

1

His boy still waited. Zachary gripped the steering wheel with both hands and recited from memory:

* * *

Sparks flew at the broad face of Jacques LaCrosse when he dumped wood onto the fire. Cursing, he backed away, wiped his eyes with a greasy sleeve and combed cinders from his beard with fingers the size of sausages. He feared a bonfire but hearing the wolf pack roam the forest stirred up images of an attack and drove him to keep the blaze going all night.

The yellow haired man laughed at him.

* * *

“Dad, you can’t do that.” Nate’s twelve-year-old voice rang clear and strong inside the sheet metal cab of the pickup truck.

“What’d I do?” Zachary glanced across, surprised by his boy’s unusual

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display of temper. “It’s just a new character. You got some problem with that?”

“You’re telling his thoughts. You’re not in the scene. That’s not the way the game is played.” Nate looked so determined in his twisted glasses. Such a little guy for his age.

Zachary liked it when his boy stood up to him but he steered down the road, wanting to carry this round. Playing a story game with Nate, he had to take small winnings and be satisfied, and like poker or chess, a bluff was sometimes the only option. “You’re wrong, Nate. The 1830 frontier wasn’t like the here-and-now. LaCrosse bragged about what happened at every saloon and campfire and the story got embellished as it went from mouth to mouth. That’s how men become legend.”

He held his breath, wondering if the little genius would buy that one. Nate didn’t say anything more and Zachary pushed on:

* * *

Yellow Jack laughed when LaCrosse shied from the fire.

“Shut the mouth, eh, *mon ami?*” LaCrosse said in thick French intonations. He sneered. That yellow hair—so small for an American. Small like woman.

The man leaned against a tree, hands cradling his head. “Jacques, you’re a real treat for travel. Ain’t that fire big enough or you fixin’ to scare away all the wolves in the forest?”

“Merde. You shut—shut the mouth!” He pointed a stout stick, over two inches thick, its branches lopped off close, its end carved to a point and charred. **“Jacques show who is afraid.”**

The smaller man slowly brought up his arms, palms forward. **“Now hold on, Jacques. You want to kill me the way you did that fur company man?”** He shook his head and laughed. **“By the time you stopped, his head looked like a half empty sack o’ beans. What was the sense of hittin’ ‘im after he was already dead? No, I don’t want to fight you, you crazy Frenchman.”**

“You know what is good for you, *non?*” LaCrosse hunkered down by the fire and held his stick to the flames. The tip flared then died. He used the charred end to poke at the burning logs and the flames licked high into the night sky. Working the stick reminded him of his boyhood and a raccoon he’d once caught. He imagined jabbing his stick into the cage, watching the animal’s fear and burning rage. He thrust the charred end into the fire again and again, each time with more force, raising a hail of glowing embers, holding his head well back.

Yellow Jack rolled into his blanket. In minutes his breathing settled to a slow rhythm.

The howl of a wolf reminded LaCrosse that the fire might grow cold while he slept. He buried fish hooks in a strip of venison then tossed the bait toward the edge of the clearing, hoping the lead wolf would grab the meat, go crazy with pain and run wild, drawing the wolf pack far away.

He looked at his sleeping partner. The man was a fool. He would have nothing if it were not for Jacques LaCrosse. He should not have talked to Jacques that way. A very stupid man, that yellow hair.

The moon peeked over the treetops and LaCrosse used his stick to roll a fresh log into the blaze. Why should he share his gold with yellow hair? It was Jacques who earned it, was it not? He squinted and his thoughts slowly spiraled inward, festering. A rush swelled within his head, blocking out the night sounds. Images of animals in traps, skinning and gutting and dead men replaced his sight of the fire. “Why do I give to ‘im gold?” he mumbled under his breath. LaCrosse thrust the stick into the fire again. Then louder, “Who is ‘e to take from me? *From me—*”

He stopped—held his breath, grinding teeth, listening, cheeks burning under bristling whiskers. Did yellow hair hear?

The sound of snoring returned to his ears and he let out his breath in one rush. Quiet—he must be quiet or that one would be upon him. Kill him maybe. His lips twisted. He could not trust the American. He was tricky, that one. LaCrosse clucked his tongue, inserted one enormous finger into a pocket, pulled out a handkerchief and cleared his nose. Rubbing dainty laced edging across his lips, he murmured to himself, “E want to kill poor Jacques, that yellow hair.” He studied the form huddled in the blanket then quickly turned back to the fire. Maybe the man would try that very night, once Jacques slept. No, he should not trust the American.

When the moon rode high LaCrosse stood and stretched.

He walked to his packhorse, lifted his Hawken rifle from the saddle holster and moved silently toward his sleeping partner.

A man could not miss with the muzzle against an ear.

* * *

“Get that guy out of the game.”

“Can’t do that, Nate. Once he’s in, he’s in—your rules.”

“Dad, you search till you find trouble.”

“A man doesn’t have to search. Trouble usually finds the man. It’d be worth your while to remember that.” Zachary wondered if he spoke too harshly.

“Look Nate, LaCrosse belongs in the period. He belongs in the game.”

“Why’d you make him pull the gun?”

“He’s a renegade—completely outside the law, living like an animal. By 1830 the territory isn’t French any more and the American Fur Company agents are after him.” While Zachary steered down the highway, he searched his mind for a face that fit the trapper. He settled on his own father. Yes. A perfect fit. The bitter notion gave him a certain amount of satisfaction. “Listen to me Nate. I’m trying to make this game as realistic as I can. When you don’t want a murder, just stop it.”

“You pushed right through. I think you had that story memorized. A man doesn’t miss—blah, blah, blah. From now on we play by the rules. One of us has to be in the scene. We take turns. And no more planning out the story in

advance.” Nate stopped talking, opened his book and silently read. That was what he did when he had his fill of Dad and in the blur of it all Zachary failed to understand what went wrong. In that moment he wanted to hear his boy’s voice more than anything else.

After another mile, the previous night with Rebecca came back to him. He played it over in his mind as he drove along. The way she rolled in bed and placed a finger to his lips, speaking softly, *Why don’t you ever praise him and say you love him?*

Zachary knew that would ruin the boy.

You have a caring, loving heart that nobody sees. Show it to Nate.

He found it hard to think of himself in those terms. Rebecca did a fine job raising Nate, and Zachary saw her in his boy’s face, heard her in his words, in his laughter—but Nate turned twelve that day and didn’t know the real world. Time to learn the ways of a man. He winced, recalling his wife’s fierce reply.

I don’t like your real world, Zachary. There’s beauty and you look right past it. You miss so much. Don’t you dare fill our son’s head with your hateful view of life. Hateful—the word stung more than a slap. Then her deep sigh. *For now, just promise one thing—control your temper.*

He admired her fighting spirit and more often than not she proved right. Then her soothing words. *I still remember falling in love with you—so strong, so fearless, so trustworthy—and that’s what you are. But you were kind and gentle then—where did that go? Can you be that man again?*

His big body relaxed, relishing the memory of their tender moment,

pulling her tight, brushing her long black hair aside. The tingle at his lips when he kissed her ear, whispering his sincere promise. He'd keep his anger in check.

Zachary relied on her for so much. Fifteen years together and he still confided in his wife—only his wife.

But he hadn't told her about *The Game*.

2

A siren blared and lights flashed from behind. Their pickup truck rolled to a stop on the shoulder of the road and Zachary fished out his driver's license before the cop reached the window.

The policeman examined his license. "Is your name Zachary Boldt?"
Zachary leaned his head out the window into the direct sun. "Yeah. It's not a good picture; I had a full beard then."

The cop stared at him then at the license while the sun penetrated Zachary's hair to the scalp like a wire brush. In his head, Rebecca's voice prodded him, telling him to be polite, to show respect. "Look officer, I'm running my kid home from school. There a law against that?"

The cop's nostrils flared. He leaned forward, smelling of cabbage and corned beef, looking past Zachary at the small boy.

Nate smiled. His glasses slid down his nose.

The cop moved back a step as if the rusty truck carried a disease. He

stood erect. "Is this your current address, Mr. Boldt?"

"Yeah what about it?"

"It doesn't match your statement about the school."

"It's a *special* school, okay? A long commute."

The cop paused. Then his voice hardened. "Sir, I stopped to warn you. Your right rear brake lamp is out. Now I'm citing you for that and unsafe lane change." Not waiting for a response, he walked to his squad car.

With a calloused hand Zachary smeared beads of sweat from his forehead then stared past his cracked windshield, ready to shout an oath when he remembered his boy beside him and his promise to Rebecca. Balling a thick fist, he again checked himself and tapped the steering wheel lightly, twice.

A cement truck blew its air brakes, inching past, its massive wheels raising dust in the still air. A line of cars followed one-by-one. He cranked his window shut and flipped on the vent fan. "Can you stand this closed a while, Nate? I know it's hot but all that noise—"

His boy shrugged and turned a page.

Warm ventilator air blew fine alkaline particles across his face and Zachary slouched back as far as his big body allowed, watching the policeman in the rear-view mirror. Lousy arrogant Wisconsin cops. The guy squatted in his cruiser like a toad, ignoring the swelling traffic, the blaring horns, taking his sweet time with the paperwork while heat rose in the closed pickup.

Zachary caught Nate watching him. "What're you looking at?"

"Are you all right, Dad?"

“What d’you think?”

“He might’ve let you off if you didn’t talk like—”

“Like what? I called him *officer*, didn’t I?”

Nate closed his lips.

“A man doesn’t beg. Doesn’t stand for any—” Zachary pulled his words to a halt, took a deep breath and scratched behind his arm through a wet cotton drill shirt, again recalling his promise. Why should he let a cop get to him? Just a donut-eater filling his quota was all. “Your mother will have dinner waiting by the time we get home. Let’s get back to the game.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. Ready?”

The boy smiled. Did all twelve-year-olds do that so easy?

“And don’t stick in anything that couldn’t happen in Wisconsin back in 1830.” Zachary forced a stern expression to emphasize his point.

Nate went silent a moment and his gaze shifted as if focusing on something not really there. Then, “I’m crouching low, sighting a big buck down the barrel of my long rifle. The forest air is so still, I hear all kinds of sounds I wouldn’t usually notice. *Don’t move*. I say it under my breath, while I tighten my finger on the trigger.”

Nate stopped talking.

After a moment Zachary recognized the prompt—*his turn*. “Okay Nate, a shudder runs down your arm. Like—like a spider. The rifle’s heavy and it’s hard to hold your aim on the target.”

Nate winced then went on. “I take a deep breath. *Don't move.* I squeeze the trigger harder.”

“Your trigger mechanism moves in jerks and skips. Your thighs cramp from crouching so long and your buckskins cut into the back of your legs. Your arms ache—feel drained of blood.”

Through his glasses Nate leveled a challenging look at his father and held that gaze while he went on. “Everything seems to move more slowly than life. Squeezing just a fraction more, I watch the release of the hammer, the flash of flint, the puff of smoke.”

“Your powder flashes in the firing pan but the gun doesn't fire. Suddenly the stock recoils. An explosion. It peppers you with black powder and you fall back—a glimpse of blue sky then the lightning pain of a sharp crack to the back of your skull.”

Nate raised a hand as if in school. “What was that all about?”

“You fell and bumped your head.” Zachary had again gained the upper hand—not easy to do against Nate. But if he didn't do his best, he'd disappoint the boy.

“Why'd you put that in the game?”

What was the kid's gripe? It wasn't as if he'd come to any real harm and Nate was the one who turned everything into a competition. Zachary thought back to the way his boy described him in this game of his. No woodcraft. Lucky to be alive. He prided himself as an outdoorsman and didn't like getting shown up as a helpless city dweller.

“Dad, I asked why you put that in.”

“Just keeping up my end as best I can. C’mon Nate, that’s way it would’ve happened. That nineteenth century long rifle is too clumsy for a kid your age.”

“I’m twelve, now.”

“You didn’t load it right and you weren’t handling it right. I try to teach you but you think you know it all.”

Nate tapped at the dashboard with a torn running shoe. “You’re just teasing me. It would’ve been more fun if I shot the deer.”

The cop appeared at the window.

Zachary cranked it down and received two pink slips, a page of instructions and a reminder to fix the brake light. He tossed the tickets between them on the bench seat then wadded the instructions into a ball. At the sound of a metal buckle, a small hand flashed in his face, grabbing his nose, twisting it, laughter ringing in his ears. He let out a mock howl of pain and pushed the hand away. “Not the driver, Nate.”

“You’re not driving now.” Nate dug a finger behind his father’s arm and Zachary lurched as if jolted by an electric current. “Stop it, you little monkey.” He shoved the boy back in place, buckled the seat belt and yanked it tight. “Keep that thing on,” he shouted over shrieks of laughter.

The laughter eventually faded and Nate’s breathing came hard as he spoke. “From now on, Dad, I’m working on you.”

“What kinda work would that be, Nate?”

“Wait and see.”

Zachary didn’t have any idea what Nate was driving at and his mind shifted to the next thing to do. Before he pulled onto the road, he powered up his phone. Always kept it off unless making a call. Three rings and he heard Rebecca’s voice.

“Hello Zachary. Is everything all right?”

“Hi beautiful. Nothing to worry about—stopped by a cop. Be a little late”

“Don’t forget what day this is.”

“You think I don’t remember?”

“Everything will be ready when you get here.”

Nate stretched out his hand.

“Hold on—Nate wants to talk to you.” He passed over the phone.

“Hi Mom...That’s what I hoped you’d say—just wanted to hear it...No, everything’s fine. We’re having fun...”

The idling engine bucked and stalled, carrying Zachary’s attention away from the half conversation. He’d lost track of time, still parked by the side of the road. A glance in the rear-view mirror showed the squad car gone. He twisted the ignition. The starter pulsed but the engine didn’t turn over and he floored the accelerator, cranking the starter another ten seconds till the truck sputtered to life.

Nate still talked, burning more minutes off the phone. “...I love you too...See you later...Bye.” He snapped the phone closed and handed it back.

Zachary switched it off. He felt uncomfortable with the thing on. “What did your Mom say?”

“Happy birthday.”

The big man grunted. “Happy birthday, Nate.” Shifting into first, he pulled onto the road.

A horn blared.

Shifting hard, grinding gears, he nudged the gas pedal, moving close to the bumper ahead and they rolled along with the line of cars on their long daily trip home from school. “How ‘bout I show you the right way to load that rifle?”

Nate stretched out his legs. “In the game?”

“Yeah. Start where you fell down and bumped your head.”

“I think that was uncalled for.”

“Well, maybe it was. Things happen.”

* * *

Zachary pulled Nate to his feet, brushed dirt and powder from the boy’s buckskins then bent to retrieve the rifle, inspecting it before handing it back.

Nate hefted the rifle with both hands while nervously kicking the dirt.

“It went off when I wasn’t expecting.”

“Good thing you weren’t peering down the muzzle right about then.

Now blow down that barrel. Check the firing hole. Plugged? Thought so.”

The boy turned away from his father.

“Don’t fret about it. It happens to us all—more than some will

admit.”

Nate set to cleaning the rifle. When finished, he blew down the barrel again.

“Now hold out your hand—steady.” Zachary dropped a lead ball onto the small palm then poured powder till the shot lay buried. “Now that’s a proper load.”

“Jeth uses a paper cartridge.”

“Who’s teachin’ you how to do this, him or me? That boy’s got a musket. Ever see him hit a squirrel at a good distance?”

“No.”

“You never will. It’s an army weapon—quick to load but not much use for huntin’. Now show me how you load that piece.”

The boy tilted his hand against the muzzle and slowly poured powder, spilling only a few grains wide of the barrel. He brushed his hand across his buckskins then pulled out a linen patch.

“You fixin’ to grease that?”

“I was going to.” Smearing the patch with tallow, he placed it across the muzzle and when he thumbed in the ball, the patch wrapped around it like a skin.

“Ram it down good and firm. Don’t tamp at it like that. Now let me see you prime the pan. This time maybe you want to use less powder.”

Nate closed the frizzen, pulled the hammer to half cock and squinted down the sights.

* * *

Zachary glanced across the pickup. "Got that straight?"

"Why don't we just say I shot the deer?"

"Can't make changes like that—once a thing's in the game, it's in. Your rules. If we don't agree we call it quits."

"Then quit." Nate smiled his defiance.

No way Zachary could quit that game and Nate's grin shouted the truth of it. The boy had called his bluff. Pride for his child instantly welled up in Zachary but out of long habit he masked it. Praise softened people and a kid like that needed toughening above all else. This day Nate turned twelve and started manhood and being so small was no excuse to coddle him—more a reason to work harder.

To Zachary, that drive home from school was *their* time—just the two of them boxed together in the truck. The seat belt held the boy relatively still for half an hour and Zachary could use that time to teach him. He wished they could do it twice a day but a four a.m. drive was way too early for school. Zachary rose each morning in the dark silence, made his own breakfast and lunch then slipped out the door. Rebecca delivered Nate—Zachary picked up. It made sense. As an artist, Rebecca's schedule belonged to her and he always suspected his wife of cherishing her mornings with Nate as much as he did the afternoons. He wondered what they talked about but whatever it was, Nate seemed to absorb

Rebecca's best qualities—her patience, her understanding, her spunk, even her beliefs. Nate already seemed more grown up than some adults—almost as if he were born that way—but Zachary still carried a duty as a father. He'd show Nate the things a mother couldn't—the things that fancy school didn't put in the curriculum. It'd be easy. Nate soaked up knowledge like a sponge.

Be careful what you say to him, Zachary. What you tell him now, you can never take back. Rebecca's words sounded right but Zachary knew she'd never understand. The game let him slip past the awkward father-and-son drill. It made a way to enjoy each other, to dream, to show Nate what was important. He heaved a sigh. Now, a week into it, he craved the common ground, the private world all their own. After ten hours at the machine shop he longed for it.

But it was a dangerous game. Nate's rules—taking turns with no turning back, nobody controlling the direction of the story. Who could predict how it would turn out? It might spin out of control and turn ugly. Sometimes it made him squirm.

Nate kept more than one game going at a time and Zachary read all the transcripts—some set in the future, others in imaginary realms. Two shelves of binders—the earliest ones printed in fat pencil on double-lined paper, the recent ones run off on Rebecca's computer—outlines of games so complex, the boy wrote them down to keep his opponents current. It was Nate's way of connecting with other people. How else would he do it, him being so different from everybody?

Just as he crowded an intersection, the traffic light switched to yellow and

Zachary powered his truck across. Something in back clunked when he touched his brake and he checked the rear-view mirror to see if he beat the light. After a couple blocks his mind drifted back to Rebecca and dwelled for a moment on her pensive smile, her tall slender frame, her elegant way of moving. An artist when he met her, she'd stuck to it and now those paintings went for good money—when they sold. He didn't understand the work she produced and he shifted his thoughts to the game, wondering how it could grow so large so fast. His boy picked the time period like baiting a hook. Zachary wanted to challenge Nate about that and immediately did so.

Nate listened, paused just an instant, then, "Maybe it's my age."

"Is that right?"

"Sure, 1830. One plus eight plus three plus zero equals twelve. You know that."

Zachary stretched across, using his knuckles to rough-up Nate's mop of wavy hair.

The boy pulled away, laughing. "You want to change it? How about 1000 or 2000—a millennial number? I can justify those years too."

"No, 1830 will do just fine, thank you." To Zachary it was the perfect era—a dream he took out of a cardboard box of documents and notes each night. Of all the history he studied in the evenings, the American frontier of the early 1800s suited him best. Life was simple. A man could make his mark and didn't need a fancy education. And Wisconsin? Just a territory with a scattering of settlers. He gripped the wheel, wishing it were a set of reins then said, "I wish I'd

been born back then."

The twelve-year-old voice: "Why?"

3

At first annoyed by the simple question, Zachary squeezed the steering wheel. He knew he'd never find words to explain it to a young boy. 1830—the simple life lost to the modern world. Of course, to Nate, everything seemed simple. That kid was too smart for his own good and his only challenge came from fighting off boredom.

“Dad, now that the rifle’s cleaned and loaded, do I kill the deer?”

Zachary shook his head. “You think that buck’s gonna wait around for you to re-load?” He punched the boy’s arm playfully. “Maybe next time.”

Nate rubbed where he’d been struck then turned back to his book. Zachary wanted to keep him talking. “Wanna try the game again?”

“Can we have some fun with it?”

“I was.”

“I wasn’t.” Nate set his jaw. “First you staged a murder then made me bump my head and let my deer get away.”

"Like I said, Nate, things happen."

After a moment the boy tucked away his book. "Okay let's play."

* * *

Nate followed his father to the game trail when Zachary abruptly stopped. The boy peered through the trees, hoping with all his heart for another deer.

Ahead in a clearing, a man lay still. At their approach he woke and instantly stood, more or less erect. Nate studied the slant of his eyes, almost squeezed closed but clearly alert—probably Chinese and once Nate got a good look he guessed him at fifteen years old. He wore stained garments made of cotton duck and his body looked shrunk inside them.

Zachary addressed him first. "Relax neighbor."

The Chinese remained standing.

"Let me talk to him, Pa."

Zachary nodded and the three hunkered down in the clearing. Nate asked his name.

"Chiang Xiao." A simple direct response then silence. Nate asked him to repeat it several times until he could form a sound something like it—*Chang Chow*. He asked about the strange clothing and Chiang looked at his sleeves and trousers then back at Nate, clearly bewildered, so the boy asked again another way. "Do other people cover their bodies like that?"

Chiang betrayed a certain excitement and what might have been pride. "All crew make." He pinched the cotton duck material of his sleeve to signify his meaning.

"You came from a ship?"

"Serve great captain." Without warning he stopped, pressed his arms against his middle as the blood drained from his face. He quickly recovered and acted as if nothing unusual had occurred but Nate noticed he kept his arms crossed tight against his belly.

"What's wrong with him, Pa?"

"Not sure yet."

More questions flooded to the front of Nate's mind but he managed to ask just two. "Where are you from—how did you get here?"

It took careful attention to understand Chiang's speech and he sometimes broke into his native tongue but they managed to learn that he'd served as carpenter's mate on a merchant ship till his captain was shot dead during a duel in Boston. Chiang ran off and joined a company of trappers traveling the Great Lakes.

Nate knew the huge lake canoes, paddled by crews of men and the enormous wealth of beaver pelts they carried but he'd only seen a harbor of tall sea-going ships once. He gained the clear impression that this Chinese esteemed his captain—almost as if he were his father—and wanted to hear about the duel but the details proved to be outside of Chiang's knowledge. He talked of the trappers. "Bad men. Steal..." He showed deep shame that

he'd fought them and failed. Piecing his story together, Nate made out that Chiang had been marooned on the shores of the big lake then worked his way inland, trading labor for food, finding scant welcome. Sailors possessed many skills—splicing ropes, special knots, carving, climbing and fighting but Nate didn't get the impression that Chiang knew any real woodcraft and wondered how he survived in the wilderness.

The Chinese squeezed his belly again then apologized in a debasing manner that grated at Nate's sensibilities and embarrassed him.

"How long since you ate?"

Chiang lowered his gaze and didn't respond.

"We just missed a deer but I have some smoked fish." The boy handed him all he had—a large handful of flaky meat intended for several days.

Chiang quickly ate it all in a few savage bites then spoke some lively words in Chinese that Nate took as an expression of gratitude.

Zachary stood. "We pass through a settlement on our way to camp. The storekeeper there probably wants a man that can handle a raft. Nate, you bring up the rear and keep your rifle handy."

The three walked along the game trail, Nate alert for deer.

* * *

The father inspected his boy. "Where'd you come up with that Chinese

name?"

"Friend of mine at school but he's really my age—not fifteen."

"You missed some sailor skills." Zachary rested his head back and felt a grin coming on. He let his hand drop to the bottom of the wheel as he switched to frontier-speak. "Considerin' all of 'em, it's carpenter work what might make him a livin' 'round here. O' course a sailor'd be acquainted with heavy drinkin' and gamblin'."

"Dad, quit with the lingo. You're no good at it."

"Just practicin', Nate. It ain't more'n a stone's throw from the talk folks use at the shop. Sometimes I fall to it natural-like."

"Stop it!"

Zachary broke into a short laugh. "Sorry Nate. You know, I think this Chiang fella might find a place in the settlement."

A Cadillac ahead pulled up short at a yellow light and Zachary quickly leaned on the brake and the horn before he noticed the line of traffic plugging the intersection. He checked his wristwatch. "Looks like it'll be a while." He tensed, impatient to move. Their truck stood dead still. He held one foot on the brake, the other on the clutch, his grip tightening on the wheel, fingers sinking into a cheap vinyl-and-foam cover. Cars raced over the bridge just a quarter mile ahead.

"Let's take the bypass. Probably better than cutting through town anyway. You with me on that?"

Nate said yes and Zachary pulled off the road. He drove his pickup

around the Cadillac and down the gravel shoulder, raising a trail of dust, racing past angry drivers who were going nowhere. He turned onto the entrance ramp. The old truck didn't have much power any more and he floored the gas till they finally reached highway speed. Nubbly tires whined like a hive of bees. Wind and road noise swarmed around his ears. He forced his way into the lane, close to the bumpers ahead and behind. Seventy-five was against the law but they moved with the flow and maybe—just maybe they'd make up lost time and get home early for Rebecca.

Zachary wanted to continue the game but Nate stared at his book. That boy could turn off the world quick as twisting a spigot. "Say something, Nate." He realized he was shouting over the road noise and rolled his window shut then reached down and opened the floor vent.

Nate slid his vent open with a toe. "What do you want me to say?"

"What happened at school today?"

A shrug. "Nothing much." Nate's usual response. He turned back to his book.

Zachary detested vague talk about what he held to be important. The thought of the tuition bill made the feelings more intense and his temper rose as his inner voice nagged at him. Rebecca must've been crazy putting him in that fancy school—they didn't teach him to survive the real world—and it oughta be real special, paying all that money for a desk in a private school as if there was something wrong with the boy.

He held his breath to still his thoughts. At least the school was on the

route from work and Rebecca drove the morning—every morning—a big commitment for her since she had to deadhead back home. He sighed. Maybe she was right. Nate had his blank spots and after all, mothers knew about such things. If the boy needed it so bad, if that doctor was any good, if the kid's IQ was really that high—

An interesting case, the doctor called it. *Atypical*, he said. Since when was being smart a sickness? No, Zachary felt certain. His boy was fine. He had his blind spots but didn't everybody? Still, he made sure Nate never knew what that doctor had told them. It was a hard secret to keep. People noticed. When first born they cooed over him. *Oh, he's so sweet.* Then later, *He's such an intelligent child.* When he got older, *How'd you manage to have such a smart kid?* Zachary scowled. What did that make him? Stupid?

Maybe I am.

He glanced across at Nate. The kid didn't look up from his book and Zachary read the page header—*Crime and Punishment*. Good title. Maybe it made some sense. A horn blared, probably God giving him the raspberry, and a van pulled past and swung in front. He glared ahead at white windowless cargo doors.

Nate turned a page and Zachary slapped the wheel. *Talk to me, Nate.* The blow stung his hand but made a booming sound he liked and the pain felt like an old friend.

Nate turned to him. "You mad?"

"No, why?"

“You look mad.”

“So what?”

“You get mad a lot.” Nate poked his father’s arm above the elbow.

“That’s why I’m working on you.”

“You keep saying that. Better mind your own business.”

“Can’t. You’re my dad.”

“So?”

Nate crossed his arms. “You’re my dad so I love you.”

Did he have to come right out with that? Zachary felt himself blush and massaged his temple with a fingertip in an effort to screen his face from Nate till the blood faded from his cheeks. “That’s fine, Nate but it’s not the kind of thing a man just blurts out.”

“Why not? Mom says we should. She says we have *the unconditional thing.*”

What was the meaning of that? Zachary filed it away as one more unanswered question. “I’m just saying, be careful how you talk to people.”

“You’re not people, you’re my dad.”

He grinned. “Well, I can’t argue with that.”

After a pause, the boy slowly uncrossed his arms. “We need to find a site for our cabin.”

“Yeah it’s time we did. Winter comes early in the North Country and we’ve roamed far enough. Don’t want to live in a tent when the snow comes.”

The van ahead slowed and Zachary stepped on the brake, still riding its tail.

“Where should we build, Dad?”

“Don’t know. In the woods some place. Help me out here.”

“You don’t need any more help—not after those last two tricks you played.”

Zachary floored the gas, switched lanes and got in front of the van.

“There’s a small settlement here but maybe we build a few miles away from it.

Gimme a minute to picture the place.”

“Just talk about it.”

“I can’t just flip a switch and pop out ideas.”

“Why not? You didn’t have any trouble with your French trapper.”

“Well, I’ll admit I planned that one out. You’re gonna have to let me stretch that rule a bit. I need to prepare. A man needs time to think.”

“Why?”

There was that question again. “Let’s just say a grown-up’s mind doesn’t move in high gear like a kid’s.” Zachary silently cursed for looking stupid in front of his own boy. He kept digging for an idea while they rolled down the road. So far, most of his input had come from nightly research. He knew Nate didn’t understand. He was bumping up against one of the boy’s blind spots—the kid assumed everybody else was smart, just like he was.

“It’s so easy, Dad. Just say anything and I’ll add to it. Then you take a turn. Then me. I’ll start—we’re on a lake in our canoe. See anything on shore?”

Zachary glanced at a grove of trees as they rushed past. “Yeah trees.”

“Notice anything about them?”

“They’re swaying.”

“Hear anything?”

“Wind.”

“Smell something?”

“Pine needles.”

Nate raised a fist in triumph. “I knew you could do it. We paddle into a bay. A northern pike breaks the surface 20 yards off and the spray sparkles in the morning sun.”

“Very poetic.”

Nate grinned. “Look at the mouth of that feeder stream. The fishing’s going to be good.”

Zachary pondered it.

“Take your turn, Dad.”

“Okay. Try this. I cup my hands and dip them in the lake and drink. It’s so clear.”

Nate grinned. “Keep going. Does it wet your face?”

“Yeah it runs down my chin and neck and soaks the front of my shirt. Ice cold.”

“Dad, you’re tipping the canoe.”

* * *

A gust of wind sent a light chop across the water.

Zachary surveyed the shoreline while Nate paddled the canoe toward the rocks. The hull swayed to one side then tipped the other way and swamped the canoe, tumbling Zachary into freezing water, screaming from cold, clamoring to his knees on shallow stones. He grabbed the gear and retrieved his hat then trudged ashore dripping water from his buckskins.

Nate laughed.

“Get back here and help me with this boat.” Zachary knew full-well that Nate capsized it on purpose. They stood in the shallows and dumped water from of the hull then beached the craft and spread out their blanket packs in the noon sun.

Without warning, Zachary swiped at the boy like a bear but Nate avoided the blow and backed a few steps away from his pa.

They stood apart when they inspected a feeder stream beside a narrow peninsula. About a hundred yards upstream a waterfall spilled over a six-foot drop. The falls chilled the air and the water churning white around rocks. The man and boy stood watching the scene for a long time.

“Let’s build by the falls, Pa. It’ll be cool all summer.”

“Too damp. Walk with me out there where the land juts into the lake.”

The rocky peninsula rose high from the water and supported a few trees. They crossed a narrow strip of land and turned a dogleg that broadened and formed a wide level clearing, the lake visible in all directions through a rim of pine. One huge oak stood near the center, spreading dense

shade. A steady breeze from across the water. Zachary breathed deeply as he surveyed the scene. To him, the place formed an island fortress, the narrow passage to shore easy to defend and he knew the lake breeze meant relief from flies and mosquitoes. A stand of pine obscured his view of the stream and falls. He'd clear those away first for cabin walls and firewood.

"We'll build here, Nate. No better place."

Still soaked from the dunking they collected dry brush and within the space of a few minutes sat by the heat of a fire.

But Nate stayed just out of his pa's reach all that day.

* * *

Zachary tapped the back of Nate's head. "Thanks for the dunking—and for the waterfall. I'll enjoy that view. You're a real dreamer, Nate—must've got it from your mother."

"You're the dreamer, not Mom."

"Me? You're wrong, Nate. I'm a practical man."

The boy laughed. "You're the one that wants to live in another century."

"What's wrong with that?" Zachary didn't see anything so great about the present day. Life was dollars. You got sick, you paid the doctor. In trouble, the lawyer. You punched a clock, paid your bills, bought insurance, mortgaged your house, saved for college, complained about taxes. Zachary was big and awkward, slower and thicker than he used to be—no better than anybody else—he knew that

for sure. But the thing that irked him the most was the complexity of the modern world.

Everything is meaningless. The verse from Ecclesiastes came back to him, the words his father forced him to memorize on his twelfth birthday—his only present. He'd taught young Zachary his slant on Truth. ‘Everybody is your opponent.’ Zachary never saw his father after that day. He wanted to do better by Nate. Teaching his boy about life was his personal excuse for playing the game but he no longer asked himself for reasons—the game itself had become the reason.

“Smile, Dad.” Nate’s book slid to the floor. He bloated his cheeks and bulged his eyes behind thick lenses in twisted frames. He slapped both cheeks, forcing trapped air between his lips.

“Quit clowning, you little snipe.” Unable to suppress a smile, Zachary turned back to the road, driving in tight formation with the other speeding vehicles. “Today you start adult life so think like a man, act like a man. What’re the opportunities, where are the hurdles? How do you handle trouble? How will you make a living?”

“I’ll be a machinist, like you.”

“Don’t get trapped in some dead-end job.”

“But you’re the boss.”

“I’m just a foreman, Nate, and that’s as far as I go.”

“It’s a good job.”

“People say so.” Zachary spread his right hand and examined the stump

of his fourth finger. "Been at it one way or another since I turned twelve." He called to mind his early years doing chores and errands until he got old enough to run the machines. Machining got into a man's blood. Did the same kind of work in the army. "But you, Nate—how 'bout a doctor, professor, scientist? You got stuff in you I never seen in anybody. You could be president, king of the world." Zachary knew if he'd finished high school, gone to college, he'd be pouring over ancient manuscripts, researching empires, teaching history. That's what he always wanted.

The rapid thumping of a blown-out tire and the truck veered left. Zachary leaned on the wheel fighting the swerve and eased his foot off the gas. The thumping slowed as he steered onto the right shoulder and part way into the ditch.

Nate hopped down from the seat leaving his door ajar.

Zachary grabbed the tire iron and jack. Cars and trucks drove by at speed while he reached into the truck bed, hauled out a balding tire on a good rim and swung it to the ground. The wheel bounced and turned twice before coming to rest. "Nate, you best stay clear of this traffic."

Coughing from dust raised by speeding vehicles, the man loosened lug nuts a quarter turn and yelled to his boy over the din of traffic, "This kinda thing happened back on the frontier. A wagon wheel split or maybe a spoke gave way or an iron rim worked its way off. Back then that meant trouble." He pumped the jack. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Nate peering around the front of the truck. "Thought I told you to stay clear. How am I gonna explain to your mother when one of these big trucks squashes you flat?"

Nate let out peals of laughter.

“You be real careful, okay?”

“Sure, Dad. I’m all right here.”

“Then you might as well learn how this is done.” He spun off the heavy lug nuts, dropping each one in his shirt pocket. “Always figure a way not to lose these nuts. Wheel’s useless without ‘em.” Sliding off the rim, he swung it into the truck bed then lifted the spare into place. “The idea, Nate, is to skip every other lug so they all snug up equal.” Three times around with the tire iron and Zachary jacked down the truck, wincing when he gave each nut a final torque then dumped the tools behind the seat. “Let’s go.”

The boy ran around the other side and Zachary cranked the starter till the engine roared to life, revved the accelerator three times then let the engine drop to idle. A cloud of white smoke drifted forward and he slammed his door. After a couple minutes he spotted a gap in traffic and pulled onto the highway. “We gotta drop that flat off at McCullough’s.”

“Uh huh.” The boy was already back at his book. Zachary knew that Nate couldn’t bear a single moment of monotony. Occupational hazard for those at the head of the line when God handed out the brains. Zachary also knew he didn’t suffer from that particular condition, but he was fine with that.

4

They turned at the exit ramp. A few miles and they cleared the big bridge at the paper mill then crawled past tight rows of storefronts, some closed for business and he counted four boarded up. They halted at a light—first in a line of vehicles waiting for nobody.

“That paper mill is huge.”

The man glanced at his boy. “Yeah. They make lots of it.”

“I’d like to see inside.”

That didn’t get a comment. Zachary flexed his fingers and looked both ways. Still nobody on the crossroad and he decided to risk it. Stepping on the gas, he pulled forward through the red light watching for a squad car. None appeared and the car behind followed him through the intersection.

A few more blocks and they turned into McCullough’s garage and parked by the big overhead door. Zachary lifted the flat from his truck bed, dropped it to the ramp then rolled it out of the way. He knew Big Jim McCullough from way

back when the two of them worked together as machinists—wild times in their youth before Jim left the trade to run his father's garage. He remembered the funeral. No wake—just some words spoken over an old man's grave in a cold wind. Jim wanted it that way and Zachary respected that. He remembered years later, standing with six men lifting the casket of Jim's wife. Watching it lowered into the hole. Everybody knew she had money but Jim never put any in the business—seemed to run the little single-bay shop for something to do. How could a master machinist be satisfied with that? Now he lived like a hermit, alone with his boy and Jeth always seemed to find one kind of trouble or another.

Zachary caught Nate's eye. "Watch what you lean on in there. Mom'll have a fit if you get grease on your shirt again."

They stepped into the grimy glass-walled office and Zachary nodded at the wide red face of Big Jim McCullough.

Jim rolled his eyes to the ceiling, almost comically but if he were trying to say something, it carried no meaning to Zachary.

"I left a flat out front, Jim. Any chance you can you fix it by morning?"

Big Jim raised both arms in the air and for the first time, Zachary noticed a scrawny kid, taxi-cab yellow hair sticking out from his head like nails. The kid stood facing the huge man at chest level, picking through his pockets.

Nate grabbed his father's arm.

A pinched voice from behind, "We got company, Jack."

Zachary turned to see a gangly figure, tight black tee shirt, shaved head. *Baldy*—that's what he'd call him. Zachary's lip curled at the thought. And the

yellow haired kid—*Yellow Jack*—right out of the game. This was serious but he couldn't help but chuckle quietly to himself.

Baldy raised a revolver at Zachary—a .38 maybe a .32—then moved to block the door. He used the muzzle to gesture toward the corner—two quick twitches. “Over there, old man.”

Zachary caught McCullough’s smirk. Jim didn’t seem to take the situation seriously at all. It was his place getting robbed and Zachary wondered about that as he obediently moved to the Pennzoil display, wishing he’d left Nate in the truck, wanting to shield him with his body, just in case the guy actually pulled the trigger. He figured the gunman about mid-twenties—*Yellow Jack* no more than sixteen.

“Tried to warn you.” McCullough barely mouthed the last word before Yellow Jack threw an elbow into his mid-section.

Jim just glanced down at him, not showing any visible reaction at all. “Be nice, kid,” his voice rumbled, gentle, low—a timbre that implied genuine threat.

Nate sidled out from behind his father and Zachary silently willed him back.

Without success.

Yellow Jack continued searching McCullough’s bib overall pockets while the big man leaned against the counter, his wide belly shoved out, his greasy hands raised like in the movies and all the time the smirk that seemed so incongruous to Zachary.

“Look how many pockets he’s got.”

"Quit fooling around, Jack. Let's get the cash and get out." Baldy walked around the counter and punched the cash register. The bell sounded. "Nothin' here."

"Hey lookit this wad he was carryin'." Yellow Jack held up a fat roll of bills, bound with a rubber band. "Had it right here," pointing at McCullough's denim bibs.

Baldy turned up a palm. "Pass it over." He caught the wad with his free hand and stuffed it in a hip pocket then closed on Zachary. "Give."

The gun barrel moved around and around, about a five inch circle. Zachary knew for sure he could take it from the guy but kept thinking about Nate standing beside him.

He stared at the muzzle.

Dug into a back pocket.

Tossed his wallet on the counter.

Baldy backed away and fingered through it. Again the pinched voice, "Not much here—that all you got, old man?" He lifted a Hershey bar from the shelf and tilted his head toward his partner. "Jack!"

Yellow Jack searched Zachary's pockets then shrugged, holding out a cell phone.

"It's a cheap pre-pay."

"Take it." Baldy spat on the floor. "Another zero. Man, you're nothin'. How 'bout the boy?"

Nate held out some change in an open palm and Zachary felt a tinge of

heat at his ears and face. The guy looked hard at him then grabbed the coins from the boy's hand. "Not enough to buy any good stuff, kid."

Out of the corner of his eye, Zachary watched Nate's excited look. He knew he better get command of that boy quick. Tapping his shoulder, he spoke in soft tones. "Think about the game, Nate. Three more deer are walking close to the trail—a clean shot."

Nate looked up and grinned. "I'm taking aim at the large doe."

"A head shot—you won't have to chase that one. The others are running off. Now let's see you dress it out."

"Shutup you crazy old man. You're not makin' sense." Baldy turned and strolled out the door and Yellow Jack ran after him.

Zachary watched through the station windows, paused a moment then peered out the door. Nobody in sight. He bent down close to Nate. "You feel okay?"

"Sure."

He lifted the boy and placed him behind the counter. Nate squatted there among stacks of magazines, looking uncomfortable.

"Stay put till I get back. You coming, Jim?"

McCullough leaned back, his huge hands resting on the counter. "What for, Zachary? They're gone, now."

"Then keep an eye on my boy." Zachary pushed through the door, glancing both ways. Nobody. A big SUV pulled up beside the pumps and a guy with a tie got out, used a credit card then slipped the nozzle in his tank.

Zachary rounded the garage. Paint from a worn out tobacco ad peeled off the brick sidewall. The ramp gave way to a dirt track, scrub trees ahead as he stepped around piles of junk. The hot breeze carried the faint sound of voices. How dumb could they be hanging around back of the station—yet somehow he'd expected it.

He found an old side-view mirror. Placed it on the ground. Slowly slid it across the dust with the toe of his boot, past the corner of the building.

He crouched down close and smiled. From there he could see around the wall without signaling his presence.

Baldy and Yellow Jack stood by a 50-gallon oil drum, the pistol butt showing above the older guy's belt. He could just hear Baldy hiss at his partner then saw him snatch the roll of bills from the drum while Yellow Jack argued in low tones then went quiet.

It looked like Baldy stiffed his partner out of his cut. Zachary wasn't building a supply of warm feelings for this punk and the guy had taken Nate's small change.

A moment and Yellow Jack ran off, out of range of the mirror. Baldy turned toward Zachary's position.

When he cleared the corner, Zachary stepped out and bulled him to the ground then stood hard on his solar plexus knocking the wind out of him. He calmly reached down and retrieved the pistol, slipping it into his own pocket.

Still on his back Baldy slowly regained his breathing then groped at his belt.

Zachary knew the guy wanted to use the gun and he patted the material of his work pants—a heavy hunk of machined steel weighed in his pocket. When the guy tried to scramble to his feet Zachary drove a knee into his chest and knocked him back. Breathing hard, Baldy produced a knife and flicked it open.

Zachary backed just out of reach in a crouch, saying nothing, focused on his target as if watching through a lens.

Again the pinched voice, “That was a mistake, old man,” and he followed his words with a string of obscenities. Just as he started to his feet, Zachary laid a front punch straight at his face, the full weight of his body behind it. Baldy crumpled to the ground. Blood oozed from his mouth and nose.

Letting out a lungful of air, Zachary flexed his hand, blood beading from two knuckles. Just another tough guy. Always plenty of that kind. Still, he knew a couple of his own crew that were no better.

Baldy lay still, breathing steady and Zachary peeled back a bloody lip. A couple teeth bent in was all. He felt the back of the guy’s neck. Seemed okay. He checked the pulse. Strong.

He found the roll of cash and the phone and dug for Nate’s small change. Standing, he took one more look at the guy then slipped the knife in his own pocket next to the pistol. Stepping across to the oil drum, he found his wallet, cards and papers scattered across the ground. He stooped to pick it all up, carefully putting everything back in place.

Alerted by a faint groan, he glanced up and across at Baldy as the youth scrambled to his feet and ran.

Zachary knew he couldn't catch the guy and he uttered a curse. For the first time he noticed the pounding of his own pulse and paused to bring himself under control, taking slow, deep breaths.

Turning back, he circled the building. Through the grimy glass he saw his boy sitting on a stool, talking excitedly between bites of a chocolate bar. Zachary pushed open the glass door. "What's this, a party? Nate, I told you to stay down. Jim, you call this watching my kid?"

"What you take me for, Zachary? A baby sitter?" The deep voice barred any argument.

"You call the police?"

"Nope."

McCullough held a stack of bills in his huge hands and shuffled through them like a deck of cards. "Them kids got nothin' but a roll o' ones. Thirty bucks." He thumped his chest with a finger. "I keep it ready in this here pocket where they's sure to find it. The real money—well it goes in a better place. Cheapest insurance I ever bought. Stopped usin' the cash register after the first time I got robbed."

Zachary counted thirty ones, just like Jim said. He placed his tens in his wallet, rolled the ones, and stretched the rubber band over the wad. Then he handed Nate his coins.

"Thanks Dad."

Zachary nodded. "Jim, call the police."

"What for? All they do is make trouble. Hey you got my thirty bucks,"

and he reached out and grabbed the roll. "Thanks, Zachary. This'll pay for fixin' that flat and maybe go against your tab. Now don't worry none about cops. I don't need 'em."

Zachary set the knife and gun on the counter and led Nate out without another word.

The boy was clearly excited. They climbed in the truck and when they slammed their doors Nate fired off a string of words. "That was a real robbery—a real gun—was that a switchblade? Those guys looked mean—where'd they go? How'd you take the gun away? How'd you get the money back?"

"Slow down. Okay let's see: In order—real robbery, real gun, real switchblade, real mean and they ran away."

He speed-dialed home and Rebecca picked up immediately.

"Hi beautiful. Couldn't call earlier."

A pause at the other end. "You sound tense."

"Sorry. Flat tire." He didn't want to mention the robbery. "We're at Jim's."

"All right, Zachary. Tell me about it whenever you're ready."

"Be home real soon. Gotta go."

He heard her say, "Drive carefully," as he powered down the phone.

Nate resumed his questions. "You didn't say how you took the gun away. How'd you get the money back?"

"And I'm not going to. Don't ever try it. I learned to fight in the army—and other places." He quickly squelched some bad memories. "What do you

know about drugs?"

"I know about them."

"Well, the kid was doped up, so it wasn't that hard."

"Why didn't Mr. McCullough call the police?"

"That's complicated. He's not the brightest guy but he's the most independent man I know. Seemed to crawl into a hole after—" Zachary stopped, not wanting to talk about the man's personal tragedies. "That old garage of his—haven't seen one like it since I was your age. He doesn't run it like a business. Not sure it clears a profit. He sits in there on his stool like a king at court. Now, if he owned a piece of the machine shop... Bet you didn't know Jim was once a fine machinist. Like I said, he's independent."

"You're not answering my question."

The boy was right and Zachary stopped rambling. "Short answer is he hates outside interference. Already been robbed a couple times this year."

"I read about those in the paper."

Zachary glanced at him. So his twelve-year-old read the news. That was good for spike of pride. Still, the papers didn't tell the whole story. "Here's the part that gets me, Nate. The second robbery, McCullough scares off a couple druggies with a shotgun loaded with slugs. Just fires over their heads and they run. Then he calls the police and they arrest him. You get that? The police arrest McCullough right in his own place. Don't chase the addicts. Don't search for 'em. They get Jim for firing without imminent danger. So you might imagine that might do something to his civic attitude. Now it looks like he's got a

system—doesn't need the police. To me, the whole thing seems wrong.”

He slowed and turned the corner onto their street. “Listen—when we get home, don't mention anything about the robbery to your mother.”

“Why not?”

“Just keep it to yourself.” He made eye contact and the boy still looked eager. Maybe if he started the game, he could calm him down. He drove past their house and headed around the block. “Seems to me you finally shot a deer.”

“You didn't stop.”

“Nothing can happen till we get there. Another couple minutes won't matter now. Play the game.”

Nate smiled. “Help me dress out this deer, Pa.”

“That's your job.”

* * *

When Nate finished gutting the deer, Zachary studied the carcass and scratched his chin. “No it's too far from camp to drag it. We'll pack it out.”

He and Nate quartered and skinned the animal.

“Make some poles about this big around.” Zachary indicated a circle with his thumb and forefinger and Nate cut green wood, stubbing off twigs and branches. Together they formed pack frames and lashed the meat and hide securely leaving the ribcage and head for the scavengers.

Zachary helped his boy lift his pack and checked that his leather arm

straps fit then hoisted his own load and led the way home. He planned to smoke a good portion of that meat, make jerky then salt the rest. "Look sharp now. Keep your eyes and ears open till we get this to camp. Don't want no surprise from a bear or pack of wolves."

5

Zachary took his place at the kitchen table between Nate and the baby, thrilled—anticipating what was to come. He remembered the importance of birthdays to a young boy. Anna waved a doll from her high chair. He watched her reach across her tray and intentionally drop her doll to the floor then cry as if it were an accident.

Nate ducked under the table, retrieved the toy and presented it to his sister.

The lights went out. Moving into the doorway, Rebecca paused just a moment, standing tall, carrying a chocolate-frosted layer cake. The candle flames pulled toward her and their light playing against her straight black hair as she glided forward, sliding one stocking foot before the other, breaking into song.

Zachary joined in mid verse, “Happy birthday dear Na-ate, happy birthday to you.”

Rebecca placed the cake before Nate then displayed it to Zachary before again setting it flat. When Nate blew, twelve candles guttered and no longer lit

his face.

Clapping and hoorays. Zachary cupped his hands like a megaphone.

“Speech, speech.”

“Zachary, don’t embarrass him.”

“He has to—family tradition.”

Nate pushed back his chair, stood erect in mock dignity and spread his arms. “Thank you, thank you, dear family.” Nate’s politician voice. “Please accept my gratitude on this glorious day. Let’s eat.”

Mom and Dad cheered and clapped again. Anna imitated them, slapping her palms together, fingers splayed wide while they shouted their congratulations. When the noise died Zachary switched on the lights.

He slipped out to the living room, hearing laughter from the kitchen, unable to make out the words.

He found a note.

I bought an extra gift for Nate. You’ll see it later. Hope you don’t mind. XOX Love, Rebecca XOX

He dwelled on those X and O marks, finding endearments more and more significant with each passing year, and pondered over what she’d bought the boy and just why she kept it from him.

Pulling aside an old bed sheet revealed his two cardboard boxes stacked high, each wrapped in leftover red paper printed with images of candy canes and

Christmas trees. Used to be a boy got a gun when he turned twelve and Zachary longed to take him hunting. Now kids wanted their own computers. He shrugged. He'd bought the best machine at the store but knew it didn't have the utility of a good shotgun. With a twelve gauge a man could hunt grouse then load slugs at deer season. With a computer—

He leaned forward against the boxes and slid them across the carpet and down the hall, bursting into the fluorescent glare of the kitchen.

* * *

11:00 p.m. with the house quiet for an hour, Zachary sat in the darkened living room, his cardboard box of history books, old documents and notes on the floor.

Finished for the night, memories his own twelfth birthday haunted him and he fought them off.

He kicked the box just out of reach. Fitted headphones to his ears. Cranked up the sound. The notes pierced. Rhythm pounded. *Misty Mountain Hop*. Music before his time but he loved it.

Holding a bottle of Jack Daniels, he judged what remained while the whiskey sloshed behind the label. Might as well do it right. He hadn't had a drink since his own birthday, about two months and he stretched out his legs thinking of his father, sitting in *his* favorite chair, across from Zachary's mother, loading a rifle, squeezing the trigger, blowing a hole in the plaster above her head.

Zachary must've been six at the time. Ran off, crying, thinking his mother dead. Huddled by the garbage cans he'd sobbed till she came, leading him back, soothing him, tucking him in bed.

The track ended. Ears throbbed. He chugged another can of Old Style, then took a swig of Sour Mash directly from the bottle. Six boilermakers was his limit—his personal definition of a bender.

He tapped the button, skipping to *Stairway to Heaven*—his personal favorite when he met Rebecca over fifteen years back. They'd married young—married even though the doctors said she'd never have kids. Zachary told her that wishing wouldn't make it happen but Rebecca prayed and prayed. She lost the first baby then had Nate. Claimed it was a miracle. Maybe it was—Zachary didn't know about those things. Then came Anna, the hysterectomy, and no more children. Those kids could never know how much they meant to Rebecca—and to him. The importance of children was a wonder and a mystery to Zachary.

His memories abruptly turned angry. How could a father treat a girl like Rebecca that way?

He remembered wanting to kill the man, knocking him down, carrying Rebecca out of that house forever, waiting for the doctor's hurried words. With a heavy sigh he again leaned back reliving her calm, steady gaze from the hospital bed and her words that he'd never forget.

You are my rescuer.

Zachary squeezed out a rare tear. He married her right there in the hospital. She was never going back to that house.

Looking up, he found Nate staring at him.

No warning. Just showed up in his bare feet.

Zachary rubbed his eyes, pulled off the headphones and in the dim light, just made out the pattern of Nate's light cotton pajamas. "You're s'posed t'be asleep, Nate" He caught himself slurring his words and brought his voice under control. "Back to bed."

"You never said good night."

"G'night, Nate. Happy birthday."

"What's wrong?"

"Not a thing, don't worry 'bout me. Was just thinkin' about things a long time ago. Go to bed."

"Wrestle me first."

Zachary paused, then pushed himself out of the chair, took a step to steady his balance and struggled to keep his voice clear. "Not like that Nate. Stand looser. Move that foot back. Get your hands ready."

"I'll do it like Chiang."

"From school or the game?"

"Both."

"Can he fight?"

"Oh yes." Nate grinned.

Zachary paused a moment and belched. "S'cuse me. Okay you look about right. From there you can punch, kick or throw me. Be ready, I'm comin' at you *now*." He lunged forward with intentional sloth, hands outstretched

awkwardly.

The boy ducked under his arms.

Zachary felt his ankles squeeze together and toppled forward. Nate crawled on his back almost immediately, laughing, tightening a forearm across his father's neck. Zachary swung an arm back. Locked the boy's head. Rolled over and pinned him.

Nate didn't make a sound.

"Truce." Zachary rolled away and closed his eyes, waiting for his breathing to slow and his head to clear. Then he heard Nate wheeze. Turning, he saw the boy doubled up. He shook him but Nate sucked at the air, his face white.

A jolt of fear then Zachary grabbed the boy's nose and chin, pressed his mouth tight and forced air into him.

Then again.

He shook him and Nate coughed then breathed deeply and Zachary heaved a sigh of relief.

Without warning the lights came on and Rebecca shoved her husband aside with surprising strength. He watched her bend over the boy, wondering what she'd seen, what she thought.

She lifted Nate's chin, tilted his head, murmured something then wiped his brow with her loose white nightgown and ran a hand through his hair.

Then turning to Zachary, "What did you do? What? *What?*" The last word a scream. She slapped him hard then raised her fists and struck him full in the face.

Zachary threw up his hands as she pummeled his chest and shoulders. He grabbed handfuls of white linen and rolled back, pulling her with him, her black hair in his face, the smell of it sensual above the pain of the blows.

She hit him again.

He pulled her close and rolled over, leaned his weight on her long legs then grabbed her wrists. “He’s fine. Fine. It’s okay. An accident—just an accident. Got stuck between me and the floor.”

She glared face-to-face. “You hurt him.”

A ribbon of skin showed between the folds of her gown and he tried to fasten a button.

She pushed him off.

“Why are you fighting?” Nate’s voice rang in Zachary’s ears.

Rebecca held her gown closed as she stroked the boy’s hair. “Tell mama what happened.”

“Nothing. We were having fun. I’m fine now, Mom.”

She again glanced at Nate then gave Zachary a wary look, hesitating.

“I was showing Dad a wrestling move.”

Rebecca gently touched Nate’s face and peered into his eyes.

She stood and faced Zachary, “We’ll talk about this alone.” She abruptly turned, clutching her gown as she climbed the stairs, her long black hair in disarray.

Zachary’s cheekbones and eyes burned from the blows. He circled an arm around his boy’s shoulders. Nate’s hair brushed his face as he lowered his voice

to the small ear. "You feel all right now? Listen to me. That move I used—don't try it on anybody or you'll get killed. Only worked 'cause I'm bigger than you. Sure you're okay?"

Nate nodded. "Why were you and Mom fighting?"

Zachary quietly laughed. "Ah, Nate, that's what happens when a man gets between a bear and her cub."

"Mom isn't hurt?"

"I'm the one got mauled." It surprised him, how quickly he sobered-up as an ache grew at the back of his head. "Off to bed now, scamp."

Nate ran to his room.

* * *

The light went on when Zachary plodded up the stairs. Rebecca sat on the bed wearing a fresh pair of silk pajamas. "*Zachary Boldt*." She said it with a crack like a whip. "If you ever raise a hand against my son again—"

"That how you got it figured?" He sat down beside her. "You never called me a liar before."

"I want you to take anger counseling."

"You're the only one lost your temper." He slipped an arm behind her then kissed her full on the mouth.

"Rebecca turned her back to him. "You smell like a bar fight."

"You know I wouldn't hurt our boy."

“You were drunk.”

“Rebecca, I never even spank the kids. That was just clean horseplay.”

He moved her long hair aside and kissed the nape of her neck. “Actually, I enjoyed that bar fight with you.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, holding his gaze a moment—her way of judging the truth. Then she went silent for a long moment.

Finally, “All right, maybe I jumped to conclusions. I guess I believe you.”

“You guess?”

She nodded then leaned against him.

Zachary wrapped his arms around his wife from behind and squeezed her to his body. He tickled her and when she giggled he undid her blouse.

She tilted her head back on his shoulder and whispered, “Not too loud—Nate’s still up.”

He nudged her ear with his nose.

“Zachary, if you really want to wrestle with me, go wash the whiskey out of your mouth.”

“A fair request, my lady.”

“I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“Don’t worry about it. Doesn’t matter. Nothing matters.” He closed his eyes. “*Everything is meaningless. I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*”

Rebecca pulled away and turned to face him. “I’ve never heard you quote the Bible. When did you learn that?”

Zachary slid the pajamas down her shoulders. "My father made me memorize it when I turned twelve. Only verse I know but it seems to fit."

"Didn't you read the rest of the book? Solomon wrote it to show that the world is meaninglessness without God. Life is rich with meaning."

"I'd like to believe that." He kissed her again and this time she didn't turn away.

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