. My wandering thoughts almost made me miss the turn for Forest Hills. I pulled in, parked, got out, locked the Hurst-mobile and began to walk up the long, narrow pathway toward my destination.

As I approached the veterans' section, I watched as a middle-aged couple shuffled along. They stopped and the woman gently placed flowers on a well-manicured grave and wiped away a tear as she stared in stony silence at the marker that read Beloved Son. And underneath, some dates. Dates that revealed that the young man had been barely old enough to vote . . . and far too young to die. The last word on the marker explained more than a thousand-word essay: Vietnam.

This simple scene touched something deep inside me. Old soldiers may fade away, but young soldiers leave empty holes in loved ones' lives—holes that will never be filled by flag-draped coffins, gun salutes at dawn, or occasional visits to cemeteries.

An involuntary shiver raced through me. There's a strange fascination in cemeteries—looking at the markers, and the few sketchy details available, trying to imagine what this person was like when he was part of the living.

I came here much better prepared: to my left, friends; to my right, friends of friends; and straight ahead, someone who was oh so much more. The marker said First Sergeant. The marker said World War II, the marker said Korea, the marker said Vietnam. The marker said dates; my heart said more. The Ol' Sarge was my mentor and my taskmaster, but most of all, the Ol' Sarge was my friend. Unfortunately, he's also the ghost of Christmas past. But he's a ghost I'm proud of.

He died at 54 but lived more in one lifetime than most people do in ten. The Ol' Sarge had fought and adventured over half the world for three decades. The memories of the short time we had together would have to be enough. Enough to balance my guilt at having contributed to his death.

"There's nothing you could have done." As this thought occurred to me, I realized that the words had been spoken—but not by me!! I whirled around, instinctively assuming my most menacing stance, to find an air force general, a genuine four-star general, standing behind me with his arms folded, shaking his head with understanding.

"Who the hell are you?" I growled. The remark, like the stance, had been instinctive also—he'd damn near scared me out of my skin.

"Now just take it easy, son," he said, smiling.

"Take it easy, my ass! You damned near got your head knocked off."

"As I said," he interrupted, "take it easy. You've never learned to control that temper, have you? Letting your instincts take over has gotten you in trouble in the past. And I imagine that it hasn't exactly endeared you to the civilian personnel you associate with.

"Oh, I know quite a bit about you," the general continued, reading my exact thoughts. "Except for one person, I probably know more about you than anyone else in the world."

"The Sarge," I shrugged without expression.

He nodded his head in silent agreement. It was not a statement that called for an answer.

"You sent for me."

"Yes, indeed." He smiled again, with that pleasant but irritating Cheshire cat smile that gave away nothing, but implied everything.

"How do I know that?"

"Fair request." He paused, measuring the look on my face, then continued. "You're here because of a communique, which reads precisely as follows: 'Meet me tomorrow at 1600 hours at the permanent residence of the most important man in your life.'"

"Like all young men who have been trained in the science of survival until instincts become reactions, you showed up,"—he paused to glance at his watch—"at 1510 hours to survey the perimeter, and to establish possible defensive positions and escape corridors in order to gain an offensive edge by watching your adversary approach. Nicely done, m' boy, nicely done indeed. It's a pleasure to see that the government's money wasn't wasted. You've learned your lessons well. So did I . . . I showed up at 1430 hours . . . I taught the class."

"Now that we've established my bona fides, verify your own."

Without a word, I pulled from my pocket a crumpled piece of notebook paper. The paper had the soiled, well-used look of a sawbuck that had been in circulation for years. In the last twenty-four hours, I'd read and reread the note enough times to commit the contents to memory. He had quoted it exactly. I passed it across.

The general examined the note and gave me an unblinking stare.

"Anything else?" he asked in the tone of a judge who's just about to sentence a convicted child molester.

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"Not unless you want my identifying birthmarks."

"Cute." He nodded, as he turned away and paced slowly to the shade of a nearby tree.

The general crooked a finger in my direction. As I approached, he put his arm around my shoulders, and maneuvered me into position with my back firmly braced against the oak. Motioning me to stay put, he continued to examine the note, meticulously straightening folded corners and creases in silence, staring intently as if expecting a mysterious invisible message to suddenly leap off the page.

Translation—he was thinking. So was I. I was thinking about the relationship between grizzly old first sergeants and Academy type four-star generals that would send him all this way to talk privately with me, a year and a half after a death. Whatever the general had planned, he'd planned it well. It was far too early in this cat and mouse game for panicky lunges. The next move was the general's.

Finally, the general nodded, folded the paper, stuffed it in his pants pocket, and turned to face me.

"Okay," he said. "Let's begin."

As we stood there eyeing one another, my first thought was that it was about time. This thought, and all others, washed away as quickly as a beachfront condo in the path of a sixty-foot tidal wave as pain and nausea blurred my vision, buckled my knees, and doubled me over in agony—the son-of-a-bitch had kneed me in the balls.

He drove his forearm under my chin and lifted upward, slammed my head into the tree, and compressed my windpipe, which made breathing a most difficult task indeed. It was as complete a job of incapacitation as had been done on me in some time.

"I'm only going to say this twice—a first time and a last time. If you ever pop off to me again in the manner you used when I first approached, you'll spend so much time recuperating that, in all probability, they'll name a hospital wing after you. Is that perfectly, unmistakably, absolutely CLEAR?" the general growled.

"Yes, sir," I answered. I meant to make my reply sound crisp. What actually came out sounded more like off-key high notes from the soprano soloist for the Vienna Boys' Choir.

The general released me and backed away in measured steps. He stood waiting, while my breathing and heartbeat returned to something near normal. As the stars in my head cleared, I trudged over to where the general was standing. Then mechanically, like a zombie in a late night horror movie, I extended my right hand and said in a slurred voice, "We understand each other."

The general nodded and clasped the proffered right palm. Shaking off the wooziness, I jerked him forward with my right hand, reached back to my heels, and followed through with all my strength with my left. Fueled by embarrassment, adrenaline, and anger, the resulting connection was every heavyweight's dream. A dull, flat thud was followed by a backward head snap and rolling of the eyes. The general staggered backward, taking three drunken steps before losing his battle for balance, and with a final, futile, arm-waving stumble, landed flat on his back. Muhammad Ali couldn't have done it better.

But I wasn't Ali or the iron hero of a Western movie. My left arm was numb clean up to the shoulder, with the aftershock seeming to paralyze my whole body. It felt like I'd just hit a wall.

As the general lay there, shaking his head back and forth, trying to clear the cobwebs, I had my first real chance to look him over. For a man who had to be near sixty, he was in pretty good shape. His 6'2" frame was lean and trim in the uniform ornamented with twelve rows of combat ribbons, the hair was salt and pepper gray, the face craggy and seasoned.

Whoever this Old Ringknocker was, he'd definitely been around where things were noisy.

But by far the most dominating feature was the eyes. "Cat Eyes" that could hold you, "Precision Eyes" that could bore right through you, "Military Eyes" that commanded with a stare. As the general pushed himself to one knee, I stood transfixed, like a possum caught in a car's headlights. The glare from those eyes stayed unblinkingly on me as the general shakily regained his feet and approached.

At a distance of three feet, he stopped, stuck out his right hand, and said, "We understand each other."

I cautiously reached out to take his hand. Our hands touched once, then again, and then snatched away, each not trusting the other, before we hesitantly, but firmly, shook hands.

"You pack quite a wallop, son," the general acknowledged. "I've been hit with rifle butts that didn't hurt as much," he finished as he patted what was in the formative stages of becoming a fairly good-sized mouse under his right eye.

"So do you, General. I don't think I'll be able to even think about any sort of carnal contact for a couple of weeks."

"From what I hear about your personal life, that shouldn't cause any problems at all," the general retorted.

I chuckled at his wit, and as a further humorous thought struck me, I began to laugh.

"Would you mind telling me what's so goddamn funny?" he asked.

"Well, General," I began, as I wiped at teary eyes. "I don't think I've ever hit anybody so hard that I know so little, but instinctively like so much. Especially," I paused to fight off another laughter attack, "considering I don't even know your fucking name."

"Damned if that's not true," the general snorted. "Damned if it's not," he repeated, as a smile spread across his face.

"Tell me," he continued, grimacing as he touched his right cheekbone a little too firmly. "Do you always go around introducing yourself in such a high-handed fashion? I don't think I've ever seen that particular style listed in any of the etiquette books I've read," he finished with a laugh.

"You just don't read the right books, General. That's SOP for four stars."

"If that's the case, I suddenly find myself hoping that I never run into you if I ever earn my fifth star. Your SOP for that must come with a murder warrant."

The last comment sent both of us into more outbursts of laughter, which probably caused us to look, to a casual passerby, more like a couple of drunks in church than two people who had traveled many miles to a covert meeting. With the passage of a minute or so, the laughter began to subside. The brief respite was only that. The general was back on the beam, and back in control.

"Son, it looks like both of us took off on the wrong runway. So suppose we hit the restart button on this aircraft and try another takeoff," he said.

"Well," I acknowledged, "considering we piled the first one up, we could only do better. Let's go for it."

"Barney Thompson," he said, as he extended his hand.

I didn't hesitate as I took his hand. Behind all this light-hearted banter, I sensed I'd just shaken hands with someone who was the Sarge's lifelong friend, with someone who would become one of mine.

I also thought I'd just passed another test in the continuing rodent and feline contest. No question but that the game was continuing. Barney's warm handshake implied that the qualification match for establishing his trust and respect had been successfully completed.

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The main event was about to start—like everything in this clandestine rendezvous—when the general was damn good and ready.

“Son?”

“Sir?” I responded.

“Gotta smoke?”

“Only cigars.”

“Outstanding!” he boomed. “Of all my bad habits, cigars are my favorite.”

I produced my cigar case and lighter, handed Barney one, and took one for myself. As I lit first Barney’s and then my own, he nodded his thanks, but stopped me as I returned the lighter to my pocket.

“Never yet seen one of those Zippos that didn’t have some interesting bit of philosophy on it. Pass it across,” he said in a voice that had the unmistakable ring of an order to it.

“When I die, I know I’ll go to heaven, because I’ve already been to hell,” Barney read aloud. “I certainly can’t disagree. About the only thing we accomplished over there was the rape and pillaging of a generation of people,” he nodded, as he flipped the lighter back. “From a military standpoint,” he admitted, “the war was a complete waste.”

“From every standpoint,” I corrected.

Without a word, Barney turned and walked a few steps away, puffing his cigar and gazing at the surroundings.

“Nice place for a cemetery, isn’t it? Nice and quiet.” At that moment, almost as if cued, out on Denner Road a car with a sky-high rear end, big fat tires, and tomato cans for mufflers went roaring by. “Well, sometimes.”

Abruptly, Barney switched subjects. “Say, m’ boy, you don’t mind if I call you that, do you? Good,” he continued without waiting for an answer. “You knew a great deal about my friend, didn’t you?” He nodded in the direction of the grave.

“Yeah, a fair amount, I guess.”

“Quantify a fair amount.”

“Well, I think he talked more to me than anyone else,” I answered.

“Why do you think he talked to you?” Barney probed.

“Oh, probably because I’m a good listener, and first sergeants are good talkers,” I responded.

“One more time with truth, my friend,” Barney barked.

“That was his way of showing you how much he cared,” I confessed.

“That’s more like it, m’ boy,” Barney said. “I think you knew more than a fair amount,” he stated.

“General,” I stuttered. “What’s the point of—?”

“—Ah, ah, aaah,” Barney interrupted. “All in good time m’ boy, all in good time,” he interrupted. “To continue. I’ve got a question for you. It’s something that I’ve never known the answer to and thought you just might.”

“Shoot.”

“I crossed paths with the Sarge in the spring of ’59, just before I got my first star. I distinctly remember him saying he was getting out at twenty because something that happened in World War II had ruined his chances for making chief master sergeant. But he stayed on for thirty—thirty-two years as a matter of fact. Got any idea what changed his mind?”

The question sounded so innocent and open that it could be just what it appeared to be: an honest, sincere request for information. And then again, maybe it wasn’t. I shot a sharp glance at Barney, looking for an indicator, but could find no help there. Barney was busy examining a part of the oak tree that didn’t seem important enough to rate such scru-

tiny, and was wearing a give-away-nothing poker face.

I continued my intensive visual examination, looking for any weakness, any chink in the armor that would betray him. Of course, it would probably be as easy as trying to get him to be totally open with the Senate Armed Services Committee, but there had to be a way of reading that granite face, and I was determined to find it.

I had it. Of all things, it was the eyes. An ever so slight dilation of retina, causing a minuscule enlargement of the pupil, and I had him.

I also now had, or at least thought I now had, some idea of what this bizarre tryst was all about. Simply put, it was about information. Somewhere in this, the general was looking for confirmation that I had specific information, which quite obviously must be related to the Sarge, or his life, or to me, or maybe to the World War II mission that had ruined his career. It only remained for me to try to figure out just what it was in particular he was after, why he wanted it, and probably most important of all, what he intended to do with it once he got it.

Having established this monumental advantage, now what? I felt like a Chihuahua that just caught a Greyhound bus, and comes to the shocking realization that the damn thing is so big that he can't even pee on the tires. Barney had thus far demonstrated an uncanny ability to use silence to his advantage. The only thought that occurred to me was to do the same thing in return—to wait him out, to force, by doing absolutely nothing, the general to show his hand. I wouldn't have long to wait. A slight rise in the shoulders indicated that Barney was about to speak.

"Did you understand what I said, son?" he cracked.

"Yes I did, General. I was just pausing to reflect on why that question is important enough for you to haul me out here for a clandestine meeting on the hottest day of the year," I said. "If that's all you wanted to know, you could've let your fingers do the walking."

"Son, that was just something I've always wanted to know the answer to. If you don't know, then maybe you are not as well-informed as I thought; in which case, you're absolutely correct, we may as well adjourn."

Well, so much for the plan. The old fart had me and he knew it. I couldn't hide the fact that I wanted to know what this was about more than he wanted to tell me. The way the question was asked, Barney was looking for an update. It was June of '76; '59 was a while back, damn near a generation. A lot had changed, a lot had happened, and more importantly, a lot hadn't.

A sudden and disillusioning thought occurred to me—this, in fact, was a game after all. But I had to look past the first definitions in the Webster's to the seamier synonyms such as scheme, profession, or hunting for fun, to find the true description of this scenario.

To find out what this was all about, I was going to have to give Barney what he wanted, which would include as much detail as I could remember, and as much as he could probably imagine. Then, and only then, would I be in a position to demand an explanation in return.

"Barney," I said without expression, "I know the answer to why the Sarge reenlisted. What happened afterward is kind of long and hard to explain."

The general walked to the shade of the oak tree and sat down against it, stretched out his legs, crossed his feet, clasped his hands behind his head, and grinned at me around the cigar clenched in his teeth.

"Son, this cigar has put me in a relaxed listening mood. Tell me what you do know." Barney gestured to a spot next to him. "Come on, m' boy, don't look so surprised. Even generals sit down on the grass once in a while and relax. Join me!" The statement

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was an order, not a suggestion.

As I sat down beside him, not fifteen feet from where the Ol' Sarge was buried, my mind was racing—racing back in time. Back to memories rusty from disuse. Back to all the stories I'd been told, and all that I'd heard. Back to an April day and a freak accident, when a man's judgment would be proved wrong, and a son's honor would be vindicated. Back to a time when a war hero was president, and another soon would be. Back to a time of innocence and cars with fins, when one man's decision, made in the wake of a repulsed sexual advance, would alter the course of destiny for his family, and all who came in contact with him . . . forever.

"It was April, Barney . . . April of '59 . . . in a typical '50's middle class Savannah neighborhood . . . a nine-year-old boy entered his house to the sound of his mother's screaming voice . . ."

CHAPTER ONE

I don't care!! I told you that if you reenlisted and accepted this overseas assignment that we're through, and that's final."

"Just who the hell do you think you are, Queen Elizabeth?" Dad roared back. "Well, I've got news for you, your highness! I have reenlisted, and am leaving for England on May 15. You can stay here, go to your mother's, or go to hell, for all I care, but you'll be going there alone—the boys are going to England with me."

"Like hell they will, they'll—"

"—Shut up!" Dad interrupted. "I haven't finished yet. For months now I've been arguing with you and it hasn't changed a goddamn thing. I've tried reasoning with you, but you just won't listen, and last night, when you refused to make love, that was the last straw—"



There were no signs of dinner being prepared that Kevin could see as he entered the kitchen. One of Dad's standing rules was that supper be ready when he got home from work at five-thirty. The only exceptions were Dad's alerts at the base, birthdays, Mom and Dad's anniversary, or other special occasions. Dad particularly looked forward to those 'special occasions' when Mom would, in Dad's words, "get herself all dolled up."

A beauty in her youth, she was easing gracefully into middle age; her five-foot-five frame was highlighted by flaming red hair, high cheekbones, and a clear complexion. Added to that was a slim waist that hardly showed any effects of childbearing, and a chest that attracted more than its fair share of attention in a sweater. The combination caused her to, at times, be vain, and sometimes teasingly seductive. An attitude that had been misinterpreted on occasion by other NCOs in the outfit at company gatherings—a misrepresentation that, more than once, Dad had dealt with swiftly with the time-honored military accident known as 'slipping on a bar of soap in the shower'.

Kevin went from the kitchen into the living room and turned on the TV set. He sat down on the sofa, but the sound of something thumping against the wall between the living room and his parents' bedroom made Kevin jump. Mom was a thrower when angry; fortunately, her aim was terrible.

When Dad had pulled in the driveway fifteen minutes ago, he had been wearing his winter dress blue uniform—the one he wore only for formal occasions—with nine rows of service decorations on it that showed off Dad's five-foot-ten-inch squatty frame in the best light, and overawed the hell out of more senior officers with less chest confetti. With thinning gray hair and a rugged face, seasoned by almost twenty years of military

service in two wars, he cut quite a figure while inspecting the troops or disciplining young airmen; it he also did a pretty good job of intimidating nine-year-old boys.



“—Now, I’m gonna try and explain one last time why I reupped,” Dad continued in a lowered voice, but Kevin was still able to hear both of his parents as clearly as if they were sitting right across from him. “Let’s review our situation from the beginning.”

Mom’s in for it now, Kevin thought to himself. Dad had begun speaking to her in that cold, hard, authoritative tone of voice that only a career of meting out disciplinary actions as a first sergeant could develop. He would start out lecturing you, and in fifteen minutes, could make you feel so guilty and small that you could leave the room by walking under the closed door . . . with plenty of headroom to spare.



“You’re awful positive that I shouldn’t have reenlisted. But what else am I going to do, huh? Answer me that. I mean, I think I’ve done pretty well, when you take everything into consideration.”

“I left my dad’s farm in ‘39 in the tenth grade because I had no intention of spending the rest of my life with my ass behind an ass. Then the war started. We met, then broke up when I found out the truth about you before I was sent overseas. But you kept writing, and we started again when I came home. Remember, despite what had happened, I forgave you, and we married just before D-Day.”

The authoritative edge was gone from Dad’s voice now. He wasn’t arguing anymore, he was pleading—pleading for his wife, his life, and his very existence.

“Thank you for constantly bringing up the past and holding it over my head. It really endears you to me,” Mom berated.

“Well, what about after the war?” Dad continued, ignoring her snipe. “If you recall, I did get out of the service in ‘47, went home to Pennsylvania, and got a job in the steel mill. But after two weeks, when I decided that I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life working in that goddamn mill, you didn’t object too strenuously about me going back in the service, now did you?”

“We could have gone to my home in Atlanta. My dad could have gotten you a job with the railroad,” Mom interjected.

“As what? Your dad was a conductor, not a vice president,” Dad snapped back.

“Anyway,” Dad said, easing into a more even and reflective tone. “The last fifteen years haven’t been so bad; I’m not saying it was easy, but we made it, didn’t we? God, remember the monsoon in Okinawa in the late forties?”

“You were pregnant, and I didn’t know it, when I left you behind in Kansas after Major Martin and I had gone ahead to Japan in anticipation of the North Korean build-up. You were two months’ pregnant again when I was sent back to Korea after being wounded. Kevin was three when I came home from Korea and we bought this house.

“The last six years here in Savannah haven’t been so bad, have they? The kids have grown, we’ve got a house full of furniture, a car we own free and clear, and along the way I was even able to build myself a workshop, and acquire a few power tools,” Dad finished.

“And that’s just why I don’t want to leave,” Mom said. “I’ve made friends here. I’ve

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settled here. Things are different now. It's not just you and me, pack our bags, and move. We've got two kids, and this house. Moving is not a simple thing. It means uprooting everything we've worked for the past six years—"

"What about the next fifteen years?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about the rest of our life. Look, I reenlisted because I like this kind of life and it's the only thing I know. But also, if I retired now, I'd have to go out and get another job anyway, because I'd only get half salary. But if I stay in for thirty, I'll get three quarters of my base pay, and we should be all right.

"When I ran into Lieutenant Colonel Martin at the Pentagon last year, he told me that there are some big pay raises coming for service people in the next few years, and I want to stick around to cash in on them."

"What is it with you and the colonel?" Mom snapped. "Can't you think for yourself?"

"Honey, I've known him since the war. The colonel has been awful good to me. If it wasn't for his protection, I'd have been kicked out of the service a long time ago," Dad answered. He paused, then continued. "And by the time I get out, Billy will be 22, going on 23, and through college."

"What about Kevin?" Mom interjected sharply.

"What about him?" Dad retorted.

"You're always talking about college for Billy, but you never mention Kevin."

"Ah, honey, you gotta understand. I like Kevin just as much as Billy, but I just don't think he's smart enough for college. I mean, he's always doing dumb things and telling lies. If he doesn't change I'll be surprised if he's not in some kind of serious trouble by then."

The statement made Kevin shiver silently to himself out on the couch. Yeah, he'd lied to Dad once, six months ago, about taking the change off the top of the milk bottles because he was afraid of Dad's fierce temper. But when he told him the truth—which was that he was put up to it by his older brother Billy—Dad didn't believe him. Dad blatantly favored his firstborn, but no matter what happens, Kevin vowed to himself, I'll make positively sure that Dad's statement never comes true.

"Now, take Billy on the other hand," Dad continued. "He's a son a man can be proud of. He's never in any trouble in school and gets excellent marks on his report card. Kevin is always in trouble. How many times have you had to go to school because he was throwing temper tantrums? And on his last report card he got a couple of Fs in reading and math."

"But honey, he's just a little slow, that's all," Mom pleaded. "Give him a little time, he'll learn."

"Yes, but that's exactly my point," Dad said. "If he's slow now, what's he gonna be like by the time he's old enough for college? By then he'll have failed a grade or two, and will probably get drafted by the army anyway. If that's the case, the best thing he could do is to enlist in the air force and put in 20 years or so."

"Like you?" Mom sniped.

"And just what do you mean by that crack?" Dad shot back.

"Just what I said," Mom said. When it came to arguments about her kids, Mom's red hair was more than a match for Dad's Irish temper. "There's more than one way to make a living besides the service. He can be a carpenter, a plumber, an auto mechanic, or a lot of things."

"But you've got to plan ahead. The future will be here before you know it."

"We'll worry about the future later. Let's settle the present first," Mom insisted. "Although I don't like it, I'll go with you to England. But let me warn you, that's not the end

of this. When we return from this tour, we're going to sit down and have a long talk about the future, which, from where I stand right now, doesn't include spending the next ten years moving from place to place. And one more thing: you've got to promise to take me on a tour of Europe while we're there.

"Aw, honey, you know those things cost a lot of money, and—"

"—I don't care," Mom interrupted. "I'm not going all the way to England for three years, and not be able to come back and tell my friends that I went to Paris, Rome, Vienna, and—"

"OK, OK, you win," Dad said. "But it's sure going to cost a lot of money."

"Take it out of the money you're saving for Billy's college," Mom finished. "And another thing, while we're on the subject of the kids, you'd better start to make Billy mind. You're spoiling that boy," Mom said.

"I am not," Dad responded with a defensive tone to his voice. "Besides, every father spoils his firstborn and namesake a little."

"Well," Mom answered, "you'd better start to discipline both boys the same. Billy is starting to get a pretty smart mouth on him."

"If he is, it's only because Kevin puts him up to it," Dad defended.

"OK, don't listen to me. But don't complain to me in ten years when you can't make Billy mind," Mom admonished.

"Don't worry," Dad snapped back. "It's the other one I'm worried about."

Kevin tried his best to look nonchalant as his parents emerged from the bedroom and walked into the living room. He managed to pull it off with his mom, who, with a cheery grin, said, "Hi son. You better wash up. We'll be eating in a few minutes." She continued on to the kitchen to begin preparing a late supper.

Dad stopped in the front of Kevin and fixed him with a very severe look. "Have you been eavesdropping on your mother's and my conversation? Huh?"

Kevin was caught. On one hand, he was deathly afraid of dad's temper; on the other, he was even more afraid of lying to him because Dad always found out.

"Yes, sir," Kevin finally murmured. He might be afraid, but he wasn't going to run, no matter what the possible consequences.

"You little—," Dad threatened, as he raised his hand to strike. "I oughta slap your teeth down your throat."

"Smitty!" Mom interjected quickly from the kitchen doorway. "He couldn't have helped overhearing the way we were yelling at each other. Leave him alone."

"All right," Dad growled. "But don't ever let me catch you doing that again or I'll blister your little butt."

Dad walked into the kitchen and muttered to Mom, "See what I mean? And you want to send him to college."



Kevin sat on the sofa and silent tears ran down his cheeks. Mom's concern was nice, but Dad was the one whose opinion counted. And no matter what he did, Kevin knew it was impossible to change Dad's mind. Dad prided himself on being an expert in the handling of men, and he was; it's just that he wasn't an expert at handling little boys. He was used to the discipline of the service, where he need only give an order to be instantly obeyed. He just couldn't, or wouldn't, learn that kids needed explanations, not discipline; and understanding, not lectures.

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Kevin's private reverie was interrupted suddenly as Billy came bursting through the front door.

"What's the matter with the little baaaby? Is the little baaaby crying, huh?" Billy tickled Kevin patronizingly under the chin.

"Is it gonna wet its little pants, um?"

As his brother leaned forward to tickle him again, Kevin reared up from his crouched position on the sofa, balled up his fist, and hit his brother in the mouth with all his strength.

Billy was two and a half years older than Kevin, a foot taller, and a good 20 pounds heavier. Whenever he fought with his brother, the result was always the same. Billy would goad Kevin into a fight, and then beat him up.

When Kevin appealed to Dad for help, Dad would always say, "A man has to be able to take care of himself in this world. If you don't want Billy to keep beating you up, pick up something and even the odds." Then he would turn to Billy and say, "Billy, one of these days, you're gonna hit that boy one time too often, and he's gonna come off the floor and beat the crap out of you. And when that happens, don't expect any help from me, just like I don't give Kevin any help now."

To which Billy would always brag: "I ain't worried. I'll always be able to handle the little squirt."

And that's just what was happening now. Billy was handling Kevin, or maybe man-handling was a better word. Kevin had gotten in a solid first punch, which rocked and staggered Billy backwards a step, and started a pretty good flow of blood from his nose, but that was all. Billy, seething with rage at the sight of his own blood, had waded into Kevin with a vengeance. He was being badly beaten by the time Dad heard the commotion and ran into the living room to break them apart.

"I'll kill the little twerp," Billy screeched, bouncing on his toes trying hard to get around Dad's restraining arm.

"Billy, break it up. You proved your point," Dad said.

"Well he started it. He hit me first." Billy yelled.

"Is that true, Kevin?"

"Yes sir," Kevin got out between tears.

"Go to your room," Dad commanded.

"But Daaaaad—?"

"I said go to your room!" Dad roared. "You hit your brother and then want me to stop it when you lose. Well, from now on, you start something like this, and I'll let your brother beat you senseless. Now, go to your room. You can come out when you think you can act like a man."

Kevin went to his room and began to cry again. It was always the same. Dad would take Billy's word for things without giving Kevin a chance to explain.



Two nights earlier, Billy had been throwing a rubber ball against their bedroom wall after they had gone to bed. Billy heard Dad coming before Kevin realized what was going on. He threw the ball quickly onto Kevin's bed, rolled over, and pretended he was asleep.

When Dad came in, Kevin tried to tell him what had really happened. Dad had looked quickly at his brother, saw he was asleep, and Kevin had gotten a spanking. "Not"—his dad had said angrily—"for bouncing the ball, but for lying to me. If you do something, be man enough to own up to it."

As soon as Dad left, Billy sat up in the next bed, laughed, and taunted him. Kevin lay in his own bed crying. But the tears of pain slowly turned to tears of rage. Someday, he'd show 'um all. His brother Billy—who knew he could get away with anything and set Kevin up to take the blame – but especially his dad, who wouldn't trust him. Someday he'd show 'um . . . someday . . . if it was the last thing he ever did.

Kevin lay in bed thinking. The last six months had not been easy on him, but he was learning some very hard, very useful, and long-lasting lessons. He'd been yelled at, more often than not, undeservedly, but the effect had been the opposite of what was intended. Instead of feeling sorry, Kevin felt mad and frustrated. Mad, when measured and controlled, can be a great motivator. It had been for Kevin. And frustration? Frustration turned outward was rage; frustration turned inward was motivation.

The more he was blamed for things, the more enraged he got. And the more determined to prove his dad was wrong about him. Now, he thought to himself, what can I do for Dad that will make him happy? After several minutes, the answer came to him. But to do it, Kevin would have to have the house to himself. Since Mom and Dad were going to a picnic tomorrow, they'd be out of the house, and Kevin knew just the right way to get rid of his brother.

With this thought lodged firmly in his mind, Kevin drifted off to sleep, excitedly anticipating the Sunday to come.



"Keeeeevin? Rise and shiinne," Mom called, as she knocked lightly on the door and walked into Kevin's bedroom.

"Oh, you're up," Mom said, surprised. "Come on to breakfast, son. You don't want to be late for Sunday school."

Kevin wouldn't be late. The excitement of the night before had carried over 'till morning. Usually he had to be blasted out of bed in time for Sunday school, but today he was up and almost dressed when Mom came in.

"You were up early today, that's good. You're finally beginning to get with the program," Dad nodded as Kevin sat down at the breakfast table. Kevin's anger and resentment began to rise. He'd never, never, be part of the program.

"Yes, sir," Kevin answered quietly.

"Now, Mrs. Brown is going to drive you and Billy to Sunday school since your mother and I are going to a picnic out at the base. Kevin, you mind Billy. And Billy, don't you go off and play baseball and leave Kevin alone, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Billy answered with confidence.

"Yes, sir," Kevin answered.

Kevin's quick response caused Dad to give him a long, thoughtful stare. After several seconds, which to Kevin seemed like hours, Dad finally nodded and without further comment, left the table.

The deceptive cooperation and the bright replies didn't bother Kevin at all. He'd often heard Dad say, "The end justifies the means."

On the way home from Sunday school, in the car, Kevin started to put his plan into effect. He yawned and stretched several times before announcing his intention to Mrs. Brown, and more importantly, to his brother, to take a nap when they got home.

Kevin watched from cracked eyelids as Billy collected his bat and glove and went off to play baseball with his friends as soon as he thought Kevin was asleep. He had overheard his brother say, "Come on, the little twerp won't wake up for hours. No reason for

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me to sit around baby-sitting.”

Kevin’s plan was off to a good start—getting rid of his brother had been predictably easy.

A cynical smile formed slowly on Kevin’s face as he watched the disappearing figures of Billy and his friends from the living room window. With a final nod, Kevin turned and skipped out the back door to Dad’s workshop.

Kevin’s plan was to clean up Dad’s shop for him. But he hadn’t realized what a big job it was going to be.

The six-foot workbench was cluttered with hand tools, drills, and miscellaneous odds and ends from past and present projects. The table saw was on wheels, though right now, it was hard to tell since the sawdust was piled almost all the way up to the top of the stand. Everywhere Kevin looked, pieces of wood and scraps of steel were leaning against walls and piled deep in corners. And if that wasn’t enough, all the porch end tables had not yet been stored away in the upstairs attic.

Well, Kevin had often heard Dad say that the best way to do an impossible job was to pick a starting spot and dive right in. “Because,” he had said, “the longer you sit and do nothing, the harder the job seems to become until it becomes almost impossible to start at all.”

After one more brief glance around the workshop, Kevin decided that before he could clean up, he’d have to put away the tools and clear the workbench and surrounding area so that the attic steps could come down . . . His plan was underway.



“Oooooooh Kevin! Is your daddy ever gonna be surprised!” Kevin looked up from sweeping the floor to see Sara Lee Young, the next-door neighbor and his mom’s best friend, standing in the doorway of the workshop. She was in her late forties, gray-haired, with grown and married children of her own. She was also Kevin and Billy’s baby-sitter when they were younger. Kevin called her “Aunt-Grandma,” because she truly was like a second grandma. She seemed to be smiling and laughing all the time—her deep southern accent and country drawl made even serious things seem funny.

“What’re you doin’, boy? Tryin’ to get on yer daddy’s good side?” she cackled.

“Yes, ma’am,” Kevin answered unsurely.

“OK, I jus’ came over to check on what yer up to. Your daddy asked me to keep an eye on you boys while they’s away. If you need help, jus’ you holler over the fence and I’ll have Buddy come on over.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll do that.”

Kevin watched Mrs. Young walk back across the yard and climb over the ranch style fence into her yard. Mom would never be caught climbing over the fence, he thought to himself. She said it was unladylike.



It had taken all afternoon, but Kevin was nearing the end of his clean-up project. All he had left to do was store the end tables in the attic and he’d be done. A good thing, Kevin thought to himself. Dad was due back soon and he wanted to be done and back in the house when they came home.

With that thought, Kevin put down the attic steps, dragged the first end table over, and started up the steps bumping it along behind him one step at a time because of its bulk and weight. Kevin would pull the end table up one step with his hand, balance it, and step up and grab the next step with his other hand.

Using this step and fetch routine, he worked the table up the ten steps until he was just below the attic floor ledge. Since the distance from the last step to the ledge was a little higher, Kevin had to reach up and at the same time balance the table. As Kevin's hand grabbed the top ledge, he suddenly found, to his horror, that there was no place to grab onto—the attic floor was completely smooth right to the edge.

In a desperate attempt to avoid falling, Kevin let go of the end table, which tumbled noisily down the steps. But that only served to unbalance him even more. Kevin swayed back and forth on the step, like a tightrope walker who had just stumbled and was trying desperately to recover before losing the fight to maintain his balance. He fell down the steps, landing squarely on the overturned end table, before rolling off and hitting his head on the concrete floor.

Kevin knew he was badly hurt. His head ached fiercely, his chest hurt, his eyes were suddenly misty and blood was dripping freely from a nasty cut on his chin. No matter how he tried, he couldn't seem to get up.

From his position on the floor, Kevin could see out the door of the workshop. He saw Mrs. Young cross her yard at a dead run, vault cleanly over the fence, and continue running toward him. It was the last thing he saw before losing consciousness.



Kevin had vague memories of being put in a car and driven somewhere very fast. Other, even blurrier memories of being poked, prodded, and having lights shined in his eyes before being undressed by someone with very soft hands, and drifting off to a disturbed, pain-filled sleep. Sometime after, Kevin had no idea of how long, a voice had started to talk to him. And, from what Kevin could determine, had talked continuously ever since. "Don't worry, son, you're going to be just fine."

Someone was alternately stroking his forehead and kissing him gently on the cheek. Kevin responded to this with an involuntary shiver and noticed an immediate change in the tone of the voice. It had suddenly taken on feeling, cooing expressively into his ear in a low tone that seemed to be choked with emotion.

Kevin awoke to see his mom's tear-stained face staring lovingly at him. "Oh, son, you're awake," Mom sobbed loudly, when she and Kevin made eye contact. "I've been so worried about you," she cried, as she patted his cheek affectionately. "You've had a bad fall, but you're going to be just fine now, son, just fine."

"That's right, son, you're going to be OK."

Kevin turned his head in response to see Dad smiling down at him from the other side of the bed. Kevin was somewhat bewildered by all of this kind attention. He wondered what had happened that would make both of his parents be nice to him at the same time, especially Dad.

"Where am I?" Kevin asked, his confusion making him hesitant.

"You're in the base hospital at Hunter," Dad said. "You were transferred here three days ago from the city hospital that Mrs. Young brought you to initially. You fell from the top of the attic steps in the garage, and landed on the end tables before rolling off and hitting your head on the concrete floor."

Kevin's bewildered look quickly turned to a grin when he saw Dad grinning at him

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affectionately, and said, "Don't worry about the rest of this, troop, you're gonna make it."

"What's the rest of it?" Kevin asked innocently.

For just a brief instant, the smiles vanished from both Mom and Dad's faces as they shot a sharp glance at each other before Dad continued in the same measured tone as before.

"Well, you've sustained some broken ribs as a result of landing on that table, and some internal bleeding and external bruising to go with it. But that appears for the most part to be under control. It took about 25 stitches to close that cut on your chin and you've dislocated your jaw. When you hit the floor, you jarred your head real good. The doctor says you'll probably have a few headaches for about the next three weeks. So, you'll be staying here until the worst of this is passed."

"Am I in trouble?" Kevin asked in a meek tone.

"Of course you're not in trouble, honey," Mom said soothingly. "This wasn't your fault. It's just one of those things that happen. It was a freak accident."

"Now if you'd cracked that concrete floor with that hard head of yours, we'd probably look on this whole matter differently," Dad mocked.

"Oh, Smitty, stop it!" Mom protested. "You'll scare him half to death."

"He knows I'm just joshing him, don't you, boy?" Dad said.

"Yes sir," Kevin answered, still unsure of how to respond to his dad's sudden attitude change.

"It's a good thing Mrs. Young was in her back yard and saw you through the shop window as you fell. She got you into her car immediately, and on to the hospital.

"Billy was telling me that this happened just after you and he finished cleaning up the shop and he went off to play baseball with his friends. You know, next time it might be a good idea to follow Billy's advice. He told me that you two had agreed to wait until I got home to put those end tables in the attic," Dad finished in a voice tinged with reprimand.

Kevin glanced at Dad. He couldn't believe what he had just heard. What did Billy have to do with this? How did he manage to convince Dad that he was involved with this? It didn't make any sense, but it probably wouldn't do any good to tell the truth, because he wouldn't be believed anyway.

"Yes sir," Kevin muttered.

"What's wrong, son? Something seems to have upset you. Are you hurting? Do you need something?" Dad asked, misreading the look of astonishment for pain.

"No, sir," Kevin responded.

"OK, son, you just let the nurse know if you need anything and they'll bring it right to you.

"Well, look, I got to go back to work. I just came down on my lunch break to check up on you and see if you or Mom needed anything. I'll stop by on my way home and we'll talk then," Dad said, as he patted Kevin on the arm on his way out the door.

Kevin rolled away from his dad as he left, and in so doing, completely forgot about Mom, who was now staring straight at him, and could not fail to see what Kevin had been trying so hard to hide—the tears that were flowing freely down the sides of his face.

"What's the matter, son?" Mom asked, as she gently stroked his head.

"Nothing," Kevin managed between tears.

"Well, something your dad said has upset you terribly. I can't fix it if you don't tell me what it is. Won't you please tell me?" Mom pleaded.

"It won't do any good. No one will believe me anyway."

"Try me," Mom challenged.

"Well," Kevin began, "I wanted to do something special for Dad to make him like

me, so I thought up the idea of cleaning up his shop to get on his good side. But now it appears that it didn't do any good."

"But that's not true, son. Your dad was telling me how impressed he was that you and Billy took it on yourself to do that for him. He was really pleased. Honestly," Mom consoled.

"But that's just the point," Kevin sniffed.

"What's just the point, son?"

"Aw, forget it. It doesn't matter anyway." Kevin suddenly found himself tongue-tied when it came to confessing the whole truth. Even though his brother deserved it, something inside him just wouldn't allow him to do to Billy what Billy almost certainly would do to him if the circumstances were reversed.

Mom was quiet for a moment, then asked, "Are you trying to tell me, without telling me, that you cleaned up the shop and that your brother had nothing to do with it?"

"Let's just forget it. It doesn't matter now anyway. Besides, I'm tired and want to take a nap," Kevin said finally as he rolled away from Mom and pretended to be falling asleep.

"Your brother wasn't even home, was he?" Mom asked as she walked around the bed and leaned down directly into Kevin's face. "You know, when Billy was telling your dad about this, I sensed something was wrong, but I just couldn't put my finger on it until now. I'm betting that not only was he not there, but crafty little devil that you are, you probably figured out an intentional way to get him out of the house."

Mom paused, and tickled Kevin affectionately until he began to giggle. "Well, one thing's certain: you've got that same stubborn streak in you that your father has, so you'll never tell me what really happened. Men," she sighed.

"Don't worry, son, you just take a nap for real, and leave this to me. I know just how to get this across to your father." Mom kissed Kevin lightly on the cheek and left.

Kevin drifted off to sleep to diminishing sounds of Mom's high heels as they clicked purposefully away and thought how funny it is was that without intending to, he had apparently accomplished more than he'd ever expected. He supposed that what Dad always said was true: "If you always tell the truth, sooner or later someone will stumble across it, and if for no other reason than ignorance, believe it."



With each day that passed, Kevin was recovering with the speed of healthy youth. He was moved from Intensive Care to a private room in the pediatric ward, complete with a fifteen-year-old girl across the hall, recovering from an appendectomy. She was blond, cute, friendly, and very well-developed for her age, and they took to each other immediately. Together they passed the hours watching TV, playing games, or just talking.

Since Kevin was now ambulatory and being held mostly for observation, he quickly got the layout of the hospital down, and then took Claire-Beth, his new friend, on a personally guided tour via wheelchair. These activities served both as a pleasant contrast to his recent painful injuries and as a distraction from worrying about the results of the meeting between Mom and Dad.

Kevin knew that a meeting, or more likely, knowing Mom, a confrontation, with Dad had occurred. Although Mom had been to see him daily and talked to Kevin three or four times a day by phone, Dad had not returned that evening as promised, nor had he called—whatever the result, it must have been a doozy. His father had not been to see him in person in three days.

As he gazed absently at the setting sun outside his hospital window, he suddenly

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sat straight up in the bed. A staccato, hollow, clicking sound, followed closely by a more solid, sturdy, thudding, noise could be clearly heard on the linoleum floor, increasing in volume as it came down the ward toward Kevin's room. Kevin's quandary would soon be at an end: his parents were here.

Kevin could feel the tension between them as they entered the room. Mom's smile was hollow, not quite reaching the corners of her mouth, as she kissed Kevin lightly on the forehead and murmured about how well he looked and how fast he was recovering.

Maybe the greeting was sincere. Kevin had failed to notice. His total energy, his total focus, was on Dad. He stared unblinking, totally concentrating on his father, who seemed to feel the effect of Kevin's intense gaze, and uncharacteristically, fidgeted uncomfortably beside the bed searching for the right way to begin.

"How have you been, son?" Dad began.

"OK."

"Just OK? You seem a whole lot better than that. The doctor tells me that you'll be ready to go home in a few days. And I understand that you've become quite a lady-killer"—Kevin shot a sharp glance across the hall, grateful and relieved to find that Claire was not there at the moment—"and bon vivant around the hospital."

Knowing instinctively that Dad was uncomfortable and unsure, Kevin shrugged without expression.

"Look, son, I apologize for not coming to see you the last few days, but I've had an ORI —Operational Readiness Inspection—at the base, and you know how those things are."

Kevin glanced at Mom, who smiled back nervously, before turning back and nodding at Dad.

Kevin watched in amused silence as Dad glanced at Mom, saw her icy stare, and returned his eyes to him.

"Ah, son," Dad tried. "concerning the incident in the garage, your mother explained to me what really happened. And well, I'd ah, like to, ah, say I'm sorry for getting the facts wrong. I'm even sorrier that you almost killed yourself trying to prove something to me that I should've seen all along. I guess I've been wrong for some time about a lot of things concerning you and Billy."

"Your mother and I have been discussing this at some length." The emphasis on length was unmistakable. "We have come to some agreements on how to fairly handle the two of you from now on."

"Such as?" Kevin said with ice in his tone.

"Well, ah, we decided that from now on, both of you boys should be disciplined the same—"

"—Big wow. Billy gets believed, I get the blame. That what you call fair?" Kevin's mouth twisted with contempt.

"I guess I can understand how you feel, son, all things considered. In the past couple of days, your mother has forced me come to terms with the fact that I've been treating you unfairly. But I promise you that things are going to be different. When I said disciplined the same, I meant it. From now on, whenever there's a disagreement between the two of you, you both will be punished evenly. Both your mother and I feel that this is the only fair way to assure that each one of you is treated equally by us. We figured that as soon as you both recognize this, it will cut down considerably on the number of disagreements you both have. The same fair treatment will extend across the board to your future education, outside activities, or anything else."

Kevin was stunned by Dad's open confession. He was not sure what he had ex-

pected, but this was not it at all. Instinctively, he glanced at Mom, and felt instantly reassured as she smiled, first at Kevin, then at Dad, warmly.

As Kevin focused again on Dad, he saw, for the first time, that there was another person under the rough exterior. A person with feelings, a person who could hurt, and perhaps most importantly, a person who could love.

"I didn't know you cared," Kevin shocked himself by saying.

Dad was quiet for a moment, then broke into an unexpected laugh. "Yes, son, now that you mention it, I guess I do. I've always had a tough time verbalizing what I've felt. Might still have if it hadn't been for you, and your mother." Dad peeked pixyishly at Mom who gave him her very best up-from-under look, then he continued. "You're so very much like me that maybe we can learn from each other."

As Kevin saw Claire-Beth, with a friendly wave, enter her room across the hall, a sudden thought struck him. He looked at Dad innocently, then said, "Claire-Beth's dad is a colonel. Do you know him?"

Kevin's comment seemed to affect Dad in some indefinable way.

"We've traveled some together," he said, as he ruffled Kevin's hair. And with a quick, "See you later son," turned and abruptly strode out of the room.

Kevin was not sure, but thought he'd seen a tear forming in the corner of Dad's eye as he walked away.

Kevin looked at Mom, who said, "You know, I think you've developed beyond your years, sport. In all the time we've been married, I've never seen your father show as much feeling with someone as he just showed with you. I don't know how you did it, but you touched something deep inside and brought to the surface emotions I've not seen in a long time." Mom paused for a moment then repeated in slow recognition, almost as if in a trance, "A long time."

Mom brightened and announced, "I think I'd better go after him and see if I can help. You going to be all right now?"

"Yes, I'll be fine," Kevin replied.

"OK, then," Mom said as she kissed him on the cheek on her way out the door. "See you later, honey."

"Yeah, see you later. And Mom?" Kevin called as she was just about through the door. "Thanks."

Mom paused in the doorway, smiled at Kevin. "No, son. It's I who should be thanking you."

The sound of Mom's heels could still be heard clicking down the hall when Claire-Beth came into the room and noticed Kevin staring out the window. She sat down on the end of his bed, followed the direction of his stare, and was still trying to figure out what had Kevin so preoccupied, when Kevin saw his mom run out of the hospital doorway and bound into Dad's arms.

Kevin and Claire-Beth watched from the window as his parents hugged and kissed each other warmly on the front lawn and snuggled close on the front seat of the car as they drove away.

"Parents!" Claire-Beth said. "Your's are as weird as mine!"



After almost three weeks in the hospital, and one week after the emotionally charged meeting with his parents, Kevin was released. He said quick good-byes to the doctors and nurses, with whom he had become something of a favorite. And to Claire-Beth, who unex-

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pectedly kissed him on the lips and hugged him so tightly against her firmly developing chest that Kevin was afraid his mending ribs had just suffered a serious setback.

In truth, Kevin had a huge crush on Claire-Beth and suspected that maybe she had a little bit of a crush on him; but he knew once they left the neutral ground of the hospital, there would be no further contact. The reason was in no way related to the five-year age difference between them; Claire-Beth's dad was the wing commander and a chicken colonel, whereas his dad was just a sergeant.

There was an unwritten, but rigidly enforced rule that officers and non-coms didn't fraternize, and this seemed to be doubly true where their offspring were concerned. It was a perverse kind of prejudice, buoyed by pride, each insisting that their kids were too good to be seen with the other. Kevin did not really understand, or for that matter, agree with this, but knew it was hopeless to try to change it.

On the ride home, Kevin sat between his parents in the front seat and listened politely as they chatted gaily about what had been happening since he'd been in the hospital. Kevin heard little of what they said. From his position in the middle of the seat he had only to tilt his head upward a bit to clearly see in the rearview mirror, the obviously brooding face of Billy, who returned his quick glances with a Boy, what I'm going to do to you when I get you alone stare.

Kevin was going to enjoy this newfound sense of power he suddenly had in the family. It was ever so satisfying to know that his brother, for the first time, could do absolutely nothing about it.



But in the days that followed, Kevin found his new sense of power short-lived. Kevin at first had thought that with the passage of a few days, things would get better, but such was not the case. It had been almost six weeks since Kevin's fall, and things had slowly but continuously deteriorated.

To say that the family routine was abnormal would be as acute an understatement as referring to Ted Williams as a fairly decent ballplayer. Mom was pleasant with Kevin, friendly with Billy, and tense with Dad. Dad's manner with Kevin was formal, obviously that of a man trying hard to keep his temper in check, and he was closely watched by Mom. His contact with Billy was another matter altogether.

Billy was bearing the full brunt of Dad's embarrassment at not discovering the truth about the garage incident, and at having been duped by Billy for an uncertain amount of time before that. As a result, Billy was uniformly spiteful to Kevin, making hateful remarks that Kevin knew instinctively were only directed at him because Billy would never dare say them to Dad.

Almost before Kevin knew it, May 15 arrived. Packing, farewell parties, and good-bye hugs and kisses were exchanged in kaleidoscope fashion as the family prepared to uproot for the journey to England. The cherished '53 Plymouth was sold for \$300, the house was rented, and all the shop tools were crated and trailered to grandma's in Atlanta to be stored under her house until the family's return.

Because of the weight restriction, most of the heavy furniture was put in storage, with only the kitchen utensils and linens being taken along. Most of Billy and Kevin's toys suffered the Plymouth's fate. They were able to take only one footlocker apiece of personal possessions.

Except for a permanent two-inch scar on his chin, most of Kevin's physical damage from the fall had healed. What had not healed either in Kevin or in the rest of the family was the emotional impact of recent events. As they boarded the plane for the flight to England, the family was truly in a state of turmoil.

CHAPTER TWO

The fourteen-hour airplane trip had been taxing; mid-Atlantic turbulence had caused the aging DC-3 to be pitched and tossed like an amateur rodeo rider on a killer bull. Most of the passengers made frequent use of the paper bags provided. Mom and Billy had been violently ill at least twice during the flight; Kevin hadn't thrown up or even been bothered by the foul odor which seemed to be everywhere. In fact, during the height of the turbulence, Kevin had volunteered to go aft and retrieve additional bags for Mom, Billy, and neighboring passengers.

The bad weather had followed them right through to landing. A steady rain was falling at Lakenheath Air Force Base, and had not slowed noticeably in the last two hours as they rode the bus northward to their final destination.

England in '59 was considered to be excellent duty for a serviceman; the cost of living was low, and by comparison, service pay high. It was a country filled with charm, adventure, and memories from past days of glory.

Kevin wasn't the only one experiencing altered emotions. Memories not yet a decade-and-a-half-distant were silently being relived as Dad stared intently at seemingly empty roadways and deserted buildings. In his memory, he saw airfields filled with bombers, adventurous nights only paid proper respect by the young . . . and the faces of men who now soldiered with the angels.

The rain, like the family mood, remained heavy as the bus pulled into the town of Dearfield and deposited them unceremoniously in front of the Tell Hotel, the only hotel in town, before driving on to other air force bases farther to the north. With twenty-four straight hours of traveling behind him, Kevin was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.



"Keeevin, Biiilly, rise and shine!" Mom called, as she knocked lightly on their hotel room door and walked in. "Hurry up and get dressed, boys. The car from the base will be here in one hour, so we'll just have time for breakfast before we go."

"Oh," Mom paused as she was leaving, "be sure and dress warmly; it's pretty cold out there."

"It's more than pretty cold out here; it's freezing. This place is going to be the pits." Billy complained as he opened the window and stuck his head out into the fog-laden air. "It must be 40 degrees out there. I wonder when it starts to get warm."

"That depends on what you mean, lad," the hotel owner's wife said, as she entered with the morning tea and towels. "Aye, it's a bit nippy in the early morning, but the sun will be up shortly, and it'll warm up right proper in the afternoon. 'Course it'll probably not be as warm as you're used to, but you lads'll learn to adapt to it. Ever since the war,

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Yanks have been coming here and complaining about the weather. Others before you have adapted; I'm sure you chaps will too.

"To help you get started, I brought you a nice hot cuppa tea. You drink this straight away and it'll warm you up right as rain. I brought towels also; the facilities are at the end of the hall. Be sure to knock, as someone's probably using them, it bein' the time of the morning it is and all. Now hurry along, I heard your mum say you got to leave in an hour. Cheerio."

"Talks kinda' strange, don't she?" Billy nodded.

"Yeah," Kevin agreed. "Wonder if all English people talk that way?"

"Don't know; they probably do. You know this place has got to be weird. I mean, can you imagine? The bathroom at the end of the hall?" Billy said contemptuously.

After a breakfast of scrambled eggs, extremely salty bacon that resembled pork rind, warm milk, toast made from very thick, hard bread, and jam with seeds in it, the car arrived and they were off to the base. The car proceeded straight down the main street, the only major street from what Kevin could tell, passing an array of shops that seemed to be a beehive of activity.

When Billy asked why things were so busy at this time of the morning, the driver, an airman who looked to be about twenty, answered. "People here have no refrigerators, so they can't store food and they must go to the market daily to shop."

To Mom's uncomprehending stare, he remarked, "Don't worry, Ma'am, you'll get used to it; we have."

At the end of the main street the road curved sharply around to the right, passed the train station on the left, and continued out of town past rows of neat houses with immaculately landscaped yards. Almost before Kevin knew it, the houses abruptly ended and the car passed on seemingly through the middle of fields of young wheat for no more than three miles before coming to the first of a row of buildings that was the beginning of R.A.F. Dearfield Air Station. The base on the right was offset on the left by woods, and enlisted and officer's quarters were separated by a field.

The car passed inside the main gate, and circled the roundabout before heading down a main street and stopping at a brick building that looked more like a fortress than US Air Force headquarters on the base. The building was surrounded on all entrances by concrete walls that appeared to be at least three feet thick. To the sides and back were peculiarly shaped, grass-covered mounds that were at least twenty feet high and at the moment, they were being mowed by English soldiers who were using a power mower with a rope to pull it up and down from the top.

As Kevin pointed at this and touched Billy on the arm, the driver nodded in the direction of the mounds, and said by way of explanation, "Bomb shelters. Left over from the war. My kids just love to go exploring around here. This was one of the bases that was bombed during World War II. You'll find those things out in the middle of nowhere. From what I understand, the whole damn island was one big military complex."

"It was!" Dad said suddenly, to no one in particular.

"You were here during the war, Sarge?" The driver asked conversationally as they passed inside.

"Here and there," Dad answered, evading the question.

"Gee, it must have been really something. My dad never left the States during the whole war; enlisted right after Pearl Harbor, too," the Airman responded.

"Tough break, kid," Dad grunted in a tone that cut off the conversation as quickly as a snuffed candle. Whatever memories were hidden away, it was evident that Dad wished them to remain so.

"Smitty!! Damn glad to see you," a voice boomed from down the hall. "Been waiting

for weeks for you to show up. In fact, once I found out you were up for overseas assignment, I requested you personally," an air force full colonel said enthusiastically as he bounded down the corridor. He grabbed Dad's right hand, almost before it could be offered, and shook it repeatedly, like a pump handle, while thumping Dad warmly on the back with his left.

"And how are you, Mrs. Smith? You're looking as lovely as ever. I think you're even prettier than the last time I saw you; Kansas in '47 or '48 or thereabouts wasn't it?"

"Yes it was, Colonel Martin," Mom answered in a subdued voice, averting her eyes. Obviously, she held the colonel somewhat lower in regard than Dad.

"Oh, call me Chuck, kiddo," the colonel interrupted. "Smitty and I go back too far to stand on formality. Hell, I was just a green first louie when we started hanging around together during the war. Taught me most of everything I know; a damn good man—your bunkmate."

"And these must be your kids. The taller one looks like you Ma'am; the shorter one is the spittin' image of you, Smitty.

What are your names, boys?" the colonel asked as he clasped both of their hands—but without causing any serious limb damage.

"Billy, sir."

"Kevin, sir."

"Say Smitty, that younger one there, he's a lot like you, I can tell. You just grow up to be half the man your daddy is, son" the colonel said, as he patted Kevin on the head and nodded to his father, "and you'll have it made."

"Yes, sir," Kevin responded in awed admiration. He had never really understood what his dad did, but it was clear that the colonel did.

"Well, I leave you folks to get settled. I'll see you tomorrow at 0800 hours in my office Smitty. We've got a big job ahead of us, and I'm damn glad you're here. I need your, ah, special talents, in the worst way. See ya," the colonel said evenly as he ambled back down the hall in the direction from which he came, and in a fashion that more closely resembled a man out for his Sunday constitutional than a person picked to command an obviously important American military station.

"Who was that?" Billy asked in a low voice.

"The base commander of the American contingent," Dad answered formally.

"Golly, Sarge, you and the colonel must go back a long way," the driver said, wide-eyed.

"We've traveled some together," Dad admitted. Then he added as an afterthought, in an almost prayerful tone: "Yeah, we definitely did do that."

The rest of the introductions were not as exuberant as the initial meeting with the colonel. The day seemed to drag by for Kevin and Billy as their parents met with one person after another, signed papers, asked questions, and went through the rigors of establishing a new residence.

They were to be billeted in the non-commissioned officers' quarters across the road, which they could occupy immediately after the inventory was completed—the house being furnished right down to silverware in the drawers. Billy and Kevin would be attending the school in the village and would be enrolled for the balance of the spring term tomorrow. By prior arrangement, Dad had purchased a car, a brand new car at that, from a dealership about thirty miles away. Kevin was somewhat perplexed by the kind of car they had bought, a 1959 Hillman Minx Estate wagon, whatever that was.

On the way back to the hotel, they were taken to their new residence for a walk-through. Compared with their previous house, this was a shed at the county dump.

Downstairs heating was via a coke stove—fueled by a carbon form of coal, almost like

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charcoal—in the kitchen and a coal fireplace in the living room—bins for both were strategically located just outside the kitchen door, next to the tool shed. The range was electric, extremely greasy, and ancient. There was no refrigerator or washing machine. There was a cold box cabinet in the corner of the kitchen with vent holes to the outside. There was also a scrubbing board.

Upstairs, there were wall-mounted space heaters in two of the bedrooms, the master bedroom and the one next to it, which Billy quickly took dibs on once he realized the third bedroom over the stairwell was smaller and without heat or closet space.

The house itself was a duplex with a postage stamp front lawn and an average size back yard that opened onto a central field with all the other houses around the block. The only saving grace was that it was on a corner lot.

As Kevin stared absently out of the car window on the return drive to the hotel, he had a feeling of foreboding. Since his accident, and the vast amount of idle recovery time that surrounded it, Kevin's perceptions had sharpened. All his instincts told him that this tour would be the period of truth in their interfamily relationships.



"Good show, lad, jolly good show!" Mr. Barnes yelled. "You Yanks are really beginning to understand sums. Here's a pence for crackers and one for your friend also," he said, as he flipped the coins to them.

As Kevin bought his crackers and ambled through the schoolyard at recess, he felt deservedly self-satisfied with Mr. Barnes's praise, especially in light of recent problems between the Americans and the school. Kevin, as well as all the other Yanks, was having a spot of bother adapting to the English curriculum and to the school itself.

There had been several meetings between the teachers and the American parents to discuss these problems, but the faculty had steadfastly, almost it seemed with malice aforethought, refused to alter, or make any concessions at all. After all, the principal had stated tersely, "You Americans wouldn't make any adjustments for one of our students who was enrolled in an American institution, so why should we make any for you?"

The problems within the school continued out to the courtyard at recess. Simply put, the English students hated the sudden influx of Americans, probably because of the stories their parents had told them about Yanks and their obnoxious conduct during the war. The cultural differences created an atmosphere of taunting, mistrust, and bloody confrontations.

After one such donnybrook, which looked more like a Harlem Street Gang confrontation than schoolyard fisticuffs, American tensions heightened considerably when the principal blamed the Americans for provoking the entire incident, suspended fourteen of them, Kevin included, for a week, and took no action at all toward their British counterparts.

Billy had complained to Mom of the unfair treatment in the school, in what was from Kevin's point of view an emotion-filled argument that focused more on winning support than on truthfulness, especially when you considered that Billy was one of the main taunters. Mom had been compassionate and comforting to Billy, but when she had discussed this with Dad, she had not found the same sympathy.

Dad believed that life was like a poker game; you played the hand you had to the best of your ability, and it was pointless to waste time on the one you wish you had. Dad had taken the position that the kids would just have to adjust to their surroundings, the same as anyone else, and had lectured Billy and Kevin to that end. This had a dual effect. Mom became the organizer for other American families with similar concerns, and Billy became further alienated from Dad and aligned with Mom.

Kevin had accepted Dad's advice, seeing it as common sense. This had in turn alienated Kevin from Billy even more, and caused friction between Kevin and Mom, which she in turn took out on Dad.

In the six months since they had arrived in England, this vicious circle had been repeated many times within the family. To the outside world, his parents looked like the all-American couple; but Kevin knew better. He'd overheard the bedroom arguments.



"Hey, Yank. I want a word with you!" The voice that interrupted Kevin's musings belonged to Woody Sherman, a British classmate with curly hair and rosy cheeks, who was, like Kevin, one of the bigger kids in his respective group.

In the past year, Kevin had gone through a growth spurt, gaining 30 pounds and seven inches. Kevin was stockier now, bigger than Billy, and towered over him by four inches. But he'd also grown up emotionally, developing a keen sense of right and wrong and the intestinal fortitude to do something about it.

"What's on your mind, ol' chap?" Kevin mimicked sarcastically.

Breathing deeply, in a visible effort of restraint, Woody continued. "Look mate, I know that relations haven't been the best between us, but this is something that's more important than our personal disagreements."

"And just what could that be, mate?" Kevin answered in the same snotty tone as before.

"Ah come on, Woody, the bleeder ain't gonna listen. This was a stupid idea in the first place." The scathing remark came from a muscular, craggy-faced kid named Paul, who was standing immediately beside Woody. "Stupid blighter probably won't be good enough anyway. Just look at 'em; thinks he's too good for us, he does," Paul continued.

"Now just hold on mate. We don't know what he'll say until we ask him," Woody said firmly.

"Well, I've been against this from the start, and so have most of the rest of us. Bleedin' Yanks have caused nothing but trouble from the moment they came here," Paul continued.

Nods and murmurs of assent were echoed by the rest of the group, which Kevin suddenly counted to be eight. Quickly, he looked around for support from other Americans in the yard, and to his horror, realized that he was alone.

"Ask me what?" Kevin asked, trying desperately to hang on to his composure.

"Yeah, ask the beggar. Get it over with," said an unseen voice from behind.

"All right, all right. Just cork up, so's I can," Woody commanded.

"Look, Yank. You know we're playing Devon next week in a soccer match for the conference championship."

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, Evert, our regular goalie, got kicked in the shin in our last match and broke a bone in his leg. Mr. Barden, the PE instructor said that he'd been watching you and that you handle the goal right well. We was jus' wonderin' if you'd consider taking his place?"

Kevin's first instinct was to laugh right in Woody's face and tell him to kiss off. This was the same person who'd repeatedly shown himself to be one of the more ardent antagonists of the Americans; and a person to whom Kevin personally owed a broken nose—courtesy of one of Woody's well landed right hooks in one of their three fist fights to date. But Woody's candid, vulnerable face forestalled his sneering response. This was a serious offer.

"When's the game?" Kevin asked, his straightforward tone matching Woody's.

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"A week from Thursday at Devon."

"When do you need a definite answer?"

"As soon as you can, mate. What with practice and all, we'll need as much time as possible for gettin' ready."

Kevin was silent for a moment, then asked, "Why me?"

"Because you're the best we could find," Woody answered candidly. Then he added, "Besides, the other 420 students turned us down. You're the only Yank we know with even a trace of skill for our game. You're our last hope, mate."

"Well, circumstances being what they've been—" knowing smiles and accompanying laughter echoed Kevin's feelings—"I think I better ask my parents for permission."

"And if their permission was not an issue what would your answer be?" Paul interrupted harshly, grabbing Kevin roughly by the arm in a vise-like grip.

"Then I'd probably say yes," Kevin retorted, shaking himself free from Paul's grasp, then brushing past Paul and striding away with a sigh of relief.



Kevin was certainly in the middle of it now. Word of Woody's offer and Kevin's reply had spread quickly through the school. To Kevin's American friends, he'd sold out; to the English, it was an insult to think a Yank could possibly play soccer as well as a native Englishman. Kevin could see Mom waiting for him as he got off the city bus that he took home from school every day. Unfortunately for Kevin, by the look on her face, it was obvious that she'd heard too.

"I want to talk to you, young man," Mom began. "Billy tells me that you've agreed to play on some English football team at school. Is that right? 'Cause if it is, you can just march your little butt to school tomorrow and tell them no. Is that clear?"

"Well, no, as a matter of fact, that isn't real clear at all—" Kevin began.

Mom's hand stung as it made contact with Kevin's face. The accompanying words, something about being a smartass and sassing back, were lost on Kevin, who was concentrating with all his strength on not crying.

"I've been working like a dog these past months, organizing the other American mothers to put these people in their place, and just when I'm on the verge of getting a lawyer of importance to listen to our complaints, you go and pull an incredibly stupid stunt like that. Now, you go straight upstairs to your room and don't you dare come out until your father comes home."

At the top of the stairs stood Billy, wearing his very best are-you-going-to-get-it-when-Dad-comes-home smirk.

"What a dumb ass," Billy said with superiority.

"Better than being an asshole," Kevin shot back as he pushed past Billy and slammed the bedroom door behind him.



"Hi, son. Your mother tells me you've been stirring up some trouble at school today; you wanna' tell me about it?" Dad asked as he knocked at Kevin's bedroom door.

"Do you mind if I ask you something, Dad?" Kevin began.

"Fire away, troop."

"I don't understand what all the fuss is about. I mean, it's only a soccer game. What's the big deal?"

"Well, son, I think the problem is not so much you as the ballpark you're playing in." Acknowledging Kevin's uncomprehending stare with a half wave, Dad continued.

"You see, we Americans are guests in this country, in much the same manner as a visiting baseball team; and as such we should be respectful of their customs. The problem is that Americans by nature are very self-confident. We have a well-founded confidence based on our own short, but very successful, history and rapid rise to world prominence. This self-confidence is often misconstrued by others as arrogance. The typical reaction to this is jealousy, which comes back in the form of hostility toward us. During the war, these differences were so acute that the English had a saying about Americans: 'Overpaid, oversexed, and over here.'

"So you can see that a lot of the tensions that you and Billy are experiencing at school are perfectly normal, given the circumstances. You brash young fellows arrive from America, and to the English girls, you seem very worldly and exciting compared to the local young lads. They see this, know that they cannot compete with this 'grass is greener' mystique, and hard feelings are the direct result."

Kevin's eyebrows wrinkled as his perplexed look showed his confusion. "I understand what you've said, but how does that relate to the kids at school, and how does that explain Mom's reaction?"

"I was just coming to that," Dad said.

"You see, once people have taken a position on an issue, they often find it very hard to back down from the stand they have taken. This is due to something called ego, that certain something inside you that gives you the courage of your convictions. In much the same manner as you were hesitant to say yes to your friend, that same inner feeling makes the other person reluctant to change also.

"You know, son, I want you to remember something. The hardest thing is to do what's right; the easiest is to do the right thing. Doing what's right means standing up for a principle or a friend, no matter what the consequences. Doing the right thing means going with the flow and never taking a risk.

"What you and your friend did today was to put aside your emotional differences and concentrate on the problem. Once you did that, the problem, like most problems, was solvable. Your friend made an honest, sincere, and open request for assistance. Sensing his honesty, you responded to it in kind. That was very mature of you.

"To people on the outside who are clinging to their emotions in lieu of facts, you appear to have sold out or betrayed your own kind. To be perfectly honest with you, your mother is caught up in the same whirlwind. She is being driven by her emotions based on her own personally held sense of perceptions, and as such, since the assumptions were not based on hard facts, all assumptions from that point onward are also in error.

"But let me make this very clear to you: That is my problem to solve, not yours. Your mother is a good woman and my wife; any problems relating to her are my concern in total. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Kevin answered, was silent for a moment, then added, "So what do you think I should do about the soccer match at school?"

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to play," Kevin said with firm conviction.

"Then that's what you ought to do. A man who wants to do the right thing and has the courage of his convictions can be beaten . . . but he'll never lose."



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"Good save, Yank!!" Woody whooped gleefully as the penalty free shot, which had been headed directly for a corner of the net, was deflected over the top of the goal by Kevin's outstretched fingertips. The sound of the whistle meant that they'd won; it was a sweet victory over interconference rival Devon, a larger school from a higher-class area whose dominance was long established.

"You did it, mate. What a bleedin' save that was!" Paul yelled as he jumped into Kevin's arms.

Other team members crowded around, expressing similar sentiments, which Kevin returned with equal enthusiasm. The game-saving block had been the height of a last period comeback that had erased a three goal deficit, due mostly to an emotionally stirring speech by Mr. Barden, spectacular play by Woody and Paul, and countless saves on goal by Kevin.

"You know, Yank," Paul enthused. "I had my doubts about you when this thing started, what with the trouble we been havin' and all, but you sure earned my respect today.

"Mine too!" Woody echoed. "Look Yank, you played a great game today, and well, we all just thought, that you deserve the game ball. Here," Woody said unceremoniously as he shoved the ball hard into Kevin's stomach, causing him to let out an involuntary grunt.

"Tell you what you do, mate," someone echoed from behind. "Catch us in a good mood, when we're not hating Yanks, and we may even sign it." As Kevin returned his laughter and extended congratulations to his teammates, he couldn't help thinking that his dad had been right again.

Even though Kevin had received his dad's permission to play on the team, he still worried about reactions on the part of the other Americans, the English, and to be perfectly honest, his mom. But Dad had told him that things are never as bad as they seem, and that with the passage of time, emotions subside and life goes on.

And that's just what had happened. There had been some initial hard feelings, but as the day of the match drew near, these feelings had diminished, to be replaced by passionate school spirit, surprising even the school faculty and the American Coalition for American Student Betterment, headed by Kevin's mom. The hard feelings of before seemed to have vanished so completely that it was almost as they had not existed at all. Nobody talked about the problems, just the game. Miraculously, almost as if they were interconnected, the American students seemed to be making it in the classroom also.

"Hey, Kevin!" Kevin's American friend Sammy called out as they ran off the field. "That was some game today. You really showed them guys that a Yank can play on an English team."

"After we teach you blighters cricket, you'll think that your baseball's a ruddy cake-walk in the park," Paul shot back as they continued off the field to a well-earned shower.

But not before Kevin caught a glimpse of his dad standing discreetly at the back of the crowd, in his very best tweed English outfit, complete with dapper English hat, puffing his pipe with what could only be described as a satisfied smile.



"Smitty, I think you have a damn good idea, a damn good idea," Chuck pointed expressively with his cigar. "We've got to do something about all our guys and I think you've hit the nail smack dab on the head."

"Thank you, Colonel," Dad answered formally.

"You know the rules; it's Chuck when we're alone."

"Thank you for that too, sir. I know your rules. I just have never gotten comfortable being on a first name basis with a senior officer."

"Well, get comfortable," Chuck said impatiently. "I'm the same guy you contemptuously called Butterballs in the war and later referred to as Major Marvel in Korea—"

"Colonel, I'm a career man; and I'd never refer to a senior officer in such an unprofessional manner," Dad interrupted stiffly.

Chuck made no effort to conceal his frustration, "The hell you wouldn't. You been breathing turbo-prop fumes or something? Your opinion of most officers is well known, and frankly, well founded. So cut the crap.

Besides, you and I survived the Octagon Mission. You earned the right to call me anything you damn well please. Are we clear, First Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir, Colonel, uh, that is to say, yes, Chuck," Dad answered, discomfort evident in his voice.

"Good," Chuck answered with a dismissing satisfied nod. "Now, back to business. You know as well as I do that this assignment has to succeed. With what those crazy Russians are cooking up, we could be in a shooting war any day. That makes the timely and successful installation of those Titans very, very, important. And since our express purpose for being over here is to supervise the installation for all the missiles in the northern sector, the one thing I don't need is our boys going off base, getting liquored up, and spilling their guts about what they do for a living. I think the locals would react rather strongly to the fact that they're living right next door to a primary target in the event of a nuclear war.

"Now, light up that pipe, and tell me about this idea you've been working on to address our morale problem."



Kevin had not intended to eavesdrop; it had been purely accidental . . . well almost.

He'd been dispatched on his bicycle by Mom to bring Dad his dinner. Although it was seemingly an easy enough task, it was a good deal more difficult in reality. It was wintertime in northern England, February to be exact, and bitterly cold. The temperature hadn't been within waving distance of zero in over three weeks. The roads were icy and treacherous. Kevin had left his bike at home, choosing instead to hike the two miles to the American headquarters. By the time he arrived, ears, nose and toes were frozen, and, finding the orderly room where Dad's desk was deserted, he'd huddled next to the coke stove until his frostbitten extremities had returned to a temperature approaching normal.

With warmth returned, Kevin had shucked off his heavy wool winter coat and, checking the hallway, had tiptoed back into the orderly room and positioned himself in Dad's chair, fantasizing himself in a similar position of authority when he grew up.

It was during one of these daydreams that he had heard voices from the colonel's office next door. There was a pass-through in the adjoining wall for Dad and the colonel to exchange documents; it was only partially closed. Instinctively, Kevin was out of the chair and had dropped below the window to avoid detection—intending to crawl around the desk and back to the front of the orderly room. But like the proverbial cat, his curiosity had gotten the better of him and he'd crouched very still, turned his listening gear up to high, peeked over the sill, and tuned in for the show.

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“Look, Chuck, the biggest problem with the troops is that they miss their way of life; they’re lonesome. So this is what I’ve got in mind to deal with this—”

WHAM!! The sliding window had slid shut with a heart-stopping crash. Kevin remain frozen in his position just below the window, certain that he’d been discovered and expecting Dad and the colonel to come charging in and snatch him from his listening post. Ten seconds passed, and then his worst fears were confirmed.

Dad, followed by the colonel, entered the orderly room and walked directly toward him.

“Son, don’t you know it’s impolite to eavesdrop on a private conversation?” Dad said angrily as stopped in front of him.

“I didn’t mean to,” Kevin admitted. “It just sorta happened when I sat down at your desk.”

Glancing at the colonel’s disbelieving stare, Dad turned, crouched down on one knee until he was eye-to-eye with Kevin, and said firmly. “Son, you are never, I repeat—never, to discuss what you overheard with anyone. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Kevin answered in a voice trembling with fear.

“Okay then, go on down to the day room and wait for me there. As soon as the colonel and I are through, I’ll take you home,” Dad said in a calmer voice.

“Yes, sir,” Kevin said quickly as he brushed past Dad, then tiptoed past the colonel as soundlessly as if the linoleum floor were made of lamb’s wool, and ran down the hall toward the day room as fast as his feet would allow. If his retreat had been photographed, it would have made a handy training film for prospective second story men making a hasty getaway after the alarm had sounded.

“How much do you think he listened to?” Kevin overheard the colonel say from behind.

“I don’t know,” Dad answered seriously.

“Well, one thing’s certain, he’d better damn well keep his little lip zipped about the Octagon Mission, or it’s your ass, Smitty; and his too if he ever talks about it to anyone. Is that clear!”

“I don’t think that will be a problem, Colonel,” Kevin heard Dad answer as their voices faded as he entered the day room and dove headfirst onto the couch. “For me or my son either.”

“You’d better make damn sure!”

What Kevin had overheard had scared him very badly; Kevin’s secret fear was war . . . and what it would feel like to die in one . . . whatever the reason.

This Octagon Mission that the colonel had referenced so threateningly must have occurred during the war and been very important, important enough to intimidate a ten-year-old boy into silence. Something must have gone very wrong on that mission, and people must have died for no good reason. And probably exposure would cause the ruination of the careers of the colonel, dad, and those others who were left.



“Hand me that wrench, son.”

“Yes sir.” Kevin responded as he retrieved the tool, climbed the stepladder, and

handed over the wrench.

Dad was the chief foreman of a remodeling project in the back of the headquarters building, a large hangar-like room that had served as a ready room for pilots during the war. The central room walls had been paneled, with arched doorways on both sides leading to a company workshop on the right and game rooms on the left. Currently the ceiling was being lowered from its current fourteen-foot level to eight feet through the use of extensive amounts of angle iron, all cut by hand, to create a supporting framework. Just to the left of the door, a bar, complete with sink and cold storage, had recently been completed. Kevin had wangled himself a job after school as bar stocker and all-around helper.

As Kevin became an established fixture during the construction, Dad, as well as other sergeants in the company, had begun to teach him elementary tool use and had trained him to operate some of the simpler shop tools. At Dad's request, Kevin had been cutting one and a-half-inch strips on the band saw to be used as spacers for attaching the dropped ceiling panels.

"Can I help with anything else?"

"Yeah, you're a short guy and can stand up in this framework, so how about coming up here and holding the wrench on these bolts so Red can tighten them," Dad said.

"You hold them with the wrench, and I'll tighten them from the other side, okay?"

"Yes sir," Kevin responded.

The person on the other side was a young staff sergeant named Red Benson. One quick glance and it was not hard to tell why his nickname was Red.

Red was an Indiana farm boy who'd joined the air force in 1950, rather than get drafted by the army. Red joined thinking he'd miss Korea. As usual, the plan backfired.

Having grown up on a farm, where a person was required to develop many kinds of skills, Red was a pretty fair carpenter. He and Dad had been the mainstays in the building of the barroom, working tirelessly late into the night for months on end.

It was past twelve when Kevin and Red finished the night's tasks. Their well-earned drink at the bar, a 3.2 beer for Red, a coke for Kevin, was suddenly interrupted by scream from the shop. Both Red and Kevin were met at the doorway by Dad, holding his right hand around the index finger and thumb of his left hand. Kevin's focus went immediately to the peculiar way Dad was holding his left hand; the blood was squirting freely from the index finger joint . . . the last two inches were no longer there.

"Kevin," Red commanded. "I'll get your dad into the car. You go into the shop and find that finger and wrap it in a cloth and get out to the car as fast as you can, you hear!"

"Yes sir," Kevin responded, but made no attempt to move.

"Kevin!" Red roared. "Get moving!! This is no time to be squeamish or get sick on me. They'll be plenty of time for that later; now move!"

Red's authoritarian tone galvanized Kevin into action. As he entered, Kevin quickly surveyed the shop and located the finger wedged between the table saw and the cover plate. Seizing a screwdriver off of the workbench, he levered up the plate, removed the bloody piece of finger, and grabbed a cloth on his way out the door.

Kevin raced up the hallway and rounded the corner with out slowing down. Careening off the walls like a banked billiard ball to the front of the building, he dived in the open backdoor of the Hillman, and with Red revving the four-banger to previously untried rpm's, they went racing into the night.



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"How are you, Kevin?" Dad inquired. "Been taking care of everything, school and so forth?"

"Yes sir. How are you?"

"I'll tell you honestly, I'll be a lot better off when I get out of here; the food's awful. I miss your mother's cooking. Not to mention her cold feet at night."

"Oh, Smitty stop it!" Mom sighed. "You'll give these boys terrible ideas about hospitals."

"I wasn't talking about the hospitals, kiddo," Dad grinned mischievously.

"Well, you'll give them bad ideas about that too," Mom shot back stiffly with a wounded look that didn't quite come off.

"How's the hand, Dad?" Billy asked courteously.

"Okay, son; and how've you been?"

"I'm okay; I've been taking care of things while you're in here."

"Well that's good to hear, son."

"Yeah, don't worry about a thing, Dad. You can always count on me," Billy continued.

Dad was silent for a moment, then nodded. "I know I can, son."

"Well, I hope you are out of here real soon. I'll come to see you whenever I can," Billy said, as he started for the door, stopped, turned around, and on seeing that Mom was not following, walked back to her and began to tug urgently on her arm.

"C'mon Mom, we'll be late," Billy said, as he tried to pull Mom toward the door.

"Just a minute, Billy," Mom resisted. "I'd like to stay and visit with your father a little longer."

"But Mom??" Billy whined. "We'll be late; and I promised Jennifer I'd get to the dance early."

"You'd better go, before Number One Son has a heat rash," Dad snorted.

"Well, if you think that's best," Mom agreed, apparently relieved that someone else had made the decision.

"Kevin. Here's a shilling for the bus ride home. Be home at six, and don't be late. My bridge party starts at seven, so I'll have little enough time to get you boys fed and over to Mrs. Hill's for the evening," Mom said airily as she pecked Dad on the cheek, patted Kevin on the chin, and breezed out the door after Billy. "Bye, dear. See you tomorrow."

With Billy and Mom no longer there, it seemed uncomfortably quiet in the room. It had been three and a half weeks since the late night race to the hospital, which had been, for the most part, in vain. The doctor had been unable to reattach the finger, although with a clever surgical procedure, he had been able to stitch up the thumb, just behind the nail. It looked funny to see the nail without all of the pad of skin behind it, but the prognosis was for complete recovery and use of the thumb.

How the accident occurred, no one was sure, not even Dad. One minute he was cutting a board, then apparently, a piece of sawdust got in his eye. He'd turned his head for just a fraction of a second, and when he'd turned back, the finger was gone.

"This is the first time I've had a chance to talk to you alone since the accident. That was a very brave thing you did, son," Dad said. "Red tells me you handled yourself real well."

"Thank you," Kevin responded in a low voice. "But I just did what Sergeant Benson ordered me to do."

"Having any nightmares about it?" Dad asked.

"How did you know?" Kevin looked up.

"Oh, your ol' man is pretty perceptive when he wants to be. There's nothing like having to deal with life's harsh realities to change a man. You've grown up a lot in the past

year; had to. You had that painful fall, had to adjust to different customs here in England, and now have to see your dad get a finger hacked off. I'll tell you, to retrieve that finger took a lot of guts; don't know if I'd have been able to do it," Dad shivered distastefully.

"One, or all of those things, would have been enough to give me sleepless nights."

"Dad," Kevin paused, then continued, "you mean it's all right to be afraid?"

"All right? Hell in certain circumstances it's down right unnatural not to be."

"But you don't ever seem to be afraid of anything," Kevin objected.

Dad was quiet for a moment, then patted the bed and said feelingly, "Sit down on the bed, partner, I want to explain something to you."

As Kevin sat down, Dad continued. "Son, there's nothing wrong with being afraid, it's what you do when you're afraid that counts. Fear is the kind of thing that left unchecked, magnifies itself in your mind until it can quite literally paralyze your thoughts or actions. So, when you feel uneasy about a situation, the smartest thing to do is to acknowledge to yourself that you are afraid—an admitted problem is half solved—and say to yourself, 'okay, given the situation, what do I have to do to resolve it?' If you follow that approach, you'll always be able to think yourself out of a tight spot."

"But what do you do if there is no way out?"

"That in itself is a form of a solution; not the ideal one, but a solution just the same."

"I don't understand."

"Well, let me see if I can explain it a little better."

"If you find yourself in a no-win position, facing certain death in a downed aircraft for example, and you have made up your mind that there is no way out, you've examined the facts and come to the solution that there isn't one."

"So now, you have to do the next best thing, like we were talking about before; or, do the right thing. Make peace with God. If it's a war, take some of the bastards with you, things like that. And by doing that, a lot of times you'll come up with a solution that you didn't think of before. The point is, that as long as you keep thinking and reasoning there's always a chance; when you stop, there's none."

"Oh, I get it," Kevin nodded slowly. "If I find solutions for the things that I'm afraid of, then they're no longer fears, is that right?"

"You're dead center on the bulls eye, troop," Dad nodded approvingly.

"So you see, if you're having nightmares about something, and you wake up in a cold sweat, figure out a solution to the nightmare and the problem is solved. As a matter of fact, I do the same thing for everyday type problems that occur to others. I see the problem and rehearse in my mind what I'd do in similar circumstances. Then when a related type of problem happens, my instincts kick in before fear even comes to bat."

Dad gave Kevin an affectionate pat, brightened, and announced, "Enough of this kind of talk. I'm sure you've got better things to do than sit around here all afternoon. Besides, I'm tired and want to take a nap. You run along."

Kevin was halfway out the door when Dad's soft call of, "And, son," caused him to turn.

"If it helps you any, I've always found that the fear is magnified when you try to do the right thing rather than do what's right."

"Why is that?" Kevin said in a puzzled voice.

"Because, like I told you when we talked about this a couple of months back during that soccer ruckus, when you do the right thing, you always have to worry about what other people think; when you do what's right, you're only answerable for your actions to God."

Kevin nodded in understanding, and as he walked from the hospital he had a feeling

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he would remember his father's sage advice for a long, long time . . . probably a lifetime.



The summer had passed for the Smith family without serious incident. Its high point had been a camping trip across the European continent, visiting eight countries in forty-five days. Included in that were two- and three-day stays in Vienna, Venice, Rome, and Paris. There were a curiously long four days spent driving around the German countryside with Dad looking intently at various locations, which on the surface seemed to have no attraction whatsoever.

For the most part, Mom was tolerant of this "vacation detour." Kevin understood, and Billy was downright crabby. Those attitudes pretty much summed up the whole vacation in Kevin's mind. Dad went to appease Mom and relive his memories. Mom went so she could go home and tell everyone about the "glorious trip to Europe" she'd taken. Billy and Kevin did not get a vote.

Even though they went more or less under duress, having lost an appeal to be allowed to remain with the neighbors, they went with decidedly different attitudes. Billy complained from the moment the vacation started until it ended. If it wasn't the camping out and having to pitch the tent every night, it was the food, or the endless hours in the Volkswagen bus they'd borrowed from a major in dad's outfit. As they moved from one place to the next in almost-forced, march-type fashion, Kevin wasn't any happier about it than Billy, but he'd decided to make the best of it. Surprisingly, he'd secretly enjoyed himself. Kevin wondered silently to himself how many other ten-year-old American boys had been to the Vatican and seen the pope celebrate a mass; not many, he suspected.

Their travels continued in the fall. Dad had more free time and weekend trips were common until the weather turned bad in early November. But this slack time in Dad's schedule had been invaluable. If there was a tourist attraction on the British Isles—from Shakespeare's Shack, to smooching the Ol' Blarney Stone—they'd been there, rolling up mile after mile on the trusty little Hillman.



It had been eight months since Dad's accident, and close to ten months since Kevin had listened in on Dad's game plan for improving morale with the colonel, a well-founded strategy that could only be termed a complete success.

The bar, appropriately named "Smitty's Smoker," had officially opened in May with a party and drinking binge that left anyone entering the building for the next two days instantly intoxicated from the fumes. Buildings had been appropriated from the R.A.F. to create a service club complete with a ballroom and a two-lane bowling alley, which was opened in June; a post exchange was operational by July. The Labor Day dance featured an American band and singer. A Halloween dance and trick or treat for the soldiers' children was held at the service club in late October; and in a similar fashion, a sit-down Thanksgiving dinner was prepared and served at the service club by the new mess hall.

The direct result of this 'home-away-from-home' strategy was a significant drop in "incidents" with the local constables concerning the young airmen in the squadron. And the drastic reduction of discontent resulted in a previously unheard of reenlistment rate of one hundred percent. The colonel pointed to this as one of the major reasons why his group was the only one in England currently on schedule with regard to operational targets.

To that end, a lion's share of the credit went to his "First Shirt," whom the colonel had nominated for senior master sergeant and NCO of the year, both of which Dad was awarded going away.

Despite all these positive signs of successful adjustment by the American contingent, Kevin still felt very strongly about his earlier perceptions concerning his parents. Even though they had not had a serious argument in months, things just didn't feel right at home. They were too polite with each other, almost formal at times, like two neighborhood dogs circling each other warily trying to decide when and where to bite next.

Kevin had tried to discuss his feelings with Billy, but had gotten nowhere. Kevin was quickly coming to the conclusion that Billy was just like Mom; he only saw the obvious and didn't have, or didn't care, to think about anything that didn't affect him personally or that required the capacity to think beyond the present.

A week before Christmas, a storm dumped three feet of snow on Dearfield, then, uncharacteristically, the storm remained stationary over the area. By Christmas Eve, the base was virtually at a standstill, buried under mounds of snow with drifts over twelve feet high a common sight. The snow grounded all incoming and outgoing flights, except miraculously, the incoming flight from the States with the Christmas presents ordered months ago from the Sears catalog by American families.

"I told you it was a mistake to come to this Godforsaken place. Just look at the mess; it'll take hours to clean up and get everything ready for the boys' Christmas."

"Now just simmer down, honey. I admit it'll take a couple of hours but we'll get it," Dad answered soothingly.

"Don't you 'just simmer down' me! I've told you, and told you, I'm tired of this place—and tired of this kind of life—and I want to go home," Mom whined.

"You're just tired. How's about you go on to bed and I'll finish up—"

"Stop patronizing me, goddammit! You haven't been listening to a thing I've said!" Mom screamed.

"I have been listening," Dad began, making no attempt to conceal his own rising anger. "But this discussion, frankly, is beginning to get a little old. Our tour here is half over, and all you've done is complain. Nothing I've done seems to please you; the new car didn't, the trip to Europe didn't, and the weekend outings didn't. What is it you want from me?"

Mom was silent for a moment then answered, "I don't know . . . but I'm beginning to honestly feel that there's one thing I don't want."

"What's that?" Dad asked in a weary tone that implied the answer was already a known.

"You!" Mom answered bluntly.

"Are you sure?" When Mom didn't answer, Dad continued. "Maybe you need some time to think it over. I know you've been under a lot of pressure lately, and I got a very special Christmas present for you."

"What's that?" Mom's snarl wavered.

"A trip home to visit your mother; here's the ticket. You leave January 4th."

"Are the boys going along?"

"No, you've never been separated from them since they were born. They're old enough now to get by without you for a while. And I've already arranged for Mrs. Hall to take care of everything while you're gone."

The sound of running footsteps was followed by Mom and Dad hugging and kissing as she jumped into his arms. "Oh, honey, thank you, thank you, this was the perfect gift. I'm sorry for the things I said earlier. I guess I'm just tense," Mom apologized.

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"That's all right, dear, I understand," Dad acknowledged softly.

"C'mon hon', let's hurry up and get everything set up for the boys. Then you can take me upstairs to the bedroom and thank me properly," Dad said.

"You dirty old man," Mom said. "How come I can never stay mad at you?"

"It's probably directly related to the size of my weewee," Dad replied with a smug expression.

Suddenly serious, Mom said, "One of these days, you're not going to be able to come up with the right thing to say at the right time, then what are you going to do?"

"I guess we'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Dad said quietly, then murmured under his breath, "and given the stormy nature of our relationship, we probably will."



One of the improvements recently completed to their living quarters was the installation of an oil-fired heating system. The ductwork was also a perfect listening post from which Kevin had overheard last night's conversation between his parents. Dad's last thoughts stayed with Kevin as he watched the Christmas morning mayhem.

Mom was all aflutter over her impending trip home, Billy was excited about his new bicycle, Santa had bought Dad a set of spotlights for his movie camera, and Kevin's gifts had added additional cars and accessories to his already rather large Matchbox car collection.

During Christmas week, there were numerous parties at the service club and at the homes of other friends and neighbors. Although Kevin wasn't there, he heard reports of an altercation at the New Year's Party. The details never came out, but there must have been some truth to it, as one of the officers was shipped stateside inside of twenty-four hours. The fact that there were no going away parties, gifts, or anything else lent credence to the rumors. He was hustled out of there before the ink had dried on the orders.

Kevin went to bed early on January 3. At 0500 hours, they were driving Mom down to London to catch her flight for home. Although only slightly over 220 miles, the trip took well over five hours on the rutty and windy roads. The return trip in the dark, with the roads icy, would be even longer. Tomorrow would be a long day.



"Bye, dear. Have a good flight, and I'll see you in two weeks," Dad smiled as he hugged and kissed Mom good-bye at Heathrow Airport.

"I will, honey. Now take care of the boys," Mom hugged in return. Turning to Billy and Kevin she said, "Now you boys mind your father. I'll miss you both. Come and give me a hug."

"Ah, Mom, I'm too old for that kind of stuff," Billy complained as he reluctantly allowed himself to be hugged, leaning away quickly when Mom went to kiss him.

Kevin hugged Mom enthusiastically. Her kiss left a perfect set of lip impressions on his cheek. "I'm sorry, dear," Mom said gaily as she pulled a tissue from her purse, dabbed it with spit, and wiped his face.

"Got your tickets?" Dad inquired.

"Right here in my purse," Mom patted it. "London to New York to Washington. Then an overnight layover, and on to Atlanta."

Dad looked thoughtful, then said, "Where did the side trip to Washington come in? I thought I booked it direct from New York to Atlanta, on the same day."

"Ah, yes, that's right, you did. But since I'm going right by there, I thought I'd stop and visit an old girlfriend I haven't seen since the war, stay overnight, then go on to Atlanta the next day," Mom answered quickly.

"Sort of forgot to tell me you changed your itinerary, didn't you?"

"Well uh, yes, I guess I did," Mom responded uncomfortably. "But look, honey, it was just the excitement of the trip and all."

"I see."

The PA system announced the last call. "Well, I've got to go dear, before they close the doors. Now, you be good." She hugged Dad again quickly, and with a wave to Billy and Kevin, turned and walked hurriedly towards the door that led to her plane.

"See you soon," Dad called after her with a half-wave.

"Of course, dear," Mom responded as she ran quickly up the steps and through the airplane door without looking back.

"I don't understand what she meant by that," Kevin said, as they turned to walk back to the parking lot.

"I do," Dad said heavily.



Hours later, in the car, as the boys were returning to Dearfield, Dad's reply still bothered Kevin. Checking the back seat first to assure that Billy was still asleep, Kevin asked, "Dad, what did you mean when you said you understood what Mom meant?"

Dad blew out a big cloud of smoke from his pipe before answering and said solemnly, "Your mom is a little upset with me right at the moment."

"What about?"

"At the New Year's party, the officer that she'd been working with on that Student Betterment Thing—the one you knocked the wind out of by crossing the picket lines to play on the soccer team—got a little out of hand with your mom and I had to help him see the error of his ways."

"What do you mean, the error of his ways?"

Dad tapped the ashes from his pipe into the cutoff beer can he'd specially designed for the purpose, and said, "Doesn't matter now. The problem corrected itself rather quickly. The colonel had him shipped stateside."

"Where to?" Kevin asked.

Dad inspected the depths of his empty pipe, then answered in a would-be casual tone, "To the Pentagon in Washington."

"The same place Mom is going?"

"Yup."

Kevin wanted to say something, but was not sure what. By the tone of Dad's voice, it was obvious that there was a lot more to the story than Dad was willing to tell; and perhaps, more than Kevin wanted to know.

"That doesn't matter, does it? Mom's going there to visit her girlfriend."

"No son, it doesn't matter," Dad said dryly.

Kevin was silent for a moment as he tried to digest what he'd been told. He squirmed uncomfortably in the car seat, then said quietly, "It's just a coincidence, isn't it?"

"I dunno; your guess is as good as mine," Dad responded in a faraway voice.

Kevin shook his head confusedly and said, "I don't understand."

"It would seem pretty logical to me that if you were going to stop and visit some-

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one you had not seen in almost twenty years, that you'd confirm the arrangements in advance. Right?"

"Yeah, right, so?"

"So, I made a call. The friend your mother is going to see died in a car accident six years ago," Dad responded.

Dad seemed on the verge of saying something else, then hesitated, deep in thought as he refilled his pipe. Kevin waited in expectation.

Suddenly Kevin asked without thinking, "Do you think it's connected to this guy who got sent home?"

Dad answered tersely, "Look, I don't know where this line of questioning is leading, but I want you to drop it right now, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Kevin answered, painfully aware that he was probably on the right track.

Dad stared unblinkingly out of the windshield at the blowing snow that appeared to be dancing in the car's headlights. Exhaling deeply, he said in a softer tone, "Son, the firmest foundation for any relationship, whether it's husband to wife, or friend to friend, is mutual trust. Even though I'm uncomfortable with her little side trip, I trust her, and therefore am assuming that she'll make the reason known to me when she's ready."

"Now," Dad said, abruptly changing the subject. "When we get home, I got a list of chores for you and Billy that I promised your mother I'd have done before she got back. At the top of your list is to clear out the tool shed. Then I want you to help me down at the shop on a couple of improvements for the Smoker."

After a few more comments and nods of assent from Kevin, the conversation dried up. The monotonous trip began to wear on Kevin and as he became drowsy, he wondered how his earlier thoughts could have been so far off the mark. Dad was making plans for when Mom returned; everything was perfectly normal.

CHAPTER THREE

There's no friggin' way I'll ever agree to that, Smitty; no way at all. You must be out of your fuckin' mind for even suggesting it." A chorus of noise arose immediately as members of the NonComs street gang argued among themselves the controversial proposal to admit blacks to the gang.

"Keith, you've got your head up your ass; we need these guys. The Cuban gangs are getting better and better. We're fightin' a war on two fronts. If we make a peace pack with the black gang then we'll have the goddamn bastards outnumbered."

"I'm with Keith," interrupted a tall, muscular kid named Glen. "I don't want no niggers in this here gang," he drawled. "Besides, how you expect us to trust 'em? Most of these jungle bunnies don't even know who their daddy is. They all inbreed; makes 'em unstable, and untrustworthy as hell."

Fighting back an urge to grab Glen, who was Keith's henchman and designated lackey, and shake him severely by the throat, Smitty continued. "We've already lost three guys when they got caught outnumbered; the last one got a knife stuck right between his ribs while at least five black gang members stood and watched. What do you prejudiced bastards have to say about that?"

"Smitty, this is a pointless discussion. You've been arguing this for the last hour and it's going nowhere. I'm the leader, and what I say goes; and I say no," Keith finished emphatically.

Smitty did a slow 360 of their meeting spot in a deserted warehouse barely two miles from downtown Miami, to get his emotions under control and think. He'd known that it would come down to an ultimatum from Keith; but the idea had to be brought up. Keith was the leader because he was the oldest, the biggest, and the meanest kid in their gang, not the smartest; he wasn't the world's most benign despot. Parliamentary debates and points of order were not his strong suit. Keith's rule remained: "If I don't understand it, we don't discuss it."

"I don't think we're quite through with this subject yet," said a voice with a French accent.

"We formed this merry little band for our own mutual protection," the speaker continued as he walked into the light, puffing on a cigarette that dangled rakishly from the corner of his mouth.

"This is not a black-white thing gentleman; it's a survival thing. Wars make strange bed-fellows. Since we're in one and outnumbered, I don't think we can afford to be that choosy about screening our prospective allies. Smitty here has gone and made all the initial contacts, worked out agreements, and taken all the risks while we sit here on our fat asses and bitch. I think we should put it to a vote; my vote is in favor of the proposal. What about the rest of you guys?"

"Frenchy, we're not voting on anything," Keith snarled angrily. "I'm the leader and I've already made my decision."

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"Maybe it's time for a new leader, mon ami," Frenchy answered right back. "One, who, as Smitty so eloquently put it, and I quote: 'hasn't got his head up his ass,' end quote."

Frenchy was not as big as Keith, but though small framed, he was lightning quick and amazingly strong. The result of a wartime marriage between a French dancer and a New Orleans hustler temporarily turned soldier, Frenchy was a perfect union of the two. His mother's good looks and his father's smoothness had made him very popular with the young ladies and very unpopular with their fathers. One father in particular had had plans for Frenchy's future that had driven the boy to the streets of Miami.

He and Smitty had taken to each other immediately. It was Smitty who had lobbied for a change in the gang's membership rules to allow Frenchy's admission.

A feather landing on a Persian carpet would have sounded like a boilermakers' convention compared to the absolute quiet that followed Frenchy's challenge. Nobody moved, nobody talked, nobody breathed. Keith's reaction was predictable; the switchblade gleamed evilly, refracting off the glazed, dingy windows of the skylights.

"Frenchy, you're a dead man," Keith hissed through clenched teeth. "You and Smitty have been causing trouble and questioning my authority since you joined, and now you're gonna pay. I hope you don't have any plans for the rest of your life, you mother-fuckers, 'cause you're gonna be dead in exactly one minute." Keith stalked toward them, waving the blade menacingly.

Frenchy had anticipated Keith's move. He'd pulled his belt, took two turns around the adjustment end, and was circling the buckle like diminutive David with his slingshot as he got set to take on mighty Goliath.

The fight was over almost before it began. Keith made a sweeping, off-balance thrust which Frenchy easily sidestepped, bringing the buckle across Keith's wrist with a deadly combination of strength and fear-induced adrenaline. The sound of wrist bones fracturing shattered the silence. Keith cried out in pain as he grabbed his useless right hand, dropping the knife in the process. Frenchy followed up the belt with a well-aimed kick to Keith's testicles and a solid punch that left little doubt that a visit to the dentist would definitely be in order.

The gang members, staring in stunned silence and disbelief, had not fully recovered from the main event when the sound of boxes being crushed and empty fifty-gallon drums being turned over announced that another bout was underway.

Glenn, who had planned to brain Frenchy with a length of pipe, had been interrupted by a flying kick from Smitty.

"Next!!" Smitty shouted savagely to no one in particular as he and Frenchy assumed back-to-back positions, clearing their own blades in the process.

A minute passed, then another. They circled, still back-to-back, warily examining each gang member eye to eye until satisfied that the fight was truly over. With the passage of another minute, Smitty and Frenchy began to believe it.

The silence was broken by Jimmy, a tall, skinny kid with the biggest zit on his forehead that Smitty had ever seen and a set of buck teeth that made Bugs Bunny's seem like a minor overbite.

"Well," he said. "I guess we're desegregated," he said conversationally to no one in particular. "What orders, leader?" Leaving the question undirected, Smitty suspected, by design to see who would answer.

"Better ask Smitty," Frenchy instructed firmly. "He's running the show from now on."

"Why not you? You beat Keith," Jimmy questioned suspiciously.

"I might have beat Keith, but look who was paying attention to everything else while the fight was going on. We need somebody who's thinking all the time. I might be

the brawn, but Smitty's the brains."

"What orders, leader?" The question was directed at Smitty from Tom, a short, compact kid with red hair and freckles.

"Break up and drift out of here a couple at a time so as not to upset the local heat. I'm going over to see LZ and tell him the outcome of, our um, 'meeting'. Meet back here tomorrow at sundown, so we can get organized on how to jointly manage our territory."

"What about Keith and Glen?" Charlie, a gangly kid with horn-rimmed glasses, and a four-inch knife scar on his jaw asked, nodding at the unconscious form of the former leader and the groggy form of his henchmen.

Smitty was quiet for a moment, then answered. "Leave 'em; Glen can get whatever help Keith needs. If he can't, tough shit."

"As you say leader," said an unrecognizable, fading voice. "As you say . . ."



"Thanks Frenchy," Smitty said sincerely as they walked alone back toward the housing development.

"Think nothing of it, mon ami." Frenchy waved a hand dismissively.

"Of course I probably should brain you for sticking me with this goddamn mess," Smitty added irritably.

Frenchy shot a shrewd sideways glance at his friend, and answered earnestly, "I don't see what you're so pissed about. You're a better man for this job than that Neanderthal Keith and you know it. I've been in the gangs in Orleans; this is a different kind of war. We're not really fighting the Cubans, we're not fighting the blacks, we're fighting our own government and that stupid Cuban Subsidy Act."

"I have to admit you have a point."

"Of course I have a point, you asshole!" Frenchy boomed cheerfully, giving him a playful head slap.

"You understand the whole thing so well, you lead it," Smitty said.

Frenchy suddenly grabbed Smitty by the arm and spun him around until they were eye to eye—the fact that they were standing right in the middle of a busy street did not seem to faze Frenchy in the least.

"Now you listen to me mon ami; we'll not speak of this again." He paused measuringly, then continued. "If this was just a gang war, then you're right, I would lead it, but it's much more than that. This is going to be settled by negotiation, not by force. You're always thinking ahead; you rehearse situations in your mind and then react instinctively when the need arises. That's what we need now: forethought, planning, and careful negotiation. Charging around like a stampede of wild horses will only lead to further useless injuries and death. Your challenge is to straighten this mess out, not inflame it. To negotiate a peace; not arm for war. To show these guys how to live; not teach them how to die."

Smitty was silent for a long time, he'd no idea how long. Truth, honest truth, is such a rare commodity that when it's heard, the time to digest and understand it becomes an insignificant entity. Smitty nodded slowly to himself—not only in understanding, but, in acceptance—and without a word, turned toward the black district with a purposeful step.

"Smitty?" Frenchy called after him solemnly. "I just hope you're up to it, man."

"So do I," Smitty murmured prayerfully to himself without turning around, "So do I."



Smitty smiled in sudden reflection as memories of a happier time invaded his thoughts unexpectedly. The happier time that had sneaked up from the darkest recesses of his mind had been Christmas 1960. They were a family of four then; now they were only three—and in those days, before his similarities to his father began to be increasingly obvious—he was still known as Kevin.

Mom had left England on January 4, 1961 to visit her family in the States for two weeks as planned. From there, life became a series of unattached coincidences.

First, Mom's father had become ill and she had decided to remain stateside for another month until he recovered from a bout with pneumonia. A month quickly spread to two, then three, as complications set in.

Mom was not halfway through her problems when Dad and other selected NCO's and officers from all over England were suddenly pulled out of their current duty station on 48 hours' notice, and reassigned to Rhein Main Air Force Base in West Germany.

The next three months contained a series of alerts, war games, and nuclear simulations that basically amounted to nothing more than diplomatic chess between the Soviet Union and the United States regarding the current state of affairs in Berlin. Unfortunately, the military served as the pawns, and even worse, uncharacteristically, the families were brought along, and billeted in temporary quarters at leased hotels. Time hung heavy on their hands as the cold war heated up over the Bay of Pigs and yet more tensions in Berlin. Three months became five.

As five months became six, the events, and the reasons behind them, became clear. Dad was the NCO in charge of assuring that the expedited schedule for getting all Titans operational in West Germany was achieved. Dad and the other NCOs were rarely seen at home. So little in fact, that the standing joke was that any wife who became pregnant during this time must be having an affair; the husbands had not been "in residence" enough to "take care of their homework."

Dad had a hotel suite, with both sons bunked across the hall in a room. Since Dad was rarely there, care and feeding was assumed jointly by all of the wives of other NCOs. When school began, buses were provided to take the dependent children to the local school at the base. Playmates were each other or the local kids that lived around the hotel. Social activities were confined to within the hotel itself or occasional bus outings to the base, always with the caveat that the air force NCO at the desk know where they were going, who they were going with, and when they would be back. The net effect was that the families lived day to day in a constant state of tension, never knowing what would happen next.

Next, in this instance, became a ten-month stop back in England—first at Lakenheath Air Force Base for six months for something called European Operational Simulation—followed by a return to Dearfield for four months to complete the tour in May of '62.

Dad was given an all day sendoff by the American command. Chuck Martin, the former commanding officer, and present base commander of Lakenheath, flew up for the going-away party. In Dad's honor, he brought along a group of his former flying buddies who put on a precision air show that dazzled the onlookers.

A country fair jet jockey in his own right, Chuck did not fly with them. He was now a brigadier general and had told everyone within hearing distance that it was time he started to act like an officer and a gentleman. Chuck obviously was extremely selective in what constituted the definition of proper behavior; at the party that night, resplendent in grass skirt, he had been declared the winner of the hula contest.

Although Dad had smiled and been pleasant throughout the entire time, he'd

never fully relaxed and enjoyed himself. Mom had not come back to join them when they returned from Germany. Although Dad put on his best face in describing the decision as a joint agreement, there was no way to hide the disappointment in his face. Dad would not talk about the subject at all. When pressed, he always said that she was stateside taking care of her ailing father. "And besides," he'd add in a mischievous voice that didn't quite come off, "us guys enjoy batching it." Nothing could have been further from the truth.

This sobering reality set in when they were packing to return to the United States. Dad's next assignment was to be Homestead Air Force Base south of Miami, Florida. Several of the key NCOs, technicians, and officers from Dearfield were also headed to the same south Florida installation.

On the surface, they were simply a group of veteran servicemen, who, it was assumed, knew how to finagle the system and move together from one base to the next. The fact that their special skills in missile technology might be useful in light of goings-on in Castro's Cuba was not being admitted to by anyone, least of all Dad.

Curiously, General Martin was not joining them. When his assignment in Great Britain was completed, he was to be posted to the Pentagon, responsible for assessing combat readiness and operational morale for the entire southern United States.

Dad always said that the military was the "world's biggest family," in that you might soldier with someone in one location, then run into him again ten years later at another post, and pick up right where you left off. Kevin had a feeling that they'd cross paths with the general again.

But, more importantly, what Kevin and Billy had long suspected was now a reality: Mom was not coming back. When packing for the trip home, Dad had separated Mom's personal effects and had them shipped to her parents' house in Atlanta, while the balance of their possessions was sent directly to Florida.

Nothing was said about divorce, because evidently, there was not to be one. When questioned, Dad replied simply that they were living apart.



"That's far enough, honky," the unseen voice commanded, snapping Smitty back to reality. "State your business."

"I want to see LZ," Smitty stated flatly.

"Well, he don't want to see you, or any other honky muthafucka'; now clear out and don't come back."

"Listen stupid, you're just the night watchman. If I had the time or energy, I'd dig you out of your hidey-hole, slap the living shit out of you, carve you up with my blade, then toss your remains in Biscayne Bay. Now why don't you be a good little boy, and run along tell your "brutha" that Smitty wants to see his black ass," Smitty snarled back nastily in reply.

Footsteps echoed hollowly down the alley to the right as the unseen guard trotted away, presumably to get his leader. Five minutes passed before the footsteps could be heard again, only this time, it was not the soloist of before; it sounded like an entire orchestra.

"This better be worthwhile, honky."

"You must be LZ," Smitty ventured. "I'm Smitty, the leader of the NonComs; we need to talk."

"I thought Keith was the leader," LZ said curtly.

"He was."

"Well," LZ growled impatiently, "what happened?"

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"Slipped on a bar of soap in the shower," Smitty said with a smile.

"Lot of that going around just now," LZ said neutrally. But there was no mistaking the evil smile and the deadly intent behind it. "You said we need to talk; about what?"

"About getting together."

"Getting what together?" he asked with suspicion.

Smitty paused, rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then said, "Getting our gangs together; joining forces, if you will."

LZ was quiet for a moment, then unexpectedly broke into uncontrolled laughter. "You must be out of your fucking mind, man!" LZ snorted contemptuously.

"It must be the way I put this suggestion across that upsets people so much," Smitty observed sadly, shaking his head in dismay. "Keith's reaction was about the same as yours."

"You don't expect me to believe you're serious about this stupid fucking idea, do you?"

"What other reason would I have for coming here?" Smitty asked.

"What reason indeed?" LZ was quiet for a moment, stirred, then said feelingly. "I'll give you credit, white boy, you've got a lotta' guts for even coming here. The last white meat that wandered onto our territory wound up sliced like a Thanksgiving turkey."

He gave Smitty an appraising stare, then said, "There must have been some small amount of discussion with the rest of the NonComs before you strolled over to offer this little treaty."

"Yeah, little bit," Smitty conceded. "Little bit."

"How in the hell did you ever get them to agree with this?" LZ asked curiously with a suspicious glare.

Usually, curiosity killed the cat, but in this case, it might save this little pussy's ass. If Smitty could get him talking, and then thinking, there might be a chance. "Well, not to put to fine a point on this, but, I, um, sort of, gave them the idea that the deal was already made."

"—You what!!" LZ interrupted incredulously.

"Now hold on! Hold on!" Smitty raised his hands defensively. "Let me explain"

"Explain nothing you motherfucker," LZ shouted. "I'll kill you myself."

Before Smitty could even think about reacting, the knife cleared LZ's pocket, and in the same motion, made a sweeping pass at Smitty's head. He tilted his head sideways and back in a desperate attempt at avoiding having his throat cut. He just about made it; the very end of the switchblade caught him just below the right jaw, slashing an incision about two inches in length and at least a eighth of an inch deep.

By Smitty's rough calculations, he was encircled by at least thirty dudes, all of whom were preparing to play follow their leader. If Smitty were forced to bet on the chances of surviving the next two minutes on himself or a milk cow caught in the middle of a school of piranha, he'd take every last cent he could beg, borrow, or steal and put it squarely on Bessy's nose.

A voice from the not-so-distant past was making itself heard in his mind. Thoughts about how to handle fear, what to do when you're afraid, and that sometimes when there is no solution, that in itself, is a solution. He'd a plan; it was not, he had to admit, much of a plan, but since there was no other solution, and he was going to die, he figured insanity was as good a defense as any.

"Well, gentleman," Smitty said cheerfully, "Looks like I'm going to die here, so how about I invite a few of you along for the ride?"

"This dumb son-of-a-bitch is nuts," a kid standing to LZ's right said. "Let's kill the crazy bastard."

"Yeah, let's kill the crazy bastard!!" Smitty screamed in repetition. Screwing up his

face in what he hoped would pass for a wild and psychotic expression as he produced his own weapon, he brought the four-inch blade into view with a press of the thumb switch.

"And by the time you're done killing me, I'll have killed a couple of you, and that will just solve everything won't it? Then," he continued, waving his switchblade wildly with a crazed expression, "my guys will come over here, kill a couple more of you, you'll kill a couple of them, and then for good measure, the Cubans will pick off half a dozen of us both.

"While we're busy killing off each other, what happens to our dollies who depend on us for protection from the common enemy?" Smitty said, surveying the group, looking for any sign, no matter how small, that his words were having an effect. "And what happens to our territories while we fight it out?"

"Less than an hour ago, Frenchy and I gave our reasons to the NonComs and the same ones apply to you: this is not a black-white thing, gentlemen, it's a survival thing. Wars make strange bedfellows. Since we're in one and outnumbered, I don't think we can afford to be that choosy about screening our prospective allies. If you dumb asses can't see that, then stick it right here." Smitty ripped open his T-shirt, and pointed to his heart, daring any one of them to step up and be the first.

LZ approached, and slowly brought his switchblade up in the direction of Smitty's heart. Smitty flinched instinctively in anticipation of being mortally wounded.

Instants passed like hours before he realized that the sudden jerk he'd felt was not a thrusting incision; it was LZ cutting a rather generous length off of what had been his shirt, folding it into a crude bandage, and applying it with surprising tenderness to the knife wound that was bleeding profusely, changing most of what was left of his white T-shirt to red.

"You're not only the ballsiest son-of-a-bitch I've ever met, you're also the craziest bastard in Dade County," LZ said. "There's only two things that stop me from killing you now: One, what you said might be, I repeat—might be—true, and second," he paused for effect, and smiled acidly, "you'd probably come back to haunt me, just for the fun of it."

"Take off. We'll discuss your idea amongst ourselves. I'll meet you tomorrow at your expressway underpass at six P.M. and tell you what we decide. You'll guarantee safe passage into your territory and back out again."

"You have my word," Smitty replied solemnly.

"I believe you. You'll be safe leaving here, too."

As they shook hands and he was escorted away, Smitty overheard LZ muttering to himself in wonderment. "Do you believe that crazy son-of-a-bitch? Went to his own gang and announced a treaty between us; and didn't even bother to tell us first. He's either the stupidest or the smartest idiot I ever seen; I wonder which."

Smitty walked away, wondering when his luck would run out.



"Daaaaaad!" Billy screamed as he ran into his dad's bedroom. "Come take a look at Kevin; he's bleeding."

The bedsprings creaked as Dad bounced off and came running into the living room.

"Let me take a look at that, son," Dad said, as he tilted Kevin's head to examine the wound.

"I think we'd better get you on down to the hospital; that gash looks as though it'll take a couple of dozen stitches to close." Dad went about the apartment gathering up shirt and shoes and collecting his wallet and keys. If he was excited, no trace of it was evident.

"What happened to my little baby brother? Not so tough after all?" Billy said teas-

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ingly in a voice that oozed spite. "If all those gangs you hang out with are made up of pussies like you, no wonder you got knifed. You probably think you're a tough little shit, but I can still take you with one hand."

"Why don't you go fuck yourself," Kevin hissed in a low voice so that only Billy would hear.

"I'll tell you how it happened," Billy continued in a voice loud enough for Dad to hear. "He was hanging around with those hood friends of his, and he probably smarted off to one of them and got stuck. Serves him right," Billy finished piously.

"Billy, shut up," Dad commanded sharply. "How it happened is not important right now. There'll be plenty of time for that later. What's important at the moment is to get your brother to a hospital."

"Sure," Billy interjected. "You always stick up for Kevin, no matter what he does. But if I so much look at you sideways, you slap the crap out of me. Well," Billy whined, "I'm tired of this and want to go and live with Mom in Georgia."

"Son," Dad replied wearily, "we'll discuss this some other time. Right now, I want you to go across the hall and stay with Mrs. Langston until I get back, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Billy answered coldly.

"I meant what I said, Billy; we'll discuss this when I get back," Dad said, as he patted Billy on the arm, motioning him to leave.

"I look forward to it," Billy answered insolently as he stormed out of the apartment ahead of Dad and Kevin, slamming the door literally in their faces.



The neighborhood being what it was, before Kevin climbed into the Hillman, he surveyed the surrounding parking lot with practiced eye, searching for any signs of unfriendly activity; his surveillance ended at their dingy two-bedroom apartment on the southwest side of Miami. There were over two hundred apartments in the complex, all uniformly awful, but with widely diverse inhabitants.

The predominant ethnic group was Cuban, outnumbering the blacks by a two to one margin; whites were a distant third. Most of the Cubans were refugees; either before Castro or after, it didn't appear to make much difference. The common bond was poverty and survival, both of which were root causes of tensions on the street, and they had the lowest spot on that food chain locked up. Far from home, isolated and alone, in a world of unfamiliar customs and language, the Cubans had long ago forsaken basic human dignity in an all-out effort to survive.

Recognizing their economic and social disadvantages, the US Government had passed the Cuban Subsidy Act with great fanfare and the best of intentions. It was supposed to help the Cuban people get on their feet economically, by matching, with federal funds, the salary of newly employed Cuban nationals for the first six months from their date of hire. There was however, a major flaw in the thought process: the lawmakers, in their infinite wisdom, forgot to take into account the unspoken law of American capitalism—greed.

Because of language and other barriers, the only jobs that the majority of the Cubans were qualified to do were low paying, non-skilled manual labor; these were the self-same jobs that were the backbone of American teenager's cash flow. In record time, the local businessmen realized that they could hire the Cubans for about half what their American counterparts would cost. This set in motion an escalating series of events that had now become uncontrollable.

It started slowly. Teen bewilderment at the sudden lack of jobs turned to frustrated

anger as the reason for it became clear. Appeals to local businessmen were unsuccessful because, as they said, "You can't blame us; we're businessmen and if we can reduce costs by hiring cheaper help, we're gonna do it. Besides, these Cubans want to work, not like most of you spoiled Americans who show up late and lazy."

The frustration led to taunting, which inevitably turned to violence. Scattered incidents of shoving and pushing were followed closely by bouts of fisticuffs. Events escalated alarmingly when one of these bouts of fisticuffs ended in a death—the result of one badly outnumbered and frightened Cuban teen who, fearing for the life of his date, had pulled a knife and in the process of waving it menacingly, accidentally slashed the throat of a white American counterpart.

In the telling and retelling of the incident, the accidental slashing became a brutal stabbing. Resentment and anger on both sides grew, as did the number of violent confrontations.

Inevitably, gangs and territories formed, ostensibly for protection. Since "The Fucking Act" as it came to be called had been passed two years earlier, there had been half a dozen white deaths, as many again black, and at least twice that for the Cubans, the majority in the last six months. The fuse was already lit and sizzling toward the dynamite at record pace; one more incident, and it would blow.



"Dad," where are you taking me?"

"To the hospital at the base."

"Won't they ask a lot of questions about this?"

"Probably will, I expect."

"What are you going to tell them?"

"The question is not what I'm going to tell them, but rather, what you're going to tell them."

"Yeah," Smitty nodded wearily. "Been thinkin' about that myself."

"I bet you have, son. Anything you'd like to rehearse on me first?"

"Nothing that you'd believe," Smitty answered moodily.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Dad replied easily. "Pretty smart you know; been around a long time; long enough to recognize a knife wound. In fact, I'll bet, if you tell me the truth, I might be able to help you come up with a good alibi."

"But you just said that I got this from a knife, and that is the truth," Smitty replied in a puzzled voice.

"That's not the truth I'm after, Smitty, and you know it," Dad replied firmly.

"Why did you call me Smitty?" Kevin asked curiously.

"Unless my sources are incorrect, that's now how you're addressed. Any of your buddies in the NonComs know you as Kevin?" To Kevin's incredulous stare, Dad admonished with a smile, "As I said, son, pretty smart, you know."

"But if you know what I'm doing, then you know the truth," Smitty protested.

"I know the whats from the police and the neighborhood scuttlebutt; what I'd like to hear from you is the whys."

"You seem to be pretty well informed already," Smitty conceded dryly.

"Intelligence is the first arm of warfare," Dad replied.

"You know the Cuban Subsidy Act—" Smitty began.

"You mean 'The Fucking Act'?"

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"Yeah, that's the one. That's what started all the trouble. Now it's gotten out of control. The whites are fighting the blacks, and both are fighting the Cubans."

"So which one of them gave you that little souvenir? And more importantly, why?" Dad nodded at the makeshift patch on his chin.

"One of the black guys," Smitty said morosely, then added cynically as an afterthought. "I was trying to do the right thing and propose a peace treaty with him."

"Why a peace treaty?" Dad prodded lightly.

"It's the only solution that I can think of to try and stop the violence. If we can't change the act, at least we can try to live with it. If we make peace with the blacks, then neither one of us we'll be fighting on two fronts. Maybe we can protect each other's rears."

"That's pretty smart for a fifteen-year old. You've thought it out well. Don't be too surprised, though, if events don't go as you planned," Dad said thoughtfully.

"Why?"

"Son, I've been involved in countless missions in World War II and Korea, and I can tell you from experience that things seldom happen as you plan. The smart man hedges his bets. After the first shot is fired, success is often the result of a set of options well thought out in advance, with survival the reward for that particular brand of initiative.

"Are you telling me, without telling me, that you approve of what I'm doing?" Smitty asked clearly.

"No indeed. What I'd like to see is for you to concentrate on your studies at Bayside High, take a serious interest in your trumpet like your brother has his saxophone, and have other normal teenage experiences. But a man can run away from everyone and everything except the face he shaves in the mirror every morning—in your case, peach fuzz with a wet towel." Dad chuckled lightly as he brushed Kevin's chin affectionately.

"As you yourself just said, you've chosen to fight for what you think is right. As long as your motive is to stop and prevent, and you're aware of the personal risks involved when you buck the system, no matter how much it hurts me personally, I can find no valid reason to intervene."

"What do you mean by buck the system?" Smitty asked.

"When you have evaluated the facts and come to a different conclusion than the consensus, and continue to support those beliefs in the face of pressure to give in, then that's bucking the system.

"In your case, most people—your brother, the police, the neighbors—consider you a hoodlum. As I said, if you are aware of their feelings and are strong enough to stand tall for what you believe, and your aims are pure, it's not my place to stop you," Dad stated emphatically.

"Now," Dad said abruptly changing the subject as they drove through the Homestead Main entrance and turned into the hospital. "What are you going to tell the doctor about that gash on you chin?"

"Oh, I guess I'm going to tell them that I—"

"—Slipped on a bar of soap in the shower," Dad growled resignedly, shaking his head in dismay, as he harmonized with his son. "You know, in my 25-plus years in the service, I came up with a name for characters like you."

"What's that?"

"Incorrigible."

"Guess I'm just a chip off the ol' block," Smitty grinned mischievously.

"You're all of that," Dad responded as they got out of the car. "Maybe even a little bit more," Dad murmured as he put his arm around his son, and hugged him in an uncharacteristic display of public affection as they walked toward the hospital.



"I came to talk, white man," LZ said coldly as he and Smitty shook hands perfunctorily. "Before we can agree on a peace pact, my guys have several, um, suggestions that they'd like to see added to whatever set of rules you honkies have in place."

"Such as?" Smitty asked suspiciously as similar murmurs of mistrust rippled through the white gang.

"Well the first thing is a common name; you're the NonComs and we're the Black Knights. We need a new name that works for both of us."

"Got anything in mind?"

"Hey, man, that's your department; you white guys are supposed to have the big brains. Us black guys only got the big balls." LZ said, as he grabbed his crotch and grinned smugly to emphasize his point.

"This might be the shortest fucking union in history, asshole!" Smitty snarled back.

"You might be right, white man!" LZ responded curtly as the blade cleared his pocket, opened, and arched in Smitty's direction.

Smitty had seen that move before—less than twenty-four hours ago—and had a 28-stitch incision to prove it. The knife passed cleanly overhead as Smitty dropped to one knee and then drove his right fist squarely underneath LZ's rib cage, causing him to gasp involuntarily as the force of the blow dislodged the air from his lungs faster than a pinpricked balloon.

They came expecting to finalize the loose ends of a peace pact. This unplanned turn of events had caught both groups so completely by surprise that no one reacted at all; they stood dead still and waited expectantly to see what the two leaders would do next.

The force of the blow dropped LZ to one knee as he labored to breathe. But Smitty suspected that LZ was faking. The rasping was forced and sounded unnatural.

Smitty's premonitions were well founded. Microseconds later, LZ exploded from his crouched position, driving murderously upward with the knife.

Using speed he'd never known he had, Smitty sidestepped the thrust, allowed the knife to pass cleanly under his right arm, then trapped LZ's wrist between his arm and side. Since step one was a success, Smitty immediately applied step two: he hit LZ behind the right elbow with all the strength he could muster with a left uppercut, momentarily paralyzing LZ's entire right hand, and causing him to drop the knife.

Smitty released LZ, backed away, and said, "Look partner, don't you think this has gone far enough?"

"Not yet, you motherfucking son-of-a-bitch!!" LZ screeched in a blinding rage. LZ suddenly spun around, tugged a gun from inside the coat of one his lieutenants, arced it over the top, cocked it, and began to lower it in a very slow, deliberate police fashion. Smitty's heart stopped; his breath caught in his throat as he watched the 38 complete its final sighting: Smitty's head.

It never made it. A short muscular arm intercepted the weapon before it could lock in on its target, pushed LZ's arm straight up, and slid a finger underneath the trigger, rendering the firing mechanism unworkable. A voice said conversationally, "Commissioned Knights."

"What did you say?" both LZ and Smitty echoed in unison as they involuntarily snapped their heads in the direction of the voice.

"Commissioned Knights, mes amis," Frenchy answered evenly through gritted teeth as he struggled to hold his leverage against LZ. "That's the name for our new gang. It has a part of both of our gangs, and if you think about it, represents just what we're trying to do."

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"What the fuck are you talking about, man?" LZ yelled as he snatched the gun out of Frenchy's grasp and held it aloft in firing position.

"You explain it to him, Smitty. Maybe the stupid idiot will listen to you," Frenchy said exasperatedly.

"He's right, man; don't you get it?" Seeing LZ's uncomprehending stare, Smitty continued. "Look, protecting our territory is what we're both after, right?"

"Yeah, right; so?" LZ asked.

"So, didn't you ever read books? Protection is for our mutual safety against a common enemy; our aim is defensive protection, sorta like them knights at King Arthur's court. And since we're taking on the additional job of protecting our families and friends we've 'commissioned' ourselves for the job."

"Commissioned Knights," LZ nodded in understanding. "You're right, it's perfect," he said agreeably as he handed the gun back to its original carrier.

Smitty decided he'd never met anyone like LZ. His rage seemed to be a volcano that he could turn on and off at will.

"You're pretty quick for a white man," LZ said approvingly as he rubbed his right arm to restore circulation.

"Must be all them big brains," Smitty answered acidly.

The body went rigid and the stare turned cold for an instant, before LZ grinned cheerfully and said, "No, in your case, I think it's them big balls. You sure there ain't some black blood in your family somewhere?" To accompaniment of laughter from members of both gangs, LZ said encouragingly, "You know Smitty, I think this can work out after all."

"Depends on what other suggestions you've got."

LZ turned and huddled with his gang for several moments then turned back and said, "You and I plan everything together?"

"Yep."

"I run my guys; you run yours?"

Smitty nodded.

"One of my guys in trouble, your guys come to help?"

"And vice-versa," Frenchy added.

LZ nodded in return and asked, "Your terms?"

"Everything you said, plus one," Smitty responded flatly. "You, representing your gang, have to pass our initiation test; which is to steal a car."

"If you lard-ass white guys could do it, I can too. You got a deal, white man," LZ said, as he and Smitty shook hands warmly to the chorus of cheers from members of both gangs.

"Just as long as you guys don't try to use our bathrooms," said the tall skinny black kid with the gun.

"Shit, man! That all you want? When you said initiation, I thought you had something tough in mind; but if all you want is for me to steal a car, no sweat," LZ said in response to the admission requirements after the laughter died down.

"Oh yeah, asshole. If you think it's so easy, maybe we should make the requirements a little tougher," Jimmy responded in a superior fashion.

"Makes no never mind to me; anything you can come up with, I can handle." Jimmy wasn't quick on the uptake. He was unprepared for debate with people he'd been raised to believe were socially and intellectually inferior.

Smitty started to intervene, thought better of it, and decided to watch and see what would happen. If the blacks were to become an integral part of the gang, instead of mere window dressing, the rest of the group was going to have to accept them as equals first.

"Well, um, I, ah—"

"—Oh' lawdy mercy sir, yo' sho' has got a hat full of ideas," LZ mimicked, in his best Uncle Remus voice. "Why I's just a poor ol' black boy, but I's can sholy see when I's in the company of a much smarter person dan myself."

"You going to let him talk to me like that?" Jimmy said, outraged, as he turned to Smitty for support.

"You started it; you finish it," Smitty stated briskly.

"Keith would have stuck a knife up his ass for talking to a white man like that," Jimmy grumbled.

"If you think that's the appropriate course of action, be my guest," Smitty answered easily as he flipped open his knife and held it out by the blade end in Jimmy's direction.

"Tell you what Jimbo," LZ said, breaking the uncomfortable silence—and more importantly—taking Jimmy off the spot, "you pick out the kind of car you like best, and that's the one I'll steal."

"A Corvette," Jimmy responded defiantly. At least that was his intent. LZ was reputed to be the fastest man on the west side with a blade; Jimmy's eyes betrayed his relief at having avoided a confrontation with him.

"Any particular color?"

"I was always wanted a red one," Jimmy responded, wistful.

"Consider it done, man," LZ said confidently patted Jimmy on the shoulder, getting a nod and a nervous smile in response.

As the meeting broke up, people began to drift away in groups of three or four until only Smitty and Frenchy were left. "You know, Frenchy," Smitty said thoughtfully, "that gun introduces a whole new element to this."

"I was just thinking the same thing myself," Frenchy admitted. "Knives and clubs are one thing, but guns are an altogether different matter. We must be cautious."

"We must indeed," Smitty agreed. But he suspected in his heart that the fuse in the automatic detonation sequence had already been lit and that events would propel towards the inevitable explosion. As with most explosions, there would be no winners. Just those left alive and those who were dead.



The phone rang at seven-thirty P.M. in Smitty's apartment. Billy answered, listened, and turned and tossed the receiver to Smitty with a sour comment of, "There's some nigger on the phone for you. It's not bad enough that you got to hang out with those 'friends' of yours, now you're not only hanging out with the spooks, but you're letting them call just like they belong here."

"What's the matter, brother? 'Fraid my hanging around with them might cause you to lose your social standing at the yacht club?" Smitty shot back as he put the phone to his ear and dismissed his brother by turning away.

"Your brother sounds like a real asshole, man," LZ said.

"Certified."

"Would you like me to have him meet some of the brothers up close and personal?"

"Now, that won't be necessary. Some people are born to be assholes; others grow up to be one." Smitty smiled a knowing smile at his uncomprehending brother, who'd no way of knowing how close he'd come to getting the shit kicked out of him, and would never have believed that Smitty had actively averted it. "What's up?"

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"Can you be at the 'bowl' at eight PM.?"

"What for?"

"Hey, man, you're the one who thought up this crazy entry requirement. I'm gonna take down the 'Vette and figured that a couple of you guys ought to be present to learn how it's done."

"Cocky son-of-a-bitch, aren't you?"

"Guilty on both counts, man."

"Okay, we'll be there." Smitty hung up, grabbed his coat, and was halfway out of the apartment when Billy called him back.

"Better watch your ass, little brother," Billy began as he walked over and stood directly in front of him. "I overheard some of the guys at school talking. That guy you got into it with a couple of days back is planning revenge."

"You mean Keith?" Smitty asked sharply.

"I didn't catch the name, but I think that's the one. He's heard about the thing with the blacks and is stirring up all the other kids, and spreading stories about you that even I can't believe are true. I asked Dad about this, he said he'd rather not discuss it, because he knew you were headed for trouble, but he didn't know how to stop it. He said you were like a plane that flames out fifty feet off the runway. A crash is a forgone conclusion; all that can be done at this point is to try to survive the impact."

"Thanks for the warning, brother," Smitty growled sarcastically.

"If that's the thanks I get, that's the last time I'll try to help you, shithead," Billy responded angrily.

"If you really want to help, come with me now," Smitty challenged.

"Why? So I can waste my time, get all busted up, and maybe lose my life championing a lost cause? I'd rather go surfing."

"And you probably always will," Smitty acknowledged sadly, making no effort to conceal his anger and disgust as he brushed his brother aside and slammed the door. There was something not right about his brother. Smitty could feel it. He just couldn't put his finger on it . . . yet.



"Where the hell is he? It's eight fifteen!"

"Easy partner, he'll be along," Frenchy said patiently.

"This guy is wacko. Hell, man, the deal is to steal a ride, not take some bigwig's prize sports car," Smitty said nervously.

The red convertible glistened in the streetlights of the deserted parking lot. The damn thing was visible for a hundred and fifty yards in all directions. If LZ was fixing to borrow this beauty, he had his work cut out for him.

"Look," Frenchy said, as he pointed across the lot to a figure emerging from the shadows. "I don't fucking believe it."

Neither Smitty nor Frenchy were sure who it was at first, and when they did recognize him, they weren't sure that they wanted to.

LZ wasn't walking in the direction of his target; he was strutting, with one of those new transistor radios glued to his ear, and he was dressed more like a south side pimp than a car thief.

He sashayed up to the car, produced a coat hanger, slid it through the weatherstripping, and was inside in three seconds flat. Just as quickly, he popped the hood, produced

from his pocket a three-foot length of wire with the insulation stripped back an inch, wrapped it around the terminal of the coil, and was in the process of connecting it to the solenoid screw on the starter when a police cruiser rounded the corner and pulled up along side.

"What are you doing, boy?" the officer asked suspiciously as he stepped out of the car, shining his foot-long flashlight directly in LZ's eyes.

"Shit man!! Get that fuckin' light outta' my face," LZ said indignantly. "It's bad enough that I go and shell out all my girls hard earned cash for a honkymobile so's I can keep up my image, but then to have a damn starter problem on my brand new ride and have to hot wire it"—LZ continued shaking his head in disgust—"and then to get roused by a badge with an attitude problem for us brothers. I tell ya, man," LZ left the statement unfinished as he gave the officer his most righteous glare.

"Un huh, just show me your license and registration so I can make sure you own this car, and I'll be on my way. The officer said calmly.

"Here, man," LZ said, as he passed across his license with his registration paper clipped to it.

"What do you think I'm trying to do, steal my own ride?" LZ said with a contemptuous snort. "Besides man, I bet you wouldn't hassle a white dude like you hassling me."

"Take it easy, kid. I'm not trying to hassle you, just doing my job." The officer said soothingly as he looked at his paper, and made a note of it in his notebook, then passed it back, his last traces of suspicion vanishing.

"Okay, man. It's cool," LZ conceded. "Now, since we're blood brothers and shit like that, why don't you let me borrow that flash, so I can see how to connect this wire to the starter and jump this dude off.

LZ took the light, produced his blade, and used it to jump across the starter to solenoid terminals. As the car turned over, LZ quickly closed the hood and his knife, returning the light to the cop as he slid behind the wheel.

"That's some knife you carry son; borders on being illegal."

"You know how it is in my line of work, man. Gotta protect my girls from the competition."

"Keep it between the white lines," the officer said, as he patted the car door, got into his patrol vehicle, and drove away.



"Man, that was unreal!" Smitty said enthusiastically as he ran up to the car. "How the hell did you get a driver's license and papers so fast?"

"Ain't no big thing, white boy," LZ said with a superior smile, then added. "Didn't nobody ever tell you honkies about the old man over on sixty-fourth?"

"I've seen some nervy people in my day, but I have to admit, that was the smoothest move I've ever seen," Frenchy echoed as he joined them seconds later, after pausing at the building long enough to be sure the police had truly gone.

"Ain't you ever heard of 'The Purloined Letter'? The best way to hide something—or steal it—is do it right up front."

Smitty and Frenchy gaped at LZ, who said acidly: "Hey man, don't you white guys ever read books, poems, and shit like that? C'mon, climb in, and let's take this sucker out to the Rickenbacker Causeway and see what she'll do."

As they drove away, LZ asked, "How come you two were the only ones to come witness my grand act of larceny?"

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"Nobody else wanted to come," Smitty answered truthfully.

"Glad you guys came," LZ responded seriously. "Glad you cared enough; never had friends like that; think maybe I do now."

As the car accelerated onto the causeway, Smitty felt a closeness to his friends that owed nothing to cramped quarters. Frenchy must have been on the same wavelength. "Except for Smitty, neither have I."

Smitty felt that his two compadres were waiting for him to say something also. He quickly discarded his first thought as corny; then suddenly, Dad's thoughts about bucking the system and believing in something came back to him. On reflection, his original thought didn't sound too bad at that.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "I've got a feeling that the three of us are going to be friends for a long time."

"Yeah, man," LZ quipped caustically. "Like the married couples say; till death do us part."

"We could always get divorced," Frenchy laughed.

"No way, man," LZ responded solemnly. "It would have to be death."

Smitty had an uneasy feeling that LZ was right.



Death it was. But it didn't happen to LZ or Frenchy, it happened all around them. Billy had been right about Dad's premonition, Smitty about his earlier feelings. The burning fuse had reached the dynamite; the resulting explosion spared no one on the west side from the concussion or aftershock.

Strangely enough, Armageddon occurred while LZ, Frenchy, and Smitty were joy-riding in their "loaned car," which, they conveniently left where it could be easily discovered—in the mayor's parking spot at city hall. After a quick stroll along the hotel shores, they were returning to the neighborhood when the lights and sounds of a police crime scene a block away lured them.

"Well, if it isn't the west side's answer to Attila the Hun," Detective Wallace said cynically in greeting to Smitty as they approached. "Since when did you gentleman of the white persuasion take to running with your darker counterparts?"

The detective, who with elevator shoes could just manage the five foot eight-inch height he claimed, was in his twenties; he was lean, average looking, and had brown kinky hair and a permanent sneer on his face. He looked too young to have a gold shield, especially considering his cynical, disrespectful attitude toward older superiors, and it was said he was not well liked or trusted by other members of the force who disagreed with his intolerant stance on the youth gangs.

"It's the environment we live in, sir," Frenchy said in his most dignified and formal manner. "We run together because we're afraid of muggers, or cops who don't know the difference between the law and the truth. As for our darker friend here, it was the lesser of two evils."

"What are you talking about, asshole?"

"Smitty here gave me a choice," Frenchy continued in his most eloquent style. "Said I could either allow my sister to date a police detective or make friends with the blacks." Frenchy reached out, put his arm around LZ, grinned evilly, and said, "It wasn't even close."

"Why you little bastard," the detective said, as he reached out to grab Frenchy, who slapped his arm away like it was a pesky fly.

"That'll do, Sergeant," a voice commanded from behind.

"Evening, boys," the voice belonged to the chief of homicide detectives, Stanley Baker, a dumpy twenty-something year veteran of the force with a kind face, a balding forehead, a belly that was losing its battle not to sag over his belt buckle, and an easygoing demeanor that was surprisingly effective. Rumor had it that his laid-back approach to his job was due to losing it on one to too many missions during the war. Stan the Man, as he was called after the St. Louis baseball great, was well liked and highly respected—on the force and on the street; he was a tough man, but one known to be a straight shooter.

"It's convenient that you're here; I was just going to have you, um, picked up and escorted over here. Come with me please, Sergeant," Baker nodded in dismissal at the detective who walked quietly away, but not before giving LZ, Frenchy, and Smitty a glacial look.

"I don't think he likes me very much," Smitty said sadly.

"I don't think he likes anyone very much," Stanley responded cynically. And almost as an afterthought, "Especially you, kid!" He pointed his finger at Smitty.

Baker led them around to the alley behind the abandoned building and announced to the miscellaneous cast of policemen, "Clear the crime scene out. I want to talk to these guys alone."

As the policemen were moving away about 30 yards outside the cordons, Smitty surveyed the area. There were two lumps on the ground covered by tarps. One appeared to be a body; the other looked more like a tent with a singular pole in the middle.

"I thought you gentleman might save me a lot of time in identification," he said, as he yanked the tarp off the first lump.

He no longer needed a tube of Clearasil for his acne, or a dentist for his buckteeth because most of his face was gone. But, there was enough for Smitty to see a big zit on the forehead and know that Jimmy would never own that red Corvette.

Jimmy had died in agony. He'd been systematically beaten to death with a two-pound sledgehammer—the steel end of which was directly where the jawbone should have been; the handle, however, was curiously missing. Smitty had never in his life seen a body so horribly disfigured. It wasn't a body at all, just a mass of twisted bones and flesh thrown haphazardly in a bloody pile.

"Know 'em?" Baker asked heavily.

"Yeah," Smitty replied woodenly, fighting back the urge to throw up. "It's Jimmy, one of the kids from our building."

"You mean your gang," Baker corrected as he dropped the tarp back in place and proceeded on to the next one.

Smitty glanced quickly at his friends and could see clearly that he was not the only one who was nauseated. Both LZ and Frenchy looked as bad as he felt right now, and as the captain started to lift the next tarp, Smitty knew the worst was yet to come.

His instincts were on target; so was his inquisitiveness. The second body was not so disfigured, but she too had died violently.

Face down, bent over a small round barrel, lay the naked body of Gena, Jimmy's girlfriend. Just visible between her spread legs was the protruding end of the hammer handle; it didn't require an awful lot of imagination to conclude where the other end was. A four foot, one-inch diameter steel rod had been inserted in her rectum, driven completely through her body, and embedded in the filling cap hole in the center of the barrel, impaling her in this ghastly position. A small pennant was attached to the rod. A slight gust of wind caused it to flap open; in the semi-darkness of the alley, Smitty recognized the single star of the Cuban national flag.

"I suppose you're going to tell us this girl was a candy-striper on her way home from visiting the elderly and that your dead friend over there heroically gave his life by trying to save her," Sergeant Wallace said sneeringly as he walked up silently, in defiance of the captain's orders, and aimed a wad of spit in the direction of the flag. He missed it completely and grunted amusedly as it landed directly on Gena's right buttock. "Bull's-eye," he crowed.

Something popped inside Smitty's head. He turned on the sergeant and hit him with more force than he'd ever hit anyone in his life. The sergeant's head snapped back so fast that he looked like he'd been clotheslined. The sergeant hit the ground and backflipped before coming to rest face-down in a puddle of Jimmy's blood.

"Bull's-eye!" Frenchy echoed as he raised circled finger and thumb in the universally understood gesture.

"Hold it!" Baker shouted sharply as a uniformed officer ran towards them, starting to draw his service revolver; the urgency in his voice froze the young man in his tracks. "Put that thing away right now! We already have two dead in this alley tonight, there's no need to add to that total," Baker continued authoritatively.

The officer glowered at Smitty, Frenchy, and LZ as he slowly released his grip, allowing the sidearm to slide back into its holster.

"Whether you know it or not, rookie," Baker said firmly. "I just saved your life. Look!" He nodded in their direction. To his uncomprehending stare, he commanded: "Look at their hands, idiot!" Frenchy and LZ had their knives drawn and at the ready. "Before you even got that cannon clear of the holster, you'd have been dead where you stand."

Meeting his unbelieving stare, Captain Baker said, "That black boy over there would've carved you up like a butcher's steak before you even got off the first round. Then I'd have had to kill him, with the odds-on favorite bet that the muscular white chap would've got me in the process. And for what? To satisfy the ego of a horse's ass," Baker said bitterly.

"But, sir? That thug hit a policeman," the officer protested.

"If he hadn't, I would have. Son, violence only leads to violence. Don't you think that there's been enough here, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you think so, don't you think the sergeant should have also?"

With agonizing slowness, the rookie nodded his head dejectedly in silence.

"Boys, I know this has been a shock to you, but I'm afraid it's not over yet." Baker said bluntly.

"What do you want now?" Smitty said in a tired voice.

"I want you three to come down to the station and answer some questions. Specifically on your whereabouts earlier tonight."

"What happened?" Frenchy asked wearily.

"Three hours earlier, at about nine o'clock, two Cuban couples were murdered in the same grisly fashion," Baker said quickly as he escorted them to a waiting police cruiser.

Somewhere a church bell chimed twelve times, announcing the start of a new day, and the end of the old. There'd be neither for Jimmy and Gena. They'd not lived to the end, nor seen the beginning. Smitty had a feeling that they were the first of many.

Smitty was wrong. Jimmy and Gena were not the first of many; they were the last of a few. There were no more murders on the west side. This was in no way due to any lessening of tensions between the gangs, which had if anything, been heightened, but rather to the mayor—and one thousand national guardsman who were now conducting round the clock patrols of every street, every alley, and every deserted building where trouble had

been known to occur. This was not the proverbial ounce of prevention; it was more like a couple of tons. The proverbial pound of cure was yet to come.



"We're wasting our time, Captain. We know he did it, or at the very least ordered it done," the detective sergeant said angrily in a nasal voice. "We've been at it for over six hours, and the son-of-a-bitch won't crack. Captain, why don't you take a little walk and I'll discuss it with him in private?" the detective snarled.

"Besides," he paused and massaged the two-inch adhesive bandage that had been placed across the bridge of his recently broken nose. "I owe this little shit, and would dearly love a chance to see how good this tough guy is when he takes on someone who's ready for him," he sneered.

"I think perhaps it's you who should take a break, Sergeant, and let me talk to him," Captain Baker said without expression.

"But Captain—"

"Now."

He waited until the sergeant and his partner, Detective Something or Other, had left the room and closed the door behind them, turned back to Smitty, and said wearily, "Okay, kiddo, let's go through it one more time."

Smitty rubbed the sleep from his eyes, yawned loudly, and said in a voice that more than matched the captain's.

"I've already told you what happened. Fifteen times we been through it and the story hasn't changed from what you have on that paper; I got nothing more to say."

"Listen to me you idiot," the captain said exasperatedly as he grabbed Smitty by the shoulders and shook him hard enough to loosen a couple of fillings. "We have witnesses who are ready to testify that they overheard you planning the execution of those Cubans as a way of warning them to stay off your territory. For most of the night you've been jerking me around and I'm tired of it."

"Now, boy, so help me, you're going to tell me the truth or I swear to God I'll let the sergeant tear you limb from limb."

"Who are your seeing-eye dogs?" Smitty said challengingly; his voice rising to match the captain's. "Besides, I've already told you I had nothing to do with those murders."

"Where were you at the time?" the captain snarled back, ignoring Smitty's question altogether.

"Like I've told you, and told you, and told you, I was taking a walk along the beach trying to work things out with LZ and Frenchy. We were on our way back to the west side when we walked up to the crime scene where Jimmy and Gena were murdered," Smitty answered exhaustedly.

"And like I told you, and told you, and told you," the captain said irritably, "we already have a positive ID from the officer on LZ placing him at the Orange Bowl at 8:45 P.M. in a red Corvette. Another officer reported seeing a car matching that description on the Rickenbacker Causeway with three people inside who bear an amazing similarity to you three gentlemen. The description of the car matches the one found abandoned in the city parking lot by a guard on a sweep at 9:20 P.M., which is approximately the time of the murders. That car was literally covered with the fingerprints of you three stooges. We have motive, we have two witnesses, and we have you placed at the crime at the time it was committed. How in God's name can you continue to stand there and deny the truth?"

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"Look man, I've already explained all that—"

"—Yeah, yeah, I know, I know, some bullshit about an initiation," the captain said bitterly.

"It's the truth!"

"Well, I don't believe you!!"

"Then go fuck yourself, 'cause that's all I got to say!!"

The captain shook his head in finality and wordlessly got up and left the room. The sergeant and the other detective soon returned.

"Now then," the sergeant grinned wolfishly as he slammed a blackjack across the edge of the table, "since you refuse to confess voluntarily, we're just going to have to beat it out of you. I'm gonna enjoy this. Stand up, fuckface."

When Smitty made no attempt to move, the sergeant reached down, grabbed him by the shirt, and jerked him upward. Smitty had anticipated this and didn't resist; in fact, he gave the sergeant more assistance than he bargained for. Using his legs like a springboard, he thrust forward, driving his forehead directly into the broken nose of the sergeant, who screamed in agony as he fell backward against the wall, bounced off it like a caromed billiard shot, and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Smitty wasted neither time nor feeling on the moaning figure on the floor. Using the chair as a step, he leaped onto the table and launched himself at his other adversary. The force of the impact as Smitty's feet connected with the unsuspecting detective's chest knocked the wind out of him as he toppled over like a fresh-cut fir.

More by sheer luck than anything else, Smitty had managed to land on his feet. He had just resumed his seat and finished working out a cigarette from the pack on the table—a difficult task since his hands were cuffed behind him—and gotten it in his mouth when the door burst open, hitting the recumbent sergeant squarely in the beak again, bringing renewed, louder moans.

"You guys must be the role models for the Keystone Kops," Smitty said smugly around his cigarette. "Light?"

There was something familiar about the sound the Zippo made as it clicked open and lit Smitty's cigarette. An arm had reached round the captain and offered the fire, a blue-sleeved arm. The sleeve was attached to a blue jacket, an air force senior master sergeant's jacket with ten rows of combat ribbons. Smitty peered around the captain and felt both instant relief and absolute horror at what he saw; Dad was the keeper of the flame.

"You want to tell me what happened here, boy?" The captain asked briskly, motioning for two nearby officers to remove the two detectives.

"Slipped on a bar of soap in the shower," Smitty smiled triumphantly. "Next time you send a couple of your henchmen in to help me recall the events as you want them to be, you might at least send someone who's not so klutzy."

"What the hell are you talking about?" the captain said stiffly as other uniformed officers appeared in the doorway and carried the two injured figures from the room.

"Now it's my turn not to believe you," Smitty said, as he stared at the captain's bewildered face, before motioning toward the recumbent sergeant. As he was rolled over, first the leather strap around his wrist, and then the blackjack itself came into view.

The captain was quiet for a moment, pursed his lips, then said, "You think I sent them. Honestly, son, I'm as surprised to see them in here as you are. I told them to keep an eye on you—from the hallway—until I came back; I went downstairs to get your father. Since I've been unsuccessful, I thought he might be able to help you understand the seriousness of your situation."

"He'll tell the truth," Dad said flatly fixing Smitty with his first sergeant's stare.

"Young man, I understand you've been giving everyone a rough time around here for the last six or seven hours. Before the next hour has come and gone, I'm going to have the truth from you. If I don't, you won't be a bother to anyone anymore, because you'll be on the wrong side of the ground before the breakfast bell sounds."

Smitty knew from past experience, that this was no idle threat. His swagger had gone; Dad had just passed sentence . . . in advance of hearing the evidence.

Smitty told Dad and Captain Baker everything that had happened from the day the argument took place in the warehouse with Keith and Glen right up to the scene in the alley. He held nothing back, but not because he was afraid of the legal repercussions. Those were mouse farts compared to the repercussions of lying to his father.

"Well, that certainly explains a few things," Captain Baker said.

"Such as?" Dad said. It came out as a command, not a question.

"Would you care to guess who the two eyewitnesses are?" the captain asked evenly.

"Keith and Glen," Smitty responded immediately.

"On the nose, kiddo," the captain agreed.

"What are you going to do now?" Dad inquired.

The captain rubbed his day-old stubble thoughtfully and said, "I dunno. There's some very heavy political pressure coming down from the mayor's office to solve this gang problem once and for all. Seems your activities are dominating the papers and screwing up the tourist trade."

The captain surveyed the depths of his coffee cup as if the answer were floating there in plain sight. He sighed, smiled tiredly, and said, "Listen, kid. I want to thank you for telling me the truth, because it did one very important thing. The mayor would shit a brick if he heard me say this, but it definitely convinced me that you're one of the good guys."

"Thanks, Captain," Smitty said, and meant it.

"C'mon, Sarge, let's go see what kind of bargain we can cook up with the DA to keep this little asshole from ending up bent over a bed frame with his cheeks spread for some big hairy guy in the funhouse."

As Smitty was led to a holding cell across from the interrogation room, Dad and the captain stood talking in the hall. Curiously, Dad was doing most of the talking. The conversation lasted ten minutes and finished with Captain Baker nodding his head and smiling in agreement as they shook hands.



"Mr. Smith, after extensive discussion with Captain Baker and the juvenile authorities, I've decided that the correct sentence in this case will be in two parts. First, effective forty-eight hours from now, you are to be out of the territorial limits of the state of Florida; to which you are not to return, to any county, for any reason, for a period of five years. Second, I am placing you on a strict non-combative restraining order. This order prohibits you from engaging in any form of altercation, shoving match, fistfight, or any other form of hostility or even an argument that can lead to hostility for that same five-year time frame.

"You are a very violent person. You have a deep-seated hatred burning inside you that must be cured if you are to function as a productive and useful member of society. I don't mind telling you that if it was not for the intervention of Captain Baker, who assures me that this sickness inside you can be cured—a fact that I personally find very hard to believe—you would be on your way to juvenile detention until your eighteenth birthday and

then would have spent the balance of the five years in the state penitentiary.

"Hear me, and hear me good. Any violation of the above provisions for any reason at all during this five-year time frame, I repeat—any reason at all, and you will be returned here to serve the entire five-year sentence in a state institution."

"It is my sincere hope that if you are forced to live like the weak you so blatantly persecute, then you may learn to appreciate the fact that they have a right to exist also."

"Remember, the Bible says the meek shall inherit the earth—"

"—But only after the strong have tamed it," Smitty interrupted, setting off a buzz of conversation in the courtroom. The lawyer Dad had hired elbowed his ribs hard.

"Young man, one more such outburst, and I'll hold you in contempt of this court," the Judge responded harshly.

"No problem, Ace; I have nothing but contempt for this court," Smitty answered.

"Bailiff, remove this piece of scum from my courtroom, now," the Judge said disgustedly, as he slammed his gavel with his right hand, and waved Smitty away with his left.

"I just hope you don't lose your life the next time you get mugged, and someone who wants to help can't because of some asshole judge's non-violent restraining order," Smitty yelled back as two court attendants and Dad hustled him out of the courtroom.

"Well, you certainly did yourself proud in there," Dad said when they were finally alone in the hallway outside the court. "What in God's name got into you? What are you using your brains for, huh? The captain went out on a limb to make a deal to keep you out of jail, and what do you do? You damn near blow it by throwing a temper tantrum right in front of the goddamn judge," he finished.

"That's no deal and you know it. What do you use your brains for? It's a cover-up and you know that too. Getting rid of me and the other quote, 'trouble makers' is fixing the symptom and not the problem; but you know that too, don't you?"

"You've always told me to do what was right and fight for what I believed in. What happened to all those pretty speeches? When I really needed your help, did you stick your neck out and help? No, you just stood by and let them hang some bullshit rap on me for grand theft auto, assaulting a police officer, resisting arrest, and any other trumped-up charge they could think of, up to and including raping the Mother Superior of the Little Sisters of the Poor."

"You talk about duty, honor, loyalty and all that crap, but I think you're a paper tiger," Smitty said bitterly.

His face stung as Dad backhanded him.

"Now you listen to me, boy," Dad said savagely, pointing his finger almost in Smitty's eye. "You can't solve the problems of the whole world; it's just too big. This is only the first time in your life that things didn't go as you planned. That's part of growing up. And if you can't accept that, then you have got a problem, and neither I, nor anyone else can help you. You got screwed; big deal. It ain't the first time, and it sure as hell won't be the last. The real question is, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to prove them right by going back to your old ways, or wrong by sucking it in and beating them at their own game?"

Dad wasn't going to run from this one; that much was certain. He was waiting for an answer, an answer he'd get before they'd leave this room. Smitty studied Dad's face during his lecture. He was right, damn it, but it just didn't seem fair.

"All right, Dad," Smitty finally answered in a hesitant voice. "We'll try it your way."

Dad reached out, put his arm around him, looked Smitty in the eye, smiled, and said, "C'mon son, let's go."

"Hi there, kiddo; how's my girl?" Dad said into the phone. As he listened to the response, his smug expression changed to a frown. "Now hold on a second, honey." I called you for a reason." He listened again, then replied, "and that's why I'm calling you. There is a problem with one of the kids and I need your help." To the response, he answered, "No, he's not sick; in fact both of the boys are in perfect health."

The answer was longer this time before Dad interrupted tersely, "Look, we can argue about who was right and who was wrong five years back some other time. Are you going to help me or not?" To the obvious question, Dad responded, "I just need to bring Kevin up to stay with you until I can get my transfer processed. He got in a little trouble down here, and part of the agreement is that I get him out of the state in 48 hours." Dad's face flushed with anger at Mom's response. "No, he hasn't followed in his father's footsteps and beaten someone half to death in a drunken rage."

"He just had a little problem with the cops, juvenile delinquency stuff. They felt that maybe a change in the environment would help. So all I need is for you to look after Kevin and Billy until my change of duty station request is processed. I called Chuck at the Pentagon and he's having the orders expedited for my 26 terminal. (A slang military request that allows a 26-years veteran, who has enlisted for the last time to pick his last duty station and be accommodated if at all possible. Finishing up his thirty years in the duty station of his choice.) If you could just look after them for about a month, I can be on station at Hunter in plenty of time for the kids to get enrolled in school."

Mom's reply was longer this time. So long, in fact, that at one point Dad held his hand over the phone and said, "Your mom's a little pissed with me. Seems she has a "friend" down here who's been keeping her right up to date on current events. Blames me personally for the whole mess; been talking to a lawyer about getting custody of you two. Curious," Dad said.

Dad returned the phone to his ear, and abruptly cut Mom off. "Look, I refused to send the kids home from to England in '61 when you wouldn't come back, and that is not a discussion I wish to pursue at this time either."

"Yes, or no, will you take the boys? If not, say so, and I'll call up my brothers and have one of them do it."

"That I'll agree to," Dad nodded into the phone. "When I get settled in Savannah, you bring the kids down, and I'll sit down and discuss with you calmly and rationally what is best for both of them."

"Now, I'll be leaving about four in the morning, and if everything goes all right, I should roll into Atlanta about eight tomorrow night." Dad exhaled heavily and continued in a more neutral tone. "I'll tell ya, you won't hardly recognize these two."

This time, it was Mom who cut Dad off. He listened, tensed, and with a curt, "See ya tomorrow night," slammed down the phone and walked away into the bedroom, muttering.



Kevin had neither time nor opportunity to make contact with LZ or Frenchy; even if he had, he wasn't at all sure they'd have connected anyway.

Jimmy, Gena, and the four Cubans' deaths had been the last straw for the mayor. Heeding the advice of the city prosecutor's office, the mayor had authorized the immediate arrest of all known gang members on the west side. The resulting "Black List" contained 150 names of known or suspected gang members.

The huge list was compiled by one of the city's district attorneys with the aid of a

MISSION OCTAGON

certain homicide sergeant, who, it was indisputably felt, would be a much better choice for assuring that a complete and comprehensive list was assembled than that “bleeding heart captain.” The final list was comprehensive enough to include many youths who had done nothing more than stay out late.

American jurisprudence and legalities took a back seat to expeditiousness. Smitty was lucky. His “case” was heard and tried in all of 20 minutes; most didn’t get even that. The parents or legal guardians were brought in and told point-blank to get their troublesome offspring out of town. No hearing, no trial, no defense. Smitty’s nemesis Keith, and his sidekick Glen, were missing from the rogue’s gallery.

The roundup of the infested herd had begun with Smitty, LZ, and Frenchy being taken into custody. Inside of twenty-four hours, the stream of cars heading north on US 1 looked strangely like a hurricane evacuation. Frenchy was already gone; flown home to New Orleans on a prepaid fare by his father to face the problems of his pecker. (One father in particular, due to his daughter’s unplanned pregnancy, had matrimony plans for Frenchy’s future, which drove Frenchy to the streets of Miami.) LZ was probably halfway to Orlando by now on his way to stay with an aunt in Chicago; he’d honked as his car went past the apartment. Smitty, Billy, and Dad had finished packing the car, and were now eight hours behind LZ, headed toward Atlanta, to Mom, to Grandma, and ultimately, to a new home in Georgia.

They’d dealt with the symptom, but not the problem. As the sounds of WQAM faded from the car radio, Smitty knew that this was just a remission . . . the cancer would strike again.

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