

BREAK  
AND  
ENTER

*AN AVONDALE STORY*

ÉTIENNE

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THE AVONDALE STORIES

Bodies of Work

Drag and Drop

Break and Enter

THE FOREVER SERIES

The Path to Forever

Prognosis: Forever

Published by

DREAMSPINNER PRESS

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ETIENNE



*Dreamspinner Press*

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Break and Enter  
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This book is dedicated to George and Mike, who keep providing me with inspiration. Without them there would be no story.

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To my long-suffering editor, Jim Kennedy, who patiently picks his way through the land mines (otherwise known as commas) that I strew across the pages with complete abandon, carefully removing the ones that aren't needed.

To my partner of many years, my first and most earnest critic.

And to the many fans of George and Mike, who keep asking for more.

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# Author's Note

SINCE the first George and Mike story appeared, many people have written to inquire if the places described therein are real, and I'm happy to say that they are. Avondale is a very real neighborhood in Jacksonville, situated between Roosevelt Boulevard (US 17) and the St. Johns River. It is bounded on the northeast by McDuff Avenue, which separates it from the neighborhood known as Riverside, and on the southwest by Fishweir Creek.

After the great fire of 1901 leveled much of downtown Jacksonville, destroying over two thousand buildings and leaving nearly ten thousand people homeless, the Springfield neighborhood immediately north of downtown was developed. Then the city began to move west and south along the St. Johns River, and first Riverside, then Avondale were born. Said to be the first planned community in Florida, Avondale was developed in the 1920s.

The restaurants frequented by our guys are very real and pretty much as described in the stories:

- Biscottis, which opened in the fall of 1993, is a very popular restaurant located in the Avondale shopping area.

- The Derby House, formerly Gorgi's Derby House, has been an institution in the Five Points shopping district of Riverside for many years.

- The Goal Post, located at the extreme southwestern boundary of Avondale, is a popular sandwich shop.

- The Pizza Italian, also in Five Points, was opened by a Greek immigrant in 1976, and he has been dishing out good pizza, wonderful lasagna, and the best meatball subs in town ever since.

- Richard's Sandwich Shop in Five Points has for more than twenty-five years offered the best camel riders\* in town.

- The Loop Pizza Grill, home of the best grilled chicken sandwich in town and locally referred to simply as The Loop, began in Jacksonville in the late eighties and has grown to some twenty locations in three states. The Avondale location, situated on Fishweir Creek, is popular for its deck, where one can sit and watch sea birds foraging in the tidal estuary while eating.

\*The term camel rider might sound like a pejorative to some in today's politically correct society, but in Jacksonville—which has one of the largest Middle Eastern communities on the East Coast—it's the name of a sandwich offered at the numerous sandwich shops around town operated by people whose ancestors fled the economic decline and religious persecution of the Ottoman Empire.



Predominately Christian, they came from Syria, Lebanon, and other parts of the Middle East and settled in Jacksonville during the early twentieth century and shortly before.

All of the sandwich shops offer sandwiches in a pocket of pita bread. The camel rider is a pita pocket stuffed with lettuce, slices of tomato, cheese, and cold cuts with some mustard and a dash of olive oil. The camel rider is a very simple but amazingly satisfying sandwich.

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## • Prologue •

*THE night was dark and overcast, and the large trees in front of the house very nearly blocked all the illumination from the streetlight at the end of the block. A dark-clad figure slipped out of the alley and into the backyard of the house, keeping close to the dense shrubbery. He slipped between a thick row of azaleas and the house and peeked into the first-floor window, which he knew opened into the library/den, and saw that the room was dark, as was the rest of the house. He had, in fact, watched its sole occupant drive away some minutes earlier, but he was naturally cautious.*

*Stupid old fuck, the burglar thought as he carefully eased the window open, using his gloved fingers. He always goes out on Thursday evenings, and he always locks the doors, but never the windows. Serves him right. When the window had been pushed open far enough, he slipped over the sill and closed the window behind him.*

*Payback time, he thought as he leisurely walked through the house, placing small and easily sold or pawned valuables into one of the two bags he had brought along for the purpose. He'd allowed himself to be picked up by the owner a few weeks earlier in one of the gay bars, and had spent a weekend allowing the pathetic old queen to suck his dick and slobber all over him as often as he liked. During the course of that long and miserable weekend, he had spotted enough goodies to make it all worthwhile.*

*Thirty minutes later, he carefully eased his two bags of booty onto the ground outside the library/den window. Then he slipped out through the window, quietly closed it from the outside, gathered his bags, and disappeared into the night.*

IT WAS Friday afternoon, and I was more than ready for the weekend as I settled down at my desk after attending an interminable meeting on the top floor of our building. At times like this, I almost wished that the sheriff hadn't adopted a more personal and "hands-on" management style, but I fully understood the need to make a complete break from the somewhat hidebound and autocratic approach his immediate predecessors had taken to law enforcement. The late and totally unlamented undersheriff had been a prime example of the previous regime. The man had been a "by the book" clown—and not very bright.

I had heard my boss say of the former undersheriff that "an original idea and a cold drink of water would have killed him." Stupid or not, it had taken the sheriff more than a year to ease the guy out of the hierarchy.

A knock on my open door roused me from my self-pity, and I heard a familiar voice say, "Got a minute, Captain?"

"For you, Lieutenant, always. Come in and have a seat."

Janet Sanchez settled down in one of my side chairs. Still on the good side of forty (barely), she was fairly trim and not unattractive. Her somewhat unique Cuban/Irish heritage had contributed to her appearance, which was vaguely Hispanic and slightly exotic.

"What's up, Janet?"

"Same old, same old. We're still trying to wrap up the big case."

"And?"

"I still have more body parts and videos than I have bodies."

A few months earlier, we had shut down a huge pornography operation that had included, in addition to the usual hard core XXX-rated gay porn, snuff and torture films, and Lieutenant Sanchez, formerly Sergeant Sanchez, was still tallying the results. Even Janet, with all her

research skills, had not come up with a final body count—simply because in some cases, we had body parts and/or porn films that couldn't be tied to a specific victim due to the fact that all the bodies had yet to be located.

“Still?”

The raid on a house on the extreme northern edge of the city had produced a ton of cash, a cache of porn/snuff/torture films on DVD, and numerous specimen jars containing male genitalia.

“Yes, Sir. As you know, those guys were meticulous about marking their trophies and their videos with names and dates. The problem is they used only nicknames in many cases.”

“Lieutenant, I know you like to dot your *i*'s and cross your *t*'s so you can close a case with everything all neat and tidy. That being said, you have to understand that sometimes it just isn't possible.”

“I realize that, at some level, but I still don't like it.”

“You don't have to like it. The bottom line is that we made a major bust and, in so doing, solved a couple dozen murders. It's time to shut it down and move on. Leave the mop-up to the FBI—they've got more manpower than we do, and a much bigger budget.”

“But—”

At that point, I cut her off. “But nothing. Shut it down and close the file by the end of the day Monday—it's time to move on.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said, somewhat reluctantly.

“If it makes you feel any better, after Monday you're not going to have any spare time to devote to old cases for a while.”

“Why? What's happening?”

“I can't tell you anything else right now. You'll have to wait until our Monday afternoon meeting.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said with visible reluctance as she got up to leave my office.

That little exchange was probably the high point of my day, and I was ready for home, hearth, and some TLC as I got into my city-issued car, but even that didn't come about quite as I had hoped. The minute I opened the back door of our house, I was greeted by Thor, our resident Irish Setter,

himself in need of TLC as he rolled over on his back and demanded a belly rub.

In the master bedroom, I stripped and headed for the shower. Stepping under the hot spray, I closed my eyes and allowed the water to wash away the tension. I must have zoned out for a minute, because I was jolted to a state of alertness by a pair of very friendly arms encircling me from behind.

“Finally,” I said.

“Finally?” Mike, my partner, parroted.

“Babe, I came home in dire need of TLC—I hope you’re going to deliver.”

“You bet.”

He delivered—in spades—first in the shower, and again in the bedroom. By the time we were both sated, it was too late to go to the wine shop in Five Points and join our impromptu tasting group, so we opted to stay home and order a pizza. We settled down on the enclosed porch of our house to enjoy our pizza and a bottle of Shiraz, and between us, we managed to demolish the bottle of wine and most of a large pizza. Thor, of course, got his share of crusts and bits and pieces.

As I finished my last slice, I said, “I wonder how long we’ll be able to keep this up?”

“Keep what up?”

“Eating pizza and other fattening foods. We’re not getting any younger.”

“Babe, as long as we keep up our exercise schedule, I don’t think we’re in any danger of getting fat.”

“Maybe, but I read somewhere that after you pass thirty, your body doesn’t process food as efficiently as it used to.”

“Only if you’re a couch potato. Besides, all you have to do is look at our vitals.”

“Our vitals?”

“We’re still holding our own at one ninety, an appropriate weight for guys who are a couple of inches over six feet tall, and we still wear the same size clothes we’ve worn for years. How many guys our age do we

know that can honestly say that? For that matter, how many guys our height, weight, and age still have thirty-four-inch waists?”

“Okay, I give up. We can still eat the occasional pizza without guilt.”

“Damn straight.”

The next morning we went, as usual, to the Y on Riverside Avenue. As soon as we were dressed in running shorts and shoes, we headed out to perform a local ritual known as “running the bridges.” This involved running across the St. Johns River via the Acosta Bridge, a high-rise span whose approaches were separated from the YMCA complex by a couple of office buildings. On the other side of the river, we followed a side street to the Main Street Bridge, which was an old-style elevator bridge, and ran across it to the north bank of the river. Then we turned around and retraced our steps. It was a good workout, especially the somewhat steep up-ramp to the Acosta Bridge on the return journey.

Back in the locker room, we removed our sweat-soaked shorts and retrieved Speedos from our bags. Wearing the Speedos, we took a brief shower before swimming a few laps in the pool to cool down, and from the pool, we went to the steam room for a bit. After yet another shower, we went back into the locker room, ready to get dressed.

Before we could dress, Mike led me to the room adjacent to the main locker room that held a row of vanities and mirrors, complete with hair dryers and other accessories. He pulled his towel from around his waist, hung it on a hook, and stepped onto the scales.

Looking at the huge circular display, he said, “It says here that I can afford to have a high-calorie breakfast.”

He stepped off the scales and I took his place. “So can I,” I said, reading the display.

“Admit it, babe, that pizza last night didn’t do any damage.”

“Perhaps, but I’m not going to throw caution to the winds.”

We went back to our lockers, retrieved our clothes, and got dressed. Ten minutes later, we were waiting for a table at the Derby House restaurant in Five Points. Situated on a triangular-shaped lot where two of the five streets that gave Five Points its name met, the building had housed a restaurant for decades. In recent years, as the neighborhoods of Riverside

and Avondale became heavily gay, the Derby House had become a sort of gay hangout, especially on the weekends.

We had been at our table just long enough to have been handed menus by the waitress when Carl and Jim joined us. Carl was a rather cute redhead in his twenties who had recently been promoted from detective to sergeant, and reported to Janet Sanchez. Jim, his partner, was a CPA who had left one of the big national firms in the not-too-distant past to start his own practice.

“Hi, guys,” I said. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Yeah,” Jim said. “Imagine that.”

In point of fact, we ran into Carl and Jim almost every weekend, either at the Derby House at breakfast, or across the street at the Pizza Italian in the evening.

We spent the rest of the weekend relaxing, so I was somewhat refreshed when I got to my office Monday morning, and was therefore in a fairly good mood when my three lieutenants gathered that afternoon for our weekly meeting. Lieutenants Janet Sanchez, Gregg Parker, and David Boyer came into my office in a group, and I waited until all of my subordinates were comfortably seated before I began the meeting. One by one, they reported on the events of the past week as they related to their particular spheres of influence. Janet began her report by mentioning a series of burglaries.

“Whoa,” Gregg said, “go over that again.”

“My team has been dealing with a series of burglaries of the homes of older gay men,” Janet said. “It seems that there are a few young gay men—drifters, if you will—who go home with these older guys for a night, or a weekend, or in some cases, longer. Later, having thoroughly cased the premises, they return in the dead of night and rob them.”

“Gregg,” I said, “why do you ask?”

“Because I have had at least one similar case.”

“Now that you mention it,” David said, “so do I.”

“Okay, guys,” I said. “As soon as we’re through with this meeting, it’s time for the three of you to huddle over this—just like you did last year with the drag queen murders.”

When they stopped talking, I said, “If nobody has anything else, I have an announcement to make.”

That got their attention, and there was silence, so I said, “The powers that be have authorized one more sergeant and four detectives to form a new team.”

Everyone began to talk at once until I raised a hand and said, “Whoa. There’s more.”

I waited for the group to get quiet.

“Lieutenant Sanchez only has one team—the major case team,” I said. “It has also been decided that the major case team has done so well that she can take on another team, so she gets the new sergeant. That being said, it won’t be a sergeant that’s new to the job.”

“Meaning what?” David said.

“Meaning that either you or Gregg are going to lose a sergeant and at least one detective.”

“Who?” Gregg said.

“We’re going to have a little lottery,” I said.

“Say what?” David said.

“Janet is going to get one sergeant and one detective, who will be transferred out from under one or both of you. That way, everybody will have to share the responsibility of taking on one or more new guys. The fairest way I can think of to accomplish that is to have a drawing.”

I took six small slips of paper, laid them facedown on my desk, and shuffled them around. “Each of these slips has the name of a sergeant who works for either Gregg or David. Please select one of them, Lieutenant Sanchez.”

Janet leaned across my desk, took one of the pieces of paper, and I scooped up the rest of them and moved them to one side. Then I removed a small box from my desk drawer and placed it on top of the desk.

“Okay, Lieutenant,” I said, “this box contains the names of all the detectives on the other teams. Pick one slip of paper from this box.”

She did so.

“Now tell us who your new sergeant and detective are.”



She told us the names.

“Okay,” I said, “that’s it, then. Looks like David lost a sergeant, Gregg lost a detective, and all three of you need to go on a little recruiting mission to complete your rosters. Any questions?”

“One question,” David said.

“Shoot.”

“Is there a cubicle available for the new sergeant?”

“There are two unoccupied cubicles in the bull pen area. Take your pick.”

“Is the exam list for sergeant from last year still valid?”

“That’s two questions,” I said, “and yes, it is. So, for that matter, is the list of people who passed the exam for detective.”

“Sorry, Gregg,” David said. “That means you lose another detective. One of your guys is the next person on the sergeant’s list.”

“Boss,” Janet said, “I hope the ‘powers that be’ understand that the major case team’s success is due to the fact that you started it and ran it for all those years. I haven’t had it long enough to take that kind of credit.”

“Modesty doesn’t become you, Lieutenant,” I said. “That being said, you wouldn’t be getting another team if they thought you couldn’t handle it.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Have fun,” I said as they left my office.

I straightened my desk and headed out the door. Before I left the building, I took the elevator up to Chief Bridges’s office, hoping that I would find him still at his desk.

“Come on in and have a seat, George,” the chief said when he saw me standing in his doorway.

“I just wanted to stop by and let you know that I’ve set things in motion regarding the new sergeant and team.”

“How did you handle it?”

“I had a little lottery and let Lieutenant Sanchez draw the name of one sergeant and one detective.”

“How did they take it?”

“Quite well, actually. They’re all busily recruiting as we speak.”

He laughed at that and said, “Give me a minute, and I’ll take the elevator down to the garage with you.”

THE end of May arrived, as did Zeb and Zeke, identical twins whom we had met in Maggie Valley a few years earlier. They came from a rather poor background, their alcohol-abusing father having died shortly after we met them. The boys were hard workers and had done a great deal of painting and other work for us when we acquired rental property. They were happy to have finished their first year of community college and equally happy to be near the beach for the summer and back at work full time in a McDonald’s management training program.

We left the boys in charge of the house and headed to the mountains at the end of the second week in June, arriving at the cabin around two on a Saturday afternoon. As usual, I took Thor up to the deck and let him trot down the side steps to his private fenced-in domain—after a quick glance around to confirm that the fence was still intact.

I went back down to the garage to help Mike unload the groceries we’d purchased in Waynesville, carry the bags up to the kitchen, and put everything away. We went back to the deck, expecting to find Thor waiting at the top of the steps as usual, but he wasn’t there, so I looked down in his run and saw that he was sniffing at the portion of the fence nearest to the back wall of the house. I called him, but he ignored my summons.

“Thor’s acting sort of weird,” I said. “I’m going to get his leash and bring him back up here.”

“Go for it,” Mike said.

I retrieved the leash and went down into Thor’s area. He was still sniffing at the fence, and he was whining. I clipped the leash in place and led him back up to the deck, and said, “Let’s walk around the yard, and see if we can figure out what’s got him so stirred up.”

We led Thor down the entrance steps and around to the back of his run, next to where he had been sniffing. He didn’t stop there. Instead, he

pulled me over to the metal shed that housed the emergency generator and began scratching at the door. I handed the leash to Mike, opened the door, and spotted a small boy curled up on a pile of clothing in one corner of the shed. I walked quietly over to the corner to investigate and saw that he was sound asleep.

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THE kid was filthy but appeared to be otherwise unharmed, so I picked him up and carried him out of the shed.

“What’s this?” Mike said.

“This is what had Thor so agitated.” The boy stirred in my arms and began to whimper, and I said, “He’s starting to wake up, so let’s get him upstairs.”

“Actually, from the smell of him, we’d do better getting him into the bathtub downstairs.”

“You’re right. We’ll do just that.”

Mike led the way, and I carried the boy to the downstairs bathroom, which was the only bathroom with a tub because we’d taken the tub out of the master bath and replaced it with a stall shower shortly after we had purchased the cabin. We filled the tub with warm water and by the time we’d gotten his filthy clothes off of him he was wide awake.

To reassure him, I said, “It looks like you haven’t had a bath in a while, so we’re gonna get you cleaned up, okay?”

He nodded, and Mike said, “Shall I throw these things in the washer?”

“Good idea.”

I used a washcloth and Ivory soap to gently wash the grime off the kid. He didn’t protest, rather he just sat in the water and let me clean him up. Since we occasionally used the downstairs bathroom to bathe Thor, there was a bottle of baby shampoo handy, and I made good use of it on the boy’s hair. Finally, I stood him up and used a showerhead on a flexible hose to rinse him down. Now that his hair was relatively clean, I could see that it was kind of a dirty-blond color.

“He looks pretty clean now,” Mike said, “but what’s wrong with his dick?”

“I don’t know. It looks infected somehow, and I’m reluctant to try to clean it. I think we need to take him to a primary care clinic or an emergency room after a bit. While I dry him off, why don’t you get one of our T-shirts? It’ll swallow him whole, but he won’t have to go around naked.”

“Done,” he said, and he hurried upstairs.

I finished drying the kid and carried him up to the kitchen. Mike met me at the head of the stairs with a T-shirt in hand, and we got the shirt on the boy and took him to the kitchen table.

“Are you hungry?” I asked the boy.

The kid didn’t say anything but nodded his head.

“Mike,” I said, “do we have any soup?”

“Yes, but why soup?”

“Because he’s very thin, almost as though he hasn’t had a square meal in a while,” I said, “and if that’s the case, too much food at once might come right back up.”

“Gotcha.” There was a pause while he rummaged around in the kitchen cabinets. “Tomato or chicken noodle?”

“The latter, I think. It’ll be easier for him to digest.”

“On its way.”

“When you get it started, look up Lucinda’s number at work and dial it for me.”

“Why?”

“Because she knows everyone around here, and she might be able to stop by and possibly identify him.”

“Sure. In fact, she ought to be getting off work just about now.”

A couple of minutes later, he handed me the telephone, saying, “It’s ringing.”

The hotel operator answered, and I asked for Lucinda. A couple of seconds later, I heard her familiar voice say, “Housekeeping.”

“Hi, Lucinda, George Martin here. Are you about to leave the hotel for the day?”

“I was just about to walk out the door. What can I do for you?”

“You can stop by the cabin on your way home. We need your help with something kind of important.”

“Are the boys all right?”

That was a mother speaking, Lucinda being the mother of Zeb and Zeke, so I said, “They were just fine when we left Jacksonville this morning. This is something totally unrelated.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Good. The gate is closed, but you have the code, right?”

“Yes, thanks.”

Mike placed a small bowl of soup and a glass of water on the table in front of the boy, and said, “Be careful, the soup is still kind of hot.”

The boy took the proffered spoon and retrieved some soup from the bowl. He blew carefully on the spoon and finally tasted it, and I sensed that he wanted desperately to dive into the soup, but its temperature held him back.

“Give it a minute or two to cool,” I said. “Mike, how about a slice of bread and butter to go with the soup?”

“Way ahead of you.” He placed a piece of buttered bread on the table.

“Why don’t you dip the bread in the soup?” I said.

The kid looked at me. Thor chose that moment to put his head in the boy’s lap, and I said, “This is Thor. He’s our dog, and he wants to be your friend. It’s okay to pat him on the head.”

A little hand reached out and gave Thor a tentative pat. Thor responded by licking the hand, which caused the kid to smile.

“Use the bread like this,” I said, and I took the bread, dipped a corner of it into the bowl and pointed it at his mouth.

He got it instantly and began to work his way through the bread.

“I think he needs more bread,” I said.

“Coming up.”

Lucinda arrived at the front door just as the kid finished the soup. I remained at the table, while Mike went to let her in, and I could hear him explaining to her what, or rather who, we'd found hiding in the shed. She walked up to the table, took one look at the boy, and said, "Robbie, where have you been? People have been looking for you for days."

The boy started crying, so I picked him up to comfort him, and he buried his face in my chest.

"What's going on, Lucinda?" I said.

"His name is Robbie Ward—his mother was found beaten to death in their house almost a week ago. His father is missing, and the authorities think he did it. Nobody has seen Robbie in more than a week."

"Mike," I said, "why don't you call Bob and Martha Plott? They need to get involved with this, I think." Bob Plott was a captain with the Waynesville Police Department, and his wife Martha was head of Social Services for the county. We'd met them not long after our first visit to Maggie Valley.

"What's that he's wearing?" Lucinda said.

"He was beyond filthy when we found him," I said, "so we gave him a bath. His clothes are in the washer, so we put one of our T-shirts on him for now."

"Oh," she said. "There might be some clothes at his house, if the authorities will allow us to go inside—it's got yellow tape across the front right now."

"There's more. He has some kind of infection or something around his penis. It looked so bad, I was afraid to try to wash him there. We need to get him to a doctor."

"We can do better than that," she said. "There's an old country doctor just up the road. He's semi-retired, but he makes house calls."

"Give him a call, please. We'll pay for his time and trouble."

Mike hung up the telephone and said, "Bob and Martha will be here shortly."

Lucinda went to the telephone and made a brief call. When she had finished, she said, "Doc Jenkins will be right here."

“Let me carry this little guy to the guest bedroom,” I said.

Somehow during the time I was talking to Lucinda, Robbie had gotten a death grip around my neck, so I stood up and carried him down the hall. I turned the covers back and laid him gently on the bed.

“It’s okay, Robbie,” I said, taking his hand. “We’re going to take care of you. My name is George. Can you say that?”

“George,” he said.

“Good,” I said, “and this is Mike.”

“Mike,” Robbie parroted.

“You already know Mrs. Hawkins,” I said. “Do you know Zeb and Zeke?”

He nodded his head.

“Good. Zeb and Zeke are very good friends of ours. In fact, they are staying at our house in Florida right now.”

“Robbie,” Lucinda said, “do you remember Doc Jenkins?”

He nodded his head.

“Good, because he’s on his way here to take a look at you and make you better.”

I started to let go of Robbie’s hand and stand up, but he clutched my hand tightly and started to whimper. “No,” he said.

“You want me to stay?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“It’s okay, big guy,” I said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’ll go open the gate,” Mike said.

“Okay.”

He left the room and, after what seemed an eternity, returned, leading an older man. “This way, Doc,” Mike said.

“Hello, Lucinda,” the man said.

I introduced myself and said, “We found this little guy hiding in the generator shed in back of the cabin when we got here today. He was dirty,



so we gave him a bath, but I didn't like the look of things in his groin, so I was afraid to wash him there."

"Gotcha," the doc said. "If you folks will excuse me, I'll take a look at the patient."

I started to get up, but Robbie clung desperately to my hand and whimpered, so I stayed put.

"I don't think he wants you to leave, George," the doctor said. "Hello, Robbie. Remember me?"

Robbie nodded.

"I'm going to take a look and see what's up with you, okay?"

Robbie nodded again.

Lucinda and Mike were standing in the doorway, just out of Robbie's line of sight, when the doc pulled the covers back and the T-shirt up. "Jesus Christ," he said. "Damn stupid hillbillies. Not you, Lucinda—as I recall, you knew better. They don't always want their boy babies circumcised, because they think it's Jewish, but sometimes they're too stupid to teach them how to clean themselves properly."

He was poking around Robbie's penis as he talked, causing an occasional whimper. "Sorry, Robbie," the doc said. "This will hurt for a bit, but you'll feel better soon. Can somebody hand me my bag?"

Mike retrieved the bag, which was on the floor near the door, and handed it to the doc.

"Do you folks happen to have some medical alcohol and cotton balls?" Doc Jenkins said.

"You bet," Mike said. "Give me a minute."

Mike went to retrieve the needed items, brought them back, and said, "Here you go." He handed them to the doc.

"Thanks," Doc Jenkins said. "Robbie, this is going to sting a bit, but it won't last long, okay?"

Robbie whimpered again and nodded.

Doc Jenkins worked swiftly, and when he had finished to his satisfaction, he said, "Now, Robbie, I'm going to give you a little shot. It'll sting at first, but soon you'll take a nice little nap."

With that, he produced a syringe and a bottle and, rolling Robbie to one side, gave him a quick jab in the left buttocks. He took another syringe and bottle and repeated the process on the other side. In seconds, Robbie's eyes closed, and you could see that he was out like a light.

"I gave him an antibiotic too," the doc said.

"Doc Jenkins," I said.

"Yes?"

"Now that he's out cold and you can do it without causing him discomfort," I said, "I think you ought to give him a quick rectal exam, to make certain that he hasn't been molested."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because I'm a policeman, and I'm paid to think about things like that," I said.

"Point taken," he said. He retrieved a small flashlight from his bag and asked me to turn Robbie over, then he spread the boy's cheeks and pointed the flashlight at his anus. After a couple of minutes, he turned the light off and signaled that I could turn Robbie back over. "I don't see any evidence of molestation," he said.

"That's good," I said, "because according to Lucinda, he's been through enough already."

"Meaning what?" Doc Jenkins said.

"Let's go out to the kitchen where we can talk."

"Sure, let's just get this little guy under the sheets first." He pulled the T-shirt down and covered Robbie with a sheet.

We sat down at the table, and Doc Jenkins repeated his question.

"I thought you'd have heard," Lucinda said. "Robbie's mother was found murdered in their house, and the police are looking for her husband. They say she was literally beaten to death."

"When was this?" Doc Jenkins said.

"Almost a week ago," Lucinda said.

"That would explain it," he said. "I was out of town for a few days last week, and I don't keep up with the news very much. It takes a while for

the local gossip to catch up with me now that I'm mostly retired."

There was a knock at the door, and Mike went to answer it, eventually returning with Bob and Martha in tow.

"What's going on, George?" Bob said. "And what's Doc Jenkins doing here?"

"Mike and I got in a little after two this afternoon. Thor was acting funny down in his run, so we put him on a leash and took him around back. He led us to the generator shed, and we found a little boy in it. He was curled up in one corner of the shed on a pile of rags. He was filthy but didn't appear to be hurt, so we brought him inside and cleaned him up."

"If he wasn't hurt, why is the doc here?" Bob said.

"Because he has a seriously infected foreskin," Doc Jenkins said. "His idiot father never taught him how to take care of himself. His foreskin also appears to be abnormally tight, and that will cause problems for him when he's older. My best guess is that he's going to have to go to the hospital in a couple of days and be circumcised to take care of it."

"Who is he?" Martha said.

"Robbie Ward," Lucinda said. "His mother was found dead in their home several days ago, and the police are looking for his father. As far as I know, nobody around here has seen Robbie since before his mother's body was found."

"It wouldn't surprise me to learn that he saw it happen," I said, "and ran away. We need to go out and check the shed—I'll bet he's been living in it for a while. How far away was his home?"

"Just up the road past Uncle Cyrus's house," Lucinda said, "but on the same side of the road as your place. He could easily have come down along the creek to your cabin."

"Does he have any relatives?" I said.

"He has a grandmother still living," Lucinda said, "but she's old and sick. She had Robbie's mother very late in life, so she's probably in her late sixties by now. As far as I know, there aren't any other kin. Why do you ask?"

"Because we'd like to keep him," I said. I glanced at Mike, caught his silent assent, and continued. "He needs somebody, and he's certainly taken

a liking to me. Are we agreed on this, Mike?” It was a rhetorical question, given that Mike and I had been best friends since age eight and knew each other totally and completely after twenty-some years.

“You beat me to saying the same thing by two seconds,” Mike said.

“Keep him, how?” Martha said.

“As foster parents, as adoptive parents, whatever we can do,” I said. “I don’t know what kind of rules there are in this state about gays adopting, but I’ll surely find out.”

“Actually, single men and women who are gay have no problem adopting in this state,” Martha said. “It’s a little more tricky with couples, but not impossible. Let me do some checking.”

“Will he have to go into child services in the meantime?” Mike said.

“Normally, yes,” Martha said, “but we don’t have any beds available right now, so there’s no reason why he can’t stay right here for the time being.”

“Needless to say,” I said, “we’ll take care of any expenses, if he has to have surgery.”

“Bless you,” she said. “We have enough budget problems as it is.”

“Let me get the camera, Bob,” Mike said, “and I’ll show you where we found him, and we can take some pictures. I know we’re in the county and outside of your jurisdiction, but you can pass things along to your counterparts.”

Martha was looking at the remains of Robbie’s food. “Did the boy eat?” she said.

“We gave him some soup and some bread and butter,” I said. “He looked so undernourished, I was afraid to let him eat too much right away.”

“That was the smartest thing you could have done,” Doc Jenkins said. “If he had wolfed down a huge meal, it would have come right back up in no time.”

“How old is Robbie, Lucinda?” I said.

“He’s five, I think,” she said. “Maybe closer to six.”

“That’s about right,” Doc Jenkins said. “He was one of the last babies I delivered before I started to slow down, and that was close to six years

ago.”

“We’ll need to make a run to Walmart and get him some clothes,” I said. “He can’t run around in one of our old T-shirts all the time.”

“Let me take care of that, George,” Martha said. “I’ll take a look at him to make sure I get the right sizes.”

“Great,” I said. “I don’t want to leave right now in case he wakes up. He got really panicky every time I tried to leave the room.”

“I noticed that,” Doc Jenkins said. “That boy has somehow bonded with you.”

“George and Mike have a way with kids,” Lucinda said. “Zeb and Zeke look on them as fathers, and deservedly so.”

“Where are the twins, anyway?” Doc Jenkins said.

“They drove down to Jacksonville as soon as their classes finished,” I said, “and they’re either on the beach or working at McDonald’s as we speak. I’ve never seen two boys so crazy about the ocean.”

“So you’re the guys they told me about working for,” he said. “I gave both of them a checkup before they started community college, and they talked my ears off about the beach and you and your friend.”

“That would be us,” I said. “Those two boys are hard workers. They’ve painted houses, done yard work, and anything else that can earn them a buck.”

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MIKE and Bob came back into the kitchen carrying a handful of clothes. “Evidently, Robbie brought some of his clothes with him and stashed them in the shed,” Mike said. “They’re not very clean, but we can wash them.”

“Good,” I said. “I have to ask you one question, Martha.”

“What’s that?” she said.

“You’ve told me about this state in general. What do you think the reaction of the local courts will be when two gay men try to adopt a five-year-old boy?”

“That will depend on the judge. I can think of one who would want to shoot you for even asking, at least one who would have no problem, and the rest of them are somewhere in between.”

“I need to make a call,” I said. “Mike, why don’t you offer these folks something to drink.”

I went to the master bedroom, fished Charles Barnett’s card out of my wallet, and called him. Luck was with me, and he was home. I explained what was going on and asked him how we should proceed. He thought about what I had told him for a full two minutes and then gave me some very precise instructions.

“Thanks, Charles,” I said. “We’ll give it a shot.”

“Call me if you need me, George. This is the sort of thing Philip and I feel very strongly about.”

“Will do.”

I went back to the kitchen, where our guests were sipping iced tea. “I just had a conversation with a friend of ours in Atlanta,” I said. “He’s an attorney, and he’s licensed to practice in Georgia, Florida, and both of the Carolinas. His best advice is that we try to get the surviving grandparent to sign off on a private adoption. That will be ten times easier than anything

else. He also said that if at all possible, we should try to avoid having Robbie formally made a ward of the state, because that will complicate things beyond belief.”

“That squares with the sort of thing I’ve dealt with all my working life,” Martha said. “I’ll approach it from that angle.”

“When you’re ready,” Lucinda said, “I’ll talk to Robbie’s grandmother. She and I have been friends for years.”

“Thank you,” I said, and I took Lucinda’s hand and kissed it.

“George, after all you and Mike have done for my boys, there isn’t much I wouldn’t do for you in return.”

“I forgot to ask, Doc,” I said. “How long do you think Robbie will be out cold?”

“Until morning, I should think. He looked tired and worn out, and that old saying about sleep being the best medicine has a lot of basis in truth.”

“How can we arrange his surgery?” I said. “There’s no one available to sign an authorization.”

“Son,” Doc Jenkins said, “if I declare it to be a medical necessity, nobody will question it. Besides, Lucinda should be able to get the grandmother’s okay.”

“That I can do,” Lucinda said.

“We should wait a couple of days and see how the infection responds to the antibiotics I gave him,” Doc Jenkins said, “and then we can set a date.”

“How long will he have to be in the hospital?” I said.

“It can be done as an outpatient procedure, but I’d like him to be in the hospital overnight for observation.”

“This is a huge responsibility you and Mike are contemplating, George,” Bob said. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything,” I said. “That little boy needs someone to love him unconditionally, and I think Mike and I qualify.”

“What he said,” Mike said. “Besides, at this point, you’d have to drag him away from George, literally kicking and screaming.”

“At some point, the sheriff’s department is going to want to ask him what, if anything, he knows about what happened to his mother,” I said.

“How do you think they’ll handle that, Bob?”

“Dan has a couple of experienced female deputies,” Bob said. “My guess is that he will send one or both of them around to ask the necessary questions, but not until the boy is ready to talk.”

“What about his father?” Mike said.

“If, and when, they catch that guy,” Bob said, “I suspect he’ll be in jail for a long time—if he manages to escape the death penalty. I don’t think we have to worry about him.”

“What happened to Thor, Mike?” I said. “He seems to have disappeared.”

“He went down the hall,” Mike said. “Didn’t you see him when you went back there to call Charles?”

“No, I didn’t.”

I got up, walked down the hall, peeked in the guest room, and hurried back to the kitchen. “I think Robbie has found himself a guardian,” I said. “Thor is curled up on the corner of the bed looking protective.”

Lucinda and Martha had to go down the hall and take a look. When they came back, Martha said, “I think you’re right, George. I took one step into the room, and Thor didn’t actually growl at me, but he managed to convey displeasure, even though he knows me. Let’s have a look at those clothes you found, Bob. It’ll give me an idea of what to shop for.”

Bob handed her a bundle of boy’s clothing, and she sorted through it, looking at the labels. “Most of these things are in pretty bad shape,” she said, “but I can get an idea about his sizes, and they’ll probably look better after they’ve been laundered.”

I dug out my wallet and handed Martha some twenties. “Get whatever you think Robbie needs, Martha,” I said. “I can find an ATM tomorrow, if you need more.”

“It’s been a few years since I bought clothing for little boys, but I think this should be enough to get him started.”

“If you and Mike manage to adopt Robbie,” Lucinda said, “are there schools near you?”

“We’ll get him into St. Mark’s Episcopal Day School to start,” I said, “and after that, Episcopal High School is the best school in the city.”



“Can I use your phone, George?” Bob said. “I need to bring Dan into this situation.”

“Need you ask? Help yourself.”

“I think I’ll run on home,” Doc Jenkins said, “but I’d like to look in on the boy first. Can one of you tell the dog I’m one of the good guys?”

“Sure,” Mike said. “Follow me.”

They returned a few minutes later. “You weren’t kidding, Martha,” Mike said. “Thor definitely didn’t want the doc anywhere near Robbie until I told him it was okay.”

“I’ll stop by and check on my patient in the morning,” Doc Jenkins said.

I walked to the door with him. “How much do we owe you?” I said.

“It looks like you just gave Martha most of your cash,” he said. “We can settle up after you find that ATM. In any case, it won’t be much.”

“Thank you so much. One of us will be here all day tomorrow.”

“My pleasure.”

I went back to the kitchen and pulled one of the bar stools over to the table. “This has been quite an afternoon,” I said.

“Man, you got that right,” Mike said.

“I wonder if that little boy actually witnessed his mother being killed?” Lucinda said.

“It stands to reason,” I said. “Why else would he have run?”

“True,” Mike said, “but he didn’t grab all those clothes on the spur of the moment. I’m guessing he went back to his house at some point and got the clothes. Maybe even some food. There were empty cracker boxes and things like that in the shed.”

“Poor little guy,” Martha said. “Imagine having to deal with all that at his age.”

“I know,” I said. “Hopefully, those days are behind him.”

“What can you tell us about his mother, Lucinda?” Mike said.

“She was an educated woman,” Lucinda said. “She won a scholarship to a state university, and after she graduated, she got a job as a schoolteacher somewhere over near Charlotte. I think she was there for

about ten years, then she moved back here to take care of her mother and taught at the elementary school in Maggie Valley. After she'd been home for a while, she married a man she had known in high school, and didn't discover until it was too late that he'd turned into a bum. I'm pretty sure she's taught Robbie how to read and some other things."

"How in the world did a woman like that wind up with a man who was capable of beating her to death?" I said.

"You're a cop, George," Bob said. "Surely you've been around enough to know how often that sort of thing happens."

"Yeah, that was a dumb question, wasn't it? Consider it withdrawn."

Dan Sutton, Sheriff of Haywood County, showed up about ten minutes after the doc left. Bob filled him in on what had happened, and Mike and I answered the few questions he asked, then he said, "It hasn't been made public yet, but the boy's father is dead."

"How?" Bob said.

"In a rather stupid and pointless exchange of gunfire with some deputies in another county about a hundred miles east of here."

"Is there any doubt in anyone's mind that he killed the boy's mother?" I said.

"None whatsoever, but that doesn't mean we won't want to ask the boy some questions. Can I see him?"

"Sure. I'll take you down the hall, but I have to warn you, our dog has decided to become his guardian."

"Let's go," he said.

We walked back to the guest bedroom, and I looked in the room. Thor perked up when he saw me but bared his teeth at the sheriff.

"It's okay, Thor," I said, walking over to the bed and petting him. "Sheriff Sutton is one of the good guys. Come on in, Dan," I said, "but don't make any sudden moves, please."

"Trust me, George, I won't. I remember who caught that serial killer by the arm when he was about to shoot you." He walked over to the bed and looked down at Robbie. "Poor little tyke," he said. "It's hard to imagine him going through what he has, and at his age."

"I know," I said, still stroking Thor reassuringly.

“Okay,” Dan said, “I’ve seen enough for the moment.”

He left the room, and I gave Thor a hug. “Good boy,” I said. He put his head back down, and I left the room.

Back in the kitchen, Dan said, “Damn, George, that is one protective dog you’ve got there.”

“I know. I’ve never seen him quite like this.”

“So, what are your plans?” Dan said.

We told him, in no uncertain terms, including the fact that we had a high-powered Atlanta attorney ready and willing to go to bat for us and Robbie.

“I don’t think it will come to that,” he said, “not with all these folks on your side.”

“I certainly hope not, Dan, because we really like this kid, and we want to take care of him. More to the point, as these folks will tell you, he seems to have attached himself to us.”

“More power to you,” he said. “You may not know this, but my good friend in Jacksonville, your sheriff, has kept me abreast of your career and accomplishments. You have more friends than you know.”

“That’s good to know, and rest assured, I’ll milk the friendships dry if that’s what it takes to get to take this kid home with us.”

“I’ve no doubt that you will. I’ll call you in a couple of days so we can arrange to have a female deputy question the boy about what happened in that house. With his father dead, it will be only a formality, but as you know, we have to dot our *i*’s and cross our *t*’s.”

“It may be more than a couple of days. Doc Jenkins says he needs some minor surgery in a couple of days.”

“What kind of surgery?”

I told him what the doc had said.

“No problem. As soon as the boy is able, give me a call.”

“Will do,” I said.

“Dan,” Bob said.

“What?”

“I wonder if it might be possible for George and Mike to take Robbie to his house in a day or so, so he can select a few things he might want to keep. You know, like a picture of his mother, or a favorite toy, or whatever.”

“Go right ahead whenever you’re ready. Now that the father is dead, our interest in preserving the house as a crime scene is virtually at an end.”

We spent another twenty minutes talking things over, and after our visitors left, I gave the last car time to clear the driveway, then pushed the button to close the gate.

“Alone at last,” I said.

“What a day,” Mike said.

“No shit, Sherlock. Any regrets?”

“Not on your life. That kid is going to be ours, no matter what.”

“Absolutely. Which reminds me, I need to call Charles back and fill him in on the details. While I’m doing that, why don’t you find a bottle of wine to open? I need a drink.”

Without waiting for him to respond, I walked down the hallway and peeked in the guestroom. Thor was still on guard, but I think he knew we were alone, and he didn’t stir. I went back to the master bedroom, lay back on the bed, and picked up the telephone. Charles answered on the first ring, and I filled him in on what had happened since we last talked.

“I think you have things well in hand,” he said, “but if you need me, I can be there in three or four hours, more or less.”

“Let’s hope it won’t come to that.”

“Indeed, but what are friends for? Besides, as I told you, this is the sort of thing in which Philip and I are especially interested. We told you about the Integrity Foundation, didn’t we?”

“That you did, but I never thought we would be in a position to possibly need its services.”

“From all you’ve told me, you probably won’t. To recap, you’re well acquainted with the woman who is in charge of Social Services in that county. In addition, you’re acquainted with the sheriff of the county and a captain with the Waynesville police department, not to mention a woman who can attest to all the things you’ve done for her sons. I don’t want you to get overconfident by any means, but it’s looking good at this point.”

“God, I hope so. This little boy has rung a bell with Mike and me.”

“Good for you. Now get some rest. And call me if you need to. I mean that.”

“Okay, Charles, I will, and thanks.”

Mike brought me a glass of wine, and I filled him in on my conversation with Charles. “Where’s your glass?” I said.

“I think I need to make a quick run to the store before I start drinking wine,” he said.

“What do we need?”

“Milk and cereal, for starters. Can you think of anything else?”

“Grab a box of oatmeal, the quick-cooking kind, and pick up one of those little night lights that plug into any socket. Robbie might wake up in the dark and be frightened.”

“Good idea. Anything else?”

“If you’re up to going as far as Walmart, you might buy some crayons and a coloring book. Whatever kiddie stuff you can think of. Just don’t get carried away.”

“Me, get carried away? Never happen.”

“Shut up and kiss me, then get out of here. Oh, and stop by an ATM somewhere—I gave Martha all of my cash. By the time you get back, I’ll have dinner ready.”

Mike went down the hall, and after a minute, I carried my glass into the kitchen. I rounded up all of Robbie’s clothes, including the sneakers he had been wearing, carried them down to the laundry room, and started a load. Back in the kitchen, I surveyed the available choices of ingredients and decided to try my hand at Janet’s recipe for picadillo. In almost no time, wonderful scents began to fill the air in the kitchen, and they must have drifted down the hall to the guest room, because Thor padded into the kitchen, sniffing.

“Those meat smells took you away from guard duty, didn’t they, boy?” I said, scratching one of his favorite spots. He had a hopeful look, but I told him, “You’ll have to wait until it’s finished.”

He gave me a look and disappeared back down the hall.

*That dog is just too smart.*

I went up to the loft, rummaged around in the desk, and found a yellow pad. Back in the kitchen, I sat at the table, sipping my wine and making sketches on the pad. By the time the food was ready, I had completed several pages of them. While I was moving Robbie's clothes from the washer to the dryer, I heard the garage door open, so I went to help Mike unload the truck. The extended cab area behind the front seats was piled high with bags.

"What did you do, buy out the store?"

"Not really. I just picked up a few things here and there."

I helped him carry his "few things" up to the kitchen and watched him empty the bags. In addition to the grocery items we'd discussed, he had bought ice cream and a host of snack items. In one bag, I found two coloring books and a large box of crayons. Yet another bag contained a few toys.

"What's that big plastic bin for?" I said.

"He'll need a box in which to store the toys."

"You did good. Come over here and let me reward you."

He moved up against me, and I put my arms around him. We kissed for a while, and he said, "That's not the reward I really want, but it'll do as a down payment." He sniffed the air. "Something smells good."

"I tried my hand at Janet's picadillo recipe," I said. "Have a seat, and we'll see if you think I succeeded."

I poured him a glass of wine, and he sat. As I was placing dishes on the table, he looked at my yellow pad and said, "What's all this?"

"Look the sketches over and see how smart you are."

In between bites of picadillo, he examined the sketches carefully. "I think you've got Janet's recipe down pat, this is good."

"Thanks."

"On the other hand, it tastes slightly different."

"That's because I added a little garlic powder and some raisins."

"Whatever it was, it certainly works. As for the sketches, they appear to be plans for a second story over our garage in Jacksonville, which will contain a master suite for us, and that leaves our old bedroom and bathroom downstairs for Robbie."

“I knew you’d figure it out. What do you think of the idea?”

“I like it. What do you think it’ll cost?”

“Not as much as you might think. I can do the carpentry, and the homeowner’s test I took at the city zoning department is still valid, so I can do the wiring as well. All we have to subcontract out is the drywall work and the plumbing.”

“Sounds good. We can decide on which one of these three basic plans later. Right now, what are we going to do about space?”

“With Zeb and Zeke in the spare bedroom, it’ll be tight. On the other hand, they spend so little time at the house; they might be willing to use the sofa bed in the den for a few weeks.”

“That’ll work. Let’s just play it by ear and see what happens.”

I had left some ground beef in the skillet and set it on the floor for Thor. He made short work of it and gave me a look that clearly said “more.” We looked in on Robbie, who was still out cold; then we rolled the lounge chairs out onto the deck and settled back to enjoy the sounds from the stream.

“I just realized,” I said, “we won’t be able to jog up the mountain tomorrow morning.”

“No, but if Robbie feels like walking, we can surely walk to the top and back.”

“What if he gets tired?”

“Babe, that’s why we have broad shoulders. We can carry him, if need be.”

“Did you ever think you would have kids?”

“Not on your life, but this kid has been dropped in our lap, and I’m glad we’ve decided to keep him.”

“Ditto.”

“One thing for sure.”

“What?”

“When we get home, we won’t have to look any further than next door for a babysitter when we need one.”

“Mrs. T?”

Mrs. Tumblin was a retired nurse who lived next door to our home in Jacksonville.

“She’s tailor-made for the job.”

“That she is.”

“I’m going to get a refill,” Mike said. “How about you?”

“Sure. While you’re at it, you can check the dryer.”

“Consider it done.”

I heard the door open and close, and a few seconds later, a cold, wet nose brushed against my arm. Thor had decided to come outside when Mike opened the door. I rubbed a couple of his favorite places for a minute or two; then he trotted to the gate and down the steps to his run. The door opened and closed again, and Mike handed me a glass.

“Robbie’s clean clothes are folded and stacked on top of the dresser in his room,” he said. “Where’s Thor?”

“In his run, taking care of business.”

“I should have known.”

“I’ve been thinking,” I said.

“And?”

“This adoption thing should include changing Robbie’s name.”

“To what?”

“His surname ought to be Foster-Martin.”

“Not Martin-Foster?”

“Babe, we settled that argument when we formed our first corporation. Foster-Martin has a better ring to it.”

“Okay,” he said. “I wonder if he has a middle name?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out soon enough.”

“Yep.”

“Do you think we should tell anyone about this?”

“It’s early days yet. When we get home is time enough.”

“The chief and Sarah are due up here next week, so they’ll be in for a surprise when we go see their new place.”



I hadn't heard Thor come back to the deck, but I did hear him scratching at the door, his signal that he wanted to go back inside, so I got up and opened the door for him. Then I walked back to Mike's chair, leaned over, and kissed him on the top of his head.

"It's getting a bit chilly out here," I said. "Why don't you come inside and warm me up."

"Race you."

"One of us has to lock up, so no race."

"If we both do it, it'll take less time."

We secured the house, turned off the lights, checked the status of our guest, and went to bed. The emotional excitement of the day carried over into our lovemaking, which was lengthy and more intense than usual.

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I WOKE up early Sunday morning to find a pair of blue eyes staring at me intently—Robbie was sitting on the edge of the bed, still wearing the T-shirt. Thor was curled up beside him on the corner of the bed.

“Good morning,” I said. “Remember me?”

“George,” he said.

“That’s right. We washed and dried your clothes last night, and they’re on the dresser in your room.”

“Okay.”

“Did you find the bathroom?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Okay. Let me pull some clothes on, and then we’ll see about getting you dressed and making breakfast.”

I slipped out from under the covers and pulled on the same clothes I had been wearing the day before. Then I took Robbie by the hand and led him back to his room. I took shorts, underwear, and a shirt from off the dresser, and handed them to him.

“Do you need any help getting dressed?”

“No, Sir.”

“How do you feel this morning?”

“I’m hungry, and my peter is kind of sore.”

“Doc Jenkins will be by later to see about the sore part. Do you like oatmeal?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good. Give me a minute to go to the bathroom, and I’ll get breakfast started.”

I left him to the task of getting dressed and headed to the bathroom for a long minute or two. In the kitchen, I poured a glass of milk, read the instructions on the oatmeal box, and decided to make enough for all three of us. While I was working on breakfast, Robbie came into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

“Help yourself to the milk,” I said. “I’m going to let Thor outside to do his business. Come on, Thor.”

Thor followed me to the door, and I opened it for him so he could take the stairs down to his run. I went back to the range and stirred the oatmeal. “It won’t be long,” I said, taking butter out of the refrigerator and setting it on the table. “Why don’t you go wake up Mike and tell him breakfast is ready?”

“Okay.” He left the kitchen and came back a few minutes later. “He says he’ll be out in a minute.”

“Thanks.” I put some bread in the toaster and poured coffee for Mike and myself just in time for Mike to appear in the kitchen.

“Morning.” He gave me a brief kiss.

“Just in time for your coffee. Breakfast in a few.”

“What are we having?”

“Robbie says he likes oatmeal, so I made enough for all of us.”

“Cool.”

I placed a fair-sized bowl of oatmeal in front of Robbie and poured some milk in it to cool it a bit. He attacked it with vigor, and Mike said, “I think he likes your oatmeal.”

“So it would seem. In fact, oatmeal is good for you. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that it helps lower cholesterol.”

“Nothing wrong with eating healthy.”

I put a slice of toast on a plate, buttered it, and said, “Robbie, do you want some jelly on your toast?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Do you like to go to McDonald’s?” Mike said.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Maybe we can do that for lunch.”

Robbie’s mouth was full of oatmeal, and he didn’t try to answer. I heard a scratch at the front door, and I got up and let Thor back inside. He trotted over to the table and assumed his begging stance, so I said, “Robbie, you can give Thor a piece of your toast if you want to. Let me show you how.”

I broke off a corner of toast and held it above Thor, who was standing, tail wagging. I said, “Sit,” and Thor obediently sat and gently took the piece of toast from my fingers.

“Now you try,” I said to Robbie.

He took a small corner of toast and held it up in the air. Thor was again on all fours. “Sit,” Robbie said. Thor sat, and Robbie gave him his treat. He was grinning from ear to ear.

We finished our breakfast without much conversation. This kid was either naturally shy, or he was still so traumatized by recent events that he couldn’t carry on a basic conversation. Mike and I went to the bathroom and took turns brushing our teeth while Robbie watched us. I produced a new toothbrush, gave it to Robbie, and asked, “Do you know how to use this?”

“Yes, Sir,” he said. He proceeded to demonstrate by thoroughly brushing his teeth.

Robbie followed us to the great room, and Mike said, “Robbie, do you feel like going for a walk?”

“Where to?”

“George and I like to walk up the road to the top of the mountain and back down again. It’s good exercise. We take Thor with us, and you can come along, if you feel like it.”

“Okay.”

I retrieved Thor’s leash, clipped it to his collar, and the four of us headed down the steps and up the driveway. We walked at a much slower pace than usual, to allow for Robbie’s short legs to keep up. When we passed Lucinda’s Uncle Cyrus’s house, I said to Robbie, “Isn’t your house near here?”

“It’s over there,” he said, pointing at a small house about a quarter of a mile up the road. When we got closer, I saw the familiar yellow crime tape across the door.

Robbie made no comment as we passed the dirt track that led up to the little house, and I thought it best not to ask too many questions. We walked another half mile, and Mike reached down and picked Robbie up, placing him on his shoulders with his legs dangling down over Mike’s chest.

“Wow,” Mike said a few hundred yards later. “The addition of a few pounds of boy adds a whole new dimension to the exercise.”

“You can hand him off to me anytime.”

“Soon, soon. Is he enjoying the ride?”

“From the look on his face, I’d say yes. How about it, Robbie? Do you like riding on Mike’s shoulders?”

“Yes, Sir.”

We walked a while longer, and Mike stopped. “Okay, George,” he said, “it’s time to transfer this guy to you.”

He lifted Robbie up and transferred him to my shoulders. Then he took Thor’s leash and we continued up the mountain. After a while, I said, “I see what you mean, the extra weight adds a challenge.”

“Yep.”

We reached the top of the mountain, and I lifted Robbie off my shoulders, set him on the road, and said, “I’m going to let you walk downhill a bit.”

“Okay.”

We walked back down to the cabin in relative silence. I was lost in thought, and I presumed that Mike was too. We got to the kitchen in time to answer the phone. It was Doc Jenkins, and he asked, “Is it okay for me to stop by and take a look at the boy?”

“Certainly,” I said. “We just got back from walking up the mountain and back.”

“I know. I saw you from my front porch. One of you was carrying Robbie on your shoulders on the way up.”

“The extra weight added an element of resistance to the exercise, so we had to take turns.”

“No doubt. I’ll be right there.”

“How about a drink?” I said to Robbie after I hung up the phone.

“Sure.”

“Lemonade okay?”

“Yes, Sir.”

I had made a pitcher of lemonade while I was cooking breakfast, so I got out a glass and poured him some. I poured iced tea for Mike and myself, and we carried our glasses out to the deck. Thor followed us and went down the back steps to check out his domain. Since the doc was on his way, I closed the gate in order to prevent Thor from getting back onto the deck until we were ready for him to do so.

Doc Jenkins arrived a few minutes later and joined us on the deck. After we shook hands, he said, “Okay, young man, let’s go inside and have a look at you.” He looked at me and added, “Do I have to worry about the watchdog?”

“No, Sir,” I said. “He’s down in the yard inside a fence and can’t get back up here until we let him.”

We went back to the guest room and stood at the door while the doc examined Robbie carefully. Finally, he looked up and said, “The infection is responding well to the antibiotics, so I think we can schedule him for Tuesday. Did he have a good breakfast?”

“He consumed a bowl of oatmeal, two glasses of milk, and a slice of toast,” I said.

“We’re planning to take him to the Golden Arches for lunch,” Mike said. “A burger, fries, and milkshake will help fatten him up a bit.”

“If he had no problem with a large breakfast,” Doc said, “I tend to agree. He’s a bit thin, so we’ll do some blood work Tuesday to make certain there are no deficiencies.” He turned his attention to Robbie and said, “You can get dressed now.”

“Mike went to the store last night,” I said, “and visited an ATM. How much do we owe you?”

“Call it sixty bucks for two house calls and the shots, and I’ll be happy,” Doc said.

“Don’t sell yourself cheap. Do you have any idea what we pay for an office visit in Jacksonville?”

“Probably, but I don’t have any overhead these days, and my needs are simple.”

“I won’t argue. I’m just glad Lucinda told us about you.”

“She’s good people.”

“That she is.”

Mike retrieved his wallet, produced three bills, and said, “Here you go, with our thanks.”

“Will you do the procedure on Robbie?” I said.

“Sorry, I don’t do surgery anymore, but I’ll make sure it’s done by someone I trust.”

“Thanks.”

We walked back to the deck with the doc, shook hands again, and he left. Thor was ready to come back on the deck, so I opened the gate and said, “Robbie, come here a minute. I want to show you something.”

I led him over to the gate that protected the stairway from the parking pad. “See this gate?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Always be very careful to keep it closed and latched. If it was left open, Thor might wander down the stairs and get lost, and we don’t want that to happen, do we?”

“No, Sir.”

I ruffled his hair and said, “Good boy. I knew you’d understand.”

“Robbie,” Mike said, “George and I are going to take a shower and change clothes. You can stay out here on the deck with Thor, or you can come inside and see the things I got for you at Walmart last night.”

Robbie’s eyes got wide at that, so we went inside, and Mike opened the plastic bin and showed him the toys, coloring books, and crayons.

“These are for you,” I said.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Boy’s got manners,” Mike said.

“You bet,” I said. “Okay, big guy, Mike and I are going to shower. Thor will stay here and keep you company.”

I don’t think he really heard me, he was so busy exploring the goodies in the bin.

*BACK in Jacksonville, a young man wearing dark trousers and an equally dark hooded sweatshirt slipped carefully and quietly through an unlocked window on the ground floor of his targeted house. These old houses are so easy to get into, the burglar thought as he lowered himself onto the floor and stood quietly, listening for any indication that his presence had been noted. As far as he knew, the house’s owner and sole occupant was out of town, but his natural caution kicked in.*

*After a time, he made his way carefully and quietly to the room he knew contained the occupant’s small home office, where he settled down at the desk and began to explore. Finding nothing of value, he was about to look elsewhere when his arm bumped against the desktop computer’s keyboard. The screen came to life, so he decided to poke around in the computer files. He wondered if there was a password and quickly discovered there was none, so he did some exploring.*

*Opening a folder with an unusual name, he uttered a quiet expletive as he began to scan its files. He’d been a Boy Scout once upon a time and had taken seriously the admonition to be prepared, which explained why he was able to fish a thumb drive out of his pocket. He inserted it into a USB port and began to copy files.*

*He removed the thumb drive and then made certain there was no evidence that anyone had accessed the computer. This will either bring me a fortune or get me killed, he thought as he secured the thumb drive in his pocket and quickly exited the premises without having stolen his usual quota of easily pawnable valuables.*



As we showered together, I said, “We ought to get him a couple of DVDs.”

“What do you get for a five-year-old?”

“Movies like *Finding Nemo*, cartoons, stuff like that.”

“Okay. After the Golden Arches, we’ll take him to Wally World and see what turns him on.”

“I know what turns me on, but this isn’t the time or place.”

“Actually,” he said, “it’s very much the place... just not the time.”

“Point taken. I just realized that spontaneity may have to take a backseat to our new responsibilities from time to time.”

“It’s a small sacrifice.”

Showered, shaved, and dressed in clean clothes, we went back to the great room. Robbie was sprawled on the floor, coloring in one of the books. I bent down to see how he was doing. “Wow,” I said, “you’re good at keeping within the lines.”

“Ready to go to McDonald’s?” Mike said.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Need to use the bathroom before we leave?” I said.

“No, Sir.”

“Then let’s get the show on the road,” Mike said.

We made certain that Thor had food and water, secured the front door, and went down to the garage. Robbie’s eyes widened when he saw the truck.

“You like the truck?” I said.

“Yes, Sir,” he said. “It’s neat.”

“You get to sit in one of the jump seats,” Mike said, opening the passenger door, which allowed him to then open the half-door. He folded down the jump seat and got Robbie strapped in.

I got in the driver’s seat and pushed the button on the garage door opener. As soon as it opened, we were on our way. “We need to look into child seats,” I said. “I’m not sure what the law says, but I’m pretty sure it’s based upon weight and/or age.”

“He’s out of sight back there. We’re probably okay for now, as long as we don’t get stopped.”

“True, but I’ll give Bob a call and ask him a few questions.”

“Whatever turns you on.”

We parked at the Golden Arches, went inside, and settled in a booth. “Okay, big guy,” I said to Robbie, “what’ll it be, hamburger, cheeseburger, or nuggets?”

“Cheeseburger.”

“Chocolate shake?”

“Can I have strawberry?”

“You sure can,” I said. “The usual, Mike?”

“Yep.”

I got in line and placed our orders. Back at the booth, I set the Happy Meal in front of Robbie, put a straw in his shake, and he dug into the food. Mike and I had chicken Caesar salads and unsweet tea. Robbie’s fries were tempting, but I managed to refrain from snatching one or two of them from his Happy Meal box. He ate everything in front of him and drained his milkshake.

“What kind of prize did you get?” I said.

He took out the little toy, showed it to me, and I said, “Cool. It’s hard to believe that there’s a city in California where an ordinance was passed that banned giving away toys with Happy Meals.”

“You’re kidding?” Mike said.

“Not at all.”

We went from there to Walmart and wandered around the entertainment section. We wound up purchasing *Finding Nemo*, a couple of cartoons, and a *SpongeBob* DVD. On impulse, I pushed the buggy toward the shoe section, and we found a better pair of sneakers than the ones he was wearing. To our surprise, we spotted the Plotts waiting in the checkout line ahead of us, and when I spoke to Martha, she turned and said, “Can we get out of line for a minute? I’d like to check some of these clothes and see if the size is okay.”

“Sure,” I said. “Go right ahead.”

I pushed our buggy over to one side and left Martha fussing with her purchases, holding them up against Robbie.

“Bob,” I said, “what do you know about the rules for child safety seats?”

“In this state, they’re based on age and weight,” he said, “and I think that pretty much holds true elsewhere.”

“I wonder if they make seats that fit the jump seat in my extended cab?”

“Most likely. Let’s go look while Martha is busy.”

I left Mike with Martha and Robbie, and Bob and I walked around until we found the appropriate section of the store. There was a bewildering array of child seats, but I found one small booster seat that looked as though it would fit the jump seat. We went back to Martha and Mike, and I placed the booster seat in our shopping cart.

“Did the clothes all fit?” I said.

“You bet,” she said, “at least as far as I can tell without actually having Robbie try them on. I guess I haven’t lost my touch.”

She went ahead of us in the checkout lane, and I was pleased to see that I had given her enough cash to cover the purchases.

In the parking lot, Robbie was yawning, so I suggested that we ought to get back to the cabin for a nap.

“Thank you so much, Martha,” I said. “I don’t know what we would have done if you hadn’t stepped up to the plate.”

“No problem, George,” she said. “I’ll call you tomorrow when I have more information about Robbie.”

“Good, I’d like to know his birth date and his full name, for starters.”

We thanked her again, and they went their own way. The booster seat fit the jump seat just fine. We got Robbie secured in it and headed back to the cabin. He fell asleep in the truck and had to be carried up to bed. As soon as we had him tucked in, we crawled into bed as well, although our nap was delayed just a bit—our erections kept getting in the way of sleep.

I spent a great deal of time Monday morning exchanging e-mails with my lieutenants and Chief Bridges, but I kept the e-mails devoted exclusively to business, making no mention of Robbie.

The next several days were instructive and occasionally frustrating. We came to know Robbie... and to love him, and I think the feelings were reciprocated. We took him to the local hospital Tuesday morning and waited forever until a young surgeon came to tell us that everything had gone as planned. We were allowed to spend a few minutes with him, but he was kind of groggy from the drugs he’d been given.

While Robbie was in the hospital, we had an appointment with Ernest Rodgers, our good “old(er)” boy attorney. We’d met Ernest when we’d purchased the strip of land uphill and adjacent to our cabin. He was in his sixties, and we found ourselves liking him immensely—so much so that we’d given him a small retainer in case we ever needed legal representation in North Carolina that couldn’t be handled by our Jacksonville attorney. His secretary showed us into his office.

“Have a seat, boys,” Ernest said, “and tell me what I can do for you.”

We filled him in on the details about Robbie, starting with our discovery of him the afternoon we got to the cabin. “What we want to do, Mr. Rodgers,” I said, “is adopt the boy.”

“Please call me Ernest,” he said. “If we get his grandmother’s approval and the right judge, I don’t see any problem.”

“That’s what our attorney friend in Atlanta told me,” I said.

“Does your friend have a name?”

“Charles Barnett.”

“Of Chandler, Todd, Woodward & Barnett?”

“I think that’s the firm’s name,” I said. “Why, do you know him?”

“No, but I know of him,” Ernest said. “You may remember me telling you that I worked in Atlanta when I was fresh out of law school. I had a good friend in those days who was law clerk for a federal judge. My old friend is now a judge in one of the suburban counties around Atlanta, but I digress. I met Judge Barnett two or three times in those days, courtesy of my friend, and he was a great man. Your friend Charles is his grandson, and I’ve followed his career for years. Do you think he’d agree to assist with this case?”

“I don’t know why not,” I said. “Do you think we’ll need him?”

“Son, that man has an outstanding track record in dealing with the kind of bigotry we might run up against, and I like to hedge my bets.”

“He told me that he’s licensed to practice in both Carolinas,” I said. I fished a business card out of my wallet and handed it to Ernest. “Why don’t you see if you can get him on the telephone?”

Ernest pushed a few buttons on his desk phone, and we heard the familiar touchtone beeps coming from the speaker. The call connected, and, after passing through a couple of intermediaries, we heard Charles say, “Charles Barnett.”

“Good morning, Charles,” I said. “George Martin here.”

“Hi, George, what’s up?”

“Mike and I are in the office of our Waynesville attorney,” I said. “It turns out that he’s a big fan of yours, and he’d like to ask you to be a part of this adoption process, if you can find the time.”

“I’ll make the time,” Charles said. “Who’s your attorney, and how does he know me?”

“This is Ernest Rodgers,” Ernest said. “I worked as a lawyer in Atlanta when I was fresh out of law school. One of my best friends in those days was a young man who clerked for your grandfather. My old friend is now a judge in the Atlanta suburbs.”

“You’re talking about Judge William Hampton, aren’t you?” Charles said.

“The same. Anyhow, through William, I met your grandfather several times, and greatly admired him. Because of that, I’ve followed your career

for a number of years. You have one hell of a track record.”

“Thank you,” Charles said. “How do you think we should proceed with this private adoption?”

The two of them launched into the realm of legal matters, and I was left behind very quickly. Finally, I realized their conversation was ending when I heard Ernest say, “That’s exactly what we’ll do, then.”

“Okay,” Charles said. “If you can schedule the hearing for a Friday or a Monday, I can take a three-day weekend and stay at our place up there.”

Mike and I thanked Charles for his help, and the call ended. Ernest actually rubbed his hands together and said, somewhat gleefully, “This is going to be fun.”

“Fun?” I parroted.

“Going into court with the biggest gun in town is always fun, especially when something goes wrong, and something nearly always goes wrong.”

“We’ll leave that in your capable hands,” I said. “Lucinda Hawkins, a friend of ours, is taking us to see Robbie’s grandmother on Friday, and we’ll need to have papers for her to sign. It’s our understanding that she isn’t well enough to come into town.”

“Give me her name and address,” Ernest said, “and my secretary will have documents ready for you to pick up by the end of the day on Thursday.”

We had come prepared for that, and I handed him a printout containing all the particulars—our names and addresses, Robbie’s name, etcetera.

“That was interesting,” Mike said as we walked back to where the truck was parked.

“I didn’t like the part about things going wrong.”

“Like the man said, ‘We’re going into court with the biggest gun in town.’”

“I certainly hope it doesn’t turn into a shoot-out,” I said. “How are we fixed for salt-rising bread?”

“We could probably use a couple of loaves.”

“Then let’s go down the street to the bakery.”

Robbie was discharged the morning after his surgery, and we took him back to the cabin. We now knew that his full name was Robin Andrew Ward, and that he would be six in mid-July. While he was recovering, we had several long conversations with him, during the course of one of which we told him that his father was dead. We had half-expected him to say “good,” but he didn’t show much of a reaction at all to the news.

Two female deputies had come to the cabin to question him about his mother’s death. They had gotten enough of the story from him to satisfy the sheriff, but when they dug too deeply, it sent him on a crying jag that lasted most of the rest of the day. He woke up screaming with nightmares for the next couple of nights.

It probably didn’t help matters that we took him by his house in the middle of all the upset, but it had to be dealt with. We found a couple of pictures of his mother and several of his favorite toys. We promised to bring him back again when we could, so he could select some more items, and then went back to the cabin.

Lucinda, bless her heart, took Friday morning off so that she could lead us to the home of Clara Pickens, Robbie’s maternal grandmother. We followed Lucinda’s truck up the mountain; then she turned off onto a side road we had yet to explore and drove another mile before pulling up in front of a small house that was situated very close to the road. We parked behind her, took Robbie by the hand, and went to the door.

Lucinda’s knock was answered by a middle-aged woman who we had been told was the grandmother’s caregiver. She greeted Lucinda warmly, and Lucinda introduced us. We were led inside to a small bedroom, where the grandmother was seated in a recliner, wrapped up in a quilt. She appeared to be terribly frail and looked many years older than her true age.

“Robbie,” she said, holding out her arms.

Robbie went over to her and accepted a hug. “Hi, Granny,” he said. “These are my new friends, George and Mike.”

We shook the old lady’s hand, and she scrutinized us carefully. “Lucinda tells me that one of you is a policeman,” she said.

“That would be me,” I said.

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“I’m a captain,” I said, “and nowadays I sit behind a desk on the sixth floor of the sheriff’s office. I spend most of my day filling out paperwork and sending other people out on the street ‘in harm’s way’.”

“That’s good,” she said. “Robbie doesn’t need any more departures in his life. He’ll have mine to deal with soon enough.”

“It’s my intention,” I said, “to be around as long as he needs me, and Mike feels the same way.”

Mike nodded his head.

“Lucinda says you have a nice house,” she said. “What about school and church?”

“We plan to enroll Robbie in a private school run by the Episcopal Church,” Mike said.

“Are you Episcopalian, then?” she said.

“Yes, Ma’am,” I said.

“I dated a young minister many years ago,” she said. “He was an Episcopal priest, and a good man. Unfortunately, I let him get away.” She smiled at the remembrance and seemed to be lost in thought for a long moment.

“I can promise you this, Mrs. Pickens,” I said. “If Mike and I adopt Robbie, you’ll see him often. We spend two weeks here every June, another week in October, and at least one weekend a month at other times. We’ll bring him to see you every time we’re in the area.”

“That’s good enough for me,” she said. “Lucinda visits me often, and over the past couple of years, she’s told me a lot about all the good things you’ve done for her boys.”

“They’re great boys,” Mike said, “and we’ve enjoyed having them work for us from time to time.”

We visited for a while longer, but it was clear that the woman was getting tired, so we obtained the necessary signatures on the adoption papers, and Lucinda and the caregiver witnessed them. Robbie gave his granny a hug, said goodbye, and we left.



Outside the house, we thanked Lucinda profusely and drove straight into town to deliver the signed documents to the lawyer's office. I dropped Mike off there and circled the block until he appeared at the curb, and then I picked him up.

"Anybody want to go to McDonald's?" Mike said.

"Me," said a small voice from the back seat.

"Okay," I said. "McDonald's it is."

We had stopped by Walmart earlier and acquired a pair of shorts for Robbie that could serve as a bathing suit. Back at the cabin, we sat in lawn chairs and watched him play in the creek until his legs started to get cold. We took him back up to the cabin and let him have a hot shower in our bathroom, after which we all took a nap. An hour or so after we awakened, Doc Jenkins stopped by to give Robbie a final post-surgery checkup.

"It's looking good," he said. "I don't think I need to see him again unless some sort of problem develops."

We left Robbie in the great room playing with his toys and walked out on the deck with the doc.

"How's he doing otherwise?" Doc said.

"That's a good question," I said. "He seems to open up a little more each day, but he's still terribly quiet and withdrawn at times."

"When the female deputies questioned him about his mother's death the other day," Mike said, "he talked about it, but only superficially. When they tried to pry a little more deeply, it set him off on a crying jag that lasted the rest of the day, off and on."

"And now he has nightmares that wake him up once in a while," I said.

"Once you get him settled down in Florida," Doc said, "you might want to take him to a good child psychologist."

"That's on our list of things to do," I said.

He said goodbye and headed for the stairs, having refused further payment for his services. That evening, we fixed a dinner that catered to Robbie's likes, including macaroni and cheese, and over the course of the

meal, we asked him a few careful questions, leading up to the main one, which I finally uttered.

“Robbie,” I said, “how would you like to come to Florida and live with Mike and me?”

“Okay,” he said.

“Good,” Mike said, “because we’d like it too.”

“Would my name still be Robbie Ward?” he said.

“If that’s what you want,” I said, “but we’d sort of like it if you took our names, and we called you Robbie Foster-Martin.”

“That’s a long name,” he said.

“It’s called a hyphenated name,” I said.

He tried to pronounce hyphenated and failed, so I took a sheet of paper and a pencil and wrote the word for him. We had learned, to our surprise, that he had been in some sort of kindergarten program in Maggie Valley for a couple of years, could count to one hundred, and knew his alphabet. His reading skills were on a par with the rest of his knowledge, from which I realized that Lucinda was right—his mother had been tutoring him at home.

“Something just hit me,” I said.

“What?”

“We need to look into the disposition of his parents’ estate, if any.”

“Why don’t you call Ernest and have him do that?” Mike said. “At the very least, we might be able to acquire their house. We could rent it out on Robbie’s behalf.”

“Hold that thought,” I said. I went back to the bedroom to make the call, feeling that it wasn’t best to talk about some things in front of the boy. I managed to get through to Ernest, and he said that it wouldn’t be a problem for us to probate the estate once we became Robbie’s parents and guardians.

I had an inspiration and went from the bedroom up to the loft, where I got online and checked movie listings in Asheville. By a stroke of luck, the latest Disney animated feature was playing at a multiplex, and more importantly, I knew where the multiplex was located.

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BACK in the kitchen, I told Mike I had set the wheels in motion with Ernest, and then I said to Robbie, “Robbie, have you ever been to the movies?”

“No, Sir.”

“Would you like to go to a movie tomorrow morning?”

“Sure,” he said. “One of the kids at the kindergarten last year talked about going to the movies.”

“Okay,” I said, “that’s what we’ll do.”

*That’s just about the longest sentence he’s uttered yet.*

The Saturday matinee at the movies in Asheville was a huge success. We had Cokes and popcorn and, in a theater full of kids, watched the animated feature. Afterward, we drove around Asheville, casually driving by our rental properties and eyeballing them, and without exception, they were looking good. Two young men from Waynesville, Donnie and Joe, were in charge of lawn and shrub maintenance now that the twins were in Florida for the summer.

When we arrived at the McDonald’s at Biltmore Village to have our usual, Robbie was still talking about the movie—evidently, it was the most exciting thing he’d ever done. On the way back to the cabin, he fell asleep and once again had to be carried upstairs. Mike and I spent a playful half-hour in bed and then took a nap ourselves until I was awakened by the telephone. It was Sarah calling to let us know that they had arrived.

“Come have dinner with us this evening,” she said. “I’m dying to show you our place.”

“Sure, Sarah,” I said, “but you need to know that there will be three of us.”

“Three?”

“We have an almost-six-year-old staying with us.” I brought her up to date on Robbie’s story.

“I think that’s wonderful, and I can’t wait to meet him. See you at seven?”

“We’ll be there, and we’ll bring some toys so Robbie can amuse himself.”

“George Martin,” she said, with that tone, “as you very well know, I have several grandchildren, including one in that age range.”

“So?”

“The point is that there is a huge toy chest in this cabin with enough stuff in it to amuse any child between three and twelve—I brought it here from our old vacation house at the lake.”

“Point taken. See you at seven.”

“Did you get enough of that from my end of the conversation?” I said to Mike.

“The Bridges have arrived, and Sarah wants to show off their place,” he said, “and we’re invited to dinner at what time?”

“Seven.”

“No problem. Can I go back to sleep now?”

“If you like. I’m wide awake, so I’ll go up to the loft for a bit.”

“Whatever,” he said, and he settled back down on his pillow.

I pulled on some clothes, went to the bathroom, checked on Robbie, who still appeared to be out cold, and went up to the loft. I got online and checked my e-mail (nothing was happening at the office that needed my input, which was good news), and decided on impulse to visit the local county web site. After some searching, I located the tax record for the property owned by Robbie’s parents and printed it. Then I went to the public record indexes, found the deed and the mortgage to the property, and printed both of them.

My yellow pad of sketches for the new master suite at our house was on the desk beside the computer, and that sparked another thought. I hadn’t been able to do much more with the sketches because I didn’t remember the exact dimensions of the house or, for that matter, the garage. I went to the

Duval County Property Appraiser’s website, found our assessment, and printed out the sketch that all such assessments contained—the external dimensions of the house and garage were right there for the asking. Armed with that information, I found Mike’s old pad of graph paper and settled down to work. I kept at it steadily until I heard footsteps on the stairs. I looked in the direction of the sound and saw Robbie at the head of the stairs.

“Hi,” I said. “Have a nice nap?”

“Yes, Sir,” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“Want something to drink?”

“Sure.”

“Lemonade okay?”

“Yes, Sir.”

We went down to the kitchen. Before I got glasses out, I said, “Why don’t you go wake Mike up? He’s been sleeping long enough.”

“Okay.”

He disappeared for a couple of minutes, and when he was back in the kitchen, he said, “He wouldn’t wake up.”

“Then you need to try harder.”

“How do I do that?”

“Try tickling him under his arms. He’s very ticklish.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. Your lemonade will be ready when you get back.”

A few minutes later, I heard sounds of childish laughter coming down the hallway. Then Robbie came running back into the kitchen and said, “He tickled me back.”

“You mean like this?” I said, and I grabbed him and began to tickle him. He squealed with delight and mock protest.

Robbie had just settled down with his lemonade when Mike came into the kitchen and said, “Did you put him up to that?”

“Who, me?”

“That’s what I thought. I’ll get you for that.”

“Promises, promises.”

“Do we have a nice bottle of wine to take to the Bridges’s this evening?”

“Does a bear sh—oops, never mind. Yes, we do.” I handed him a glass of tea, saying, “I’m going to take mine out on the deck, if anyone wants to join me.”

The three of us, accompanied by Thor, went out onto the deck and settled down in our chairs. We went back in the cabin eventually, and by six forty we were in the truck and on our way. As we pulled up in their driveway, the chief and Sarah came to the porch and down the steps. Evidently, they had been watching for us. I helped Robbie out of the truck, took him by the hand, and started up the walkway.

“Oh, my,” Sarah said. “You didn’t tell me Robbie was so adorable.”

“Robbie,” I said, “this is Chief Bridges and Mrs. Bridges.”

“Hi,” Robbie said.

“Hi, yourself,” the chief said.

“I have a grandson your age,” Sarah said. “Why don’t I take you inside and show you our toy box.” She took him by the hand and led him up the steps.

“Nice place you’ve got here, Chief,” I said.

“We like it. Now fill me in on the details about the kid. Sarah was a little short on information.”

We sat in rocking chairs on their porch, and Mike and I told the whole story from the moment we’d found Robbie in the shed.

“That’s amazing,” the chief said. “What can we do to help?”

“For one thing,” Mike said, “you can call on our lawyer and make a statement as to what lousy characters we are.”

“Not a problem,” the chief said. “Just give me his name and address.”

“I can do better than that,” I said, and I pulled out my wallet and found Ernest’s card. “Here’s his card.”

“I’ll take care of it Monday,” he said.

“In case you haven’t checked, I was online earlier, and everything is quiet and serene in Jacksonville at the moment.”

“Good.”

“Can we have the fifty-cent tour?” Mike said.

“You bet,” the chief said. “Follow me.”

He led us into the cabin, which I would have characterized more as a house, based on its size. Robbie was busy coloring at a little table in one corner of the living room, and Sarah was bustling about the kitchen. Mike handed her the bottle of wine we had brought, and the tour continued. There were three bedrooms and two baths.

“You’ve got a lot of space here,” I said.

“Probably a little too much space,” the chief said, “but Sarah wants to be able to have both boys and their families up here at the same time.”

“And she’s the boss, right?” Mike said.

“Pretty much,” the chief said with a sigh of resignation.

“What kind of heat do you have?” I said.

“The air-conditioning system includes an oil-fired furnace,” he said.

“You’ll need that furnace in the winter.”

“We came up several steps to the entrance,” Mike said. “Does that mean there’s a basement?”

“Yes,” the chief said, “follow me.”

He led us through a door and down a flight of steps. The basement was paneled and, in addition to a large recreation room, contained a couple of small rooms, a full bathroom, and appeared to extend under most of the house.

“Wow,” I said, “you could hold one heck of a party down here.”

“Like I said, it’s really more space than we need, although we’ll probably put some bunk beds down here for the grandchildren.”

We went back up to the kitchen, and Sarah said, “Just in time, boys, dinner is ready.”

I went to the living room and said, “Okay, Robbie, it’s time to eat, but you need to wash your hands first.”



“Where?”

“Follow me,” I said.

Over dinner, the conversation centered mostly around Robbie and our plans for him. “What are you going to do about school?” Sarah said.

“We’re going to do our best to get him in St. Mark’s,” I said, “and when the time comes, if he has the grades, Episcopal High School.”

“You can’t do any better than that.”

“George has already begun drafting plans to build a second story over the garage,” Mike said. “We’re going to put a new master suite for us in the addition, so Robbie can have our room, and we’ll still have a guest room.”

“If you ever need a babysitter,” she said, “you know where to find me.”

“Thanks,” I said. “We’ll hold that in reserve. I’m pretty sure our next-door neighbor Mrs. Tumblin will jump at the chance to run over and take care of him.”

After dinner, Robbie went back to the little table and the coloring books, and we sat around the dining table talking.

“He’s awfully quiet, isn’t he?” Sarah said.

“Not nearly as much as he was just a few days ago,” I said, lowering my voice. “Remember, he witnessed his father literally beating his mother to death, and that’s a lot to process for a not-quite six-year-old.”

“We’re going to get him some counseling when we get home,” Mike said.

“And he has no relatives?” the chief said.

“Just an elderly, and very ill, maternal grandmother,” I said. “She’s already signed off on the adoption.”

“As it happened,” Mike said, “Lucinda has been friends with her for years, and she put in a very good word for us.”

“As you sow, so shall you reap,” Sarah quoted.

“What the devil does that mean?” the chief said.

“Think about it, Henry. George and Mike started doing good things for those two sweet boys when they first started coming up here. As a result

of those good deeds, they managed to buy some adjacent property from a man who wouldn't even have talked to them without Lucinda's intervention, and now this."

"Point taken," he said.

"Speaking of the twins," she said, "I guess they're at your house."

"Either there, or at the beach, or hard at work at the Golden Arches," I said.

"Won't it be a bit crowded at your house when you take Robbie home?"

"We'll work something out," Mike said.

"The twins can stay with us, if necessary," she said.

"Thanks," I said. "We'll keep it in mind."

We had finished the bottle of wine, so the chief opened another one and poured refills all around. We sat at the table, lost in conversation, through another glass of wine, until I said, "I'd better check on Robbie." I got up and went into the next room and saw that he was sound asleep on the sofa, so I went back to the dining room.

"He's fast asleep on the sofa," I said.

"You boys are going to make great parents," Sarah said.

"I hope so. Goodness knows it's not something I ever pictured myself becoming."

"Me neither," Mike said, "but this little guy sort of landed in our laps, and we kind of like it."

"We're just hoping the adoption thing can be handled by Friday, so we don't have to make a special trip."

"Or worse," Mike said, "so we don't have to go home and leave him up here temporarily."

"A friend of ours is coming up from Atlanta to assist our local lawyer, if necessary, for the court thing," I said.

"Who would that be?" the chief said.

Mike and I took turns telling them about our first meeting with Charles and Philip, adding what we knew about them and Charles's firm.

“They came down for the weekend and ran the River Run with us this year,” I said, “and we’re going to Atlanta to stay with them on the Fourth of July and participate in the Peachtree Road Race.”

“Your lawyer friend sounds like the kind of guy you want to have on your side,” the chief said.

“According to our local lawyer, Charles is much more than that,” I said, and I told them some of the things Ernest had mentioned.

“I’ll look forward to meeting him,” the chief said. “Sarah and I will certainly attend the court hearing, in case we’re needed.”

“Thanks,” I said. “We have absolutely no experience with this sort of thing.”

“That’s why you’ve hired professionals,” Sarah said.

The second bottle of wine was two-thirds gone, and we decided it was time to gather up Robbie and head back to the cabin. Mike picked him up and carried him to the truck while I said goodnight to our hosts, thanked them again, and got in the driver’s seat.

At the cabin, we peeled Robbie’s clothes off down to his underwear and tucked him in bed. After Thor came back inside from taking care of his business, he curled up at the foot of Robbie’s bed as usual, and we shut up the house for the night and retired to our bed. We were too relaxed from the food and wine to do much more than cuddle a bit before we drifted off to sleep.

We spent the next several days relaxing and enjoying our vacation. Each day the new addition to our family brought a new surprise and an occasional challenge. We woke up several mornings to find Robbie sandwiched in between us. His explanation was always the same—a bad dream. We made a run to Asheville and visited a couple of bookstores, where we purchased some books suitable for an almost-six-year-old, along with a set of phonics CDs. We had fun going through the phonics program with Robbie, and he caught on very quickly. There was little doubt in our minds that he would be at least on the same level as his classmates when he started school in September.

Ernest Rodgers gathered affidavits and other material, and Martha’s department made short work of the requisite background investigations.

Fortunately, both Mike and I were squeaky clean in that respect. In fact, neither of us had even had so much as a traffic ticket since we were in our teens, and both of us had sterling records from those days as well. The adoption hearing was set for Friday at ten in the judge's chambers, and Charles and Philip were planning a three-day weekend in the mountains so they could be present. We were looking forward to seeing them again.

We had a couple of meals with the chief and Sarah, and they and the Plotts came over to the cabin once for a cookout.

Wednesday morning, we got a call from Zeke.

"What's up?" I said when he identified himself on the phone

"Zeb and I drove by the rental houses this morning just like you asked," he said.

"And?"

"It looks like the bungalow on Forbes Street is vacant."

"Are you sure?"

"It looked kind of deserted, so we stopped and looked in the windows. Zeb and I think the renters have moved out—we couldn't see any furniture."

"You know where we keep the spare keys to the houses, don't you?"

"Sure."

"Can you go over there and do an inspection before you have to go to work?"

"You bet—we're both working three to eleven right now."

"Take a yellow pad and make notes of any damages. Hopefully, they didn't take the stove and refrigerator with them."

"They didn't. We could see that much through the back door."

"Call me when you're done."

"George."

"What?"

"Will you and Mike rent that house to Zeb and me?"

"The two of you?"

“Well, us and our two friends, Josh and Norm.”

“Josh is the blind guy we met at The Loop and Norm is the guy that spent the night with Zeb?”

“Yeah.”

“Is this getting serious?”

“I don’t know how serious, but we’ve decided to all live together for a year and see what happens.”

“What about school?”

“We can transfer to FSCJ.”

“Okay, then. Mike and I will make you a deal for month-to-month rental. What will you do about furniture?”

“Lots of Goodwill and Salvation Army stores around. What will the rent be?”

I gave him a figure, and he said, “We can handle that. The four of us will check out the house and let you know.”

“Good. We won’t do anything until we hear from you.”

Mike was standing behind me as I sat at the desk, so I said, “How much of that did you get?”

“Enough, I think. The bungalow is vacant, and the twins and their new friends want to rent it.”

“Yep.”

“They got over the ‘fuck everything that moves’ phase a lot sooner than I thought they would.”

“True.”

The week sped by quickly, and before we knew it, the fateful day was at hand. We met at the courthouse about twenty minutes before the ten o’clock hearing was scheduled in the judge’s chambers. Ernest had found a small, unused room not too far from the site of the hearing, and we held a brief meeting. Martha had brought a young woman named Linda Mears from her office, and she was going to stay in the room with Robbie and keep him company.

Charles and Philip showed up about five minutes after we arrived, and I introduced them to everyone present, that is, Ernest Rodgers, Lucinda Hawkins, Bob and Martha Plott, Sheriff Sutton, and Chief and Mrs. Bridges.

“Okay, everyone,” Ernest said. “It’s time to go down the hall to the judge’s chambers.”

“What’s the judge’s name again?” Charles said.

“Rosalie Jordan,” Ernest said. “She’s very good at this sort of thing. As you know, she interviewed Robbie yesterday and accepted all of our documents in evidence. She told me today would be a mere formality.”

“Then let’s get on with it,” Charles said.

Ernest led us down the hall and stopped at a door marked “Judge Jordan’s Chambers.” He opened it, and we followed him inside, where we found a slightly frantic secretary.

“Oh, Mr. Rodgers,” the secretary said, “I’ve been trying to track you down. I’m afraid I have bad news. The judge was rushed to the hospital early this morning and probably won’t be available again until late next week.”

“What do we do now?” Ernest said.

“The clerk has reassigned the case to Judge Williams,” she said. “You know where his chambers are, and I believe you’re expected.”

Ernest told her thanks and motioned us outside.

“What’s the matter, Ernest?” I said. “You don’t look so hot.”

“That’s because Judge Albert Williams is the worst bigot in this entire courthouse,” he said. “Do you want me to withdraw the petition and wait for Judge Jordan to recover from whatever it is that ails her?”

“If I may speak?” Charles said.

“Be my guest,” Ernest said.

“I think we should charge right ahead as if there were no problems at all with this change,” Charles said. “To do any less would be a sign of extreme weakness and would show a lack of faith in our position.”

“George?” Ernest said.

“I’m with Charles,” I said. “Let’s get the show on the road.”

“Okay,” Ernest said with a grin. “Now you know why I wanted to enter the fray with the biggest gun in town.” He clapped Charles on the back. “Follow me.”

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HE LED US down another hall and opened a door. Letters stenciled on the glass identified the office as Judge Williams's chambers. We followed Ernest inside and found yet another secretary sitting at a desk.

"Hello, Susan," Ernest said. "I believe His Honor is expecting us."

"Go right in, Mr. Rodgers," she said, pointing at an inner door.

Ernest opened the indicated door and we followed him inside.

"Good morning, Ernest," a voice said. I looked in the appropriate direction and saw a somewhat fat-looking man (it was hard to tell because he was seated behind a desk) with a bad case of male pattern baldness and an even worse comb-over. "You folks find seats, and we'll get this procedure going."

Ernest and Charles took chairs on the left side of the judge's desk, and Ernest indicated that Mike and I were to sit in the chairs next to them.

The judge looked at the documents in front of him and said, "This case involves a petition from George Martin and Michael Foster. Are the petitioners present?"

"They are, Your Honor," Ernest said, motioning to Mike and myself.

"Who's the young man next to you, Ernest?" the judge said.

"This is Charles Barnett, senior partner of Chandler, Todd, Woodward & Barnett out of Atlanta," Ernest said.

"What possible interest could a presumably high-priced Atlanta attorney have in this proceeding?" the judge said.

"The petitioners are personal friends of mine, Your Honor," Charles said in an even and what I recognized as a tightly controlled voice. "I'm licensed to practice in Georgia, Florida, and both Carolinas. I have a



summer home near here, and my friends asked me to sit in on this proceeding.”

“Whatever,” the judge said. “I don’t think this will take long.”

“I’m here for as long as I’m needed,” Charles said in that same tone of voice.

“This case involves the petition of two single men to adopt a five-year-old boy who was recently orphaned,” Ernest said. “The boy’s only living relative, his maternal grandmother, has given her consent, she being too old and ill to undertake the upbringing of a small child.”

“Yes, yes,” the judge said. “I read all that, but I just don’t see how I can grant this petition.”

“Why not?” Ernest said.

“Well, because,” the judge said, “if I understand it correctly, these two men are ho-mo-sex-u-als, and we just can’t have that sort of thing going on in this county.”

“What sort of thing would that be?” Ernest said, dropping the “Your Honor.”

“Ho-mo-sex-u-als raising young boys,” the judge said. “That’s not natural, or right, or proper.”

“You do understand, I hope,” Ernest said, “that Judge Jordan has already signed everything but the final order, and has agreed to everything asked for in the petition?”

“True,” the judge said, “but she isn’t here, is she? I understand she’s in the hospital right now.”

“Is that your final decision?” Ernest said.

“I’m afraid so,” the judge said.

“Then, Your Honor”—Charles sort of spat the word “honor” out of his mouth, and his voice had dropped several notches—“I respectfully suggest that it would be in your best interest to change your mind, here and now.”

“And why would I want to do that?” the judge said.

“Because, Your Honor,” Charles again spat the word out almost as an epithet, “if you do not sign off on this petition, my clients will appeal it to a higher court, all the way to the Supreme Court, if necessary, and that’s not

all. I will immediately file the appropriate paperwork to have you removed from office for failing to follow the law in this case, which, as you know, is quite simple. This is a private petition between private and consenting parties. There are no issues of law on which you may rest such a decision.” Charles rattled off a series of what I knew were citations of case law, but couldn’t follow.

“Counselor,” the judge said, “I’ve looked at the documents in this case. Petitioners have a bunch of rental property and are obviously well-heeled, but they don’t have the kind of resources necessary to pursue this case all the way to the Supreme Court.”

“No, they don’t,” Charles said, “but he does.” He pointed at Philip.

“Who is he, and how is he interested?” the judge said.

Charles handed a business card across the desk to the judge, who picked it up and read it. “Integrity Foundation. Never heard of them.”

“For your information, Your Honor,” Charles said, again with that tone, “the Integrity Foundation was established to defend gay men and women from all manner of bigots, including yourself. The Foundation has in excess of ten million dollars at its disposal, and there’s more where that came from. That amount is more than enough to pursue this case through the courts for the next twenty years, if need be. Do you really think your county is going to back you with that kind of resources? And I should add, the Foundation has never—I repeat, never—lost one of these type cases.”

“Are you daring to threaten me in my own chambers, Counselor?” the judge said, getting more than a little bit red in the face.

“No, Sir, I’m not,” Charles said. “I’m stating the facts—and making you a solemn promise. You have absolutely no legal grounds on which to refuse this petition, and the Foundation, aided by my firm, will pursue it all the way, for as long as necessary.”

“I’d suggest you listen to this young man, Albert,” Ernest said, dropping the formal title of “judge.” “Let me tell you something about his track record. Decades ago, when I was a young lawyer in Atlanta, I knew Mr. Barnett’s grandfather, who was a highly respected federal judge at the time. There were people back then who said Judge Barnett would have gone to the Supreme Court eventually but for his untimely death. In any case, I’ve followed his grandson’s career with interest. In the past six years, Mr.

Barnett has put the District Attorney of Fulton County, Georgia behind bars and gotten two or three Atlanta detectives fired. He then sued the DA, the city, the county, and the detectives for millions of dollars—and won. As part of that same case, Mr. Barnett is responsible for the public exposure and downfall of a television preacher, and he sued the preacher and his organization and won a few more millions, putting the preacher’s organization out of business in the process. More recently, he has had the sheriff of a county in the Atlanta suburbs removed from office and a couple of his deputies fired. He sued all of them, and the county—and won millions again. Those are just the cases with which I’m familiar, and they all involved discrimination against gay men or women. I rather imagine there are several more cases like that with which I’m not familiar. What I’m telling you, Albert, is that when this young man goes on the attack, he does not take prisoners.”

“So what?” the judge said, somewhat weakly.

“So what?” Ernest said. “My God, Albert, I’ve known you for a long time, and this isn’t worthy of you. Just last year you told me you were looking forward to retiring in two years and collecting your pension. If Mr. Barnett succeeds in having you removed for cause, and he will succeed, as he always does, that pension may well be in jeopardy.”

“My pension?” the judge said with a trembling voice.

“Yes, Albert,” Ernest said, “your pension. Good God, man, look at the facts in front of you. You have a little boy who was tragically orphaned and destined to become a ward of the county. You have two young men with sterling backgrounds and more than adequate resources to give the child every possible advantage. You have in front of you character references from the sheriff of Duval County, Florida; from Chief Bridges, one of three chiefs who run that department, and who is present in this room; from our own Sheriff Sutton; from Captain Plott of the Waynesville Police Department; from Martha Plott, head of Social Services for this county; all of whom are also present. What more do you need? You’ve got a choice here: do the right thing, or see yourself forced out of office in disgrace. Didn’t you hear the man? That Foundation is sitting on ten million dollars, and more is available. How long do you think this poor little county will back you against those odds?”

“But I just don’t like it,” the judge said.

“You don’t have to like it, Your Honor,” Charles said, in that same tone, “but you are honor-bound to follow the law, or your entire career has meant nothing. The law is clear in this matter, and you don’t really have a choice. I assure you, there isn’t an appellate court in the land that will stand behind you if you deny this petition. The choice is yours.”

There was a very long silence, and the judge’s face was a study in conflicting emotions. Finally, he threw up his hands, signed a document, and handed it to Ernest. “Okay, you win,” the judge said. “Now get all of these people out of my chambers before I change my mind.”

“Thank you, Judge,” Ernest said.

“Just go,” the judge said.

Ernest motioned us to follow him out of the room. He closed the door carefully behind him and said to the secretary, “I need four certified copies of this order immediately, my dear.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said. “Right now?”

“Right now,” Ernest said. “We’ll wait.”

She turned to a copy machine and made copies. Then she used a seal to stamp them and mark them all as certified true copies and handed them to Ernest.

“Okay,” Ernest said, “let’s go back to where we left the boy.”

Back in the room, Robbie jumped up from the chair he was sitting in and latched onto Mike and myself.

I said, “My God, Charles, that was an amazing performance. You didn’t even raise your voice. In fact, you lowered it a bit.”

“It’s what I do for a living, George,” Charles said, “although I have to say I don’t usually enjoy it quite this much.”

“Charles never raises his voice,” Philip said, “but when he lowers it and gets ‘that’ tone in it, look out....”

“You put on a good show too, Ernest,” I said. “I can’t tell you how grateful we are.”

“Just doing my job,” he said. “It’ll be on your next bill.”

“Did I hear what I thought I heard in there?” Chief Bridges said.

“Yes, you did,” the sheriff said. “Mr. Barnett called Albert’s bluff, and Albert blinked.”

“But to threaten a judge with removal from the bench and get away with it,” the chief said, “that’s amazing.”

“It’s what makes the system work,” Charles said. “There are checks and balances in place for these kinds of situations... and I took full advantage.”

Ernest looked at Robbie and said, “Well, young Robin Foster-Martin, are you ready to go home with your new daddies?”

“Yes, Sir,” Robbie said, still clinging to Mike and me.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” I said, “but I think I need a drink. In fact, why don’t we take you all to lunch and celebrate? Mike and I will treat.”

“Sure,” Ernest said. “I never turn down a free meal. Where?”

“Is J. Arthur’s okay?” I said.

“Couldn’t be better,” Ernest said.

Martha’s helper started to leave, but I stopped her, saying, “Linda, you’re invited too.”

“Okay,” she said. “Thanks.”

We caravanned to the restaurant, arriving well in advance of their lunch rush, and the staff quickly set up a table large enough to accommodate all of us so that we could be seated. It took a while to get all of the drink orders placed, given that there were multiple conversations going on simultaneously. Finally, when everyone had a drink and had placed their orders, I stood up and rapped a glass with a knife.

“I’m not going to make a speech,” I said, “but a couple of things need to be said. This has been an extraordinary two weeks for Mike and me. Neither one of us ever expected, in our wildest dreams, to become parents, until this little guy entered the picture. We’re also deeply indebted to everyone at this table, as all of you played a part in the process just concluded, from our good friend Lucinda, who paved the way for us with Robbie’s grandmother, to the many friends in local law enforcement, and elsewhere, that we’ve made over the past two years or so that we’ve owned property here, and especially to Ernest Rodgers and Charles Barnett, two

very different but equally extraordinary lawyers. I've never liked speeches, so I guess I'll just say 'thank you' to everyone and sit down."

Mike stood up, raised his glass, and said, "To the lawyers."

Everyone else said, "Hear, hear."

Ernest stood up for a moment and said, "I just want all of you to know, and I think Sheriff Sutton will back me on this, that Albert Williams is not typical of the kind of people we have in this county. Twenty years ago he was the norm. Today he is the exception. Maybe tomorrow people like him will be just a memory."

"Well put, Ernest," Charles said.

Charles turned to me and said, "When are you and Mike going home?"

"Early Sunday morning."

"I hope you're still planning on coming to Atlanta for the Fourth of July and the Peachtree Road Race," he said.

"Sure," I said, "if you've got room for us and this little guy."

"Oh, we have room," he said. "You have no idea how much room we have. Even with six little boys of our own, there are very nearly always plenty of bedrooms available."

"Six boys," Sarah parroted.

"Yes, Ma'am," he said. "Through a couple of lawyer friends of ours in Boston, Philip and I have each hired surrogate mothers on three separate occasions."

"Then you must certainly have your hands full," she said.

"Having a cook and a full-time nanny helps," he said, "but Philip and I are on duty when the Nanny has a night off."

"It's a really big house," Philip said, "and we've only filled it once. That was when all of my siblings and most of their children came up from Louisiana at the same time."

"George," Charles said, "do you remember me telling you about our friend Lydia?"

"The child psychologist?" I said.

“Yes,” he said. “With your permission, I’d like to have her on hand the Saturday of the Peachtree event. We can sort of leave Robbie in her care, which will give her an opportunity to make an assessment of his needs and possibly some recommendations.”

“Absolutely,” I said. “Maybe she can refer us to someone in Jacksonville.”

“I’m sure she can and will,” he said. “Meanwhile, I’m going to send you her private e-mail address, so you can send her as much information as you think she needs.”

“I don’t know what to say, Charles,” I said. “You guys have done so much already, I’m sort of overwhelmed.”

“Just say ‘yes’,” Philip said, “and go with the flow.”

“Then by all means, ‘yes’,” I said. “There are definitely a few lingering problems from all that he’s been through, and the sooner they’re addressed, the better.”

After we had all been eating for a few minutes, Philip excused himself to go and use the facilities. Linda was sitting directly across the table from me, and I noticed her watching him leave the room. She saw me looking at her and sighed. “Gosh, that’s a beautiful man,” she said.

“That he is,” Charles said, “but I assure you, he’s not available.”

“Yeah, but a girl can dream, can’t she?”

I turned to Ernest and asked him about the estate of Robbie’s parents, and he said, “Now that you and Mike are officially Robbie’s parents and guardians, I’ll get things rolling.”

“I don’t know how these things work,” I said, “but if the house has to be sold, or auctioned, or whatever, Mike and I would like to buy it.”

“Do you know if there’s a mortgage?”

“There is,” I said. “I found it online the other day.”

“If no creditors come forth to make any claims during the mandatory waiting period,” he said, “you might be able to pay it off or arrange to assume it. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Good,” I said. “Meanwhile, we need to arrange to have someone clean it out. There are probably perishables in the kitchen, for example.

We're going back over there tomorrow to see if there's anything else Robbie wants to take with him."

"I'll get some help from my neighbors," Lucinda said, "and we'll take care of the house."

"Thanks," I said. "We're also going to take Robbie by to see his grandmother before we go home. Do we need to call ahead?"

"I don't think so," Lucinda said. "She never goes anywhere, and from what I've been told, she doesn't sleep during the day. You can stop by most any time."

"Then that's what we'll do," I said.

When we had finished our lunch, the sheriff and the Plotts, along with Martha's helper, said their goodbyes and left.

"Lucinda," I said.

"Yes, George?"

"I have some news about the twins, if they haven't already told you."

"What news?"

"We asked them to run by the rental houses the other day and see how they looked. One of them has gone vacant unexpectedly."

"So?"

"They want to rent it."

"Why would they need a whole house?"

"Because they've met a couple of guys whom they really like, and they all want to move in together."

"Really? Do you know them?"

"We've met them briefly. Zeke's friend, Josh, just graduated from UNF and will start working on his Master's degree this fall. In addition to that, he's also a piano tuner, and I understand he's quite good at it—we met him at lunch one day. He was born blind, but you'd hardly know it—it doesn't seem to slow him down much. Zeb's friend Norman also just graduated and will also be starting work on his Master's this fall—he and Josh are best friends. I don't know much more about Norman, but we've met him and he seems to be a nice, stable young man."



“That’s a lot to take in at once,” she said.

“Well, there may be a bit more.”

“What do you mean?”

“It won’t be just for the summer—the twins and their new friends have made a commitment to live together for a year.”

“What?”

“They mentioned transferring to Florida State College at Jacksonville next term.”

“You think?”

“It’s just a random thought,” I said, “but it wouldn’t surprise me. I met Josh one day at The Loop when he and Zeke were there having lunch with Tom Foster, the organist at the Church of the Good Shepherd. Josh had just tuned his piano and had auditioned for the choir. I remarked at the time that in all the years we’ve known the boys, it was the first time I had ever seen one of them out and about without the other one. I suspect they’re maturing and getting ready to settle down.”

“Oh, George. I hadn’t expected to lose them this soon. A year from now when they move to Florida permanently will be hard enough.”

“You won’t really lose them, my dear,” Sarah said. “They’ll always be your sons. It’s not as though you’ll never see them again.”

“I know that,” Lucinda said, “but it doesn’t make it any easier.”

“Maybe it won’t come to that,” Sarah said.

“George’s predictions are usually on the money,” Lucinda said.

“Why don’t you take some vacation time later this summer and pay them a visit?” Sarah asked. “You can see for yourself how things are going. You’re welcome to stay with us.”

“I might just do that,” Lucinda said.

We said goodbye in the restaurant parking lot. Charles and Philip were going back to their retreat until Sunday, and everyone else, except the Bridges, had to get back to work.

As the chief and Sarah were getting in their car, Sarah said, “Have you thought about a pediatrician for Robbie?”

“We haven’t quite gotten that far in our thinking,” I said.

“Both of my daughters-in-law use the same man,” she said, “and they rave about him. I think he’s right there in the Dillon Building at St. Vincent’s Hospital. I’ll get his name, if you like.”

“Please do,” I said, “and thanks.”

“What are you boys doing tomorrow, George?” the chief said.

“As little as possible,” I said.

“Good idea. See you at the office in a week.”

Robbie was already nodding in his booster seat by the time we got back to the cabin, so we all crawled in bed. Robbie was half-asleep already, but Mike and I were still somewhat keyed up from the events of the morning. However, we found a way to relieve the tension a couple of times, and then we drifted off as well.

I woke up after an hour or so, dressed, and went up to the loft. I went online, answered a couple of e-mails, and had a sudden thought, so I picked up the telephone and called the HR department at work. It was easier than I’d hoped. The woman to whom I spoke faxed me some paperwork, which I filled out, signed, and faxed back to her.

I jumped when a pair of arms encircled me. “Geez, Mike,” I said, “you know how to sneak up on a guy. I was so engrossed in what I was doing that I didn’t hear you come up the stairs.”

“I guess I’m just naturally sneaky,” he said. “What’s that you’re doing?”

“It just hit me,” I said, “that we need to get Robbie insured, so I called the HR department at work. They faxed me some paperwork. I filled in the blanks, signed, it, and faxed it back. I’m waiting for an e-mail confirmation that he’s now covered.”

“Good thinking,” he said. “I’d have done the same thing, but you’re part of a huge group and have better benefits.”

“I’m surprised that Robbie isn’t up.”

“He was out cold when I went down the hall. Do you think we should wake him up?”

“Probably. Maybe we ought to take him back to his house this afternoon and get that over with.”

“Instead of tomorrow?”

“Sure, why not?”

I went downstairs and Mike followed. In Robbie’s room, I sat down on the bed and gently shook him. “Time to get up, big guy,” I said.

He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and smiled. Then he surprised the heck out of me by hugging first Mike, then me. Neither Mike nor I were quite prepared for what happened next—Robbie said, “I can’t call you George and Mike if you’re going to be my daddies, can I?”

“You can if you want to,” I said. “What would you like to call us?”

“Can I call you Dad, and Mike Daddy?”

“Kiddo,” I said, “you can surely do that, can’t he, Mike?”

“Yep,” Mike said.

We were both getting misty-eyed, so I picked Robbie up, carried him to the kitchen, deposited him in a chair, and said, “How about some lemonade?”

“Sure, Dad,” he said, “but I need to go to the bathroom first.”

“Okay, kiddo,” I said, “go right ahead. The lemonade will be waiting for you.”

Mike walked up to me, grabbed me, and gave me a huge kiss. I kissed him back for a long moment before busying myself with lemonade and iced tea.

“I sure as hell didn’t see that one coming,” Mike said.

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“Careful, not where he can hear you. I wouldn’t want to have to wash your mouth out with soap.”

“You and whose army?”

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I SET a glass of lemonade on the table in front of Robbie, as he had just come back into the kitchen, and Mike and I sat down at the table with our tea.

“Robbie,” I said, “would you like to go back to your old house after a bit and see if there’s anything else there that you’d like to take to Florida with you?”

“That’s okay, I don’t want to go back there. I got the good stuff last time we were there.”

“No problem, we just wanted to give you the opportunity.”

“What’s going to happen to the house? Will they come and tear it down?”

“No,” I said. “Mike and I are going to try to buy it, and then we’ll probably rent it to somebody.”

“Is that okay with you?” Mike said.

“Sure.”

“Maybe I’ll slip up there now and have a look,” I said. “You can stay here with Robbie.”

“Go for it.”

I finished my tea and went to the bedroom to retrieve my wallet and keys. It took only a few minutes to reach the little house, and I pulled up in the yard. I walked around the outside of the house first, making mental notes as to what needed to be done. Then I opened the front door and entered the living room.

I wandered around from room to room, finding nothing of particular interest. In what had been Robbie’s room, I began a thorough search of the room, the chest of drawers, and the closet. My search yielded a few viable toys and two stuffed animals that had obviously seen a lot of use. The

clothing in the chest of drawers wasn't worth salvaging, nor, except for what appeared to be Robbie's best Sunday outfit, were the clothes in the closet. I tried to remember what kind of work Robbie's father had done, but either I had forgotten or nobody had given me that information. I carried the stuff I'd salvaged to the truck and went back down the mountain. Back at the cabin, I called the sheriff.

"Hello, Dan," I said when we were connected. "George Martin here."

"What can I do for you, George?"

"I just made a thorough inspection of the house Robbie's parents lived in and found a few toys he might like. He was sort of reluctant to go back there."

"I can understand that."

"The thing is, it's wide open to anyone. In Jacksonville, it'd be a prime target for vandalism. How much of a risk is that up here?"

"Not as much as you'd think, George," he said. "People usually leave well enough alone up in the hills. On the other hand, the fact that a woman was killed there would arouse a certain amount of morbid curiosity."

"Should we padlock it and put 'No Trespassing' signs in place?"

"It wouldn't hurt, but at this point what difference does it make?"

"Because Mike and I are going to attempt to acquire it from the boy's parents' estate. We can fix it up, rent it out, and set the money aside for Robbie's future education."

"In that case, I think padlocking the house and posting the property would be a good idea."

"Thanks, Dan."

"No problem, George."

After he hung up, I made some notes on a pad while the condition of the house was fresh in my memory. Then I went back downstairs. Mike and Robbie had been on the deck when I returned, and they were still there.

"Well?" Mike said when he saw me.

"I just talked to the sheriff to ask him about the risk of vandalism to the house. He agreed with me that it might be a good idea to padlock the place and put up some 'No Trespassing' signs."

"Go for it, you're the resident handyman."

“We can make a run to the hardware store later.”

“Okay.”

“Robbie,” I said, “I’ve got some stuff from your house down in the truck. Want to take a look at it and see if you want it?”

“Sure.”

“Follow me.”

We went down to the garage, and I lifted him into the bed of the truck. He pawed through the toys until he spotted the stuffed animals. He grabbed one of them and said, “Where was he?”

“Under your bed.”

“I looked all over for him.”

“What’s his name?” Mike said.

“Andy.”

“Why Andy?” I said.

“Because he’s a panda, can’t you tell?”

“Okay, I see that now,” I said. “I guess this means you’re glad to have him back?” Silly question—he was hugging the animal for dear life.

“Yes, Sir,” he said. “He keeps me company at night.”

“Good,” Mike said, “now you’ll have Andy and Thor to keep you company.”

“What about the rest of these things?” I said.

“Can I take them with me to Florida?”

“You bet.”

“Okay.”

I lifted him down from the truck, and the three of us gathered the things and carried them upstairs. “We need to get Robbie some sort of duffle bag or a little suitcase,” Mike said. “There’s a lot of clothes and stuff to carry home Sunday.”

“I guess that means we’ll go to Wally World for the locks and hardware,” I said, “and you can look for duffle bags while I deal with the hardware.”

I heard the phone ringing in the kitchen and dashed up the rest of the stairs and across the room just in time.

“George,” a voice said, “Martha Plott here.”

“Hi, Martha, what’s up?”

“I have something you need. Robbie’s kindergarten records were just handed to me.”

“How long will you be in your office?”

“Another hour or two.”

“I’ll be right there. Give me the address.”

“You’ll be right where?” Mike asked when I hung up.

“Martha’s office. She just got hold of Robbie’s kindergarten records.”

“Let’s go. We can do the Wally World thing while we’re in town.”

We secured the house and headed down the mountain in the truck, and half an hour later I was standing in Martha’s office.

“You didn’t waste any time,” she said.

“This is important, so we hurried.”

“We?”

“Mike and Robbie are in the truck, waiting.”

“There’s not a lot in these printouts,” she said, “but such as they are, they’re yours.”

She handed me a small bundle of printouts, and I said, “How did you get them?”

“That program was shut down after school ended in December, and I’ve been trying for months to track down the people who ran it. Robbie’s not the only child whose records are needed by others.”

I skimmed the documents. “Well, this is more than we had before,” I said, “and there’s a couple of vital pieces of information here.”

“What’s that?”

“His social security number, some standard test results, and his record of immunizations.”

“I expect his new school will be interested in the test results.”

“No doubt. He’s pretty smart, can count to one hundred, and knows his alphabet. He can also read a bit, and we purchased some phonics CDs and have been working with him on that.”

“Good. Going into a new school, it’s hard to know what to expect, so the better prepared he is, the better he’ll do.”

“Thanks again, Martha, for everything. I expect we’ll see you guys in October, if not before.”

“We’ll look forward to it, George.”

I got in the truck and said to Mike, who was driving, “Next stop, Wally World.”

We found what we needed at Walmart and went back to the cabin. I left Mike and Robbie there and took the truck back to Robbie’s former home. In no time, I had padlocks in place and “No Trespassing” signs on the front of the house and at the entrance to the driveway.

On the way back to the cabin, I stopped by Lucinda’s house and gave her a set of keys to the new locks. At the cabin, I found my two guys on the deck lying in the hammock. The grill had a fire going in it, but it wasn’t quite ready for cooking.

“Steak or chicken?” I said.

“We had a pretty big lunch, so chicken breasts should be more than enough.”

“I’ll go get the rest of it started.”

“Go for it. Robbie and I are quite comfortable.”

Before I started work in the kitchen, I retrieved the camera, went back to the deck, and took several photos of them in the hammock.

We spent a quiet evening at the cabin and a very quiet Saturday enjoying our last day of vacation. We took Robbie to see his grandmother after lunch on Saturday, and he spent half an hour with her. We considered, and then decided against, taking him to the cemetery to visit his mother’s grave, as we weren’t at all certain of his reaction.

*THE burglar, dressed in black as usual, waited in the shrubbery by the garage. It was nearly nine, and he knew that his intended victim would be*



*backing out of the garage anytime now. He had more than a passing acquaintance with the man and his habits, having spent two weeks as a guest in the house in the recent past.*

*He heard the whine of the garage door motor and watched the door slide up and out of sight. A late-model Lincoln Town Car backed quickly out of the garage and down the driveway, not waiting for the garage door to close. With precise timing, the burglar did a quick roll and tuck under the door before it touched down on the concrete. The Town Car was already out of sight.*

*He went straight to and through the kitchen door and looked at the alarm panel. He was in luck—at least half the time the owner of the house didn't bother to set the alarm, and tonight was one of those times. The guy usually stayed at the bar a couple of hours. Add to that the half hour travel time each way, and he had at least three hours to pick and choose the valuables he was after.*

*In the living room, where the valuable porcelain collection was on display, he began to carefully wrap the fragile pieces in towels he had removed from the owner's bathroom. He had just finished stuffing one canvas bag full of goodies when he heard the unmistakable sound of the garage door being opened. Shit, the old fart had come home unexpectedly. He grabbed a heavy brass bookend from a shelf and hurried to the kitchen, where he stationed himself behind the door leading to the garage.*

WE WERE on the road by seven Sunday morning, which put us in our driveway a little before four. I was surprised to see the twins' car in the driveway, as I'd figured they would be at work. They heard the door opening and came down the hall to greet us.

"Hi, Robbie," Zeb said.

"How are you doing?" Zeke said.

"Hi," Robbie said.

"We've got your room all cleaned up for you," Zeb said.

"Have you guys already moved into the Forbes Street house?" I said.

“Yep,” Zeke said.

“You mean you’ve already rounded up furniture and everything?”

“Yes, Sir. With four of us pitching in, it didn’t take that long or cost that much for each of us. Actually, Josh and Norm already had bedroom furniture, and we got the rest of it at thrift stores.”

“I guess we’d better draft a rental agreement, then.”

“Make it for one year,” Zeke said. “That’s what we’ve agreed to.”

“Okay,” Mike said, “now that we’ve got that settled, let’s get the truck unloaded.”

Zeb led Thor to the backyard, and Zeke carried Robbie’s belongings to his room while Mike and I carried in the ice chest that contained the perishable items from the cabin’s refrigerator.

Zeb came back from the yard, and I said, “Why don’t you take Robbie out to the backyard to play with Thor and then come back so we can talk.”

“Sure. Come on, Robbie, the backyard is great, and Thor loves to run around in it.”

He took Robbie by the hand and led him to the back door, returning a few minutes later. “Okay, guys,” I said, “let’s have the full story.”

“There’s no story. We really like Norm and Josh, and we think we’re ready to settle down.”

“Have you told your mother?”

“We talked to her today after lunch.”

“And?”

“She seemed to be okay with it. Wants to come visit us and check out Norm and Josh.”

We walked out into the backyard to see what was going on. Thor was running around in circles, and Robbie was chasing him. “I guess Thor has a new favorite playmate,” Zeb said.

“Yep,” Mike said. “That’s for sure.”

“Did he really see his father kill his mother?” Zeke said.

“Unfortunately,” I said. “He doesn’t like to talk about it, and he still has nightmares once in a while. It’s going to be a while before he gets over everything that’s happened to him.”

I noticed Frances coming across her backyard toward the fence, so I walked over to talk to her. “Glad you guys got home okay,” she said. “Who’s the little boy?”

“As of Friday, he’s ours,” I said.

“Yours?”

I told her the whole story and said, “Let me call him over to meet you.”

“Robbie,” I called, “come over here for a minute.”

He ran over to me and looked up at Frances.

“This is Mrs. Tumblin. She lives in the house next door. Mrs. Tumblin, this is Robbie,” I said.

“Nice to meet you, Robbie,” she said. “I’d shake hands with you, but this fence is a little too high for that. I hope your new daddies will let me take care of you sometime.”

He ran back to play with Thor and the twins, and she said, “You will let me babysit, won’t you?”

“Of course, but not for free. We’ll pay you whatever the going rate is.”

“Starting when?”

“Well,” I said, “Mike and I both have to work tomorrow, although he could take Robbie with him to his office.”

“Don’t even think about it. What are you going to do about school?”

“We’re going to try to get him into St. Mark’s, if they’re not full.”

“That’s expensive.”

“Yeah, I looked at their Web site, and it’s pretty expensive.”

“On the other hand,” she said, “he’ll get the best education around.”

“That’s true, and we’re committed to making that happen.”

“I’ll talk to you and Mike later about specifics for tomorrow and the rest of the week.”

“Thanks,” I said. “We appreciate it.”

We took Robbie inside the house and showed him where everything was. He seemed to like his room and dug Andy out of his bag and put him on the pillow.

“Have you guys eaten?” I said to the twins.

“Not yet,” Zeb said. “We were sort of waiting to see what you wanted to do.”

“Why don’t we go over to The Loop? I’ve kind of got a yen for a grilled chicken sandwich as only they can do it.”

“Sure,” Zeb said. “We’ll meet you there. Can we bring Josh and Norm?”

“Sure.”

We settled down on the deck at The Loop and enjoyed our sandwiches. Robbie was fascinated by everything in sight, especially the St. Johns River, which could be seen from the deck—he’d never seen a body of water larger than Lake Junaluska. The twins and their new boyfriends seemed very relaxed with us and with each other, and Robbie seemed especially fascinated by Josh.

“I’ve never met a blind person before,” Robbie said.

“Well,” Josh said, “you have now, and I hope we can be friends.”

Robbie proceeded to pepper Josh with questions about what it was like to be blind, which Josh answered with incredible patience. We finished our meal, and the guys said goodbye and headed for Forbes Street. Back at our house, we settled down in the den.

Frances came over after Robbie was asleep, and we worked out a suitable arrangement for babysitting from now until school started. At bedtime, Mike and I walked down the hall and looked in on Robbie. He was sound asleep in his new bed, one arm wrapped tightly around Andy the panda.

“What are we going to do about the Y tomorrow morning?” I said once we were in bed.

“You go work out in the morning,” he said. “I’ll pass until tomorrow, but since you’re going to be there, why don’t you check with the staff? I think they have some sort of child care thing going, but I don’t know whether it’s for all day or for while you’re working out or both.”

“Okay, and I’ll call the school tomorrow morning and inquire about class availability.”

“What if they’re booked up?”

“There are two or three other Episcopal schools in town, and any of them would be head and shoulders above the public schools, not to mention the so-called “Christian” schools, most of which are largely fundamentalist in nature.”

“Okay, I can live with that.”

The next morning I went to the Y by myself and on to work, leaving Mike to deal with things at the house. I learned at the Y that their “KidZone” program included babysitting while members worked out, and their hours began as soon as the Y opened.

My desk, as expected, was overflowing with paperwork, so I got a cup of coffee and dug in. I took a midmorning break to call Episcopal Day School and was pleased to learn that they had two openings in September. I committed to one of them immediately, subject to their approval of our application, and called Mike to tell him the good news.

When my three lieutenants filed into my office for the Monday staff meeting, I told them that I had an announcement to make of a personal nature and that I would do so when the meeting was over. Clever me—they were just curious enough that the meeting lasted an hour less than it might otherwise have. Most of the meeting was devoted to the series of burglaries involving older gay men and their frustration with the lack of progress on the cases.

When we were finished, Janet said, “Okay, boss, what’s this personal announcement thing? You’re not taking early retirement, are you?”

I laughed and said, “Hardly that. As a matter of fact, I’ve just made a commitment that will definitely preclude early retirement.”

“Don’t screw with our heads, Captain,” David said. “Out with it.”

“Okay,” I said. “It began when Thor started acting funny as soon as we got to the cabin on Saturday two weeks ago.”

I took them through the whole story, right up to the somewhat contentious adoption hearing. “And that’s the announcement,” I said.

“Holy shit,” David said, “that’s one hell of an announcement.”

“When do we get to meet Robbie?” Janet said.

“In good time. The kid has been through a lot, what with seeing his mother killed and having his life turned upside down. He still has an

occasional nightmare, and we're trying very hard not to overwhelm him with too much new stuff at a time."

"Why don't you have Mike bring him by the office one afternoon near quitting time?" Gregg said. "That way you can show him off."

"We can do that."

"Have you got a picture?" Janet said.

"I'll send you an e-mail of one I took on the deck of the cabin showing Mike and Robbie in the double hammock."

They left, I got back to work, and by five o'clock I had made a barely noticeable dent in the paperwork, but I decided to go home anyway. Robbie ran to greet me at the door and gave me a big hug.

"Hi, there, big boy," I said. "Did you have a good time today?"

"Yes, Sir. Mrs. Tumblin is a nice lady, and she made me hot dogs for lunch."

"Cool. Come tell me all about it while I change clothes."

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HE FOLLOWED me into the bedroom and kept up a running commentary of his day while I put on shorts and a T-shirt. In the kitchen I found Mike at the stove busily fixing dinner, so I gave him a quick kiss and sat down at the kitchen table.

“How’s it going?” I said.

“Finest kind. Everything is under control.”

Tuesday afternoon we met with the assistant head of the school and filled out the necessary paperwork. She examined the paperwork carefully and assured us that Robbie, who was waiting in a reception area under the watchful eyes of a secretary, would be accepted.

“Do you offer a discount if we write a check for a full year’s tuition right now?” I said.

“You bet we do, Captain Martin,” she said, and she told me the amount.

I wrote a check, handed it to her, and she said, “Very good. You gave me all of the background on this young man when we spoke on the telephone yesterday, so I don’t think we need to go into it again, and I’ve given you the handouts concerning uniforms and other things you’ll need to know.”

“I wish we could give you more in the way of reports from his previous schooling.”

“What you’ve given me is more than we get from some folks.”

“Then we’ll see you when school opens.”

In the car, I said, “That was simple.”

“Money talks.”

“Such a cynic.”

“It’s twoo, it’s twoo.”

Since it was already late afternoon, we went downtown to my building. Robbie gaped in awe at the high-rise office buildings, which wasn’t surprising, considering his background and his experience with skyscrapers being limited to television. I parked in my usual spot, and we walked into the building holding Robbie’s hands. We went up to my floor, and I knocked on Janet’s door, startling her. She looked up from her paperwork, smiled, and said, “This must be Robbie.”

“Robbie,” I said, “this is Lieutenant Sanchez, one of my helpers.”

We chatted with Janet for a few minutes and made the rounds of the other offices. From there we went to the top floor, having determined that the sheriff was in. His secretary gushed over Robbie for a couple of minutes before ushering us into his office, where the sheriff stood up and came around his desk to greet us.

“This is the sheriff of Duval County,” I said to Robbie.

“The sheriff?” Robbie parroted.

“That’s right, young man,” the sheriff said.

“Do you have a gun and a badge like on television?” Robbie said.

“I sure do, but I don’t get to wear them very often. For that matter, George has a gun and a badge too.”

“Yes, Sir,” Robbie said, “they’re locked up, but he showed them to me and told me that I was never ever to touch his gun.”

“We won’t keep you,” I said. “As you know, I took the afternoon off to get Robbie enrolled in school, and everyone wanted to meet him.”

“Were you able to get him in St. Mark’s okay?”

“We got lucky. They had two openings in first grade.”

“We also want to thank you,” Mike said, “for the character reference you gave George.”

“I heard about what happened at the hearing,” the sheriff said. “Henry mentioned it when I talked to him yesterday.”

“It was an interesting morning,” I said. “It isn’t every day you see a judge being threatened with removal from the bench.”



“Henry says your Atlanta friend is one of the top-tier attorneys up there.”

“So we understand,” I said. “He’s certainly the guy you want in your corner when the chips are down.”

The sheriff was looking closely at Robbie. “He looks a bit like you, George,” he said. “Are you sure you weren’t sowing some wild oats up in those hills six years ago more or less?”

“No, Sir. If I had, I think I’d remember it.”

“No doubt.”

We settled down into a routine, and Robbie seemed to adjust to it fairly quickly. July third arrived, and we drove to the airport around noon on Friday. The Fourth fell on a Saturday, and I was able to take an extended weekend for the trip. The twins and their new boyfriends agreed to stay at the house for the weekend to take care of Thor, and Robbie was beside himself with excitement at the prospect of flying in an airplane for the first time in his life. We touched down at the general aviation airport in Marietta after an extremely smooth flight through very clear skies, and Philip was waiting for us inside the airport office.

“Charles sends his apologies,” Philip said. “He was in court earlier and the case ran a lot longer than expected. I expect he’ll arrive at the house about the same time we do.”

Mike dealt with the general aviation people regarding the care of the plane, and then Philip led us to a gleaming BMW.

“Nice wheels,” I said.

“Thanks. This car isn’t as sexy as your truck, but it serves its purpose.”

He drove us down I-75 to an exit marked West Pace’s Ferry Road, then through a number of streets before pulling up in front of a pair of wrought-iron gates. Set well back from the street was a humongous house, and when Mike spotted it, he said, “Holy crap, it’s Tara.”

“Babe,” I said, “it’s more like Twelve Oaks. Tara wouldn’t even rate as an outbuilding next to this place. It’s amazing.”

“It’s home,” Philip said as he pushed buttons on a keypad to open the gate. He pulled up in front of the house and stopped. We had just taken our

bags out of the car when a Jaguar sedan pulled up and Charles emerged from the driver's seat.

"Sorry I wasn't able to get to the airport," he said.

"No problem," I said. "Philip has things well in hand."

"This is an amazing house," Mike said.

"Wait until you see the inside," Philip said.

They led us through the front door into a grand foyer and up a flight of stairs. I saw hallways stretching in both directions and what appeared to be a study linking them. "Your rooms are this way," Charles said. We followed him down the hall, and he stopped at the open door of a small bedroom.

"This will serve Robbie, I think," Charles said, "and your room is next door."

He took us into a large, comfortably furnished bedroom and showed us the bathroom that connected Robbie's room with ours. "Come on down to the study at the head of the stairs when you get settled," he said, "and we'll take you downstairs to meet the rest of the family."

"Come on, Robbie," I said, "let's check out your room."

We went into what would be his room, and I put his bag on a small stool. "Why don't you take Andy out and put him on your pillow so he can get used to the room?" I said.

"Okay," he said, and he followed my suggestion.

When Andy was settled to Robbie's satisfaction, we went to the room Mike and I were to share, and Mike and I each took a quick shower and changed into more comfortable clothing while Robbie sat on the bed waiting for us. When we felt presentable, we took Robbie by the hand and followed the hallway back to the study Charles had mentioned. He and Philip had changed into more casual clothes as well and were sitting in the study waiting.

"This is a nice room," I said. "It looks so comfortable."

"That it is," Charles said. "We'll show you around upstairs later. Right now, Gran is waiting to meet you."

He led us back downstairs to the foyer and through a double door. “We’ll take a quick detour through this part of the house and catch up with Gran in the sunroom,” Charles said. “This is the library.”

It was a magnificent room, paneled in warm woods with bookshelves built in and a huge fireplace. There was a large portrait of a man in middle age hanging above the fireplace. Philip saw me looking at it and said, “That’s Charles’s grandfather, Judge Barnett.”

Charles then led us through a sitting room, and we emerged in what he called the sunroom, which was a large paneled room that appeared to run across the entire back of the house. Floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over a flower garden. An elderly lady and a much younger woman were sitting on a small sofa at one end of the room, and we walked up to where they sat. An Irish Setter was curled up on the floor beside them.

Both women stood, the older one with the aid of a cane, as we entered the room. Charles’s grandmother was unusually tall for a woman of her generation, very slim and quite elegant. The younger woman was an extremely attractive redhead whom I judged to be somewhere close to Mike and me in age.

“Thor,” Robbie said, and he ran to the dog.

“That’s not Thor, Robbie,” Charles said. “His name is Lance. He looks like Thor because he’s the same kind of dog, and he likes little boys, so feel free to pet him.”

Robbie was already on the floor doing just that.

“Gran,” Charles said, “meet George Martin and Mike Foster, and this young man is Robbie.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Barnett,” I said. “Your home is magnificent.”

I shook hands with her, and Mike did the same.

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s been my home since I came here as a bride a very long time ago.”

“George and Mike,” Charles said, “this is Lydia Brannon. I believe she’s been exchanging e-mails with you.”

“That she has,” I said. “Nice to meet you.”

We finished the formalities, and Charles said, “Robbie, this nice lady is going to come to the house tomorrow morning and stay with you while George and Mike go run in a race with Philip and me, but she wanted to come meet you this afternoon.”

“That I did,” Lydia said. “Would you like to take a walk with me through the garden?”

“Okay,” Robbie said. “Can Lance come with us?”

“Sure,” she said. “Come, Lance, let’s go for a walk.” She took Robbie by the hand and led him to a door at the far end of the room, with Lance on their heels. We watched them walk through the garden and then turned our attention to our hosts.

“Please have a seat, boys,” Mrs. Barnett said, “and tell me about that adorable child. My grandson has given me a rather abbreviated version of the story, but I’m guessing that he left out a great deal.”

Mike and I took turns telling the story, starting with our arrival at the cabin.

“How’s he doing in Jacksonville?” Charles said.

“He seems to be adjusting well,” I said, “but I think he’s a little too quiet and withdrawn. On the other hand, I have absolutely no experience with little boys, so I could be wrong.”

“By the time you fly home on Sunday,” Charles said, “Lydia will have a full report for you. She’s one of the best child psychologists around.”

“In one of her e-mails,” I said, “she gave me a couple of names in Jacksonville.”

“Did you get him enrolled in school?” Philip said.

“Yes,” I said. “He’s been accepted at St. Mark’s Episcopal Day School, so that’s one problem out of the way.”

“Well, I think both of you are to be commended,” Mrs. Barnett said. “You didn’t have to take that child in.”

“That’s true,” I said, “but there was an invisible sign hanging around his neck that said ‘keep me’, if that makes sense.”

“It makes perfect sense to me,” she said.

“That and the way he clung to you when you tried to leave him in the guest bedroom,” Mike said. “When the doctor was examining him, he wouldn’t let go of George’s hand for anything.”

“Was he ill?” Mrs. Barnett said.

“Not ill,” I said, “but when we washed all the dirt and grime off him, we noticed he had some sort of infection in his groin area.”

“That country doctor got so mad when he examined Robbie,” Mike said. “He said something along the lines of ‘Dumb hillbillies, they won’t have their boy babies circumcised because they think it’s Jewish, but they’re too stupid to teach them how to clean themselves properly.’”

“In a word,” I said, “his foreskin was too tight and so badly infected that he had to go to the hospital a couple of days later to be circumcised. It was just one more trauma on top of everything else he’d been through.”

I looked out at the garden, and saw that Lydia and Robbie were still walking around, trailed by Lance.

“Charles literally saved the day when the good judge was replaced with a bigoted one,” I said.

“You should have seen him put that country judge in his place,” Mike said. “It was quite a performance.”

“He didn’t even raise his voice,” I said. “Instead, he sort of lowered it and got very intense. After he saw how things were and what he was dealing with, he made the words ‘Your Honor’ sound like an epithet.”

“I can imagine,” she said. “His grandfather was like that. I observed him in court more than once before he was appointed to the bench.”

“Would you guys like something to drink?” Philip said.

“If you mean alcohol,” I said, “it’s a bit early for us, but iced tea would be good.”

“That’s what I had in mind,” he said. “And here comes Mrs. Goodman, right on cue.”

Philip introduced us to Mrs. Goodman, the cook, who set a tray on a small table. The tray contained a pitcher of tea, a bucket of ice, and several glasses, and she proceeded to pour tea for all of us.

“Charles,” I said, “didn’t you tell us that you and Philip have six little boys? I think it was mentioned at the restaurant when we were celebrating Robbie’s adoption.”

“That we do.”

“This house is awfully quiet for one containing that many children.”

He laughed and said, “This time of day, they’re up in what used to be the attic. We converted it into a playroom, and it’s extremely well insulated. Their nanny will bring them down later.”

“How long have you been a policeman, George?” Mrs. Barnett said.

“A little over twelve years,” I said. “I started working in the Sheriff’s Office while I was still in college, under an apprenticeship program they offered.”

“So you’re with the Sheriff’s Office, instead of the Jacksonville Police Department?”

“Since the City of Jacksonville and Duval County formed a consolidated government in the late sixties, that’s all there is. There is no Jacksonville Police Department, as such. The words ‘policeman’ and ‘deputy sheriff’ are pretty much interchangeable.”

“I think I may have heard that many years ago,” she said, “but I had forgotten the details.”

“Do you have a huge hierarchy?” Philip said.

“Not really. The sheriff is the head of the department, and there are three chiefs under him that actually run things. You met my boss, Chief Bridges, at the hearing. Each chief has a number of captains who report to him, and we captains each have three or four lieutenants under us, and so on.”

“George is the youngest captain the Sheriff’s Office has ever had,” Mike said, “and before that, he was the youngest lieutenant.”

The conversation ranged from that topic to many others, and I began to realize that Mrs. Barnett was extracting information from us with all the skill of an expert interrogator. At the same time, she seemed to be genuinely interested in what we were telling her. I don’t know how long we sat there talking, but eventually Lydia, Robbie, and Lance came back to where we sat.

“Hi, big guy,” I said. “Did you have a nice walk in the garden?”

“Yes, Sir,” he said. “It’s real big.”

“We’re going to go up to the playroom now,” Lydia said, “and visit the tribe.”

She reached for Robbie’s hand. He took it, and they went toward the stairs, Lance following them. Philip refilled our glasses, and the conversation resumed. Lydia came back downstairs without Robbie, and Philip poured her a glass of tea when she was seated.

“He’s definitely troubled about something,” she said, “and I’ve no doubt it has to do with witnessing his mother’s death.”

“Did I tell you in one of my e-mails that when the female deputies questioned him about what he saw, they probed a little too deeply and set him on a crying jag that lasted most of the rest of the day?”

“No, you didn’t, but I’m not surprised.”

“Because of that,” Mike said, “we were afraid to take him by the cemetery to visit his mother’s grave.”

“Given what I know so far, I’d say that was very smart of you,” she said.

“You can get him through this, I hope,” I said.

“Certainly, but I want you to forget the two names I sent you. I think he needs to talk to a woman instead of a man, so I’m going to send you a couple of different names.”

“Because of the violence he witnessed?” I said. “The medical examiner reported that his mother had literally been beaten to death. When we found him in our generator shed, he had more things with him than he could have carried in one trip, which makes me think he had to have gone back to his house more than once before the body was actually discovered.”

“Exactly. It’s clear that he has a deep bond with you and Mike, but my feeling is that he might find some men a little threatening. I wish you weren’t three hundred fifty miles away. I’d like to take care of Robbie myself.”

“Why?” Charles said.

“Because I don’t see this kind of trauma very often,” she said, “and this is the sort of case that cries out for a study to be made and a paper to be written.”

“How often would you want to see Robbie?” Charles said.

“I’ll have a better opinion on that after tomorrow,” she said, “but weekly, I should think.”

“For how many weeks?” Charles said.

“There’s no way to predict that,” she said, “but for a minimum of six months, perhaps a bit longer. Where are you going with this line of questioning, Charles?”

“Bear with me for a minute,” he said. “Is this the sort of study for which you might be able to procure a grant?”

“Very likely,” she said.

“Enough to reimburse George and Mike for the cost of aviation fuel for a round-trip flight to Atlanta every week?” Charles said.

“I have no idea how much that would be,” she said.

Charles told her his best guess, and Mike nodded in agreement.

“At least that much,” she said. “Why?”

“Hear me out,” he said. “I already know that Mike has access to two airplanes. If he could get one of them every Saturday for six months and fly Robbie up here to see you, would that work?”

“Sure,” she said, “but I sense a lot of ifs.”

“Would it be a disaster if he occasionally had to miss a week for one reason or the other?” Charles said.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“Do you see where I’m going with this, George?” Charles said.

“Yes, I do,” I said, “but that ball is in Mike’s court. What do you think, Mike?”

“Those guys almost never use their planes on the weekends,” he said. “In fact, they’re pretty paranoid about using the planes too much for personal use because of possible tax consequences. They mostly use them



for flying their most important clients places or for flying down to Tampa or Orlando for conferences or trials.

“They actually issue me an invoice for the use of the plane, and I pay it with services rendered. I don’t see why I couldn’t get one of the planes at least three out of four weekends, if not all four.”

“But where would we stay?” I said.

“Need you ask?” Charles said. “This house has several empty bedrooms on any given night of the week.”

“That would be a terrible imposition,” I said.

Mrs. Barnett, who had remained silent throughout the conversation, spoke up. “Nonsense, young man. It’s no imposition at all, and even if it were, it would be a small price to pay to see a sweet little boy restored to his full potential.”

“Actually,” Charles said, “the biggest price to be paid would be the wear and tear on you and Mike, what with all the running back and forth.”

“I’ll defer to your grandmother’s superior wisdom on that one,” I said, and I was rewarded with a smile from Mrs. Barnett.

“As it happens,” Mike said, “George and I do have income from several rental properties. Flying to Atlanta every week would curb our plans for expansion, but we could do it on our own dime if need be. For that matter, it doesn’t have to be an overnight trip each time.”

“How so?” I said.

“Think about it,” Mike said. “If we got into Atlanta around ten, allowed Robbie the necessary time with Lydia, and were on our way home by three or four, we could easily sleep in our own bed that night.”

“True,” Charles said, “but as far as expending your own funds on fuel, why not let some foundation with a fat purse underwrite the cost, if it’s for the advancement of child psychology.”

“I surrender,” Mike said.

“Lydia?” Charles said.

“Need you ask?” she said. “You’re dangling a huge opportunity in front of me, and I’ll see if I can get a friend of mine to write up a grant proposal next week. For an opportunity to follow a case like this from

beginning to end, what's a couple of hours every Saturday morning for six months or so?"

"I don't know much about how these things work," I said, "but Robbie has been enrolled as my dependent with the City of Jacksonville's group insurance plan. Surely there's a way to get the insurance to cover some of your time, at least."

"Now you're talking," Charles said. "Use the system and make it work for you."

"I don't know what to say," I said. "I'm more than a little bit overwhelmed right now."

"George," Mrs. Barnett said, "I've watched Charles and Philip at work for several years now. This won't be the first time they've stepped up to the plate and gone to bat for something or someone they believed in, and it certainly won't be the last."

"Then by all means," I said, "let's try to make it work. Mike?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "If it will help that little guy, then why not?"

"Speaking of little guys," Charles said, "let's go up to the playroom and see what they're up to."

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HE LED us upstairs to the hallway that led to our room and opened a door I hadn't noticed, revealing a stairway leading up with some sort of electric chair lift running along one side of it, presumably for Mrs. Barnett's use. At the head of the stairs we emerged into a huge room—the ceiling, at the center peak, was more than head high, and it tapered gradually to two or three feet above the floor level on each side of the room. There were dormer windows spaced regularly along both walls, and I saw two or three low tables spaced down the length of the room. Robbie was standing at one of them, and there were two smaller boys standing next to him. Two younger boys were playing nearby with Lance in attendance, and two still younger boys were in a playpen. A thirtysomething woman stood as we entered the room.

“Hi, Grace,” Philip said. “Meet George and Mike. They're Robbie's dads.”

We shook hands with the nanny and stood for a while watching the kids at play. Robbie was so engrossed with what he was doing that he didn't seem to notice our presence. I walked down to the table and saw that it was an elaborate setup of what I recognized as Thomas the Tank Engine, complete with wooden tracks and a host of trackside buildings and accessories.

“Mark and Steven are a bit too young for Lionel,” Charles said, walking up behind us, “so we went with Thomas instead.”

“Robbie is starting to yawn,” I said. “I think it's naptime.”

“Yeah,” Philip said, “it's that time of day for our tribe as well.”

We led a somewhat reluctant Robbie back downstairs and to his bed. He snuggled down with Andy, and I said, “You can play with Mark and Steven again after you wake up, okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

“We’ll be downstairs in the room where you met Lance,” I said.

We headed down the hall and met Lydia at the head of the stairs. “Lydia,” I said, “before we go downstairs, I’d like to ask you a question or two in private.”

“Sure,” she said, “there’s nobody in the study right now.” She pointed the way into the study, and when the three of us sat in facing chairs, she said, “What’s on your mind?”

“This may sound silly,” I said, “but how should we deal with nudity around Robbie?”

“Give me an example,” she said.

“For one thing, Mike and I sleep raw,” I said, “and Robbie frequently comes into our bedroom early in the morning and crawls in bed with us.”

“And,” Mike said, “earlier, while we took turns showering, he sat on the bed carrying on a conversation with us while we undressed and dressed.”

“On the other hand,” I said, “we’ve been very careful to lock our bedroom door if we’re going to be doing things he doesn’t need to know about or witness.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it, guys,” she said. “You’re both males, and so is he. He’s a couple of years from the age at which he’s going to start asking questions about why your bodies are more developed than his. When that time comes, and it will come, answer his questions openly and honestly. There are any number of books you can buy that will serve to guide you. The very worst thing you could do is to give him an idea that nudity around other males is somehow shameful or something to be hidden.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“We’ve got a lot to learn,” Mike said.

“Parents survive,” she said.

“True,” I said, “but most of them have five years to work their way up to dealing with a five-year-old.”

She smiled at that, and said, “Don’t worry about it.”

We returned to the sunroom, where Mrs. Barnett was where we had left her, and Charles and Philip were sitting with her. Lydia said goodbye to all of us and promised to be back in time for dinner. “I’m spending the night,” she said, “so I can be around first thing in the morning.”

After she had gone, Charles said, “Want to swim some laps?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “We missed our workout at the Y this morning.”

“Follow me,” he said.

He led us out the same exterior door Lydia and Robbie had used earlier, and then down a brick walkway to the building that housed the pool. It looked sort of like a huge greenhouse, with translucent glass walls and a glass roof which were anchored to solid brick structures at each end. We followed him into a dressing room, where we removed our clothing and stowed it in baskets on shelves. Philip handed each of us a pair of high-quality swim goggles and we went to the pool.

It was great—we already knew that it was twenty-five yards long, which was just under half the length of an Olympic-size pool, and I saw that there were four lanes for swimming laps defined by the black lines running the length of the pool’s bottom.

By my count, we had just finished a mile of laps when, as I turned to begin another lap, I saw a couple of guys make running jumps and cannonball into the pool. We suspended our laps at the shallow end of the pool, stood up, and the two newcomers swam up to where we were and stood. One of them had black hair and bore a resemblance to Philip. The other was a really cute blond.

“George, Mike,” Philip said, “meet my nephew Steve and his boyfriend Roger.”

We shook hands, and Steve said, “Uncle Philip, I think Roger and I qualify as partners now, don’t we? After all, we’re eighteen and we’ve been together for two years.”

Philip laughed and said, “I stand corrected.”

“We just finished a big job,” Steve said, “and needed the pool to cool off.”

“Knock yourselves out,” Philip said, “then join us in the Jacuzzi, if you like.”

Philip led the way to a large Jacuzzi, which was built into the floor of the room. Its perimeter was tiled, and there were steps leading down into it. The four of us sat quietly for a while, allowing the jets of warm water to relax our muscles, and when Steve and Roger finished splashing around in the pool, they walked over and into the Jacuzzi. As they did so, I saw that their bodies were deeply tanned.

The boys settled in the Jacuzzi and sighed. "God, this feels good," Roger said.

"You mentioned a job," Philip said. "I thought you had classes today."

"Only one," Steve said, "and it was canceled. We went out to the 'burbs and put in a sprinkler system."

"It was a complicated one," Roger said, "one of the kind that uses waste water, or gray water as it's called, from the house with a backup supply from the normal water source."

"How's Mr. Goodman working out for you?" Charles said. In an aside to us, he added, "Mrs. Goodman's husband used to act as a combined butler, chauffeur, handyman for Gran, but as she put it, with four men in the house to do that kind of thing, he was getting bored, so Steve and Roger hired him."

"When we start at Tech full time in September," Steve said, "he's going to be in charge of the sprinkler systems."

"You've got that right," Roger said. "He's the only one we've found that we can trust to do it right."

"Is it that complicated?" I said.

"No, Sir," Roger said. "It's really very easy to join sections of PVC pipe with PVC cement. The problem is that some of the kids we've had working for us would get in a hurry and not use enough cement."

Evidently, Roger saw nothing odd about an eighteen-year-old referring to other teenagers as kids.

"Eventually," Steve said, "a joint would come loose, and an angry customer would call us to complain about water squirting out of the middle of their lawn."

"Then we'd have to spend time and money digging up their lawn to fix what should have been done right in the first place," Roger said.

“Tell me more about your business,” I said.

The boys launched into a long narration of their history in the lawn maintenance, landscaping, and irrigation business.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Mike said.

“Of course,” I said. “I’m thinking of two young friends of ours. They’re identical twins and are probably a year older than you guys, since they just finished their first year of community college up in Waynesville.”

“Right,” Mike said. “They’re spending the summer in Jacksonville because they’re crazy about the ocean. They’ve also been involved in management training at McDonald’s for the past couple of summers and plan to make a career out of the Golden Arches.”

“I think they might be interested in taking a page from your book,” I said, “and starting a business like yours in the Jacksonville area. They’ve made a good deal of money doing lawn work on the side over the past few years, and what you do sounds like a natural next step for them.”

“Are they gay?” Steve said.

“Yes, they are,” I said. “In fact, they’ve just acquired boyfriends for the first time.”

“When you live in the hills,” Mike said, “where things are kind of backward and old-fashioned, you’re very careful about talking to other guys about being gay. In fact, I think it’s safe to say that until they started working at Jacksonville Beach and spending their free time on the beach, they hadn’t had much opportunity to meet other gays.”

“Why don’t you invite them to Atlanta?” Charles said. “Maybe they could stop by here one weekend before school starts in the fall.”

“Do you think that could be arranged, George?” Philip said.

“We’ll certainly ask them,” I said. “They’re at our house this weekend taking care of our dog.”

“Speaking of taking care of people,” Mike said, “we probably ought to go check on Robbie. He’s been napping for a while.”

“Robbie?” Roger said.

“We just adopted a little boy,” I said, and I gave them the short version of the story.

We all got in the pool for a while to cool down from the Jacuzzi, after which we headed for the showers. Back in the house, we found Robbie sitting in the sunroom talking to Mrs. Barnett and sipping a glass of what appeared to be lemonade.

“Hi, there, big guy,” I said, ruffling his hair. “Sorry we weren’t upstairs when you woke up.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “Mrs. Barnett said you were swimming.”

“That we were,” I said. “By the way, do you know how to swim?”

“No, Sir.”

“Well, we can’t have you living in a city near the ocean and not knowing how to swim,” I said. “We’ll take you to the Y the next time they have a class for kids your age.”

“Okay.”

Steve and Roger walked up to us, and I said, “Robbie, this is Steve and Roger. Steve, Roger, this is Robbie.”

They shook hands solemnly with Robbie and took seats in nearby chairs.

Mrs. Goodman appeared and said, “Dinner will be served in thirty minutes.”

“Good,” Steve said, “because we’re starved.”

“Ditto,” Roger said.

“Can we go up to the playroom?” Robbie said to no one in particular.

“You bet we can,” Steve said. “Let’s go.”

Robbie followed the boys out of the room, and Mrs. Barnett said, “That is one very bright child.”

“I’ve noticed that,” I said. “At times he is so withdrawn, and then, when you least expect it, he comes up with something that to me, at least, sounds way beyond his years.”

“He and I were having an interesting conversation when you came back from the pool,” she said. “He even volunteered the information that his parents were dead and that you boys were his new daddies.”



“Really?” I said. “That’s amazing. Moreover, it’s something that Lydia needs to know.”

“I thought so too,” she said, “and I’ll pass the information along to her. She’s really quite special in what she does.”

“So I gather,” I said.

“When Philip’s nephew came to us,” she said, “he had been beaten almost to death by his father for being gay. Lydia spent a lot of time helping him get over it.”

“It would appear that she succeeded,” Mike said.

“She helped him gather the courage to go back to Louisiana and testify against his father in court,” she said.

“What happened to his father?” Mike said.

“He was sentenced to a very long prison term,” she said, “and was stabbed to death in the prison some months later.”

“Inmates have a reputation for not liking child beaters and molesters,” I said.

“Just so,” she said.

“How did Steve take that news?” Mike said.

“Since he had already told his father in court that he wasn’t a father, but merely a sperm donor,” she said, “it didn’t seem to bother him.”

“Let’s get back to Robbie,” I said. “How did you get him to mention his parents?”

“I think he just blurted it out,” she said.

I gave her a steady look and smiled. Then I said, “Mrs. Barnett, you’re probably one of the most skillful interrogators I’ve ever met, and I mean that as a compliment of the highest order. You managed to somehow get him to talk, didn’t you?”

She smiled and said, “Guilty as charged. I had a very good mentor in Charles’s grandfather. He taught me how to work a room and casually elicit information from people, and it has been an extremely useful skill.”

“Well,” I said, “if you ever want a job, I’ll hire you in a heartbeat, despite the department’s mandatory retirement age. You’d have to spend a

lot of time consorting with the criminal element... but it wouldn't be boring."

She laughed and said, "George, that's just about the best offer I've had in years, but I'll have to respectfully decline."

"Too bad you didn't have a tape recorder handy," Mike said.

She smiled again, dug into the folds of her skirt, produced a microcassette recorder, and said, "You mean like this one? A few years ago, Philip persuaded me to write a book about life in Atlanta in the old days, and he even managed to get it published. Lately he has been after me to dictate the rest of my memoirs, so I've played with this thing for a few minutes every day for a few weeks now. I just happened to be using it when Robbie came downstairs looking for you."

She pushed the rewind button, then, after a minute or two, pushed another button, and we listened to her conversation with Robbie. When the tape ended, she turned the machine off and said, "I'll give this to Lydia after dinner."

"You're an amazing woman," I said.

"She's what?" Charles said from behind me.

"Your grandmother is an amazing woman," I said, "and I've just offered her a job as an interrogator for the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office."

"I can see the headlines now," Mike said. "'Sweet little old lady persuades hardened criminals to tell all.'"

Mrs. Barnett began to laugh, and I told Charles about the tape.

Philip said, "You're not the only one who's observed that skill in Gran."

Mrs. Goodman appeared and told us that dinner was served in the dining room. It took a while for everyone to assemble, and Mrs. Barnett was still smiling when she sat down at the table. Steve and Roger came downstairs with Robbie in tow, and Grace brought Mark and Steven with her and got them settled in their high chairs. Mrs. Goodman produced a booster seat for Robbie, and Lydia showed up a minute before we were ready to dig in.

Charles opened a couple of bottles of Bordeaux. As he decanted them, he said, "I haven't shown you the wine cellar yet. We'll take a look at it

after dinner.”

“Charles’s great-grandfather started the wine cellar,” Mrs. Barnett said, “and my late husband kept it going.”

“That he did,” Charles said as he began to pour. “For some reason, my father wasn’t all that interested. On the other hand, I started adding to the collection as soon as I could afford to do so.”

“Are you interested in fine wine, George?” Mrs. Barnett said.

“Absolutely,” I said. “Much of our social life revolves around impromptu wine tastings every Friday evening at our neighborhood wine shop.”

“Anywhere from four to as many as twelve or more of us gather at the shop,” Mike said. “We pick out a bottle we’d like to try, and the owner divides it between us. After we’ve sampled three or four wines, we pick a restaurant that has a reasonable corkage policy and take more wine with us to have dinner at the restaurant.”

“Philip and I certainly enjoyed the Friday we spent with your group,” Charles said.

“We enjoyed the Burgundy night Saturday at that steak house, also,” Philip said.

“Burgundy night?” Lydia repeated.

Charles explained that we’d had dinner with several other couples at the steak house, and every couple was required to bring—and share—a bottle of premier cru or grand cru Burgundy.

We had a great time at the dinner table, and the conversation went from wine to a number of other fascinating topics. Before we had dessert, Mrs. Barnett gave Lydia the tape recorder, and she excused herself to go and listen to the tape. Later she came back into the dining room, where we were still visiting over our coffee, and took Robbie up to the study to spend some more time talking to him. Charles led us down to the cellar and unlocked a door at one end of it. He stepped inside and flipped on the lights.

“Holy shit,” I said when I saw the wine cellar.

He led us around the various racks, pointing out a few treasures from his great-grandfather’s day that were still waiting to be sampled. “Some of this wine is reaching a point at which it absolutely must be drunk in the next

several years,” Charles said, “and we’re hard at work trying to get to it before it goes bad.”

He and Philip told us about their involvement with the Atlanta Wine and Food Society.

“You ought to organize a group like that in Jacksonville,” Charles said.

“Actually,” I said, “there used to be one. It lasted for more than twenty years. The last man to be president of the group kept it going for more than five years, and when he retired and moved away from Jacksonville, he passed the torch to someone else. Unfortunately, after less than a year, that person had to shut it down for a number of reasons, so it’s history now.”

“What happened?” Charles said.

“Poor attendance, loss of an adequate venue, you name it,” I said. “I don’t know the whole story, but I’ve heard bits and pieces from others.”

Charles went back among the wine racks and returned a moment later with a bottle. “Let’s take this bottle of Port up to the library and sample it,” he said.

We went back upstairs to the library and Charles opened the bottle, passing it around so we could read the label. “W & J Graham Forty Year Old Tawny Port,” I read. “Sounds good.”

“That’s because it is good,” Philip said. “In fact, it’s more than good.”

Charles poured a small amount of Port into little glasses and passed them around. When he’d finished pouring, he raised his glass and said, “Cheers.”

We echoed him and took a sip.

“God,” I said, “this is way beyond smooth.” I felt the fiery liquid all the way down, and it was a wonderful feeling.

“What do you guys think, Steve?” Philip said.

“Not bad,” Steve said.

“Ditto,” Roger said.

“Not bad,” Charles said. “As someone once famously said, you’re damning it with faint praise.”

“Try rating it on a ten-point scale,” Philip said.

“Okay,” Steve said, “I’ll give it at least an eight and a half.”

“Ditto,” Roger said.

Charles laughed and said, “I’ll accept an eight and a half.” He refilled our glasses.

“What’s the plan for tomorrow morning?” I said.

“The race ends in Piedmont Park,” Charles said. “Early tomorrow morning I’m going to drive my car to Lenox Square and park it, and Philip will follow me in his car and bring me back to the house. Steve can drive us over to Phipps Plaza around seven fifteen in Philip’s car and drop us off. That’s only a block from where the race begins, and we can take MARTA back there from near Piedmont Park.”

We finished our Port and went upstairs. Lydia was still talking to Robbie, but he was clearly showing signs of being ready for bed, so Mike took him down the hall to supervise his bath, and I stayed in the study to talk to Lydia.

“What did you think of Mrs. Barnett’s tape?” I said.

“I was surprised,” she said. “She managed to extract an amazing amount of information in a very short time.”

“I offered her a job as an interrogator,” I said.

Lydia laughed and said, “She’s very good at it.”

“Did Robbie open up to you just now?” I said.

“A little,” she said. “Remember, I have to walk a fine line between digging for information and pushing too hard. As time goes on and he begins to trust me, it will get easier and I can push a little more. It’s almost like walking on eggshells.”

“Grant money aside,” I said, “we’re more than willing to start next weekend, if you can schedule the time.”

“I’ll make the time,” she said. “This kid interests me.”

“Great,” I said. “Before we leave Sunday, we can cobble a schedule together for the next few months.”

“Count on it,” she said.

“It sounds as though you’ve known the Barnetts for a long time,” I said.

“That’s true,” she said. “I’ve known Charles ever since he and my brother met when they were in college. They were partners almost from the day they met.”

“What happened?”

“My brother died of a brain tumor a number of years ago. Charles was devastated afterward and wasn’t in the best of shape for nearly three years—then he met Philip.”

I excused myself and went down the hall to the bathroom where Robbie was playing in the bathtub with Mike watching him. “He’s starting to get a bit wrinkled, isn’t he?” I said.

“Yep,” Mike said. “Time to stand up and rinse off, big guy.”

Robbie obediently stood up and allowed Mike to use the showerhead to rinse the soap off him. We dried him, got him into some shorty pajamas, and tucked him into bed with Andy.

“Goodnight, kiddo,” I said. “We’ll be right next door.”

“Goodnight, Dad,” he said.

Mike told him goodnight and got a “Goodnight, Daddy” in return.

We turned the light off, closed the door behind us, and went to our bedroom.

Saturday morning, July fourth, we had a very light breakfast downstairs at six thirty, and Charles and Philip appeared just as we finished. Charles said, “We’ll grab a quick bite, change, and be ready to go in a few minutes.”

We went to our room, pausing only to check on Robbie, who was sound asleep. We donned our running gear, fastened our official race numbers on our running shorts, made a final pit stop, and headed back downstairs. Steve and Roger were finishing their breakfast when we got to the dining room.

“Uncle Philip said they’ll be here in a couple of minutes,” Steve said.

Charles and Philip showed up clad in their running gear, with Lydia right behind them. “Robbie’s still asleep,” I said, “but he’ll probably wake

up most anytime.”

“I’ll handle it,” she said. “Go knock yourselves out.”

We followed Steve out of the house and got into Philip’s BMW. In almost no time, Steve dropped us off a block from our assigned location, saying, “This is as close as I can get.”

“No problem, kiddo,” Philip said. “We’re good to go.”

We got out of the car, and Charles led us to our assigned places and explained that in the past, the starting point had been dictated by our numbers, which were dictated by the numbers we had been given when we’d registered for the race. “We’re about two blocks from the starting line,” Charles said. “Remember, we have to finish the race in a certain time in order to collect our T-shirts, but the good news is that the official countdown doesn’t start until everyone has crossed the starting line.”

“With more than 50,000 runners,” Philip said, “it takes more than a half hour for all of them to cross the starting line.”

We stood around talking and watching the huge crowd of humanity around us. Finally, I heard a shot, and Charles said, “That’s the starting gun. Now we wait until our group is allowed to move forward.”

I had to hand it to the race organizers, as they were experts in managing the mass of runners. Two or three people stood behind a tape, holding signs that said either “stop” or “walk,” and they maneuvered our group forward until the tape was dropped and we were allowed to run freely. When we finally crossed the starting line, I noticed that the clock had been running for twenty-four minutes.

The actual race wasn’t too bad compared to the River Run, which was one-third longer. The problem was the heat and humidity—on the Fourth of July in Atlanta, Georgia, it was fairly warm by eight o’clock in the morning and very humid.

There were people handing out bottles of water at various spots along the way. Of considerably more importance were the fire hydrants that had a series of spray nozzles attached to them. They were spraying a cloud of water across the runners, which provided a welcome, if somewhat brief, respite from the heat.

At one point, when the street started up a long hill, Charles said between breaths, “This section is called Cardiac Hill because there have been more than a couple of heart attacks here during the long history of the race.”

“Thanks for telling me that... just kidding.”

Charles and Philip, knowing that we were totally unfamiliar with the streets and landmarks, kept us abreast of our progress. Finally, Charles said, “This is the home stretch. We’ll be in Piedmont Park in no time.”

We crossed the finish line, collected our T-shirts, and headed to the MARTA station a few blocks away. At the station, Charles produced a set of keys and some subway tokens from a pouch attached to his shoe by the laces, and we went through the turnstiles. It was a short subway ride to the Lenox Square Station, and at the car, he retrieved a bunch of towels, handed them to us, and we dried ourselves as best we could before we got in the car. We were back at the house in less than thirty minutes and went straight to the pool to cool off. In the pool, I said, “That was quite an experience. I can’t wait for next year.”

“Me too,” Mike said.

“I forgot to look at the clock when we crossed the finish line,” I said. “How did we do?”

“We did it at an eight-minute pace,” Charles said, “which is more than respectable.”

We exited the pool and went to the showers. We had left clothes in the locker room the night before, so when we emerged from the pool house, we were ready for the day. Back at the house, we settled down in the sunroom for a hearty breakfast served by Mrs. Goodman with an assist from her husband, whom we had not previously met, and Robbie ran into the room, followed by Lydia.

“We saw you on TV,” he said.

“You did?” I said.

“There were news cameras stationed along the route,” Lydia said, “and Robbie spotted you at least twice during the course of the race.”

“Good for you, kiddo,” I said. “Come here and give me a hug.”



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TO MY surprise, he jumped into my arms, gave me a hug and a kiss, and proceeded to do the same thing with Mike. We relaxed for the rest of the morning, visiting with our new friends and enjoying ourselves. Steve and Roger had gone out to the suburbs to install another sprinkler system, taking Mr. Goodman with them. They were back in time for lunch, and we were joined by Mason and Angela Cartwright, Roger's parents. They were an interesting couple, and, looking at Angela, it was obvious from whom Roger had gotten his blond good looks—at forty or thereabouts, she was stunning. After lunch, we all spent some time in the sunroom.

I could tell that the number of new people added to the mix was getting to be a bit much for Robbie, so I took him up to the playroom for a while. Mark and Steven were there, and the three of them spent some time together. Granted, two three-year-olds didn't have that much in common with an almost-six-year-old, but they seemed to enjoy each other's company. When Robbie began to yawn, I took him to his room and got him settled down with Andy.

"Are you having a good time, big guy?" I said.

"Yes, Sir," he said. "I've had fun."

"Good," I said, and I kissed him on the forehead and told him to get some sleep.

I went downstairs and headed toward the sunroom just as Roger was walking his parents to the door. We exchanged goodbyes in the foyer, and I continued on to where the others were sitting. Charles asked us what our plans were for the rest of the weekend.

"We don't really have a schedule," Mike said. "Why?"

"I was thinking about Robbie," Charles said. "Why don't you take him out to Six Flags in the morning?"

"Won't it be crowded on a holiday weekend?" I said.

“If you’re waiting in line at the entrance when they open,” he said, “you can usually sample the most popular rides without too much of a wait.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “The later in the day it gets, the longer the lines are.”

“The longer what lines are?” Roger asked, walking into the room and the middle of the conversation.

“Where do we go that has long lines in the afternoon?” Steve said.

“Six Flags?”

“Bingo,” Steve said.

“Why?” Roger said. “Are we going?”

“George and Mike are thinking about taking Robbie in the morning,” Steve said.

“Can we go along?” Roger said. “We haven’t been out there this year.”

“Sure,” I said, “the more the merrier.”

“If you won’t think us poor hosts,” Charles said, “Philip and I will beg off. He’s had a steady stream of visiting siblings, nieces, and nephews through here this year, and I’ve lost count of the number of times we’ve gone there.”

“Charles,” Mrs. Barnett said rather sharply, “that’s not polite.”

“What good are friends,” I said, “if they can’t be honest with each other?”

“Right,” Mike said. “Besides, we didn’t come here expecting to be relentlessly entertained twenty-four/seven.”

“Steve and I will show you how to get to the best stuff the quickest,” Roger said.

“In that case,” I said, “the trip will be our treat.”

“That’s nice,” Roger said, “but do you have any idea how much those tickets cost?”

“I doubt they’re any worse than Disney World,” I said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“We’ve never been there,” Steve said.

“What?” Mike said. “Never been to Disney World? We’ll have to correct that one of these days soon.”

“Yeah,” I said, “it’s only an hour or so from us.”

“George,” Mike said. “It’s more like two and a half hours. You may have gotten there in an hour or so that time you drove a cruiser all the way to Orlando at ninety plus, but the rest of us have to follow the speed limits.”

“Jacksonville to Orlando at ninety plus?” Charles said. “Sounds like there’s a story there.”

I laughed and said, “It turned out to be a major story. We had a murder in Jacksonville and learned there was a possibility that the perpetrator was headed for Orlando. I sent a detective down there to follow up on that lead, and he and another detective knocked on a door and found two bodies. My boss had an almost-new Crown Vic delivered to my house, and I was in Orlando almost before the local cops arrived.”

“Was it fun, driving that far that fast?” Roger said.

“Maybe for the first five minutes after I was out of city traffic,” I said, “but mostly it was extremely tense. At those speeds, even sporting flashing lights in the left-hand lane with people getting out of your way, there are a lot of things that can go wrong. Plus, you really have very little control over your vehicle at those speeds. That was the first time I’d ever had to do such a thing, and I hope it will be the last.”

“You may have read about the case,” Mike said, “as it led to the uncovering of a number of murders and a pornography ring.”

“Now that you mention it,” Charles said, “we saw your press conference.”

Steve and Roger excused themselves, saying they had to go out in the ’burbs to call on some prospective customers who’d asked for estimates. Lydia asked Mike and me to come up to the study so we could work out a schedule for Robbie’s sessions with her, so I retrieved my laptop from our room and set it up on the desk in the study. She used Charles and Philip’s desktop machine to access her office computer, and we worked on setting dates for the next six months. It took a while, but we finally had a timetable that accommodated both her schedule and ours.

“I do have one question,” I said.

“Ask,” she said.

“Do you think Robbie is likely to have a problem with his classmates when they find out he has two dads and no mother?”

“That’s impossible to predict,” she said, “but it’s certainly much less likely to happen in an Episcopal school than in the public schools, given the well-known tolerance and inclusiveness of that denomination.”

“Should we give his teacher your card and tell her that she is free to talk to you if it becomes necessary?” Mike said.

“By all means,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, “that’s what we’ll do. We want to get that little guy up to speed as quickly and painlessly as we can.”

“Speaking of little guys,” Mike said, pointing at the entrance to the study.

“Hi,” I said to Robbie, who was standing there rubbing his eyes. “Have a nice nap?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Why don’t you come over here and give me a hug?” Lydia said. “I’ve got to go home in a few minutes.”

He walked over to where she sat and complied. “That’s nice,” she said. “I’ll see you next Saturday.”

“Are you coming to Jacksonville?”

“No,” she said, “George and Mike are going to fly you up here just to see me.”

“Okay.”

“Then I’ll leave it at that,” she said.

We shook hands and she went downstairs. We followed a few minutes later with Robbie in tow and found Charles and Philip were still sitting, talking quietly with Mrs. Barnett.

“Charles,” I said, “would either you or Philip be kind enough to give us a lift to the nearest mall? We need to buy this little guy some clothes, but we’ve been in such a whirlwind since we got back from the mountains that we really haven’t had time to shop for him.”

“We can do better than that,” Philip said. He pulled some keys from his pocket and handed them to me. “You can take my car.”

“Are you sure?” I said.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “It’s just a piece of machinery.”

“Can you find Lenox Square?” Charles said.

“Where the race began?” I said.

“The same.”

“I think so,” I said, “once I find my way to Peachtree Street.”

“Let me show you the GPS system,” Philip said. “It won’t take a minute to program the directions.”

“Will you take a word of advice?” Mrs. Barnett said.

“From you?” I said. “Absolutely.”

“Remember that whatever clothes you buy,” she said, “will be outgrown long before they’re worn out, so don’t get carried away.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Mike has a tendency to do just that.”

“Who, me?” Mike said.

We followed Philip to the car, and he put the device through its paces. “That’s a neat toy,” I said.

“Charles loves toys,” Philip said, “and he insisted on buying this one for me. There are a couple of kiddie seats in the trunk.”

He retrieved a booster seat from the trunk and gave me the combination to the gate.

As we drove to the mall, I said, “How much do you think this car cost?”

“At least double what your truck cost,” Mike said.

We found the mall, parked in the covered parking section, took Robbie by the hand, and led him down the concourse to Macy’s. He was a little overwhelmed by the number of people, and clung tightly to our hands. They were having a huge sale of fall apparel in the boy’s section and, with the advice of a matronly saleslady, we found several pairs of long pants that we felt he would be unlikely to outgrow before spring. We made a few more purchases and wandered around the mall for a while.

“Have you noticed what I’ve noticed?” Mike said.

“You mean all the cruising that’s going on in this place?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s not surprising,” I said. “Atlanta has been a Mecca for gays for many years.”

On the way back down Peachtree Street, we spotted a Toys “R” Us and took a stroll through it. We allowed Robbie to choose one item, and to our surprise, he selected a stuffed giraffe instead of a toy. We also stopped at a large Barnes & Noble and browsed a bit. While perusing the section marked “Of Local Interest,” I spotted a familiar name, so I purchased the book. We also found two or three books Robbie liked that were labeled as suitable for his age group.

Back at the house, I carried most of our purchases upstairs to our room. Then I went to the sunroom to find Mrs. Barnett. She was having a solemn conversation with Robbie as I walked up, and I handed her the book and said, “Will you autograph this for me?”

“My word,” she said, “where did you find this?”

“In the ‘Of Local Interest’ section at Barnes & Noble,” I said.

“I had no idea this thing was still in circulation,” she said. She signed the book and seemed genuinely pleased that I had asked her to do so.

“From the blurb on the jacket,” I said, “it sounds interesting.”

“It’s more than interesting,” Charles said. “And it got very favorable reviews at the time it was published.”

“I hope you like pee eye zee zee eh,” Philip said, spelling the word.

“Of course we do,” I said.

“Good,” Charles said, “because the gang is coming over this evening, and we’ll have it by the pool.”

“What about the little guy?” I said.

“Grace will keep an eye on him until he’s ready for bath and bed.”

“Doesn’t she have enough to do?”

He laughed. “She loves taking care of kids. Besides, she has a girl coming over this evening who helps her three or four nights a week.”

“The gang?” Mike said.

“Friends of ours,” Charles said. “Two couples, actually.”

“Great,” Mike said.

We left Robbie with Mrs. Barnett while our hosts showed us the rest of the house. We were particularly impressed with the master bedroom they had installed over the sunroom, and the huge stall shower in the master bath was a turn-on.

“Wow,” I said. “I’ve never seen so many showerheads in one shower. When we build our master suite over the garage, I’m going to copy this.”

“Be my guest,” Charles said.

“Charles is a shower freak,” Philip said, “as if you couldn’t tell looking at this installation.”

They showed us Steve and Roger’s room and the neat little office that had been set up for the boys in what had been a small bedroom. Then we walked around the grounds a bit and wound up at a small greenhouse. “The boys are rooting cuttings here,” Philip said, “and when the cuttings are fully rooted, they transfer them to larger containers and take them out to a nursery where they have leased some space.”

“Actually,” Charles said, “the old couple that owns the nursery is in the process of selling it to a corporation we set up for the boys. They do a fair amount of landscaping, and it will be good for them to have a really inexpensive source of shrubs and small trees.”

“Listening to them talk about their business,” I said, “it’s clear that they have the capitalist gene in full measure.”

“You’ve got that right,” Philip said.

“The wall around the grounds is nice,” I said. “It looks as though it’s been there forever.”

“That was our intent,” Charles said, “when we had it built a few years ago.”

“You certainly succeeded,” Mike said.

Back in the house, we followed our hosts up to the playroom once again. Robbie was at the train table, as usual, and Mark and Steven were with him. Grace introduced us to the teenage girl who was her part-time helper and assured us that Robbie would be well looked after.

At the train table, I got Robbie’s attention and said, “Looks like you really like Thomas the Tank Engine.”



“It’s so cool,” he said, and he started to show me, for the umpteenth time, some of the cooler aspects of Thomas.

“Great,” I said, making a mental note for Christmas. “Mike and I are going out to the pool, but we’ll be back in time for your bath, okay?”

“Okay,” he said, kind of absentmindedly.

We went back down the stairs and out to the pool, where the four of us began to once again swim some serious laps. As usual, I kept count. Thirty-six trips from one end to the other and back again in a pool that size adds up to just over a mile. When we finally stopped at the shallow end and stood up, I saw that we had an audience—there were four naked men sitting on the edge of the pool with their feet dangling in the water.

“What are you guys up to?” Charles said.

“Enjoying the show,” a very hairy blond said. “I think you and Philip have finally met your match in the lap swimming department.”

“That’s for sure,” the man next to him said. “I’ve never seen anyone else even come close to keeping up with you.”

Charles introduced the four as Richard and his partner Bruce, and John and Joe, who were also partners.

“Where are Roger and Steve?” Bruce said.

“They went to dinner and a movie with a couple of their friends,” Charles said, “so it’s just us. From the smells, I guess you brought the pizza with you.”

“That we did,” Richard said, “but now that the show is over, we’re gonna to get in the pool for a bit.”

We horsed around in the pool for quite a while and then went to a round table next to the Jacuzzi, consumed pizza and beer, and had a great time. Later, while soaking, we learned a little about each of the four newcomers, and they of course extracted pertinent data from Mike and me. From the Jacuzzi, we went back to the pool to cool down and then to shower and change.

In the house we found Robbie in the playroom, and he was too tired to protest when we took him downstairs for his bath.

Sunday morning after breakfast, Philip handed his car keys to Steve, and the boys drove us down the interstate and out to Six Flags. We got there

thirty minutes before opening time, and there was already a small line.

“Do you guys like wild rides?” Steve said.

“We do,” I said, “but I’m not sure how Robbie will react to them.”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough,” Mike said.

It turned out that Robbie had the wild ride gene in full measure. He loved them—the wilder the better. Unfortunately, he was a few inches too short to be allowed on the rides that looped the loop, and he wasn’t too happy when one of us stayed with him while the other went on the ride. “We’ll come back here when you’re taller,” Mike said.

Finally, it became clear that we had all had enough, and the lines were getting longer and longer, so we went back to the car. “Take us somewhere so we can buy you lunch,” I said to Steve.

“How about The Varsity?” Roger said.

“What’s that?” I said.

“The world’s largest drive-in restaurant,” he said. “The original Varsity was built way back in the twenties, I think. There are several locations now, but the original Varsity is just across the expressway from the Tech campus. You have to see it to believe it.”

“By all means,” I said.

The Varsity lived up to the praise the two boys heaped on it on the way downtown. It was an amazing place. We had hotdogs, Cokes, and fries, and did a fair amount of people watching while we ate. Robbie was still so wound up by the Six Flags experience that he couldn’t stop talking about it.

Back at the house we rounded up our bags, which we’d packed before we left for Six Flags, said goodbye to Mrs. Barnett, and climbed into the Jaguar.

Charles and Mike talked airplanes all the way to the airport, while Philip and I sat quietly and listened. Just before we boarded the plane, our hosts gave each of us a hug. Robbie was sound asleep before we cleared the air space around Atlanta and didn’t wake up until we landed in Jacksonville. When I unpacked his things, he took his new stuffed giraffe and put it on the bed with Andy the Panda.

“What’s his name?” I said.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’ll have to think of one.”

When Robbie's birthday rolled around, Sarah Bridges rounded up a couple of her grandchildren along with two of their friends and had a nice surprise birthday party in celebration of Robbie's sixth birthday. After seeing his shyness in the mall, we were careful not to expose Robbie to very many new people, which wasn't difficult, given that our weekly trips to Atlanta for his sessions with Lydia left us with little free time on the weekends. We took him to the beach to see how he would react to the ocean, having arranged for the twins and their new boyfriends to meet us there one Saturday afternoon when they weren't working, and Robbie took to the ocean like a duck to water.

On a Sunday afternoon in late July, we accepted a dinner invitation from our friends Tom and Noah and arrived at their house about ten minutes ahead of schedule. Tom answered the door, and we introduced Robbie to our hosts.

"Dr. Foster," I said, "this is Robbie. Robbie, this is Dr. Foster."

Robbie extended his hand and said, "Are you a doctor like Doc Jenkins?"

"I'm not that kind of doctor," Tom said. "I have what is known as a PhD, which stands for 'Doctor of Philosophy'. Why don't you call me Tom?"

"Okay."

"Well, Robbie Foster-Martin, why don't you come in? This is my friend Noah."

After Robbie and Noah had a ritual handshake, Mike handed Noah a bottle of wine, which Noah promptly carried to the dining room. Tom led us into the living room, and Robbie spotted the piano, which was clearly visible through the double doors leading to the studio.

"That's the biggest piano I've ever seen," Robbie said, looking toward the music studio.

"I'll show it to you," Tom said. He led Robbie into the studio and instructed him to sit on the piano bench.

"Can I play it?"

"Sure," Tom said.

Robbie began to peck at the keys. He was pressing first one key, then another, but not actually banging on the piano, and I walked up behind him, ready to stop him if he got carried away. After a few minutes I put a hand on his shoulder and was about to stop him, but Tom interrupted me, saying, “Listen for a minute”

I listened. Robbie’s random pecking at various notes had begun to morph into a tune that was vaguely familiar. Tom reached for a hymnbook that was lying on top of the piano, selected a page, and placed it on the music rack.

“Where did you hear that tune, Robbie?” Tom said.

“We sang it in church this morning.”

“That’s right,” I said. “I had forgotten about that. Robbie was quite taken with the tune and hummed it all the way home from church.”

“Not only did he get the tune right,” Tom said, “he got it in the right key. Listen.”

He sat down beside Robbie and began to play the hymn. Then he stopped playing, looked at us, and said, “This kid has a natural ability, and he needs lessons.”

“How much will they cost?” I said. “Not to mention the fact that we don’t have a piano.”

“I’ll teach him,” Tom said. “Call it a trade-off for all the times we’ve used your cabin in Maggie Valley, and you don’t need a piano at this point, just pick up an electronic keyboard. New ones aren’t that expensive, and used keyboards are dirt cheap. You can buy a piano later if he sticks with it and it seems justified.”

That was how Robbie’s musical education began. Tom told us what beginner books to purchase, and we scheduled a weekly appointment for piano lessons. Mike talked to Jonny, his helper, about keyboards, and Jonny found us a used one at a bargain price.

It took a few weeks to adjust to our new routine, but the progress reports from Lydia were worth it. We told Zeb and Zeke about Steve and Roger and their business, and they expressed an interest in seeing it firsthand. With that in mind, Mike and I put Robbie and Thor in the truck early on the Friday before Labor Day, and the twins followed us to Atlanta in their car. The invitation had been extended to include Josh and Norm, so

they were in the car as well. We arrived at the Barnett home in mid-afternoon, and Philip met us at the door.

“Aren’t you going to take your bags out of the truck?” he said.

“Let’s wait and see how Thor and Lance react to each other first,” I said. “We can go to a pet-friendly motel if need be.”

We hadn’t been too enthusiastic about bringing Thor to their house, since we had no idea how two adult male dogs that hadn’t been neutered would react toward each other, but Charles and Philip had insisted. Steve and Roger appeared at the front door, and we introduced them to Josh, Norm, and the twins and left the young men in their care. Then I took Thor’s leash, and Philip led us back to the sunroom. Mrs. Barnett and Lydia were sitting at the far end talking and drinking tea. Lance was curled up on the floor at their side, but he got up and came over to us. Robbie was standing beside Thor, who began to bristle just a bit, and a low rumble came from his throat.

Robbie grabbed Thor around the neck and said, “It’s okay, Thor. This is my friend Lance.” He called Lance, and when Lance came somewhat warily over to him, Robbie hugged him.

We stood, frozen in place, waiting to see what would happen next. Lance had begun to lick Robbie’s face, and Robbie was giggling. Thor kind of sniffed around the two of them, and then he licked Robbie’s face as well.

“Well,” Philip said, “I guess that answers that question. I think you can safely bring in your bags.”

Lydia took Robbie up to the study for their session with both dogs following them. We walked over to Mrs. Barnett and said hello, and then Philip told us that we were in the same rooms we’d occupied the last time we stayed in the house. We retrieved our things and took them up to our room. Then, showered and refreshed after the drive, we put on clean clothes and went back down to the sunroom.

Roger and Steve had evidently just introduced the twins and their friends to Mrs. Barnett, and they were getting to know her. I watched with amused interest as Mrs. Barnett skillfully extracted four life stories in less time than I would have thought possible. She particularly managed to make Josh feel at ease. Damn, she was good—and had certainly missed her calling.

Finally, Steve said, “We’ve got a sprinkler job to do, and we thought you might want to come with us and see what it’s all about.”

“Won’t I just be in the way?” Josh said.

“That won’t happen,” Zeke said, “as long as I’m around.”

The six young men left, and we spent the next hour talking with Philip and Mrs. Barnett until Lydia came downstairs and told us that Robbie and both of the dogs were in the playroom with the tribe.

“If you have time,” I said to her, “you might want to talk to the twins about Robbie’s parents. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that they could give you a great deal of background information, given that they were neighbors.”

“Thanks, George,” she said, “I’ll do just that.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask how you think Robbie is doing,” I said.

“Very well, actually,” she said. “I think perhaps he will begin to really open up to me in a few more weeks.”

“I guess it’s wrong of me to expect instant gratification,” I said.

“Indeed,” she said. “By the way, do you have any objection to my using hypnosis on Robbie?”

“Not if it will help him,” I said. “Mike?”

“Go for it,” he said.

“Sometimes hypnosis is a good tool for helping patients talk about things that are too disturbing to face consciously,” she said. “Sadly, it has been abused a lot in recent years—all that publicity about so-called repressed memories comes to mind.”

“Lydia,” Mike said, “you have our complete confidence and trust. You can use whatever methods you feel necessary.”

“At least,” I said, “there’s no evidence that Robbie was ever abused by his father, either physically or sexually.”

“Right,” she said. “I remember you telling me that you had the doctor examine him when you first met. That was a smart thing to have done.”

“It comes from being a policeman for years,” I said. “Always suspect the worst.”

“The real test,” she said, “will come when he starts school next week.”

“How so?” I said.

“For the past few weeks,” she said, “Robbie has interacted primarily with adults. When he starts interacting with other children his age, it may well help some of the withdrawal to go away. I’ve watched him playing with Mark and Steven, and what I’ve seen in that respect is encouraging, but as I said, the real test will come when school begins.”

We had dinner with the family, after which we went to the pool and swam laps with Charles and Philip. The six young men joined us, and I noted with interest that they were getting along very well, and with some guidance from Zeke, Josh even managed to swim a few laps.

We were on our way to the mountains by seven the next morning, and we spent a wonderful two days at the cabin, enjoying the sounds of the stream and the relative solitude. We took Robbie to his grandmother’s for a lengthy visit on Saturday afternoon, and Bob and Martha Plott dropped by for a short time Sunday afternoon.

The twins and their boyfriends turned up at the cabin Sunday evening and were beside themselves with what they had learned from Steve and Roger. Zeb summed it up, saying, “As soon as we get a handle on classes next term, we’re going to start a business like that on the side.”

“Good,” I said. “It won’t be cheap, but you can do it if you try.”

We left the cabin at first light on Labor Day so we could be home early on a school night. We’d purchased an adequate supply of school uniforms for Robbie and laid his first day of school clothes out on his dresser. Tuesday morning, Mike and I both drove him to school and helped him find his room, after which we went to the Y. By late afternoon I was anxiously waiting for a report from home as to how the first day of school had gone, but I needn’t have worried, because my telephone rang a little after four.

“Martin,” I said.

“Hi, Dad,” Robbie said.

“Hi, yourself, kiddo. How was school?”

“It was great. I met a lot of kids, and the teacher is real nice.”

I let him run on for a while and finally said, “Okay, you can tell me the rest of it when I get home. Let me talk to Mike, okay?”

Mike assured me that everything was copacetic, and I went back to work.

Our Saturday trips to Atlanta continued without interruption. Most of them were day trips—we landed in Marietta, someone would pick us up and take us to the house where Lydia was waiting, and we would be back in the air by three or four.

We drove to Atlanta on a Friday in October, planning to head to the mountains Saturday morning for our annual week of fall leaves. After her session with Robbie, Lydia told us that she felt it was time for him to visit his mother’s grave. “Are you sure?” I said.

“Definitely,” she said. “He and I have talked about it. Is it marked?”

“It wasn’t originally,” I said, “other than with one of those little metal markers the funeral homes use. But when Mike and I took charge of Robbie’s parents’ estate, such as it was, we had a small stone placed on her grave.”

“Where is his father buried?”

“In a pauper’s grave over in the county where he was shot,” Mike said. “Evidently there wasn’t anyone who wanted to claim the body.”

“Is that a problem for Robbie?” I said.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “It has become very clear to me that Robbie and his father had no relationship at all. He was just a sort of distant figure who was around some of the time.”

“That’s sad,” I said.

“Yes, it is,” she said, “and you wouldn’t believe how often I hear that same sad story.”

After dinner, Robbie went up to the playroom with the tribe while we joined our hosts in the sunroom. During a slight lull in the conversation, Mrs. Barnett said to me, “I was right about you and Mike.”

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Those twin boys that were here Labor Day weekend talked my ears off about the two of you,” she said. “They couldn’t stop telling me about all the good things you’ve done for them.”



“It was a two-way street,” I said. “They did work for us, and we did things for them.”

“That’s a bit too simple, I think,” she said. “I’ll stick to my original impression of you.”

“Dare I ask?”

“You and Mike are just like Charles and Philip,” she said. “You go through life seeing things that need to be done, particularly in the area of helping the less fortunate, and you do whatever you have to do.”

“I don’t know what to say to that,” I said.

“There’s nothing to be said, just keep on being the same fine men that you are.”

We headed for the cabin early the next morning, and we took Robbie to see his grandmother Sunday afternoon. She had looked somewhat worse the last time we’d visited but seemed better this time. Robbie chattered away, telling her all about school, taking swimming lessons, and such, until it became clear that she was getting tired. We told him we needed to go and promised to come back two or three more times during the week ahead.

We told Mrs. Pickens that we were planning to take Robbie to the cemetery before we went home and offered to take her along, but she declined, saying that her daughter lived on in her memory and that was more than enough.

We had a great week in the mountains, and for once, the foliage was exactly at its peak during our stay and the weather cooperated beautifully. The day before we were to drive home, we took Robbie to the cemetery behind a tiny country church in the hills and led him to his mother’s grave. We’d purchased a nice bunch of artificial flowers and allowed him to place the container in front of the tombstone and arrange it to his satisfaction. Mike found several small rocks and said, “Let’s put these against the vase so the wind won’t blow it over, okay?”

“Okay,” Robbie said.

He stood in front of the tombstone for a long time, and I wondered what was going through his head. Finally, he looked up at us and said, “Can we go home now?”

“We sure can, kiddo,” I said. Mike and I each took one of his hands, and we walked back down the hill to the truck.

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JUST before lunch on the Monday after our return from the mountains, I got a call from my boss asking me to stop by his office for a couple of minutes. “What’s up, Chief?” I said as I sat down in front of his desk.

“Not a lot, George,” he said. “I just wanted to give you a heads-up on a possible ‘hot potato’ your people are handling.”

“Hot potato?”

“Robbery and murder in a gated community on the south side,” he said. “The victim’s name was Sterling Jordan. His sister is married to a man who knows the sheriff quite well, and the sheriff says the woman is a diamond-studded bitch.”

“I have my staff meeting just after lunch,” I said, “and I’ll make sure that everyone is up to date on this thing. What are their names?”

“The victim’s sister is Doriana Murchison,” he said, “and her husband is Howard Murchison. He’s a sort of mid-level mover and shaker about town. Not old money, but not exactly new money, either. He’s okay, according to the sheriff, but the wife is the driving force behind him, and she might not be quite so easy to deal with.”

“Thanks for the early Christmas present,” I said.

“Handle it, George,” he said. “That’s why the taxpayers pay you the big bucks.”

The staff meeting began, and because she was youngest in terms of seniority, Janet’s presentation was last. She talked at length about the robbery/murder the chief had mentioned. “Sergeant Johnson’s investigators say there’s a gay angle to this one, Captain,” she said.

“How so?”

“The victim had a habit of picking up younger gay men in the bars and elsewhere,” she said. “They would stay with him for a couple nights or a few days and then go on their merry way with a generous amount of jewelry and pocket money given to them.”

“Presumably for services rendered?” David said.

“So it would seem,” Janet said.

“Are we sure about this?” I said.

“Boss,” she said, “Carl has personally interviewed four young guys who spent a lot of time with the deceased, granting sexual favors for gifts. We’re not quite talking about prostitution, but maybe the closest thing to it. It seems there are a number of men in their early twenties who make a habit of taking care of older men sexually with an expectation of gifts afterward.”

“If memory serves me,” I said, “all three of you have open cases involving burglaries of older gay men. I think you need to sit down somewhere and compare notes,” I said.

“If that’s all you have today,” Janet said, “we’ll do that right now.”

“That’s all,” I said. “Wait a minute, I forgot to mention that we’ll be feeling a great deal of heat on this murder/robbery thing.”

“Why?” she said.

“The deceased has a sister,” I said, “and she is married to some sort of mid-level mover and shaker about town. Her husband is acquainted with the sheriff, and the sheriff says the woman is a diamond-studded bitch, so tread carefully and tell your people to do the same. I want copies of everything you have in my hands later today, just in case I have to stroke these people at some point.”

“Gotcha,” she said.

They left, and I resumed dealing with my paperwork. An hour later a copy of the file, or Murder Book, to give it its proper name, was handed to me, and I spent an hour reading the file and making notes.

WE SPENT Thanksgiving weekend in the mountains and stopped by Atlanta on the way there, so that Robbie could have his weekly session with Lydia.

As usual when we were in the mountains, we took him to visit his grandmother. He babbled happily away about all the wonderful things that were happening in school, and we knew she enjoyed hearing it because she told us so at length.

By mid-December I was looking forward to Christmas in the mountains. It would be an extra-special Christmas this year, given that it would be our first Christmas with a six-year-old in the house. I pulled my department car into our driveway one afternoon, noting that Mike's car was already there. I was home a little early, and so, it seemed, was he. I let myself in the back door and had barely turned the lock when I was attacked from behind.

"Sit," I said to Thor, who had reared up and placed his front paws on my shoulders, more or less pinning me to the door. Thor sat just as Robbie came running up to the door.

"Hi, Dad," he said.

"Hi, yourself," I said, picking him up for a hug and kiss. "How was school?"

"It was great," he said. "We've got a new boy in class."

"Really?" I said.

"Yes, Sir. He transferred from a 'piscopal school on the other side of town."

"Robbie," I said, "the word is E-piscopal. Give it a try."

"Sure," he said. "'Piscopal."

I laughed and said, "We'll try it again later. What's the new boy's name?"

"Sandy," he said, "and you know what?"

"What?" I said.

"He has a hyphellated name and two daddies just like me."

"Really," I said, choosing to ignore his mangling of the word hyphenated.

"Yes, Sir."

*That's interesting*, I thought. "Where's Mike?"

“In the kitchen.”

“Okay, big guy. Give me a minute to change clothes, and I’ll join you and Mike in the kitchen.”

I went to the master bedroom, pulled off my clothes, and selected khakis and a long-sleeved shirt. Thor and Robbie sat on the bed watching me intently, both waiting for attention. In the kitchen, I gave Mike a hug and a brief kiss, and Thor a treat.

“I just heard the latest news,” I said.

“What news?”

“New kid at school, two daddies, hyphellated name.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, “that news.”

“So?”

“I really don’t know much more than Robbie does. A kid transferred over from St. Andrew’s. I didn’t meet him or his parents.”

“Shit,” I said. “You’re no help.”

“You said a bad word,” a voice said from behind me.

“I’m a grown-up,” I said. “It’s allowed once in a while.”

“Oh.”

Mike set the kitchen table, and we sat down to eat. Robbie was babbling nonstop about the events of the day.

“Do you have any homework tonight?” I asked when he finally ran down.

“Some.”

“How much?”

“I have to read ten pages in my book.”

“Okay,” I said. “That’s what we’ll do as soon as we finish dinner.”

After dinner we settled down in the den and patiently listened to Robbie reading the requisite ten pages. “Very good,” I said when he had finished.

“Okay,” Mike said, “now you have to take care of that Christmas card you picked out for your granny.”

We set the card on the desk and waited while Robbie laboriously printed “Love, Robbie” on the card for his grandmother.

“Good,” I said. “I’ll address it right now, and we’ll put it in the mailbox tomorrow.”

“When will Granny get it?”

“In two or three days,” I said. “When you see her at Christmas you can ask her about it.”

“Can I take my keyboard and play for her?”

“You bet. Maybe you should go practice right now.”

“Yes, Sir.”

As it was a school night, the deadline for bath and bed arrived early, and we got Robbie tucked in with his two favorite stuffed animals, Andy the alleged Panda (alleged because he was too old and bedraggled to positively identify his species) and Raff the Giraffe.

In the den, I said, “Now, what do you know about the new kid?”

“Not a thing. All I know is that a new kid transferred in, and Robbie somehow managed to find out that he had two daddies. That’s it.”

“That’s it?” I said.

“Babe,” Mike said, “unlike yourself, I’m not a trained investigator.”

“Perhaps,” I said, “but surely you can find an excuse tomorrow to pump the teacher for details.”

“I’ll give it the old college try. If anybody has the scoop, it ought to be Mrs. Green.”

“One can only hope. Are we set for Saturday?”

“You bet.”

On Saturday morning we were scheduled to fly to Atlanta so Robbie could have his weekly session with Lydia.

“He’s shown a lot of improvement since he started his sessions with Lydia,” I said.

“No argument,” he said. “Are you getting tired of all the running back and forth?”

“In a word, no. Not if it helps him get over the trauma of having witnessed his father beat his mother to death. Why, are you getting tired of it?”

“Hardly. You know I love to fly, and we both enjoy visiting the Barnett family, but I realize that the sessions have to end at some point.”

“No argument there,” I said. “On the other hand, we did make a six-month commitment.”

“Point taken.”

“See if you can find an excuse to talk to Mrs. Green tomorrow. I’m curious about this kid with two daddies.”

“Can’t it wait ’til the class Christmas party next week? All of the parents will be there.”

“Probably,” I said, “but try anyhow.”

“Okay.”

He left the room, and I turned to the computer and became totally engrossed in the task of entering checks and receipts in Peachtree accounting software. Eventually a glass of wine appeared on the desk beside the keyboard, and a friendly mouth nuzzled the back of my neck.

“You about done with that?”

“Two ticks.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

I turned just in time to see his naked butt disappear through the door, so I closed the program, grabbed my wine glass, and followed him. Later, we lay side by side, propped up on the king-size pillows, sipping our wine and talking. Finally I hopped out of bed, grabbed my glass, and started to leave the room.

“Where are you going?”

“To get a refill,” I said, “and then back to the computer to finish what I was doing.”

I padded naked to the kitchen to refill my glass; then I went to the den and sat down at the computer. I finished my accounting tasks and opened an Excel spreadsheet to transfer some numbers to the spreadsheet, then I sent a



few reports to the LaserJet and closed both programs. Mike was sprawled in the recliner, so I retrieved the printouts and handed them to him.

“Something to study,” I said.

“I’d rather study this,” he said, reaching for my groin.

I jumped back and said, “Reports first, fun later.”

He examined the reports carefully and said, “Are we going to have a huge tax liability this year, do you think?”

“Probably not,” I said. “I ran the third-quarter reports past Jim last month, and he did some quick calculations. You know how a CPA hesitates to make absolute predictions; he thinks we look okay, but it’s going to be close.”

“So what’s the bottom line?” he said.

“We ought to buy one or two more rental properties,” I said. “Also, we need to think about getting rid of one set of wheels.”

“Yeah,” he said, “I’ve thought about that. Now that you have a department car, we don’t really need both my car and your truck. What are you thinking?”

“Your car is getting some age on it, and we’re beginning to outgrow a truck with an extended cab,” I said. “I’m thinking we’d look good in a small SUV, something like an Explorer.”

“I can live with that.”

“Think you can get it up again, big boy?” I said.

“Race you,” he said, and we hurried to our bed.

The next morning at six we left for the Y in two vehicles as usual. We dropped Robbie off in the Y’s KidZone section and completed our daily workout. I drove from there to work, and Mike took Robbie to school. By five thirty I had made enough of a dent in my never-ending paperwork that I felt comfortable heading home. Our elderly neighbor, Mrs. Tumblin, came over a little after six to stay with Robbie, and Mike and I went down to the wine shop at Five Points. The usual crowd had already begun to gather and sample two bottles of wine.

As we were enjoying the third bottle, Jackie, one of the regulars, said, “Whatever happened with the film those people were shooting?”

“I believe it’s scheduled to air on one of the cable networks in late January,” I said. A reporter and cameraman had followed both myself and my team around for months, recording how we worked, along with details of our personal lives, and they had joined the group at the wine shop many times.

“Yeah,” Mike said. “George has been promised a preview copy, but we don’t know when he’ll get it.”

We went to dinner with the group, but Mike declined to share any more wine during our meal, given that he was flying early in the morning.

The next day we were in the air before eight, and Lydia picked us up at the little airport in Marietta and drove us into Atlanta and to the Barnett home. At the house, she took Robbie upstairs to the room that Charles and Philip used as an office, and we went to the sunroom to visit with Mrs. Barnett. We always looked forward to these visits, as the old lady was well educated and kept herself up-to-date and informed on current affairs. Charles and Philip were out of town for the weekend.

Lydia came downstairs to talk to us after she’d finished with Robbie and he had gone up to the playroom with the Barnett children. We discussed Robbie’s progress from her viewpoint, and we brought her up to date on how school was going. He was still a little remote and withdrawn at times, but the progress that had been made since summer was encouraging, and we had just finished our conversation when its subject came into the room.

“Hi, big guy,” I said. “What’s up?”

“Nanny told me it was time for me to come down here,” Robbie said.

“So it is,” Mrs. Barnett said, “and here comes Mrs. Goodman with our lunch.”

“When will the Barnett children eat?” I said.

“In a bit,” she said, “and the oldest two will join me for dinner.”

We had a nice lunch, which Mrs. Goodman served in the sunroom. Then Lydia drove us to the airport. Robbie had by now become an experienced traveler, and once the plane was in the air, he went to sleep as usual.

Monday afternoon, my lieutenants came to my office for our weekly staff meeting, and they laid out brief summaries of their ongoing cases in

order of importance. Janet Sanchez summed up the meeting, saying, “It’s kind of been a slow week for crime around here, Captain.”

“Yeah,” one of the guys said, “we need some excitement.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” I said. “I seem to remember having similar thoughts during a slow period a couple of years ago.”

“And what happened?” he said.

“A series of convenience store robbery/murders happened,” I said.

They left and I got back to work. Wednesday I left the office at noon so that I could accompany Mike to Robbie’s school party. Mike still hadn’t managed to extract any data from Mrs. Green about the new boy and his parents, and I was rather looking forward to meeting them. We arrived at the school and went straight to Robbie’s classroom. There were a total of ten kids in his first-grade class, six boys and four girls, and we had by now met all of the kids and most of the parents. Robbie led us to where a little boy was standing, kind of awkwardly, with two men, whom even I, with almost zero gaydar, recognized as being family.

“This is Sandy Fisher-Price,” Robbie said, “and his daddies.”

“I’m Ronald Fisher,” one of the two men said, “and this is Warren Price.”

We introduced ourselves and shook hands. After five minutes of conversation with the two men, I realized that despite Robbie’s connection with Sandy, we were destined not to be friends with his daddies. The party lasted about an hour... and then school was over until January. We were in the truck, so we used the rest of the afternoon to acquire a Christmas tree, take it home, and get it decorated. Robbie thought it was the best tree he’d ever seen.

“Just think,” I said, “we get to do this all over again when we get up to the cabin.”

“Are we going to have a tree there too?” Robbie said.

“You bet,” I said.

“Cool.”

We had dinner and finally got an excited Robbie settled down in his bed for the night. Mike and I sat in the den with glasses of Pinot Grigio.

“Well?” he said.

“Well, what?”

“Don’t be coy,” he said. “What did you think?”

“Think about what?”

“The hyphenated kid’s parents, of course.”

“Babe,” I said, “those guys are way too gay for us.”

“Yeah,” he said. “If we register as a one on a ten-point scale, they’re somewhere around six or seven.”

“At least they don’t gush like Deborah’s buddy Lamar,” I said.

“You know what’s going to happen, don’t you?”

“Probably, but tell me anyway.”

“Robbie’s already latched onto the kid,” he said, “which means we’re going to be interacting with his dads from time to time.”

“If and when that happens,” I said, “we’ll take it as it comes and deal with it.”

I had been plugging away on the Internet during most of this conversation. “Look here,” I said.

“At what?”

“Just look.”

He got up, stood behind me at the computer, and said, “What’s this? Delinquent taxes. Oh shit, that’s Robbie’s grandmother’s property.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I was curious to see how much land she actually had with her house and stumbled over this.”

“How much does she owe?”

“Just under \$150 for each of the past two years.”

“Is she that hard up?” he said.

“I have no idea, but I think the woman who stays with her during the day is some sort of church volunteer. And for all I know, she could be getting some government help—there’s just so much that we don’t know about her situation.”

“I think we need to pay them as a Christmas present,” he said, “and maybe we should inquire more deeply into the state of her financial affairs.”

“Too right,” I said. “We asked Lucinda if the woman needed anything, and she didn’t seem to think so.”

“Maybe we’d better have another conversation with her,” he said. “We can’t have Robbie’s granny tossed out of her home for nonpayment of taxes. Who knows what other problems she might have.”

“I’ll put it on the list of things to do,” I said as I printed out the pertinent information.

“Have you checked the public records up there,” he said, “to see if she has a mortgage to worry about?”

“If she does, I couldn’t find it.”

“We could ask our Waynesville lawyer to have a title search run on the property,” he said.

“Are you thinking we should offer to buy it from her on Robbie’s behalf?” I said.

“Not really, but that’s not a bad idea.”

“Let’s check things out thoroughly before we get too involved,” I said.

“Okay.”

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CHRISTMAS fell on a Friday, and we planned to make a long weekend of it. We drove to Atlanta Tuesday afternoon, arriving at the Barnett home by bedtime. Lydia came over for breakfast and an early session with Robbie, while we spent some time with our hosts. We had brought small gifts for the adult members of the family, as well as Lydia, and placed them under the huge tree in their library, and when we left, we were loaded down with a number of packages from the Barnetts. We had an early lunch and were on the road to the mountains by one. In Waynesville, we stopped to acquire our usual list of perishable grocery items and a nice six-foot tree.

Robbie had taken a long nap on the road from Atlanta to Waynesville, so he was full of energy and helped us get the tree set up and decorated. We had two large plastic containers filled with packages in the back of the truck, and we carried them up to the great room and piled them under the tree. We spent the next day unwinding and enjoying the ambiance of the Christmas tree, a nice fire in the fireplace, and the excitement felt by our six-year-old. We took Robbie over to see his grandmother after lunch on Christmas Eve, and she didn't appear to be any better or worse than she had been the last time we had seen her. Robbie gave her a gift that he had selected and wrapped all by himself, and then we handed her an envelope.

"What's this?" she said.

"A little something to brighten your day, we hope," I said.

She opened the envelope and took a few long minutes to digest its contents. "You paid my taxes," she said. Tears ran down her cheeks.

"We can't have Robbie's granny turned out of her home by the tax collector, now can we?" I said.

"George and I aren't rich," Mike said, "but if there is anything you need that we can take care of, please let us help."

He was talking to Mrs. Pickens, but he was looking at her caregiver, a middle-aged lady named Mary Hart. The woman nodded in understanding.

Robbie pulled his keyboard out of its carrying case, set it up, and played two or three simple little pieces upon which he had been working for weeks. His grandmother was very impressed and told him so at length.

“Your mama was a musician,” she said.

“She was?” Robbie said.

“When she was younger. That’s how she went to college—on a music scholarship. She would probably have started teaching you about now.”

“Lucinda told us that Robbie’s mother had won a scholarship,” I said, “but she didn’t say what kind.”

“She was in the band all through high school,” Mrs. Pickens said, “and after she got her degree, she taught music at the elementary-school level.”

“I guess that’s where Robbie gets it from,” I said, and I went on to tell her about Robbie playing a hymn by ear at Tom’s house.

Later, as the caregiver walked with us to the truck, I gave her my card and extracted a promise that she would call us if there was a need that could not be met with available resources.

In the truck, Robbie asked, “Why was Granny crying?”

“Those were tears of happiness,” I said. “Sometimes people, especially ladies, cry when they’re really happy.”

“Oh.”

Lucinda and the boys—“the boys” now included the twins’ boyfriends—stopped by that night, and we exchanged gifts. I told her about the taxes, and she promised to keep an ear to the ground and let us know anything she heard. “I’m sorry, George,” she said, “but nobody had any idea her taxes were delinquent.”

“Fortunately,” I said, “it was a matter of public record, and I was able to discover the problem and deal with it.”

“What would have happened?” Zeb said.

“Eventually, her house would have been auctioned off to the highest bidder,” I said, “and she would have been forced to find another place to

live.”

Changing the subject, I asked the boys about their second year of college and got an enthusiastic report. The twins had, as predicted, transferred to Florida State College at Jacksonville in the fall. Although it had recently become a four-year college and changed its name to Florida State College at Jacksonville, most locals still referred to it as FCCJ. In fact, the school had originally been named Florida Junior College, and for years after its name was changed to Florida Community College at Jacksonville, locals continued to refer to it as FJC.

“If you like college that much,” I said, “maybe you ought to take a few courses at UNF after you finish with FSCJ.”

“UNF?” Lucinda said.

“The University of North Florida,” I said. “They could probably take at least one course each term. It would take a few years, but they could get their four-year degrees that way.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, “their employers might allow them to have the time, and some larger companies have tuition-reimbursement programs.”

“We’ll look into it,” Zeke said.

“But the first thing we’re going to do,” Zeb said, “is buy a truck and trailer and start doing some serious lawn care and landscaping work.”

“Yeah,” Zeke said. “We haven’t forgotten all that stuff that Steve and Roger showed us.”

“What kind of truck are you thinking about?” I said. Mike read my mind and gave me a thumbs-up.

“One like theirs,” Zeb said. “Just like yours, in other words.”

“What will you do with the car?” I said.

“We were gonna give it to Ma,” he said, “but she went and traded her old truck in on a new car.”

“On the other hand,” Zeke said, “we really need two cars some of the time, so we’ll just hang on to it.”

“In that case,” I said, “we’ve got a deal for you. I have a city car now, and Mike and I don’t need two personal vehicles. With Thor and Robbie, we’ve just about outgrown my truck, and we’re planning to trade his car



and my truck in on an Explorer or something similar. You can buy the truck from us the same way you bought the car, if you want to.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Zeke said. “Thanks.”

Both of them grabbed us and hugged us tightly. Lucinda looked more than a little bit overwhelmed, and said, “Have you boys actually finished paying for the car yet?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Zeb said.

“And we have enough in the bank to pay cash for the truck,” Zeke said.

“Good,” she said. “I just don’t want you to overdo it.”

Robbie had conked out during the conversation, so Mike picked him up and carried him to his room. Fortunately he was already wearing his winter pajamas. When Mike returned, he said, “He’s down for the count.”

“That’s for sure,” I said.

“George,” Zeke said, “how much do you think one of those little trailers will cost?”

“The kind that Steve and Roger use to haul their equipment around?”

“Yeah, that kind.”

“You can probably pick one up used for less than two thousand,” I said.

“There you go,” Mike said. “I see used riding mowers for sale all the time at reasonable prices, so your initial equipment outlay won’t be huge.”

“As soon as school is out,” I said, “and you guys get settled in your summer jobs, we’ll see if we can help you find some equipment for a reasonable amount.”

“You’d better start saving your money now,” Mike said.

“Oh, we’ve been doing that ever since Steve and Roger showed us how easy it is to make money doing what they do,” Zeb said.

“And,” Zeke said, “we saved all the money we got from that study of twins we participated in down in Gainesville at the University of Florida.”

“It’s easy,” I said, “but don’t forget that Roger’s father is a big-time real estate developer, and he helped them make some contacts.”

“Right,” Mike said. “We don’t know anybody like that in Jacksonville, so you’ll have to start slowly and grow your business.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” I said. “By the way, how is it that McDonald’s is able to do without both of you at Christmas?”

“We did a lot of trading days off with other manager-trainees,” Zeke said.

“Yeah,” Zeb said. “We can’t do it every year, just every couple of years.”

“And Tom was good enough to allow Josh to take Christmas off from the choir,” Zeke said, “so it worked out well.”

“Yeah,” Norm said. “What it means is that neither Zeb nor Zeke will have a day off for the next month.”

“Josh,” Mike said, “you and Norm have been mighty quiet through all of this.”

“I think we’re both a little overwhelmed,” Josh said. “Neither one of us comes from what you would call a loving family.”

“Yeah,” Norm said, “it’s almost like acquiring a new mom all of a sudden.”

“That’s good,” I said, “because Lucinda has told us that she now has four sons instead of two.”

“Lucinda,” Mike said, “does anybody know what happened to Robbie’s paternal grandparents?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “They moved away from the area long before his mother moved back here. Nobody seems to know where they went or why. Does it matter?”

“Martha told me that her department searched for other relatives,” I said, “but they didn’t find any. On the other hand, I doubt they had the budget to hire investigators, so the search may have been merely perfunctory. As Lucinda said, does it matter?”

“It might matter to Robbie one day when he’s older,” Mike said.

“Yeah,” I said, “and it might matter to us if they were to find out about Robbie and the adoption.”

“You mean they could contest it?” she said.

“They could try,” I said, “and if they got a judge like the one we had when we adopted him, it could be bad.”

“Hopefully that won’t happen,” Mike said.

“True,” I said, “but it’s something we have to think about.”

The Hawkins extended family left around eleven, and we settled down on the sofa, watching the fire and finishing our wine until I finally said, “I think it’s time for Santa to do his thing.”

“Right behind you.”

We went downstairs to the storeroom, where we had hidden a few things for Robbie to find under the tree in the morning. We set everything in place, damped the fire, and turned out the lights. Thor was already curled up in his bed, which was now in Robbie’s room, and Mike and I crawled under the covers and slept, only to be awakened the next morning by an excited Robbie, who was bouncing up and down on the bed between us.

“Wake up, wake up,” he said. “Santa’s been here. Come see.”

“Okay,” I said, “but let me go to the bathroom first.”

I swatted Mike on the butt and said, “Rise and shine.” Then I grabbed a heavy bathrobe, stuck my feet into slippers, and took care of business.

In the great room, Robbie was beside himself. “Look, Dad,” he said, “it’s Thomas the Tank Engine. A whole set of tracks and everything.”

“Cool,” I said, ruffling his hair. “Why don’t you set it up while I go make some coffee?”

He needed no encouragement, and by the time Mike appeared on the scene, Robbie had assembled an elaborate and somewhat oddly shaped arrangement of track. We settled down on the sofa with our coffee, watching Robbie and enjoying his excitement. Finally we started opening other gifts, handing Robbie his packages as they turned up. Everyone on my staff had bought something for him, as had Chief and Mrs. Bridges.

Mike and I had a leisurely breakfast, but Robbie was too excited to eat, so we settled for letting him take a slice of toast to the area around the tree. We carried our coffee to the great room and watched him for a while. Finally, I said, “Robbie, you forgot about one stocking hanging on the mantle, didn’t you?”

“I did?” he said, and he went to look. After a moment, he added, “There’s one here with Thor’s name on it.”

“Why don’t you see what’s in it and give it to Thor?” Mike said.

He dug a couple of rawhide treats and other items from the stocking and handed them to Thor, who immediately carried everything off to one corner of the room and began working on the rawhide bone.

Mike and I went to our bedroom and pulled on thermal underwear before slipping into our warm-up suits. Then I dragged a reluctant little boy away from his toys, dressed him as warmly as we were, and we headed up the mountain, Thor pulling on his leash, as usual. It was a wonderfully crisp day, and we enjoyed every minute of our walk.

In the cabin, the three of us took a long, hot shower together as we sometimes did, after which we all got dressed and ready to go to the Bridges’s for Christmas. Sarah and the chief had persuaded both of their sons to bring their families to the mountains for Christmas, and the presence of six adults and five children under the age of twelve meant they had a full house.

As we drove up the road to their house, Mike said, “Tell me again how well you know the sons?”

“I’ve known them all my life,” I said, “and used to see them often when we were kids because the chief and my dad were best friends. Since college we’ve gone our separate ways, and today they’re more like distant cousins I see once in a while by accident, but never on purpose.”

“That makes sense, I guess.”

We pulled up in the driveway, gathered our packages, and went to the door. The chief, wearing a Santa Claus hat, ushered us in and directed us to the living room. It took a while to get all of the introductions taken care of, but eventually Robbie was down in the basement happily playing with the Bridges’s grandchildren, and we were in the living room enjoying the fire and the conversation.

Later, as we drove to the cabin complaining about having eaten too much, it began to snow. By the time we’d parked the truck in the garage and gone up to the great room, it was coming down quite heavily.

“This is so cool,” Mike said. “A white Christmas after all.”

Robbie was yawning, so I said, "Time for a nap, big guy."

We went to his room and got him settled down in bed with his animals. In the great room, Mike had moved a chair around so he could sit and watch the snow falling, and he said, "He certainly wasn't impressed by the snow."

"Think about it. He grew up in these mountains, so it's not a novelty for him."

I found two glasses and poured us each some Shiraz. Taking the glasses, I pulled a chair up beside Mike, and we sat for a long time, sipping the wine and watching Mother Nature at work. I went to the kitchen for refills, and the lights went out. I looked at my watch, and a couple of minutes later, I heard the muffled sound of a motor coming from outside, and the lights came back to life, followed by the ringing of the telephone. I answered from the wall phone in the kitchen.

"Did your lights go out?" a familiar voice said.

"For a few minutes," I said. "Then the generator kicked in."

"I'd forgotten about that."

"We installed it last year. I guess I must have forgotten to show it to you the last time you were here."

"How does it work?"

"Why don't you drive over here and have a look? The gate is closed, but the code is still the same."

"We'll do just that," he said, and hung up.

I opened another bottle and set three clean glasses on the counter.

"Who was that on the phone?" Mike said as I handed him his glass.

"The chief. He wanted to know if our power was out. I told him it was for a few minutes until the generator kicked in. He's coming over to see how that works."

Ten minutes later, the gate control beeped, which was a signal that the gate had been opened. Shortly after that, I heard or rather felt through the floor the vibrations of three grown men hurrying up the steps to the deck, so I went to open the door for them. The three Bridges entered the room, and I took their coats. Scott, the eldest son, was a younger version of his dad, but

Henry Jr. was a different matter. Sarah had told me more than once that he resembled her father, whom I had never met.

“Nice place, George,” Scott said.

“Thanks, we like it. Let me show you around.”

After a quick tour, I led them outside so they could see the generator in its shed. In the great room, Mike had turned our chairs around to face the room, and our visitors took the sofa. We discussed the relative merits of having a generator and its cost. They were surprised to learn that they had overestimated the probable cost of the system by several thousand dollars. The lights flickered off for a moment and then came back on.

“What was that?” the chief said.

“I believe that means that power has been restored and the generator has shut down,” I said. “Why don’t you check with Sarah?”

He went to the kitchen and returned a few minutes later. “Our power is back on,” he said.

They pulled on their outerwear and left; then I locked up and said, “We’ve probably got time for a quickie before Robbie wakes up.”

“Race you.”

Early the next morning, we said goodbye to our stream and pointed the truck south. I spent the next three days playing catch-up in the paper chase, not that I ever really got totally caught up.

The office was closed on the Monday after New Year’s, and my weekly staff meeting was canceled. As a consequence, our next meeting was a full one. My phone rang five minutes after Gregg, David, and Janet had gone back to their offices. It was the desk sergeant downstairs.

“Captain,” he said, “there’s a Mr. and Mrs. Murchison here to see you.”

“Have someone bring them up,” I said.

A minute later, he called back to warn me that the woman was irate over our perceived lack of progress in solving her brother’s murder. While I waited, I gave the sheriff a quick call to tell him of their arrival. A female deputy ushered a middle-aged couple into my office, and I braced myself.

The man introduced himself as Howard Murchison and his wife as Doriana Murchison; I offered them a seat. He was fifty-something, fat, and balding. She was in the same age range and was clearly fighting a losing battle with the ravages of late middle-age. Virtually without preamble, Mrs. Murchison launched into a tirade. She apparently believed that the department was incompetent, that nobody was interested in solving this terrible crime, that nothing was being done, and on and on. I waited patiently until she at last ran down.

“Mrs. Murchison,” I said, “let me call the lieutenant and sergeant in charge of the investigation to my office, and they’ll be more than happy to give you a complete progress report.”

“Humph,” she said.

Ignoring her, I picked up the phone and dialed Janet. “Lieutenant Sanchez,” I said, “is Sergeant Johnson in the building?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good, because I want the two of you to come see me, and bring the Jordan file with you. His sister would like a progress report.”

Hanging up the phone, I said, “They’ll be here shortly.”

“You’re awfully young to be a captain,” Mr. Murchison said.

“I’m the youngest captain the department has ever had,” I said, “and before that I was the youngest lieutenant.”

“I guess that says something about your abilities,” he said.

“Including, no doubt, his ability to kiss ass,” his wife said.

“Now, Doriana,” he said, “that was uncalled for. I know the sheriff pretty well, and he has told me more than once that his higher-ranking people are where they are based solely on merit.”

“Humph.”

Evidently “humph” was her favorite word.

Janet and Carl appeared in my doorway, and I waved them in.

“Mr. and Mrs. Murchison,” I said, “this is Lieutenant Sanchez, and with her is Sergeant Johnson. They’ve been handling the case.”

“Have a seat,” I said to my guys. “Lieutenant, why don’t you give Mr. and Mrs. Murchison a quick rundown of where we are.”

Janet opened the file and gave a quick précis of the data, including the fact that the dead man’s Lincoln Town Car had been found two days before, abandoned in one of the most crime-ridden areas of the city.”

“Have you any suspects, Lieutenant?” I said.

“The deceased was known for taking young men home with him,” she said, “and giving them cash and jewelry in exchange for sexual favors.”

Mrs. Murchison exploded in a lengthy tirade, the sum total of which was that her late brother could not possibly have been one of “those” kind of people, and once again, I let her rant until she ran out of breath.

“Mrs. Murchison,” I said, “I have in front of me interviews with no fewer than four young gay men, all of whom state that your late brother took them home for periods of time that varied from a weekend to a period of two weeks. In addition, we have interviews with the security guards at the entrance to his community confirming that a steady stream of young men called upon the late Mr. Jordan.”

“Humph,” she said. “I still don’t believe it.”

I pulled a sheet from the file, handed it to Mr. Murchison, and said, “Please read this.”

He read the document and looked a question at me, so I said, “It’s typical of the other interviews in the file. There are a lot of young gay men floating around the gay bars here in town who more or less earn extra money by letting themselves be taken home by older men. It’s not, strictly speaking, illegal, and there’s not a lot we can do about it.”

Having read the interview, he handed the document back to me.

I said, “Lieutenant, do we have any suspects?”

“We have dozens of fingerprints from the house,” she said, “not all of which can be matched with any known database. We’ve interviewed everyone whose prints were identified, and they all have confirmed alibis for the time of the murder. At the moment we’re concentrating on locating two men who were known to have gone home with the deceased at one time or another, both of whom have disappeared from the local scene.”

“What else, if anything,” I said, “can you tell us?”



“This case appears to be connected with a series of burglaries,” she said. “We have complaints from a half-dozen or so older gay men that their homes have been robbed. Most of them have admitted that they took one or more of these young men home with them at one time or another. Sergeant, do you have anything to add?”

“Our best working theory is that a couple of these guys, maybe even one or both of the two that have gone missing, would go home with an older man, check the premises out, and return later to rob him,” Carl said. “Mr. Jordan may have gone out for the evening, returned unexpectedly, and stumbled upon one of them in the midst of robbing him.”

“Humph,” Mrs. Murchison said. “I don’t believe it... I won’t believe it. My brother was many things, but he was not a homosexual.”

“Doriana,” her husband said, showing much more patience than she deserved, “I just read this interview, and the captain says there are many more. Besides, you and I both know that we’ve been hearing rumors about Sterling’s eccentricities for years.”

*Now there’s a quaint euphemism for “queer.” Time to change the subject.*

“Mrs. Murchison,” I said, “do you have a list of the items that were missing from your brother’s home? I see from the file that we don’t such a list as yet. We could use descriptions. Photographs would be even better.”

“I think Sterling’s insurance agent probably has that information,” she said.

“That would be wonderful,” I said, “particularly if any of the items had identifying marks. Small and highly valuable items eventually turn up in pawn shops, and we need to circulate a list as soon as we can.”

“I’ll have the insurance man call you tomorrow,” she said.

“Lieutenant Sanchez,” I said, “please give Mrs. Murchison your card so she can contact you directly.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said, and handed each of the Murchisons a card.

A familiar figure had been hovering in my doorway through much of this, and he chose to make his entrance. “Howard,” the sheriff said, striding into the room. “I heard you were in the building. I hope Captain Martin has been taking care of you satisfactorily?”

“He certainly has, Walter,” Mr. Murchison said. “Unfortunately, some of the things he’s told us are not things that my wife wants to hear just now.”

“Humph,” Mrs. Murchison said. “I suppose all this nonsense about my brother will be all over the papers.”

*This bitch is more worried about her reputation than her brother’s death.*

“Mrs. Murchison,” I said, “the department’s files are not exactly public records as such, nor are they sealed and private. We do our best to keep control of sensitive information, but people do talk, and we’re not always successful in containing things. Even if we succeed in protecting the information, there’s nothing to prevent a reporter from asking people the same questions we have and getting the same answers.”

“Why would they do that?” she said.

“Normally they wouldn’t, my dear,” the sheriff said, “but if you start raising too much of a fuss, rumors will circulate, and somebody is bound to start nosing around.”

“Oh,” she said.

*That’s marginally better than “humph.”*

“Captain Martin is one of the brightest people in this building,” the sheriff said, “and his people consistently have the highest record of success. If they are to solve this terrible crime, his people have to go where the evidence leads them, even if it leads them to some conclusions that you might find less than pleasant.”

He stroked her for a couple of minutes and finally led them from the room. Janet, Carl, and I all let out a sigh of relief, and Janet said, “I swear to God, boss, if that woman had said ‘humph’ one more time, I would’ve reached over and bitch-slapped her into next week.”

“I’m glad we don’t have to go through that with every case,” Carl said.

“You’ve got that right,” I said. “Thanks, guys, and keep me posted. I’ve got a feeling we haven’t heard the last of Mrs. Murchison.”

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THE sheriff came back to my office a few minutes after Janet and Carl left and asked to see the file. He read through a couple of the interviews and said, "I'm glad she didn't want to read this stuff."

"Yes, Sir," I said. "There are a lot of details in there that she doesn't need to see, but her husband seemed to handle it well."

"Yeah, and most of the time he handles her as best he can. I've never seen her quite like she was when I walked up to your door."

"All I could think of to do was just sit there and take it until she ran down, which she finally did, just like she did the first time."

"The first time?"

"Thirty seconds after she sat down in that chair, she took off like a rocket, or as they say... she went ballistic."

He smiled at the image and said, "Do your guys have a chance at solving this?"

"There's always a chance," I said. "It hinges on tracking down our two missing suspects, or maybe we'll get lucky with the pawn shops. It's early days at this point."

"I think maybe you'd better send me an occasional progress memo on this one, George," he said. "Maybe I can deflect some of the heat with an occasional telephone call to Howard."

"Thank you, Sir."

Before I left for the day, I sent a detailed memo to the sheriff and copied Chief Bridges. Later that evening, after Robbie was in bed, Mike and I were in the den as usual.

"We need to get to work on the new master suite," I said.

"Where do we stand?"

“The plans I drew up have been approved by the relevant authority, and we have three estimates. I’ve almost come to the conclusion that we ought to act as our own contractor and subcontract most of the job out.”

“Why?”

“Because if we do it all ourselves, it will drag out for the rest of the year or longer. I don’t have as much free time as I did a couple of years ago when I re-roofed the house pretty much by myself—with you as my gofer. Not to mention the fact that the construction calls for removing part of the roof over our bedroom and Robbie’s bedroom, and one or two people can’t handle that in as timely a manner as a crew can. To put it bluntly, if it rained, we’d be up shit creek.”

Our original plan had been to construct a master suite over the garage, but it had grown considerably since then. We were now contemplating a master suite for Mike and me and a bedroom and bath for Robbie. The addition required a second story to be built over the garage and about a third of the house. Our new bedroom featured French doors opening onto a small screened-in porch above the backyard.

“No argument, babe,” he said. “Can the contingency fund handle it?”

“That’s another thing. I think maybe we’ve been keeping too much cash lying around in the fund.”

“Whoa. I never thought I’d hear you say that.”

When we first started seriously acquiring rental properties, I had always firmly insisted that we have an adequate cash reserve, which we called our contingency fund. The amount was tied to a formula—so much set aside for each property we owned.

“Hey. I’m man enough to admit it when I’m wrong, and in this case, I wasn’t really wrong... just overly cautious.”

“So,” he said, “do you think we can occupy our new suite by the time of the River Run?”

“That would be nice, but definitely not a realistic expectation.”

“Then go for it. Do some of the work, if you want, but hire the rest out. I’m looking forward to that sexy new shower.”

That decision having been made, we set things in motion the next morning, and by the end of the next week, workmen were swarming all

over the house. Despite the considerable efforts of the various subcontractors and workmen to keep the house free of dust and sawdust, we literally choked on all of the above for several weeks.

As the construction dragged on, so did the robbery/murder case. One of the two prime suspects was located in Ft. Lauderdale and eventually provided an airtight alibi for his whereabouts on the night of the murder. At a staff meeting in late February, we were discussing the murder case and the related burglary cases.

“Janet,” I said, “you have a comprehensive list of the items missing from the Jordan home. Has anything turned up in the pawn shops?”

“Nothing that can be positively identified,” she said. “A couple of small sterling silver items have shown up that may be from the house, but we can’t be sure, and we’ve been unable to track down the persons who pawned them.”

“Let me guess, they used fake IDs and addresses.”

“Exactly.”

“There were a lot of valuable items on that list that are highly collectible,” I said. “Have you looked at eBay?”

“eBay?”

“It’s the ideal venue for selling collectible stuff anonymously.”

“Shit, Captain, none of us thought about that.”

“Well, now that you have, run with it.”

“You bet.”

“Remember this when you do—when you search for items for sale on eBay, you can also search for closed auctions.”

“What does that mean?”

“It refers to items of a like nature that have already been sold and the auctions have ended. With your computer research skills, you ought to be a natural at digging into eBay records.”

“Consider it done,” she said.

“Good, because the sheriff has asked me to keep him posted as to progress in this case. He, in turn, is doing his best to keep his friend Howard

and, therefore, the wife, off our case.”

Throwing a research challenge at Janet was like throwing a dog a bone. Less than twenty-four hours later she was in my office showing me the results. There were two active eBayers selling collectible items similar to those that were missing from the Jordan home, one of whom had only begun selling on eBay a couple of weeks after the murder.

“Well done,” I said. “Now all we have to do is find out who this guy is, and where he lives.”

“His listings say that the merchandise ships from Florida,” she said.

“Yeah, but where in Florida?”

“I have an idea about that, boss.”

“Tell me.”

“One or two of these things are in the under \$100 category. Why don’t I purchase one of them and insist on paying by check or money order?”

“Go for it. I’ll get you some money from petty cash if necessary.”

On the home front, my predictions concerning Robbie and the new kid had been on the money. The two of them had become inseparable, and we were eventually invited to dinner at Sandy’s house. A pleasant dinner turned sour almost immediately when Ronald, or Ron as he preferred to be called, asked us if we had participated in last year’s pride parade.

“Certainly not,” I said.

“Yeah,” Mike said, “we don’t fit in with that crowd.”

“That crowd?” Warren parroted.

“For want of a better word,” I said, “the in-your-face crowd.”

“Don’t you want to display pride in being gay?” Ron said.

“Do you display your pride in having ten fingers?” I said.

“Or ten toes?” Mike said.

“The people who march in those parades aren’t celebrating their pride in being gay,” I said. “All they’re doing is making a statement that they’re proud of being flamboyant.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, “and they make the rest of us look bad.”

“How so?” Ron said, his tone becoming even less friendly.

“Because people see what goes on in those parades,” I said, “and proceed to tar all of us with the same brush. I’ve been ‘out’ at work for seven years in a profession that is noted for its macho and redneck attitudes. Nobody really pays any attention to my sexual identity at work anymore, at least not most of the time, but after those highly publicized pride events, some of them start looking at me in a funny way.”

“I’ve seen it happen,” Mike said. “Some of them act like they expect George to show up at work wearing a tutu or something.”

“When anyone asks,” I said, “and they do, from time to time, I just tell them that the people in the parades are the tip of the iceberg—the ten percent that is highly visible—and the rest of us are just like everybody else.”

Ron launched into a highly impassioned speech, the gist of which was that the parades were important, etcetera.

“We’re going to have to agree to disagree on that subject,” Mike said.

A stony silence ensued, and I had the feeling that there would be no more invitations. On the way home, I said, “That was predictable, wasn’t it?”

“Unfortunately,” Mike said. “Sad, but predictable.”

“We could have smiled and lied through our teeth.”

“No way, babe. If they aren’t man enough to take it when we tell it like it is, screw ’em.”

“You screw ’em. I’ll stick to screwing you, thank you very much.”

After we got home and had Robbie settled in his bed for the night, I turned to the computer and checked our e-mails. “Here’s some good news,” I said.

“Tell me.”

“Ernest has finished probating the estates of Robbie’s parents, and all claims against their estates have been settled.”

“How?”

“Robbie’s mother had a life insurance policy through her employer, and it was large enough to take care of her funeral expenses with enough left over to pay their bills.”

“Did his father have any insurance?”

“Nobody seems to know,” I said, “but it’s worth looking into. If there was any insurance, maybe the proceeds could be applied to the mortgage on Robbie’s house.”

“Speaking of that mortgage, what has Ernest found out?”

“All we have to do is keep the mortgage company happy. Our original estimate was that it would only take a couple of grand to make the house rentable.”

“What else?”

“Geez,” I said, “isn’t that enough?”

“I know you, and there’s something else you’re not telling me, so what else?”

“The property, as you know, includes almost ten acres, most of it along our creek.”

“And?”

“We won’t need any kind of zoning variance to build two or three rental cabins along the creek,” I said.

“The kind that the Realtor told us would rent for big bucks on a weekly basis in the summer and during the ski season?”

“Just so.”

“Hot damn.”

“Why don’t you call him tomorrow and find out what kind of cabins we need to build?”

“Will do.”

“And who up there builds them, and at what probable cost.”

“That too.”

“I’m so glad we’re on the same wavelength,” I said.

I had a surprise visitor Friday afternoon. There was a knock on the doorframe, and I looked up. “Crystal,” I said. “What a surprise. Come in and have a seat.”

“Hi, George. Good to see you.”



Crystal Young was the documentary filmmaker who, with her cameraman, had spent months following my people around, filming every aspect of our work and some aspects of our lives. It had grown from the original idea of making a training film into a projected miniseries.

“You too. To what do I owe the honor?”

“This,” she said, setting a good-sized box on my desk.

I opened the box and saw that it was full of DVDs. “What’s this?”

“Final product. Six episodes that will air, commencing in late April or early May, as soon as the current season is over. In addition, there is one DVD full of material we didn’t use.”

“Cool,” I said. “Are you satisfied with the results?”

“Oh, yes. I’m more satisfied with this than I have been with any project I’ve done in the last fifteen years.”

“Crystal, you’re not old enough to have been doing this for fifteen years.”

“That’s sweet of you to say, but unfortunately I am that.”

“Who else has copies?”

“Just you, so far, but I have to go see the sheriff in a few minutes.”

“What about copies for my people?”

“There are several copies of each DVD in the box,” she said. “Feel free to make as many additional copies as you need.”

“I know what everyone who works for me will be doing this evening.”

“No doubt.”

“How long will you be in town this time?”

“I have a seven o’clock flight this evening, but I’m coming back next month to do the River Run.”

“Mike and I will look forward to it.”

“Are those two handsome men from Atlanta going to be here again?”

“Yes, they are,” I said.

“I did some research and found out quite a bit about those two.”

“And?”

“There’s quite a story there—several stories, in fact, but I expect by now you know most of it.”

“Probably.”

“I’m going to do my best to persuade them to let me do a story on them,” she said.

“Lots of luck,” I said. “Charles and Philip are two very private people. They’ve been thrust into the spotlight from time to time, but they don’t particularly like it.”

“I’m still going to try.”

“Have at it, but Mike and I can’t help you.”

“Whyever not?”

“Because they’ve become rather close personal friends, and because there’s an ongoing relationship there of which you’re not aware.”

“Can you tell me?”

I filled her in on our discovery of Robbie and subsequent events, up to and including the weekly counseling sessions. “That’s his picture,” I said, pointing at a framed five-by-seven on my credenza.

“He’s adorable. I wish all that had gone down while I was still filming.”

“Well, it didn’t, and I’m just as glad. That little boy has been through enough.”

“Point taken. I’ll look forward to meeting him next month.”

“You’re on.”

She left, presumably to go upstairs, and I called Janet and my other two lieutenants into my office. When they had assembled, I handed out the DVDs, explained how I had gotten them, and told them to make copies to pass along to their subordinates.

“There ought to be enough in there to keep everyone out of mischief for a few evenings,” I said.

They thanked me and left, and I wrapped up the report I was working on and went home for the day. Because Friday was our wine-tasting night, we didn’t get around to the DVDs until Saturday. After we had Robbie

settled down for the evening, we started watching the them, and even with a lot of fast-forwarding through parts of the DVDs, it took us until almost midnight to watch them. The film had begun with interviews of the sheriff and Chief Bridges, and had concluded with interviews of myself and my three lieutenants. I was really touched by Crystal's interview of Gregg Parker, one of the two lieutenants I'd inherited from the chief when he and I had been promoted. She had asked him how he had felt when I had been promoted over him, given that he was nearly twenty years older and had more seniority.

"I was annoyed at first," Gregg said, "but then I got to wondering what difference it made. After all, I was counting the days until I turned in my retirement papers, almost marking time, if you will."

"So, how did things turn out?" she said.

"I'm still here," he said, "and I'm going to hold off retiring for a while."

"Why?"

"It's hard to explain," he said. "Let me tell you a story. Two years ago, my wife and I bought a larger home in a different neighborhood. The kids weren't too happy about that because they had to change schools. Two or three months after the move, I realized that my oldest son, who had been in the band since sixth grade, was spending a lot more time practicing his trumpet than before, so I asked him why. He told me that his old band director had made him practice, but his new band director made him want to practice."

"So you're saying that Captain Martin manages to bring out the best in people?" Crystal said.

"Yeah," Gregg said, "something like that."

"Wow," Mike said, turning the DVD player off. "That's quite a tribute."

"It's a lot to live up to," I said.

"Handle it, babe, handle it."

Sunday morning after our workout, we met Carl and Jim at the Derby House for breakfast. The first thing Carl said was, "Hi, Robbie. Did you know that your daddies are going to be on TV?"

“They’ve already been on TV,” Robbie said.

“When was that?” Carl said.

“In Atlanta,” Robbie said. “I saw them on TV when they were running in that race.”

“Oh,” Carl said.

“I guess that means you watched the DVDs,” I said.

“You bet, boss,” Carl said. “They were terrific.”

“Yeah,” Jim said. “I can’t believe how much personal stuff they used. That shot of Janet’s husband taking a swing at you and being hauled off to jail was priceless. Too bad they blurred out the bastard’s face.”

“True,” Carl said. “Unlike so-called reality TV, that was neither staged nor scripted.”

“I’m hungry,” Robbie said.

“I guess that settles that,” I said. “Hunger is more important than incipient fame.”

The Friday before the River Run came, and we picked up Charles and Philip at the airport. When they saw the extent of the construction at our house, Charles said, “Are you sure you don’t want us to stay at a hotel?”

“No need,” Mike said. “Robbie is looking forward to sleeping with us for a couple of nights.”

We gave them a quick tour of the addition, which was still a long way from being completed.

“As you can see,” I said when we were looking at the master bathroom, “we pretty much copied your shower design.”

“No problem,” Charles said, “it’s not patented.”

As we had done the previous year, we took them to the Friday night wine tasting with us, and we had a great time with the group. Instead of going to dinner with the group, though, we took a bottle of wine to the Pizza Italian and filled up on lasagna and garlic bread.

Carl and Jim came by Saturday morning and picked up Robbie, and they planned to take him to a vantage point somewhere in San Marco, so

that he could wave at us as we ran by. Despite her promise, Crystal didn't show up for the race.

It was a little chillier than it had been the previous year, but we warmed up quickly enough and didn't feel it. Mike and I were watching opposite sides of the street as we ran, and he was the first to spot Robbie, who was on Jim's shoulders at the time. We waved at him as we drew abreast of them and passed by their vantage point, and after the race, we met up with them for breakfast at the Derby House. We had a great weekend and were sorry to see our guests leave Sunday afternoon.

Robbie's six months of weekly visits with Lydia had stretched well beyond the original timeframe planned, but we were now only going to Atlanta every other Saturday. We hoped that would drop to one visit a month in June and stop entirely by the end of the year. Not that we didn't enjoy our trips to Atlanta and our visits with the Barnett family. We were merely anxious to return to our old pattern of one weekend a month in the mountains.

I invited Mr. and Mrs. Murchison to my office near the end of the day on the last Friday in March, and I had also asked Janet, Carl, and the sheriff to be present. When we were assembled, I asked Janet to bring us up to date, which she did.

"To summarize," she said, "we found some of the late Mr. Jordan's collectible items were being sold on eBay, so I bid on one of them and won the auction. I insisted on paying by check, and when I mailed the payment, I paid an extra fee at the post office that required that the envelope be signed for."

"Whose idea was the eBay thing?" the sheriff said.

"Captain Martin's," Janet said.

"The address was a post office box in Tampa," I said, "but the Tampa police were unwilling to assign a plainclothes officer to watch the post office every day."

"Right," Janet said, "but we were able to get some cooperation from the folks at the Tampa Post Office. When the guy turned up to sign for the envelope, they asked for identification and made a copy of his driver's license."

“The item was mailed to one of Lieutenant Sanchez’s relatives in south Florida,” I said, “and has been positively identified as having come from Mr. Jordan’s collection.”

“Why south Florida?” Mrs. Murchison said.

“If she had used a Jacksonville address, he might have gotten suspicious,” I said. “She used a relative’s eBay account so that the address on the check would match the shipping address.”

“What’s the bottom line here?” the sheriff said.

“We’ve issued an arrest warrant,” I said, “for one Wallis Mayhew, age twenty-two. He was the missing man on our list, and the postal clerk in Tampa can positively identify him.”

“The problem is,” Janet said, “that he’s a drifter. My people have a lot of man-hours invested in this case, and from what we’ve pieced together of his life, Mr. Mayhew doesn’t have a regular job. After he graduated from high school, he spent several years living with, and sponging off of, a number of different young men his age. After the last one got tired of it and kicked him out, he started preying on older men.”

“He’s never been fingerprinted,” I said, “so we have to catch him before we can match his prints to those at the murder scene or, for that matter, to the prints in the victim’s car. On the other hand, we found fingerprints on the item the lieutenant purchased that match prints found at the crime scene and in the car, so once he’s caught, we should be able to convict him. He’d tried to wipe the item clean, but we picked up one that he’d missed.”

“He has family here in Jacksonville,” Janet said, “but they kicked him out and pretty much disowned him years ago. Our plan is to have his photograph circulated around the gay bars in central Florida and hope someone will spot him. We’ll start with Tampa and St. Petersburg and work our way across the state.”

“We had hoped that when he deposited the check in his bank account,” I said, “that information might lead us somewhere.”

“But it didn’t,” Janet said. He somehow managed to get it cashed at one of those check-cashing places, so that was a dead end.”

“We think that he’s probably living with, and off of, someone in the Tampa area,” I said. “All we have to do is find him.”

“That won’t be easy from two hundred miles away,” the sheriff said.

“No, Sir,” I said, “but that’s all we’ve got. Hopefully, a heavily publicized search will flush him out of hiding.”

“Well, I think you’ve done well,” Mr. Murchison said. “We had pretty much given up hope that the murder would ever be solved.”

“Humph,” was Mrs. Murchison’s comment.

“We’ve also filed a notice with eBay,” I said, “advising them that the seller in question was dealing in stolen goods. However, even if they close his account, he’ll probably start again under a different seller name. We tried to trace him through the IP address of his computer, but he was smart enough to make all contacts using computers in libraries and Internet cafés.”

“Where is the item that the lieutenant purchased?” Mrs. Murchison said.

“In our evidence room,” I said. “It will have to stay there until the suspect is brought to trial.”

“Humph.”

The sheriff took charge at that point, thanked Janet for her hard work, and escorted the Murchisons to the elevator. Carl followed them, leaving Janet and me alone in the office.

“Boss,” Janet said, “that woman seriously gets on my nerves.”

“I know what you mean. To repeat what the sheriff said, ‘Well done, Janet.’”

“Thanks, boss.”

“I don’t mean to pry,” I said, “but how’s your social life now that you’ve been a free woman for a while?”

“Are you asking me if I’m dating?” she said.

“If I wanted to know that, I’d come right out and say so, but now that you mention it, are you?”

“Not quite yet, but soon.”

“Good. You know what they say about falling off a horse?”

“Yeah, but I’m not quite ready to get back in the saddle at this point,” she said. “Frankly, after all those years of marriage, it’s still something of a novelty to come and go as I please without having to answer to anyone else.”

“That’s a very good attitude, but sooner or later you’re going to get lonely.”

“When that happens, I’ll deal with it.”

“I’ve no doubt that you will.”

She left, and I turned off my computer terminal and did the same.

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*THE burglar had chosen a spot on a side street near its intersection with the street on which his next target resided. His vantage point gave him a clear view of the target driveway, and his patience was ultimately rewarded when he saw an old Jaguar sedan back carefully down the driveway and head south in the general direction of downtown St. Petersburg. Remembering what had happened in a certain gated community in Jacksonville, he waited a full thirty minutes before he slipped into the shadows and down the alley toward his goal.*

*It took him only a couple of minutes to loosen enough of the glass louvers in the jalousie windows to gain entry through the sunroom of the house. Once inside, he quickly gathered two bags of expensive artsy-fartsy goodies, along with the stash of cash the owner of the house kept in his freezer.*

*His last act before leaving the house was to carefully restore the jalousie windows to their original state. Then he opened the door leading from the sunroom to the backyard, set it to lock behind him, and pulled it closed.*

*These old farts were even better targets than the ones in Jacksonville, he thought as he drove away.*

WHEN I got home, the welcoming committee was waiting. We had decided as an experiment to take Robbie with us to the wine shop, and he was excited about getting to go out with the grown-ups. We knew that he would be worn out long before we were really ready to call it an evening, but various members of the group had been asking to meet him, so we walked

into the wine shop with Robbie between us. There was a small bar in the shop about twenty feet back from the checkout counter. It was all that remained of what had been a full-service bar back in the days before the shop's owner had stopped selling alcohol by the drink and began selling wine and spirits only by the bottle.

This evening it was being used by a representative from one of the local distributors, and she was pouring samples of a couple of wines her company was promoting. I lifted Robbie off the floor and set him on one of the bar stools. He immediately discovered that it swiveled, and I had to press up against the stool to keep him from spinning around in circles. There was a plateful of cubed cheese on the counter, so I speared one of the cubes with a toothpick and gave it to him. Various members of our group wandered over to the counter for a freebie, speaking to Robbie as they did so, and I watched carefully as he interacted with more adults than was normal for any sign that he was having any problem with the situation. When he'd first come to live with us, he would have hidden behind Mike or me when faced with that many unfamiliar grown-ups, but he was holding his own and smiling as he answered their questions.

As was sometimes the case, nobody seemed interested in going to dinner en masse, so we took Robbie to the Pizza Italian for lasagna, which he loved. The minute we walked through the door of the restaurant, Robbie spotted two familiar faces. "Carl and Jim are here," he said. "Can we sit with them?"

"They're in a booth," I said. "It only holds four."

"Sometimes they put a chair at the end of the booth," he said.

"Sometimes you're just too smart, big guy," Mike said.

We pulled a chair away from a vacant table and settled in the booth with Robbie occupying the chair.

"I guess tax season is over," I said as we settled in the booth.

"You bet it is," Carl said, "and I've had him all to myself for the past three weeks. It's been wonderful."

"And exhausting," Jim said.

“Was your second tax season as a sole practitioner significantly better than the first?” Mike said.

“Was it ever,” Jim said. “I finally hired a helper, and it’s a good thing, what with new business, repeat business, and referrals.”

“Don’t tell them that,” Carl said. “Your rent might go up.”

We owned a small house near Five Points that Mike used as an office, and we had rented part of it to Jim.

“That’s why I have a lease,” Jim said. “It’ll be almost two years before I have to deal with my greedy landlords.”

We laughed at that, knowing it was a joke. Mike had given Jim extremely favorable terms, starting with a low-ball rent the first year with small step increases in each successive year.

“Are you guys going to go to the mountains this year?” I said.

“We’re not sure,” Carl said. “We both have families that want to see us, and right now we’re juggling invitations.”

“If you change your mind,” Mike said, “let us know. Our cabin sits there all by itself much of the time.”

We had brought a bottle of wine with us, and we shared it with our friends, which was just as well, given that Mike and I had shared more bottles than usual with our wine group that evening. On the way home, Mike said, “Don’t look now, but guess who’s sound asleep.”

“That’s hardly surprising. It’s more than a bit past his normal bedtime.”

Saturday afternoon, I settled down on the floor of what would be our new master bedroom to work on the wiring. I had to finish roughing it in so that it could be inspected on Monday, and it was going to take most of the weekend to finish the job. Robbie was acting as my gofer—I was teaching him to use the correct terminology for such things as junction boxes, and he was obviously getting a kick out of it. Mike was downstairs doing laundry, cleaning the house, and doing whatever else needed to be done. He was still my primary gofer for heavy items, such as bundles of shingles, and I had worked him very hard when I had done the roofing on the addition. We had compromised and allowed a subcontractor to remove a portion of the roof

over the first floor so that the new second floor could be roughed in. This made them responsible for any water damage should it rain, but as soon as the second story had been framed in and plywood sheathing installed on the new roof trusses, I had taken a Friday off to get the protective layer of felt in place. Mike had then worn himself out carrying heavy bundles of shingles up a twenty-six-foot extension ladder all day Saturday and Sunday so I could get them in place as quickly as possible.

Robbie said, “Dad, someone’s coming up the stairs.”

I was in the middle of twisting two twelve-gauge wires together in a junction box using a pair of needle-nose pliers, so I merely grunted by way of reply.

“Looking good, George,” a familiar voice said.

I finished my immediate task and looked around. It was, of course, Chief Bridges. Mrs. Bridges was with him. “Hi,” I said. “Excuse me for not getting up.”

“Don’t be silly, George,” Sarah said, “we won’t disturb you. Mike is just showing us around.”

“I see you have a helper,” the chief said.

“That I do, and he’s turning into a good little gofer.”

“Carry on,” the chief said, “we won’t keep you.”

I returned to the task at hand and, without getting up, slid my butt over to the next wall stud that needed my attention, and by Sunday evening I was ready for the inspection. One of the good things about doing the wiring myself, other than the money saved, was the fact that we could have more outlets. Electrical contractors charged so much per outlet, which typically meant only the required minimum of one outlet for every so many feet of wall space was installed. I was installing double the minimum amount of outlets required, and in the case of the little office we were installing under the eaves, more than triple the minimum. Mike had questioned that when I showed him the plans.

“Babe,” I said, “look at all the shit we have to plug in around our desk. Who knows what kind of devices we’ll be using in our new office five or ten years from now?”

“Point taken.”

Mrs. Green had requested that we meet with her near the end of May to discuss Robbie’s progress, and when we arrived at the meeting, there were two other teachers present. She introduced them as the second and third grade teachers respectively and said, “We have a problem with Robbie, but let me hasten to add that it’s a very good kind of problem.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Robbie’s intelligence is way above normal,” she said. “He came to us with a somewhat limited educational background, and he has progressed far beyond everyone’s expectations. The bottom line is that Robbie has been performing at a second-grade level for several months now and is almost ready to be moved ahead to the third grade, but there are a couple of areas that need work.

“So,” Mrs. Green said, “what we are proposing is that Robbie be placed in a special status next year.”

“What does that mean?” Mike said.

“We want to work out a schedule,” she said, “such that he will spend a small portion of every day with the second grade, and the rest of the day with the third grade. That way, by the end of the next school year, we’re confident he will be ready for the fourth grade.”

“So,” Mike said, “what you are saying is that he will, in essence, skip a grade, but it will take a whole year for him to do it.”

“More or less,” Mrs. Green said.

“Have you talked to Lydia Brannon, his psychologist, about this?” I said.

“Yes, I have, and she thinks that he can handle it.”

“If she approves,” I said, “then so do we, right, Mike?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Good,” she said, “then we’ll proceed accordingly.”

On the way home, I said, “That will solve one problem.”

“And that would be?”

“Sandy Fisher-Price. If Robbie moves ahead a grade, it will automatically create a gap between him and Sandy.”

“Not to mention that it will widen the gap between us and Sandy’s dads.”

“Bingo.”

Steve and Roger drove down from Atlanta the following Thursday, arriving in mid-afternoon, and Robbie slept with Mike and me Thursday night, which he loved to do, so Steve and Roger could have his bed. Zeke and Josh came by to pick up our guests Friday around noon, and we all headed for Disney World. The two visitors from Atlanta were in the twins’ car with Zeke and Josh, Norm and Zeb were in Norm’s car, and Mike, Robbie, and myself were in our truck. Thor was at his favorite place—the boarding kennel. We knew it was his favorite place by the degree of excitement he exhibited when we drove up the long driveway to the kennel, which was situated on ten acres west of town.

Charles and Philip had flown down in Charles’s Cessna and were waiting for us at the Disney Contemporary Resort, where they had booked a pair of suites, each having two bedrooms. I didn’t even want to contemplate what it must have cost. We planned to visit the Magic Kingdom on the annual Gay Day, which was the first Saturday in June.

The six boys—Josh and Norm were twenty-two, and the other four were a year and two years younger, respectively, but Mike and I thought of them as boys—wore the customary uniform of the day, which was a red T-shirt or some variant thereof. Mike and I were dressed in shorts and regular polo shirts, as were Charles and Philip; we were among the first hundred people in line when the gates opened Saturday morning, and we hurried to Space Mountain, as it was still one of the most popular rides in the Magic Kingdom. On a visit to Six Flags Over Georgia the previous year we had learned that Robbie loved the rides—the wilder the better.

By the time we stopped for lunch, we were ready for a break. The boys were still going strong, but the rest of us were very nearly ready to call it a day. We ate lunch in one of the many restaurants, during the course of which the boys decided to tackle some more rides, and the rest of us were planning to return to the hotel to take a nap. We had passes that would gain us admittance to the park on Sunday, so there was no rush.

We walked a little way from the restaurant, and Robbie said, “I need to pee.”

“Now that you mention it,” I said, “so do I, and there’s a restroom just ahead.”

Mike waited with Charles and Philip while I went inside the restroom with Robbie. The minute we entered the room, I sensed that something was very wrong. There was an unusual smell, which I identified as fresh blood, and there were moans coming from one of the stalls.

“Robbie,” I said, “run and get Mike right now.”

“But I have to pee.”

“No argument,” I said. “Go now.”

I had never spoken to him quite that sharply, so he ran from the room. I looked under the edges of the stall doors, and as far as I could tell, only one stall was occupied, and I saw a pool of blood on the floor. Mike came into the room with Robbie in tow, followed by Charles and Philip. “What’s up?” Mike said.

“One of you block the entrance,” I said, “one of you call 911, and one of you get Robbie out of here as soon as he takes care of his business. There’s someone hurt in the last stall, and there’s blood all over the floor.”

I left the three of them to sort out who would do what, and I went to the last stall and cautiously opened the door. A man who appeared to be in his fifties was sitting on the toilet, pants around his ankles. There was a knife on the floor between his feet, and he was clutching his stomach. Blood was seeping steadily from beneath his hands. He seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness.

“I’m a police officer,” I said, hoping it would penetrate. “Help is on the way.”

I took a handkerchief out of my pocket, moved his hands out of the way, and held it tightly against the wound as a compress. Then Philip said from behind me, “Mike took Robbie outside, and Charles is calling 911. What can I do?”

“Give me a handkerchief, if you have one. Mine is getting saturated.”

He complied, and the blood flow finally slowed down a bit when I pressed the additional handkerchief in place. The man was starting to mumble, so I decided to attempt to question him, but first I said to Philip, “Got something to write on, and with.”

“Sure,” he said. “I always carry a pen and a small notebook in case I suddenly think of an idea for one of my books.”

“Good. Put them to use now, please.”

“Sir,” I said to the man, “can you tell us what happened?”

“He stabbed me,” the man said.

“Who stabbed you?” I said.

“Jack.”

“Jack who?” I said.

“Jack.”

“How did you get here?” I said.

“My car.”

“Can you describe it?”

“Jag.” His voice lapsed into a mumble.

“Can you tell us your name?”

“Juan Lopez... live in... *mumble*... stole my wallet... *mumble*....”

Before I could ask him anything else, a deep voice said, “What’s going on here? Please step away from that stall.”

“I can’t do that,” I said. “This man has been stabbed. He’s bleeding, and I need to hold this compress in place.”

“Let me see,” the voice said.

A heavysset man wearing a uniform pushed in between Philip and me and peered into the stall.

“Holy shit,” he said.

“Indeed,” I said. “There’s a knife on the floor. I’m not quite sure precisely where he was stabbed, but it’s somewhere south of his navel. We’ve pretty much exhausted two handkerchiefs already.”



“Good thinking,” he said, and he handed me another handkerchief. “Who are you?”

“Captain Martin with the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office,” I said. “Folder and shield are in my right hip pocket if you want to check.”

I felt a hand explore my pocket and the folder being removed. “So you are,” he said. I felt the folder being slipped back into my pocket. “This must be your lucky day, stumbling on a crime on your day off.”

“This man identified his attacker as Jack,” I said. “He has the victim’s wallet and might be driving the victim’s Jaguar. That’s all I could get out of him. Give the officer what you wrote, Philip.”

“Sure, George,” Philip said.

The EMT team arrived, and I was finally able to back out of the stall. The officer to whom I had been talking identified himself as Sam Rainey, and we shook hands. He stared at me for a long moment.

“Holy shit,” he said, “I recognize you from that television series about your department. It was on the cable last month.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“Let’s go outside,” he said, “so I can get a formal statement from you.”

“Sure. Give me a minute or two to wash all this blood off my hands.”

Philip and I followed him outside, where a small crowd had gathered. Mike and Robbie were sitting on a bench under a nearby shade tree with Charles. Robbie spotted me and yelled, “Dad.”

He ran over and hugged me around the thighs, which were chest high for him. “What’s happening?” he said.

“There was a man in the restroom,” I said, “and he’d been stabbed.”

His eyes got wide at that, and he said. “Was he dead?”

*Oh God, I hope this doesn’t cause him to have flashbacks about his mother’s death.*

“No, but he was bleeding badly. Philip and I used our handkerchiefs to try to stop the bleeding.”

“Wow.”

“Robbie, why don’t you go over there and sit with Mike and Charles while I talk to this policeman?”

“Yes, Sir,” he said, and he went to the table.

“My partner and I adopted him last year,” I said to the cop. “He’d just witnessed his mother being beaten to death by his father. A week or so later, the father was shot while resisting arrest. I’m afraid all of this may bring back some of his old nightmares.”

“Damn,” Sam said, “that’s a lot for a little kid to go through. How old was he then?”

“He was a couple of months shy of six when his mother died,” I said, “and he’s been through a ton of counseling since then.”

“Okay,” he said, “let’s get your statement, and you folks can go on your way.”

I took him through it, step by step, until he seemed satisfied that he had enough information. “Thanks,” he said. “I’m sure either my sergeant or the lieutenant will be contacting you.”

“Good,” I said. “I don’t know anyone in your department, but I did work on a case some time back with a lieutenant with the OPD.”

“Who?” Sam said.

“Lieutenant Clarence Ivory,” I said.

“Big black guy, sounds like James Earl Jones?”

“That’s Clarence. One of the really good guys.”

“Yeah, I’ve met him a few times.”

Philip and I went to where the rest of our party was waiting. “Can we go to the hotel now?” Robbie said.

“You bet we can, kiddo,” I said.

I lifted Robbie onto my shoulders, and the five of us headed for the monorail, and by the time we reached the hotel, it was after three.

In our suite, Philip and Charles retired to their room, and Mike and I did the same. We crawled in our bed and allowed Robbie to snuggle in

between us. Mike and I woke up about an hour later, but Robbie was still out cold, so we got up and quietly went into the sitting room. Charles and Philip emerged from their room a few minutes later.

“Where’s Robbie?” Charles said.

“Still out cold,” I said. “He was worn out.”

“We’re just hoping that the incident in the restroom won’t cause him to have any flashbacks about his mother,” Mike said.

“Yeah,” I said, “it’s only been a year, and he’s come such a long way since then.”

“Frankly,” Mike said, “we think Lydia is a miracle worker.”

“That she is,” Charles said.

“Yeah,” Philip said, “she worked wonders with my nephew after his father beat him half to death.”

“Mrs. Barnett alluded to that when we met Lydia,” I said, “but she didn’t elaborate.”

“Basically,” Philip said, “my sister and her family were out of town for the weekend. Steve stayed home, and his best friend came over to stay with him. My brother-in-law came back home unexpectedly and walked in on them when they were in bed fooling around. He flew into a rage and very likely would have beaten Steve to death if his friend hadn’t picked up something heavy and hit him over the head with it.”

“Steve was just conscious enough,” Charles said, “to beg his buddy to bring him to us in Atlanta instead of a hospital there in Louisiana. His buddy called his brother, and the two of them drove through the night, arriving at our door at first light.”

“Anyway,” Philip said, “we were talking about Lydia. My sister got a divorce, and I got custody of Steve because he was afraid to go home. After several months with Lydia, he managed to go to his father’s trial, look him in the face, and testify.”

“How old was Steve at the time?” I said.

“Not quite sixteen,” Philip said.

“Wow,” Mike said. “If someone ever did something like that to Robbie, I don’t know what I would do, but it wouldn’t be pretty.”

“Speaking of Robbie,” I said, “I think I just heard noises coming from our bedroom.”

The bedroom door opened, and Robbie came into the living room. “Hi, big guy,” I said. “Have a nice nap?”

“Yes, Sir,” he said. Mike and I were sitting on a small sofa, and Robbie squeezed in between us.

“How did you like Disney World, Robbie?” Charles said.

“It was cool,” Robbie said.

“Ready to go back to Space Mountain?” Charles said.

“Yes, Sir.”

“I think we can be in line tomorrow morning before it gets too crowded,” I said.

The telephone rang. Charles, who was sitting next to it, answered. “It’s for you, George,” he said, holding the receiver.

I walked across the room and picked up the phone. After a minute of conversation, I said, “Come on up,” and hung up the telephone.

“That was a lieutenant with the sheriff’s department,” I said. “He was calling from downstairs and wants to get our stories firsthand.”

A few minutes later there was a knock on the door, so Mike got up and opened the door. “Captain Martin?” we heard a voice say.

“No,” Mike said, “but please come in.”

A short and somewhat plump man of forty or thereabouts came into the room, and I got up from the sofa and said, “I’m George Martin.”

“Lieutenant Barker,” the man said.

We shook hands, and I introduced him to everyone else in the room.

“Have a seat, Lieutenant,” I said, “and tell us what we can do for you.”

“I have the report you folks gave Deputy Rainey,” Barker said, “but I want to get a firsthand account. So, who wants to tell me what happened?”

“I do,” Robbie said.

“Go right ahead,” Barker said, with a look of amusement on his face.

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“We had lunch,” Robbie said, “and were walking to the monorail station. I told my Dad that I had to pee, and he said, ‘so do I’, and we went to the restroom. The minute we got inside, he said, ‘Robbie, go get Mike right now.’ I said, ‘But I have to pee,’ and he said, ‘Don’t argue, just go get Mike.’ I went back outside and told everybody something was wrong. When we got inside, Dad said, ‘There’s somebody hurt in the last stall. Somebody block the door, somebody call 911, and somebody get Robbie out of here after he finishes his business.’ I peed, and Daddy took me outside.”

I looked at Robbie in amazement and started probing his hair with my fingers. “Dad,” he said, “what are you doing?”

“Looking for the little tape recorder you’ve got hidden in there. That was just about verbatim, as best I can recall.” I ruffled his hair and said, “You did good, kiddo.”

Looking at the lieutenant, I said, “That’s about the size of it. The minute I walked inside that restroom, I knew something was wrong. I heard moans, and I smelled blood, which is a smell you don’t ever forget. After Mike and Charles left with Robbie, I looked in the stall. There was an older man sitting on the toilet—he was clutching his stomach, and blood was running out from under his hands. There was a knife on the floor between his legs—I didn’t get a good look at it, but it might have been a pocketknife. He was bleeding profusely, so I used my handkerchief as a compress, and when my handkerchief was saturated, Philip gave me his. I managed to get a few words out of the guy, and Philip wrote them down. The rest you know.”

The lieutenant was writing things in his notebook and didn’t respond right away, so I said, “How is the victim, by the way?”

“In recovery, last I heard,” Barker said. “He came to in the ambulance long enough to say his attacker was a young guy named Jack, and that’s about it.”

“Any luck finding his address?” I said.

“Not yet,” Barker said. “Juan Lopez is an extremely common name.”

“Have you looked beyond Orlando?” I said.

“No, why?”

“Older man-younger man rings a bell,” I said, “and it is gay day at Disney World. This may be a stretch, because I don’t know if the victim was gay, but you might want to contact Lieutenant Sanchez in my office. She’s working on a series of burglaries and one burglary-related murder, all of which involved young guys preying on older gay males. She has a driver’s license photo of a guy who was selling some of the victim’s collectibles on eBay. He was living in Tampa at the time, which was just a short while ago, and I’d like very much to know if you found any prints that match the ones we found at our crime scene.”

“Oh, Lord,” Barker said. “If our victim is from the Tampa area, there will be ten times as many guys named Juan Lopez to track down.”

“Why?” Philip said.

“Ever hear of Ybor City?” Barker said. “There were dozens of Cuban cigar manufacturing plants in Tampa in the late nineteenth century. Most of them were in the Ybor City section. I believe they even out-produced Havana in terms of cigars and were known as the cigar capital of the world around 1900. There is a huge population of folks with Cuban ancestry in Tampa, and Lopez is as common a surname as Smith.”

“Are you a history buff?” I said.

“Not really,” Barker said, “but I grew up in Tampa, and you can’t help learning things like that when you live there.”

“Do you have any contacts within the Tampa Police Department?” I said.

“I don’t,” Barker said, “but surely someone in my office will.”

“I worked a serial murder case last year,” I said, “involving Orlando, Tampa, and St. Petersburg, in addition to Jacksonville. Lieutenant Ivory

with the OPD has at least one contact in the Tampa Police Department.”

Robbie pulled on my sleeve, so I looked at him and said, “What?”

“I’m hungry,” Robbie said.

“We’ll go have an early dinner just as soon as I finish talking to the lieutenant,” I said, “okay?”

“Yes, Sir.”

The lieutenant and I discussed the investigation for a few more minutes, and I gave him the necessary contact information for Janet Sanchez. He thanked us for our help, promised to keep in touch, and left.

“Okay, big guy,” I said to Robbie, “we can go get you fed now.”

“Can we go to McDonald’s?” Robbie said.

“That would be a bit complicated considering where we are,” I said. “We’d have to go get the car, leave the park, and drive quite a way to do that, so I think we’ll have to settle for what they have in one of the hotel restaurants.”

“Okay,” he said.

“I’ll call the boys,” Philip said, “and see if they’re back and want to join us.”

He dialed their suite with no results, so he tried Steve’s cell phone, with better luck. “They’re still in the park,” Philip said as he hung up, “so we won’t wait for them.”

“If you guys want to eat dinner later,” I said, “feel free to do so.”

“That’s okay, George,” Philip said. “We thought we might eat early and then go back to the park and look at the lights.”

“Why don’t you join us?” Charles said. “That would be a sure way to wear you-know-who out for the evening.”

“Sure,” I said. “That sounds like a plan.”

We had a light supper in the hotel café, and I once again managed to out-manuever Charles in the matter of picking up the check. Since he and Philip had insisted on taking care of the rooms, Mike and I felt that paying for the food was the least we could do. It had almost become a game, and so far it was George and Mike four, Charles and Philip zero. After we ate, we



went to the Magic Kingdom and explored Main Street for an hour or so, but when Robbie started to get tired from all the walking, we returned to the hotel, leaving Charles and Philip to their own devices.

We got Robbie bathed and in his bed, and then we retired to the living room. There was a movie available on the hotel cable that was on our “want to see” list, so we opened a bottle of Shiraz—we had brought several bottles of wine with us—and settled down to watch it.

By the time Charles and Philip turned up with the boys in tow, the movie was half over and we were nodding. The boys were exuberant in their enthusiasm for all things Disney, and all of them were wearing caps with mouse ears. There wasn’t enough wine left in the bottle for eight more people, so we opened another bottle. When the movie ended, Mike and I retired to our room, having agreed to meet downstairs for breakfast the next morning an hour before the park was scheduled to open.

Robbie was out cold in his bed, so we stripped, crawled in our bed, and spent some quality time together. The next morning we were among the first fifty people to enter the Magic Kingdom, which enabled us to enjoy Space Mountain, Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, and a couple of other rides that Robbie found especially thrilling. We had an early lunch in the park and made it back to the hotel just in time to beat the checkout deadline. Charles and Philip left for the general aviation airport where their plane had been left, the boys opted to return to the park for the afternoon, and we went to the car and headed toward I-4 and home.

The boys turned up at the house around nine Sunday evening. Robbie was sleeping with us so his room would be available for our guests. Steve and Roger were planning to leave for Atlanta as soon as they awakened, the twins had to be at work by noon, and the other two had classes, so Mike and I resumed our normal schedule Monday morning, leaving our guests to fend for themselves—the twins had promised to come by the house to see their friends off, and they would secure the house for us.

When my lieutenants arrived for our Monday staff meeting, I was hoping that there would be good news from Orlando. Janet dashed that hope almost immediately when she reported that the fingerprints on the knife used in the Disney attack did not match those of our suspect. We were, in fact, back to square one on the burglary cases.

The twins came to see us later in the week, and we cut a deal with them on the truck. We then traded Mike's car in on a new Explorer. It wasn't as sexy as the truck had been, but it was certainly more practical.

We were able to paint the new rooms in early June and moved into them a few days later. The shower in the master bathroom was absolutely wonderful. We really enjoyed the multiple showerheads, as well as the tiled bench in our new shower. We had also installed a faucet at waist height to which we attached a detachable showerhead on a long hose for use on Thor.

I came home early one day a couple of weeks later and when I went upstairs to change, I heard sounds coming from the bathroom, so I went to investigate and found Mike and Robbie in the shower. They were both wearing their underwear, and Thor was with them. Mike was sitting on the bench holding Thor, and Robbie was in the process of hosing him down with the detachable showerhead. Soapy water was flowing down Thor's legs, and I noted that a folding chair had been placed just outside the shower doors.

"Having fun?" I said.

"You bet," Mike said. "By the time you shed your clothes, we'll be ready to send Thor to you. There's a stack of towels on the floor beside the chair."

"Two ticks," I said.

I went into our bedroom and stripped, leaving my shorts in place for the same reason that Robbie and Mike were wearing theirs—if Thor got to jumping around, his paws might accidentally come into painful contact with our more sensitive parts. I went back into the bathroom, and closed the door behind me, because the first place Thor headed for after a bath was our bed—he loved to roll around on the comforter until he dried off. Mike had already spread a couple of layers of old quilts on top of the comforter in anticipation of this.

Settling down on the chair, I said, "Ready when you guys are."

The glass door opened, and a soaking wet Thor bounded out into the bathroom. I went through four or five towels getting as much water as possible out of his long hair. When I was satisfied that I had done all that I could, I opened the bathroom door, and Thor headed straight to the bed and

began to roll around on it. Then I slipped out of my shorts and stepped into the shower just as Robbie and Mike left it.

“I hope you guys left some hot water for me,” I said.

“There should be plenty,” Mike said.

Mike and Robbie had finished toweling themselves dry by the time I stepped out of the shower and did so myself. I went into our bedroom to pull on shorts and a T-shirt while Mike, similarly dressed, went to take care of mopping up the now very wet bathroom floor and dropping the towels down the laundry chute we’d installed as part of the remodeling project. Thor was still rolling around on our bed, and I sat down on the edge of the bed to pet him. Robbie came into the room carrying a couple of doggy brushes, and we spent some time combing Thor’s fur coat into some semblance of order. During the process of grooming Thor, I listened to a long monologue of the day’s exciting events from the perspective of a six-year-old. When his grooming was completed, I shooed Thor out of the bedroom and gathered up the damp quilts.

“Want me to put them in the laundry chute?” Robbie said.

“I think they’re probably a bit too bulky for the chute—they might get stuck. I’ll just carry them downstairs.”

I set the quilts down for a minute and said, “I didn’t get a hug when I came home.”

He extended his arms, and I picked him up for a hug, after which I retrieved the quilts and carried them downstairs.

We left for our annual June vacation in the mountains a few days later, and while we were there, we went to see our Waynesville lawyer at his request.

As we settled into chairs across from his desk, I said, “What’s up, Ernest?”

“Where’s the boy?” Ernest said.

“In your outer office under the watchful eye of your secretary.”

“Good, because he doesn’t need to hear this. I had a call from his grandmother, Mrs. Pickens, and because she can’t get out, your friend Lucinda Hawkins took me to see her.”

“And?” Mike said.

“She wants to deed her property to the two of you as trustees for Robbie, and she will reserve only a life estate for herself.”

“Okay,” I said. “What does she want in return?”

“Only your guarantee that you will take care of the real estate taxes and any major repairs on the house.”

“Why not?” I said. “We paid her back taxes last year—they weren’t much—and as best I can recall, the house is in pretty good shape.”

“What brought this on, Ernest?” Mike said.

“She didn’t spell it out to me, but according to your friend Lucinda, Mrs. Pickens has been diagnosed with terminal cancer.”

“How long does she have?” I said.

“A year, maybe a bit more, it’s one of the really slow-growing kind. In a way I think she’s relieved, given that she’s been suffering from a number of ailments for quite a while.”

“What do we need to do?” I said.

“Nothing. All I needed to hear was your verbal acceptance, and I’m authorized to record the deed she executed.”

“Wow,” Mike said.

“We still do things on a handshake around here, at times,” Ernest said. “Add to that the fact that she is pleased as punch with the changes in her grandson since you boys adopted him and that’s it.”

“One thing’s for sure,” I said. “This property, added to the income from the property in Robbie’s parents’ estate, will ensure his college education one day.”

“Not that we wouldn’t have seen to it anyway,” Mike said.

We cut our stay in the mountains short by a couple of days so we could stop by Atlanta on the way home to once again participate in the Peachtree Road Race. We enjoyed visiting the Barnett family, as always, and the race was a lot of fun. While we were there, we had a long conversation with Lydia about Robbie’s progress, during which we also told her about his grandmother’s terminal condition.

“Is there anything we should do,” I said, “to help prepare him for her death?”

“Not really,” she said. “On the other hand, at some point when you take him to visit her, he’s certainly going to notice that she is getting worse. Answer his questions truthfully and as completely as you can. The worst thing you could do would be to tell him things are all right when it will be obvious to him that they’re anything but.”

We took Robbie to the beach for his seventh birthday in lieu of another party. His teacher had organized a party at the end of the school term for all of her students whose birthdays fell in the summer months. She explained that many parents found it difficult to round up enough classmates who were in town to have a proper birthday party when school was out, so we celebrated the birthdays of Robbie and two of his classmates.

Things were fairly quiet at work during most of July and August. My people dealt with the usual stuff—armed robberies and a couple of murders—but there was no progress on the gay burglaries/murder case. On the last Monday of August, I got a call from an excited Janet.

“Guess what?” she said.

“I’ve no idea.”

“Our boy Wallis Mayhew was arrested in St. Petersburg over the weekend.”

“Our boy?”

“You know, the gay burglary/murder case suspect.”

“Gotcha. How did they catch him?”

“Would you believe a routine traffic stop?”

“Stranger things have happened, Lieutenant. Please tell me they still have him on ice.”

“Yes, Sir, they do. He’s not going anywhere unless it’s in one of our cruisers carrying him back to Jacksonville.”

“Make it so, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, Sir. I’ve already turned it over to the fugitive-apprehension department.”

“Plan your interrogation of him very carefully.”

“More so than usual?”

“Absolutely. Think about how many cases you guys can probably close if you can get him to talking like Chatty Cathy.”

“I’ll get with Gregg and David. Between the three of us we can decide who’s best to interrogate this guy.”

“There you go.”

Just before lunch on Friday, I sensed a presence in my doorway and looked up from my computer screen. “What’s this?” I said. “A delegation?”

All three of my lieutenants were standing in the doorway.

“We need to talk to you,” David said. The others merely nodded in agreement.

“Come in and have a seat.”

They did so. After a moment of silence, I said, “Don’t keep me in suspense.”

Gregg and David looked at Janet. “It’s about the gay burglary/murder cases,” Janet said.

“What about them? You’ve got the guy, right?”

“We’ve got him,” she said. “His fingerprints match those at the murder scene, those on the stolen car, and those on the item I purchased on eBay.”

“So what seems to be the problem?”

“He’s lawyered up—and clammed up.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Sir,” she said. “He was arraigned this morning, and a public defender was appointed.”

“Who?”

“Patrick Trovillo.”

“He’s pretty sharp. In any case, it’s pretty much out of our hands now.”

“The lawyer wants a meeting with one or more of us and the prosecutor.”

“Why? What does he want?”

“His client wants the death penalty taken off the table and the murder charge reduced to manslaughter.”

“Well, good luck to him.”

“Boss, it isn’t quite that simple,” she said.

I made a “give it to me” motion with my hand.

“Mr. Trovillo says his client can give us access to something really big.”

“Big enough to make those concessions worthwhile?”

“So he says.”

“Then arrange a meeting.”

“We haven’t been able to do that.”

“Whyever not?”

“The prosecutor isn’t interested and says they have the guy dead to rights and they intend to go for broke.”

“Don’t tell me... let me guess. One of the clowns is in charge.”

“Bingo,” she said.

There were three assistant prosecutors who we referred to, collectively, as “the clowns.” We did so because they were notorious for being “by the book” clowns. While the law enforcement community was, generally speaking, in favor of prosecutors being rigid and inflexible, we also realized that once in a while it was necessary to give something up to get something.

“Let me see if I can get his lawyer on the phone.”

I looked in my Rolodex, selected a number, and dialed. “Is he in?” I said when I had worked my way through to his secretary.

“Captain Martin of the Sheriff’s Office. ... I’ll hold. ... Hello, Patrick. George Martin here. ... Yes, it’s about the Mayhew case. Can you give me at least a hint at what your client has to offer? ... Because I need some leverage if I’m going to have to go to the top of the food chain in the

prosecutor's office. ... Yes, I agree, that sounds pretty big—provided it checks out. ... Thanks, Patrick, I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

Three faces were looking at me expectantly as I hung up the phone.

"Well?" Janet said.

"He says his client may have something that both we and the FBI would dearly love to know."

"And that would be?" David said.

"Attorney/client privilege prevented him from saying anything more than that."

"What are you going to do?" Gregg said.

"Just what I told him—climb the ladder in the state's attorney's office—starting at the top. That may take a while, so I'll have to keep you posted."

Emulating what I hoped was Chief Bridges's dismissal style, I turned back to my computer monitor. I finished what I had been doing when they arrived and then called the chief.

"Got a minute?" I said when he answered.

"As always," he said.

"I'll be right up."

Once in his side chair, I wasted no time. "Chief, how well do you know Katharine Odum?"

"Quite well, why?"

"Good. I'm hoping that you can get through to her more quickly than I could."

"Again, why?"

I outlined the problem.

"And you want to ask her to lean on this 'clown'?"

"Something like that."

He picked up his phone and dialed a number. After a minute or two of working his way through subordinates, he put his hand on the mouthpiece of his telephone and said, "We're in luck, she's in the office and free to talk.



“Hello, Katharine,” he said. “Henry Bridges. ... Yeah, it’s been a while, but you know how it is when you’re serving the public. ... Too true. I don’t want to take up too much of your time, but one of my people has a small problem with one of your people. ... Captain George Martin. Have you met him? ... His reputation is well-deserved, I can assure you. He’s sitting in my office, so I’m going to push the phone’s speaker button and let him explain his problem.”

He pushed the button and gave me a go-ahead motion. “Hello, Mrs. Odum,” I said. “George Martin here.”

We exchanged pleasantries, and I outlined the problem with the assistant prosecutor.

“Henry,” she said, “do you know this particular public defender?”

“Only slightly, but Captain Martin assures me that Mr. Trovillo is not given to exaggeration.”

“That’s good enough for me. I’ll give my ‘clown’ a call and encourage him to be flexible in this case.”

“Your ‘clown’?”

“Oh come on, Henry. I know what you folks call three of my most inflexible assistant prosecutors behind their backs.”

“You’re very well informed, Katharine.”

“That’s what the taxpayers pay me for, Henry. Want me to get back to you—or Captain Martin?”

“I don’t need to be the middle man here. Just give the captain a heads-up.”

“That I will do. Goodbye, gentlemen.”

“Thank you, Chief,” I said.

“My door is always open, George.”

He turned back to his paperwork, and I went back to my office, where I sent e-mails to all three of my lieutenants to give them a heads-up. After that, I dialed a number.

“Lunch?” I said into the phone when my party answered.

“Absolutely,” Mike said. “Where?”

“I’m in a Camel Rider kind of mood.”

“See you there in a few.”

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THE majority of the sandwich shops in Jacksonville are owned by people from the Middle East. Mostly of Lebanese or Syrian origins, and mostly Christian, many of them had been in the city for several generations. All of the sandwich shops offered a variety of sandwiches, many of them served in pockets of pita bread. The Camel Rider was a favorite of ours, and Richard's at Five Points made what was, for our money, the best one in town. Mike and I had a nice, if somewhat hasty, lunch at Richard's, and I returned to the office.

At my Monday afternoon meeting with my lieutenants, I learned that a meeting had been scheduled in an interrogation room the next morning with the gay burglar/murder suspect, his public defender, and the prosecutor. The four of us decided to attend as observers.

"Who will be doing the questioning?" I said.

"We've decided on Sergeant Johnson," David said.

"I admit Carl's good, but he's hardly the best we have available," I said.

"Yeah, but he's only a few years older than the prisoner, and they have something in common," David said.

"No argument there," I said.

At nine the next morning, David, Gregg, Janet, and I entered the observation room downstairs. I was surprised to find a well-dressed, very trim, middle-aged woman present whom I instantly recognized.

"Mrs. Odum," I said to the State's Attorney for the Fourth Judicial Circuit, "I'm George Martin. What brings you to our little domain?"

"Captain Martin," she said, "pleased to meet you. You're even better-looking in person than you are on television, and to answer your question—curiosity."

We shook hands, and I introduced her to my three lieutenants. We chatted for a minute but were interrupted when Carl entered the room, trailed by Patrick Trovillo and a man whom I did not recognize. Carl and Trovillo were introduced to Mrs. Odum, who in turn introduced Assistant Prosecutor Arnold Baldwin to the rest of us. Then Carl took charge.

“Now that we’re all here,” he said, “let’s get the show on the road.”

Carl, Trovillo, and Baldwin entered the interrogation room, and we watched through the one-way glass. When they were seated at the table, Carl began.

“We are here to interview Wallis Mayhew, who has been charged with one count of murder and several counts of burglary,” Carl said.

He went through the standard procedure of Mirandizing the prisoner before he continued.

“Present in the room are Patrick Trovillo, public defender, Arnold Baldwin, assistant state’s attorney, Sergeant Carl Johnson, and the defendant, Wallis Mayhew. Mr. Mayhew is represented by Mr. Trovillo.”

Trovillo took his cue and stated that Mr. Mayhew was willing to plead guilty to several counts of burglary and an included offense of manslaughter, subject to the death penalty being taken off of the table. Mr. Baldwin agreed, subject to the sufficiency of the information provided by the defendant.

“Okay, Wallis,” Trovillo said, “it’s up to you.” He nodded in Carl’s direction.

“Your name is Wallis Mayhew?” Carl said.

“Yes, Sir.”

“What, if anything, can you tell us about a series of burglaries of older gay men that took place in Jacksonville between these dates?” Carl gave a range of dates.

“I did them, and several in St. Petersburg that you might not know about.”

“Which ones?”

“Give me some names and addresses.”

Carl did so, and one by one, the prisoner admitted to each of the burglaries.

“Mr. Mayhew,” Carl said, “what happened when you entered the residence of Sterling Jordan?”

“The stupid old fuck came home early. He usually goes out to the bars at the same time on certain nights, so the minute he backed his car out of the garage, I slipped under the door as it was closing.”

“You had been in Mr. Jordan’s house before?”

“I spent nearly two weeks in the old fuck’s house.”

“Why?”

“Why the fuck do you think? I let him suck my cock and slobber over me in exchange for a place to stay and an occasional twenty for pocket money. Man, his house was loaded with expensive junk. Junk I knew I could easily sell.”

“Mr. Jordan lives in a gated community. How did you get onto the property?”

“Are you kidding me? They don’t watch the walls. There’s lots of places where there are trees and cover. It’s easy to climb over a wall after dark. How do you think those rich kids slip in and out to have fun without their families knowing about it?”

“So, you climbed a wall to gain entry to the subdivision and made your way to Mr. Jordan’s house?”

“Yeah. Like I said, he leaves at the same time two or three nights a week. All I had to do was hide in the shrubbery and wait for the garage door to open.”

“Then what?”

“The garage door opened. While he was backing out of the driveway, I waited for the door to start to close, and then I ran over and rolled under it. The stupid old fuck was too busy heading out to even notice.”

“So, you gained entry to the residence?”

“You bet your ass. That place is loaded with collectible shit. I grabbed some towels and stuff from the bathroom and started filling my bags with goodies, using the towels to protect them from breakage.”

“And?”

“I had almost two bags of stuff when I heard the garage door opening. I had left the kitchen door open—it leads directly to the garage. So I grabbed something heavy and hid behind the door. The minute the old fart walked through the door, I clobbered him.”

“That’s it?”

“Of course that’s it. I didn’t mean to kill him. I just wanted him out cold for a couple of hours. I finished grabbing what I could, loaded his car, and left the development.”

“So far, Mr. Mayhew, you haven’t told us anything we don’t already know,” Baldwin said.

“Yeah, but there’s one more burglary that you don’t know about.”

“Why is that?” Carl said.

“Because it was never reported.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t actually steal anything, and the guy never knew I entered his house.”

“Please explain that.”

He walked them through his visit to the house in question and his discovery of data on the computer.

“Mr. Mayhew, what did those files contain?”

“Documents and spreadsheets. Most of the documents were written in a foreign language—probably Russian, because that’s where the owner of the house is from. There was enough stuff in English to let me know that the Russian documents weren’t letters back home to his grandma. I think the guy has something to do with the Russian mob. The numbers in the spreadsheets had lots of zeroes after them.”

“Where are those files now?”

“Still on my thumb drive and in a very safe place.”

“You’ll need to be more specific than that.”

“It’s in a safe deposit box in a bank, okay?”

“Which bank?”

“First Guaranty.”

“Which location?”

“The main branch on King Street.”

“Where’s the key?”

“Lost it when I moved. For a fee they’ll drill the box.”

I had been making notes, and when I heard this, I turned to Janet. “Janet,” I said, “call First Guaranty. Find out if there is a box, what it costs to have it drilled, and how much notice they need.”

“David,” I said, “as soon as Janet confirms the existence of a box, make plans to transport Mr. Mayhew to the bank.”

“Gregg,” I said, “someone in this building has a list of translators to whom we have access. Ask about Russian.”

The three of them left the room. Five minutes later, my cell phone rang. “There is a box,” Janet said. She went on to tell me the cost and timing.

“There is a box,” I told Mrs. Odum after I closed my phone.

I left the observation room and went into the hallway. Then I opened the door of the interrogation room, went inside, and said, “We have confirmation that such a box exists. We could get a court order to have it opened, but it might be easier to transport Mr. Mayhew over there, and it would certainly be quicker.”

“Set it up as quickly as you can, Captain,” Baldwin said.

“Arrangements are already underway,” I said.

I went back to the observation room and called Janet. When she answered, I said, “Parading the prisoner through the bank lobby in an orange jumpsuit isn’t a good idea. Check with the bank and see if they’ll send someone out to a cruiser to see his ID and get whatever signatures they need.”

“Been there, done that, boss. They jumped at the idea.”

“Good. Send someone downstairs to retrieve Mayhew’s driver’s license.”

“Ditto.”

“I knew there was a reason why we paid you the big bucks, Lieutenant. Good show.”

Mrs. Odum was giving me a “look” as I closed my phone. I raised an eyebrow at her in return. “Penny for your thoughts, Ma’am.”

“I was reflecting on some of the things Henry has told me about you over the years,” she said.

“Over the years?”

“He and I have known each other for a long time.”

“What things?”

“I guess I owe Henry an apology. I honestly didn’t believe some of the things he told me about how well you manage your subordinates and the kind of rapport you have with them.”

“If there’s any credit to be taken,” I said, “I owe it to the chief. I’ve worked for him for a long time and more or less modeled my management style after his.”

“Perhaps, but I think it’s more than that. In any case, I’m glad I finally got to see you in action, and you were right to insist that Mr. Baldwin be encouraged to be flexible.”

“Yeah, but if this really involves the Russian mafia, we’ll have to turn it over to the Feds.”

“Your buddy Nick Metaxas will do a good job, I’m sure.... Don’t look so surprised, Captain. As chief law enforcement officer for the Fourth Judicial Circuit of Florida, which includes Duval and two other counties, I make it my business to know what’s going on with law enforcement in my ‘domain’, if you will.”

The ringing of my cell phone prevented a response, and by the time I’d taken and completed the call, she had left the room, so I went back upstairs to my office and settled down to work. By the time I left for the evening, the thumb drive had been retrieved, documents printed out, and the translators were ready to start working on them.

In lieu of being left with the KidZone people Saturday morning, Mike and I let Robbie swim a lap with us and then play in one corner of the pool while we finished our laps. After breakfast we had to go and inspect one of our rental houses, the tenants having vacated the day before. As we walked



up to the front door of the house, we scanned its exterior carefully, with an eye to any needed maintenance. Then we unlocked the front door and entered the living room.

Mike placed his hands over Robbie's ears before saying, "Holy fucking shit."

"Ditto," I said.

The living room was a disaster. Holes had been punched in the walls, and there were splatters of odd colors on them. It got worse as we toured the rest of the rooms. "Robbie," I said, "run out to the car and get the camera."

"Dad," he said, "the car is locked."

I pushed a button on the clicker and said, "Not anymore."

"Okay," he said.

We always carried the digital camera with us when we made an inspection. "Document, document, document" being the watchword. This was our first instance of real damage inflicted by tenants, and it was a classic. Robbie handed me the camera, and I went to work. By the time I had carefully recorded every tiny bit of damage to the interior and exterior of the house, I had filled the camera's memory card to 99 percent of capacity.

"What now?" Mike said.

"We go home and call the former tenants. Then we get several estimates from at least three handymen and/or contractors, then we call the insurance company, and then we call our lawyer. In that order."

"Sounds like a plan."

We managed to get several estimates by the end of the day, mostly because we had a list of handyman-type people upon whom we could call. The former tenants were nowhere to be found, so we resolved to turn matters over to our lawyer on Monday to file suit. Estimates in hand, we would also contact our insurance company, and that was where matters stood when we arrived at the Derby House on Sunday morning for breakfast. We had just been seated when Deborah entered the room. She spotted us, joined us, and fussed over Robbie for a couple of minutes before she turned her attention to us.

“What’s up, Deb?” I said. “You’re not in costume today—at least not so far as I can tell.”

“Lance is taking a break from theater at the moment, so I am too,” she said. “You guys don’t look particularly happy this morning. What’s the matter?”

We explained the tenant problem.

“Wow,” she said, “that’s terrible. Do you check prospective tenants yourself?”

“For the properties in Asheville we use a rental agent, but for the ones here at home we do it ourselves.”

“Maybe you should rethink that. I can refer you to a Realtor friend who manages properties for a fee—she does background checks on all tenants.”

“We might take you up on that,” I said. “What’s her name?”

“I have her card in my purse.”

A young black couple, the guy’s pants precariously hanging well below his hips, walked by the table. The guy stared at Deb, and she stared back.

“Whose bitch are you?” she asked the starrer.

“Say what, mama?”

“Your underwear is exposed, so I asked whose bitch you are,” she said. “Surely you know how that custom started.”

“Say what?”

“It’s not a fashion statement,” she said. “It started with young black guys in prison. It was a warning to other prisoners, one that meant, ‘I’m somebody’s bitch. Mess with me and you’ll answer to him.’ Do some research and you’ll find that I’m correct.”

He gave Deb a look of thinly veiled contempt and walked away.

“Deb,” I said, “did you make that up on the spot?”

“Not at all. A friend of mine researched the subject of exposed underwear and showed me her findings.”

“You said a bad word,” Robbie said, looking at Deb.

“Yes, I did,” she said, “but haven’t your daddies told you that it’s okay for grown-ups to do that once in a while?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Tell us about your Realtor friend,” Mike said, changing the subject.

“She’s been managing all sorts of rental properties for nearly ten years and has gotten very good at eliminating undesirable tenants before they move in.”

“And for this, she charges how much?”

“Five or six percent, something like that—I think the fee depends on how many units are involved.”

“That’s a lot,” Mike said. “I wonder if her track record justifies the fees?”

“You’d have to ask her that,” Deb said. “I would think that being saved the time and trouble of placing ads in the paper and checking credit, etcetera, would be worth something.”

“You just earned a free breakfast,” I said.

“Thanks.”

When I arrived at my desk Monday morning, I found a huge folder on top of my paperwork. It contained a full report, complete with translations of the various documents—the process had taken all day Saturday and part of Sunday—with a summary page in front. As soon as I had digested the summary, I called the chief to see if he was available. Finding that he was, I headed for the elevators.

“What’s up, George?” Chief Bridges said as I settled in one of his side chairs.

I explained the situation in some detail, told him what I proposed to do about it, and he said, “Handle it, George, handle it. Handle it.”

Back in my office, I called Mrs. Odum and told her what we had.

“That’s amazing,” she said. “What are you going to do about it?”

“This is way beyond the scope of our office,” I said, “so I’m going to give Nick Metaxas a call. In any case, I think our little burglar has earned his deal.”

“I agree,” she said, “and I’ll pass that along to Mr. Baldwin.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

When I met with my lieutenants that afternoon, they were eager to know what was happening with the burglary case.

“This case involves criminal activity in several states,” I said. “In point of fact, the documents seem to indicate that the local guy was merely a sort of mid-level coordinator of activity. The case has been turned over to the FBI—they have resources and manpower that we don’t have, not to mention the problems of jurisdiction.”

From the looks on their faces, especially Janet’s, they weren’t entirely happy with that announcement.

“Look at it this way,” I said. “We’ve uncovered a criminal enterprise, and the bad guys don’t know that we know about it. The two people who translated the documents have been sworn to secrecy, and the three of you should consider yourselves so sworn, and that applies to all of your subordinates as well. We don’t want word of what will be an ongoing federal investigation leaking out of this building. Everyone did a great job with this case, but it’s time to close the book on it and move on.”

Three days later I was summoned to a meeting in the sheriff’s office. When I arrived in his office, I found Mrs. Odum already there.

“Have a seat, George,” the sheriff said. “We’re waiting for Mr. and Mrs. Murchison.”

I looked a question at him.

“The lady wasn’t happy to learn that we’ve cut a deal with her brother’s killer.”

Before I could reply to that, the sheriff’s secretary ushered the Murchisons into his office.

The meeting went badly almost from the beginning. The minute the sheriff introduced Mrs. Odum to the Murchisons, Mrs. Murchison did her usual thing—and began to rant. She didn’t understand why her brother’s murderer had been offered a deal, and didn’t want to hear any explanations.

Finally, Mrs. Odum stood up and prepared to leave the room.

“Where are you going?” Mrs. Murchison asked. “I haven’t finished.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you have,” Mrs. Odum said. “I came to this meeting as a courtesy to the sheriff, but I’ve had quite enough. He may choose to put up with this nonsense, but I don’t. Good day! Mr. Murchison, if she’s always like this, you have my sympathy.”

She left the room, and Mrs. Murchison, who had been rendered momentarily speechless, started to say something, but I cut her off.

“Mrs. Murchison,” I said, just sharply enough to get her attention, “there are one or two things about this situation that you may not have considered.”

“I can’t imagine what,” she said, somewhat nastily.

“The killer has pled guilty,” I said, “so there won’t be a trial. Think about all of those young men your brother took home with him at one time or another. The defense attorney would surely have placed every one of them on the witness stand, and all the sordid details of your brother’s life would have become a matter of public record. Surely you wouldn’t want that to happen.”

“Oh,” she said. “I hadn’t thought of it quite that way.”

“Perhaps you should, my dear,” the sheriff said. “Captain Martin is absolutely correct. Had there been a trial, all of your brother’s dirty linen would be flapping in the public breeze, and the press would have had a field day.”

She calmed down, and the sheriff’s secretary eventually escorted them from his office. He and I looked at each other, smiled, and rolled our eyes. He thanked me for defusing the “dragon lady,” and I went back to my desk.

We spent the Friday and Saturday of Labor Day weekend in Atlanta with the Barnett family. Robbie had a one-hour session with Lydia Saturday afternoon, and after he went up to the playroom, we had a long conference with her.

“He seems to be doing quite well,” Lydia said.

“Yes, he is, thanks to you,” I said.

“I can’t take all the credit, George. The environment you and Mike provide has as much to do with his progress as anything.”

“We only have one real concern,” Mike said.

“What’s that?” she said.

“He is so quiet so much of the time. Not withdrawn—just quiet. He never causes any problems, and I don’t think we’ve had one instance ever of him misbehaving.”

“That’s true,” I said.

“Children who have been through the kind of trauma Robbie experienced frequently react with extremes of behavior,” Lydia said. “They regularly begin to act up and become problem children. Less often they become little model citizens, so to speak. This is usually true when they find themselves in a loving environment and are made to feel truly secure.”

At the dinner table that evening, I mentioned Robbie’s budding musical ability and how it was discovered when we were at the home of Tom Foster.

“Tom Foster,” Charles said. “Why is that name familiar?”

“Well, besides being a teacher at the University of North Florida, director of the Jacksonville Symphony Chorus, and Organist and Choirmaster at the Church of the Good Shepherd, Dr. Foster is also something of a concert artist,” I said. “I think he performed at St. Philip’s Cathedral last year or perhaps the year before.”

“I remember that concert,” Philip said. “It was an extraordinary occasion. In fact, I purchased several of his CDs. I sent one of them to some friends in Boston.”

“Really?” I said. “He performed in Boston recently. Give me a minute and I’ll think of the name of the church.”

“It was the Church of the Advent on Beacon Hill,” Mike said. “Tom and Noah stayed with a couple of guys who live across the street. They are cousins and lawyers or something like that.”

“That would, no doubt, be our friends William and Henry Lane,” Philip said.

We drove home on Sunday in order to miss the Labor Day traffic, and we took Robbie to the beach Monday. Mike and I set our folding chairs on the beach and sat for a long time, watching Robbie happily playing in the surf.

“Does it get any better than this?” he said.

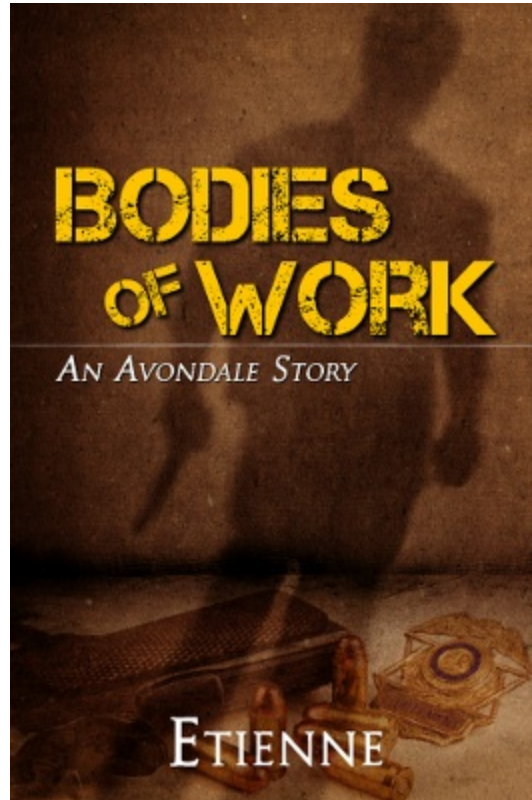
“Better than what?”

“The two of us, sitting on the beach, watching our son play in the surf.”

“Babe,” I said, “you just said a mouthful.”

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# The Adventures of George and Mike, Book One

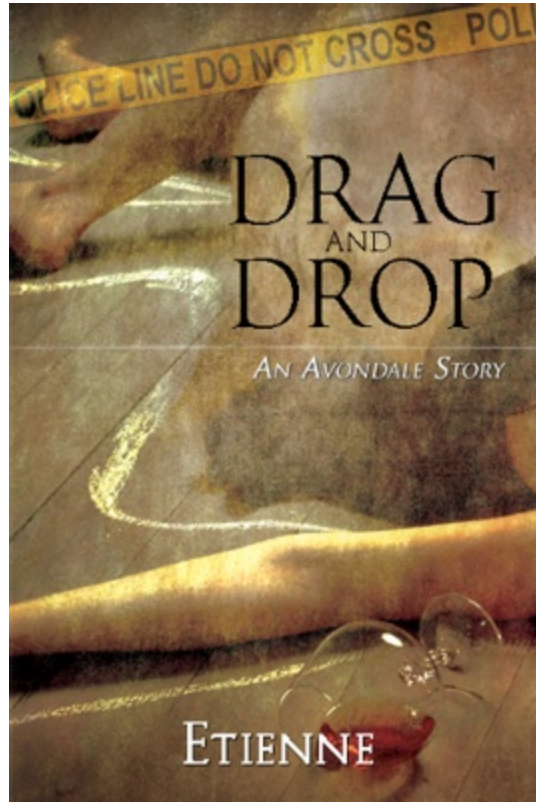


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## The Adventures of George and Mike, Book Two



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ETIENNE lives in central Florida, very near the hamlet in which he grew up. He always wanted to write but didn't find his muse until a few years ago, when he started posting stories online. These days he spends most of his time battling with her, as she is a capricious bitch who, when she isn't hiding from him, often rides him mercilessly, digging her spurs into his sides and forcing the flow of words from a trickle to a flood.

Visit Etienne at <http://www.etiennestories.blogspot.com>. You can contact him at [Etienne.Reynard@comcast.net](mailto:Etienne.Reynard@comcast.net).

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