

pieces of destiny

by
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Pieces of Destiny

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Also by the author:
Groovy Kind of Love
Jagged Angel
Project Cerulean Blue (2015)

Limited eBook Edition
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Created in the
United States of America

This book is dedicated
to the fine authors
Isaac Asimov, David Gerrold, Ken Grimwood
and all the other futurists who shaped my life
when I was a kid growing up...

and made me wonder about
“the roads not taken”
with time-travel.

Introduction

This novel is a departure for me. Though I've been a science-fiction fan almost from the moment I was able to read, I never thought of writing an science fiction tale myself. My previous novels (*Groovy Kind of Love* and *Jagged Angel*) were, respectively, a nostalgic romance and a contemporary thriller. But as much as I occasionally enjoy reading SF, the subject didn't seem something about which I wanted to write.

A few years ago, my online friend Mark Roeder (author of the popular *Gay Youth Chronicles* published through iUniverse) graciously allowed me to offer a few suggestions on his 2002 novel *Keeper of Secrets*. This story's intriguing premise involved a contemporary gay teenager, who lived with his family in a 100 year-old house. The boy learns that over a century ago, two gay teenagers died tragically — one murdered, one by suicide — and their ghosts continue to haunt the residence. The story was a two-tiered plot, one dealing with a homophobic delinquent forced through circumstance to live with a family with a gay teen, and then the mystery of several unhappy souls haunting the old mansion.

After assisting with the manuscript, I told Mark, "you know, I think there's a fascinating story here, just in the story of two gay teens from the 1800s. What would their lives be like? What would it be like to be gay in that era? How would their world relate to ours?" Roeder agreed, but pointed out, "it'd take far too much research to tell a story like that." I reluctantly agreed, and put the idea aside for a couple of years.

But the idea of these two gay 1800s teens started haunting me (no pun intended). After mulling it over for several years, I finally thought: what if the story *wasn't* about two 1800s teens? What if one was a contemporary teenager who fell in love with someone from the past? How would the boy survive with the tumultuous events of the 1800s? Could he ever make it back to his own time, and for that matter, would he want to? Could the romance survive, or would it ultimately wind up tragically? What would happen if historical events changed, altering the dominos of time? And the story took off from there.

I greatly admire some of the genre's classic time-travel tales, from H.G. Wells' original *Time Machine* from 1895 (and the memorable 1960 film produced by George Pal), Richard Matheson's 1976 novel

Bid Time Return (and the romantic 1979 film adaptation *Somewhere in Time*), Karl Alexander's 1979 novel *Time After Time* (also an excellent film by Nicholas Meyer), my late friend Ken Grimwald's 1987 novel *Replay* (optioned to 20th Century-Fox for a film that has not yet been made), as well as my friend David Gerrold's superb 1972 novella, *The Man Who Folded Himself* (expanded and reissued in 2003). Add to these Bob Zemeckis and Bob Gale's amazing scripts to the 1980s *Back to the Future* film series, and they've basically exhausted almost every possible direction in which you can go with time-travel stories. And my short list omits dozens of marvelous time-travel episodes of *Twilight Zone* (both the original 1960s Rod Serling series and the 1985 revised version), *Outer Limits*, *Star Trek*, and too many others to count.

I was determined not to write this novel until I could try something new, or at least attack the plot from an unexpected direction and try to avoid the usual cliches sometimes found in this sort of story. After spending many weeks of research, I also wanted to avoid the themes I had written before, and this time feature a contemporary "out" gay teenager who had no fear of who he was, and also knew exactly where he was going in life and what he wanted. Despite the historical setting, the story is more about people than it is about events; the reader need not worry that this will turn into a history lesson. There'll be some romance, a dash of adventure, and, yes, a little sex as well. Don't be put off by the initial science-fiction introduction; *Pieces of Destiny* is intended to be not so much a far-out yarn as it is a heartfelt story about adventure, fate, and the sacrifices one is willing to make, all in the name of love.

My heartfelt thanks to those who have provided comments on the early drafts of the story, including my longtime partner Roddy, as well as my friends on Awesomedude.com, including The Dude, Cole Parker, VWL, and Tragic Rabbit. I also thank Mark Roeder, for inspiring the story in the first place, as well as Dom Luka (of the Gay Authors Guild) for offering additional thoughts. And of course, thanks go to my readers, who continue to help make my efforts worthwhile.

—John Francis
May 2013
Northridge, CA

pieces
of destiny

john francis

Chapter 1

It started as a low rumble, then began to roar like the sound of a thousand stampeding elephants. The ground beneath my feet was shaking violently, a flurry of rocks grazed my shoulder, and I hit the ground with a groan, getting a face full of dirt. My flashlight winked out, and the cave began to collapse around me.

Oh, shit. I knew immediately that this one was going to be bad. *Very bad.*

I'd been well-aware of the risks in exploring caves for years. I'd been an amateur spelunker since I was nine, mostly because of my father, who was into archeology as a hobby. "*Don't ever underestimate the risks below ground,*" he used to tell me. "*Cave-ins, poison-gas pockets, or just losing your way and getting hopelessly lost... you can't ever be too careful.*" His words came back to haunt me as the rumbling grew even louder.

I fought to open my eyes, coughing as I tried to get my bearings through the thick clouds of dust that filled the air. *I must be seeing things,* I thought, as several small rock chips glanced off my head. *Everything seems bathed in some weird kind of blue glow. But there shouldn't be any light underground!*

"Nice effect," I said out loud, "but you can turn it off now!" I made an attempt to get back up on my feet, but I felt like a drunken man trying to stand on a capsizing ship. I immediately fell back down and cursed, then tried to lean up on my elbows. Suddenly, there was a crack of thunder, and the rock wall behind me began to collapse. I felt a dull pain on the left side of my head. My face hit the dirt floor for the second time, and I tasted blood.

The unearthly blue glow brightened to an almost-blinding level, and my nostrils stung with a sharp burning smell, like ozone during a lightning storm. I instinctively curled into a ball, trying to protect my head, praying that I'd somehow escape getting crushed by the thousands of pounds of rock above me. I squeezed my eyes tighter, as if that could somehow save me.

Then, just as quickly as it had started, the roar dissipated into total silence, leaving my ears ringing. For an instant, I felt freezing cold and I couldn't breathe. There was a momentary lurch, as if I was spinning inside a blender, and the ground beneath my feet seemed to evaporate. Then... I blacked out.

I don't know how long I lay on the cave floor — maybe a few minutes, maybe an hour. I quickly discovered that regaining consciousness wasn't like it was in the movies: when I came to, I felt a wave of nausea, then immediately rolled to my side and heaved up most of the lunch I had eaten earlier that day. *That's one Big Mac I didn't need*, I thought ruefully, as I wiped my mouth on my sleeve. I sat up in the dark and fumbled clumsily for my flashlight, which was just two feet away from me, half-buried in dirt and gravel. Bracing myself, I hit the switch, and a powerful beam of light shot out.

I didn't like what I saw.

The narrow tunnel to my right had completely collapsed, burying the only route that led back up to the surface. Gravel, dirt, and large jagged chunks of limestone and gypsum filled the passage. The cave had become my tomb. I began to hyperventilate, but I fought back the urge to panic.

I had been exploring a small group of caverns located in some hills a couple of miles southwest of St. Louis, while visiting my aunt during summer vacation. My father had died of an aneurism back in March, and my mom and I agreed we should spend the summer apart, so we could deal with our grief separately. Both of us together in the same lonely house had proved to be impossible over the last three months; she was off on a Caribbean cruise with her sister.

And now I'm stuck in bum-fuck nowhere, I thought, *buried under forty feet of solid rock*. The air was dank, filled with a fine brown mist of sediment, and I could still smell a faint odor from whatever had been

burning minutes before. *Gotta stay calm. Keep my breathing steady; try to preserve whatever oxygen is left down here.*

I wondered how far I had fallen, or if I had just been fooled into thinking I had fallen by the sudden ground movement. Maybe it had been an earthquake; experts had been predicting a massive quake for Missouri for years, like the one that had bent the Mississippi River for a time and caused it to run backwards. Maybe a pocket of underground gas had exploded. Or maybe a nearby volcano had erupted, just as Mount St. Helens had back in 1980. I shuddered at the thought of St. Louis being buried under ten feet of volcanic ash. But I wouldn't know for sure until I got outside.

I moved closer to the back of the cave and found my blue nylon North Face backpack, which was submerged in a pile of rubble, mostly chips of granite and dirt. I opened the bag and checked my supplies: the cellphone battery was still good, but the reception indicator flashed "No Service," which figured, since I was at least thirty feet below the surface.

"Can you hear me now?" I said sarcastically. *Piece of crap.* I clicked off the power switch and the phone chirped merrily as it shut down. *Might as well try to save battery power while I could.*

My trusty Maglite, with two D-cells, was scratched and dented, but it still seemed to be working okay, and my Bic butane lighter was intact. I shook my thermos bottle, which rattled with broken glass. *So much for the Gatorade.* I had a couple of sticks of beef jerky, a half-eaten Quaker granola bar, a pack of Necco wafers, a sealed can of Canada Dry ginger ale, a small folding shovel and a pickaxe, a spiral-bound pocket notebook, two ballpoint pens, a pocket knife, a pair of Rayban sunglasses, plus my iPod and earphones. The iPod battery was low; I made a mental note to charge it once I got out of here.

"If we ever get out of here," I sang aloud, remembering an old Paul McCartney song my dad used to sing back home. My voice echoed around the cave, reverberating as if to taunt me in my rocky prison. My Aunt Olivia, with whom I was staying for the summer, wouldn't even know I had gone until she got home from work at 6 P.M. I had told her about the cave last night, not long after I arrived for my visit, so she knew I was planning to come down here. I knew her well enough to know that if I didn't make it back by dinnertime, she'd enlist her whole neighbor-

hood in a search-and-rescue party. But even though I was half a head taller than she was, I didn't doubt she'd kick my ass once she got hold of me. *I might be better off just staying down here*, I mused. *Then I could die slowly instead of having Aunt Olivia skin me alive.*

I slung the backpack on my shoulder and winced at a momentary stab of pain. *Shit. That boulder hit me a lot harder than I thought.* I felt something wet and sticky drip down from my forehead, and touched it with my fingertips.

Christ! I was bleeding.

I immediately felt dizzy, and leaned against the cave wall for support. I mentally ran down the list of do's and don'ts: *I probably wasn't hurt that badly*, I thought. *It's just a mild concussion. I could probably survive at least a week or two down here if I had to, if the wound doesn't get infected.* My hands were shaking, but I knew that was just nerves, not any permanent damage. I probably wasn't going to bleed to death, assuming I could get back to the surface. But that was a big *if*.

As if to answer me, I felt a small breeze flutter behind me. *A breeze!* That meant I at least had a chance of finding another way out. I slid the flashlight under one arm and held my hands out, trying to sense the draft's direction with my fingertips. I caught a cool wisp of air and traced it over to a small hole in the right wall. I had lucked out: this wall wasn't solid rock, but a mixture of large rock and dirt. After only twenty minutes of digging, I was able to carve out a passage just wide enough for me to wriggle through. It led to a larger cave, roughly twice as large as the one I left behind. At the very top was a distant shimmer of light, filtered down through rippling waves of dust and silt. I could see I had a long climb up, at least 35 feet. But the wall had a mild slant to it, so I was confident I could make it up if I was careful.

"No guts, no glory," I muttered. I shoved the flashlight down the front of my jeans, letting the beam point upwards to my escape route. I secured my backpack on my shoulder one last time, took a tentative step up onto the wall, and grabbed a protruding rock and pulled up with all my strength. The stone immediately crumbled away in my hand, sending me sprawling on my back.

"Shit!" I shouted, my cry echoing back at me, as if mocking me for my incompetence. "*Use your eyes first,*" I remembered my dad telling me.

“No sudden movements — keep it slow and steady.” He not only knew how to explore caves, he was an expert free climber, a skill I’d never been able to master. I winced, then unsteadily got back up to my feet, secured my backpack on my shoulders, and tried again. I gingerly got a foothold on a rocky surface that looked solid enough to support me, and pushed up. I was relieved to find the second rock held my weight, and I slowly began to pull myself up, one painful step at a time.

It took me almost ten agonizing minutes to reach the top. Always one to take a dare, I couldn’t resist using my flashlight to look back at the abyss below. *Shit*, I thought. *I can barely see the cave floor from here.* I slid the flashlight back in my waistband and peered back up. *Almost there!* My hands were nearly raw from the effort, and my head was starting to throb again. Gritting my teeth, I reached up and used my fingers to feel for the top shelf, only a foot away from a tantalizing shaft of sunlight that streamed in from above.

Suddenly, another rumble erupted deep in the earth.

“No, no!” I cried. “Not now!” *I was so close!*

A dozen small rocks rained down on my face and neck. Disobeying every rule my father taught me, I scampered up the last few feet, ignoring the small stabs of pain as my hands and knees scraped over the jagged rocks. I coughed and wheezed as clouds of dust blossomed up around me, and with a loud cry, I used all my strength to launch myself through the cave opening, then tumbled out into an explosion of light. I felt a dull pain in my left shoulder, then rolled along the ground several times, crying out as the flashlight dug into my stomach. I finally came to a stop in the dirt and lay still on my stomach, panting.

Suddenly, there was a noise from a few yards away.

“Hey!” a voice said. “Ya alright?”

Some feet shuffled closer.

“I think he’s dead,” another voice drawled from nearby. “Looks like a niggra.”

“He ain’t no niggra,” shot back the first voice. “He’s just covered with dirt. Cain’t ya see?”

I stirred, then groaned as I tried to sit up. A thick yellow-brown cloud of dust and dirt evaporated around me, and I opened my eyes only to be momentarily blinded by a blast of sunlight. As I blocked the daz-

zling glare with my fingers, I could just make out the heavily-backlit faces of three teenage boys, about as old as me. They were shirtless, barefoot, and wore ragged cut-off shorts. The sun was scorching — much hotter than I remembered it being when I'd first gone into the cave earlier that morning — and judging by the long shadows nearby, it must be past five o'clock. *I must've been unconscious a lot longer than I thought.* I struggled up to my feet, and one of the boys lent me his hand for support.

"Thanks," I said, brushing off some of the dirt and mud from my face and body. "Man, I thought I'd bitten the big one for sure."

"Bitten what?" another asked.

"After that cave-in back there," I said, nodding my head back towards the opening. Dirt and rocks were still sliding down our side of the hill. "We really should get out of here. That felt like at least a 6.0 quake, maybe even a 7. The whole place might collapse any second. Might even be liquefaction."

One of them laughed. "You're talkin' crazy!" he drawled, and the others chortled.

Great, I thought, giving the boy a sideways glance. *Now I'm stuck with a buncha Missouri backwater hicks.* Although St. Louis was fairly urbanized these days, some of the outlying areas were white-trash ghettos. My Aunt Olivia liked to rail against "those Wal-Mart people," as she referred to them. I hated being in Missouri; I told my Mom she was sending me to "Misery." But I had bigger things to worry about at the moment.

"You're hurt," one of the boys said, tentatively touching the wound on my forehead.

"Ow!" I said, letting out a hiss between my teeth. "Shit. I hope that thing doesn't need stitches. Busted up my mouth, too." I ran my tongue over my bottom lip, which had a bloody welt on the left side.

"You oughta clean yourself up at the creek," the taller boy on the left replied.

I gave him an odd glance. He had said "creek" as if it were "crick."

We half-slid, half-fell as we worked our way down to the trail at the bottom of the hill. My eyes momentarily lost focus, and I had to stop for a moment just to clear my head, then we made our way to a clearing below.

"I been in that cave before," the boy to my left said, as we headed East to the river bank. "Some say it's haunted. S'pose to be injun treasure buried around here, too."

"Native American," I corrected. "Pinkashaw tribe. I read that, too."

"I heard they was called Missouriis," the boy to my right insisted. "Just like the state."

"Naw," said the first boy, who had shaggy blond hair. "He's right. Pinkashaws."

We reached the river bed, and I knelt in the mud and splashed water on my face. Despite the summer day's heat, the water was ice-cold, and I felt a stab of pain through my mouth and was momentarily overcome with another wave of dizziness.

"Whoa," I said, grabbing my shirt to dry my face and hands, then recoiling as the throbbing in my forehead momentarily worsened. "That hurts like a mofo."

"You sure talk funny," said the blond, eyeing me curiously.

I glanced at him. "I'm known for my snappy banter," I said, grinning. *Not bad-looking for a hillbilly*, I thought. "Gimme a sec."

I checked my backpack for my cell. "Shit," I said, patting my pants pockets frantically. "I must've dropped my phone back there!"

I got up from the river bank with the idea of running back up the hill, but I'd only taken a few steps when my stomach lurched and I half-fell down to my knees. *God, my head hurt!*

"Settle down," the blond said. "I'll get my ma to tend to ya back home."

I tried to protest, but two of the boys helped me back up to my feet. I wobbled a bit and had to fight to keep my balance. The third boy peered at me as if I was a zoo specimen. "You ain't from around here, are ya?" he sneered.

"Got that right," I muttered.

The brown-haired boy stepped close to me. "You a yankee? If ya are, I'll sooner cut ya dead."

I gave him a glance. He was skinny, probably a couple of years older than me, but not much taller, and had a pock-marked face, with the beginnings of a patchy moustache on his upper lip, and a small scar on his jaw. *Who does this asshole think he is?*

"No way," I said, pushing past him. "My family hates the Yankees. They totally suck this season. I'm more of a San Francisco fan." Okay, that wasn't quite true. I actually thought baseball was boring. My Dad was the big Giants fan of our family, but we always watched their games on TV on the weekend as a male-bonding thing. Used to, anyway.

"Don't mind Jesse," the blond said. "He don't mean nothin'."

"Shut up, Travis," he growled. "Shows what you know."

As we approached a narrow wooden foot bridge, I stopped. "Wait a minute," I said, trying to get my bearings. "Hold up. I thought there was a Texaco station right around here."

"A what?"

I turned eastward, then south, trying to get my bearings. "Yeah, and there should be a McDonald's right over there!" I pointed to a distant field, which was filled with scrub-brush and a few scraggly trees but was otherwise empty. The air smelled strange, too. *Probably the dust from the cave-in*, I thought.

"Ya must've hit your head mighty hard back there," Jesse retorted. "Knocked some of your brains clean out. McDonald's place is a mile 't the other side."

"C'mon, we'll get you to my momma," said Travis. "Lemme help ya with that."

I nodded and slid off my backpack and handed it to him. "Guess I got turned around when I came out of the cave," I said, more than a little confused. "Maybe I'll call my aunt from your place."

We trudged another half mile through a clearing, then made our way to a small farm by a dirt road. The distance wasn't far, but I was already sweating profusely from the heat and feeling a little nauseous. My head throbbed. I ignored their conversation, mentally running down what kind of explanation I was going to have to give Aunt Olivia. *She's gonna kill me for sure*, I thought, *once she sees the blood*. But then I grinned. I knew I could make a play on her sympathy. I'd find a way to calm her down. I was her favorite nephew, after all.

Our group stopped, and I leaned against a white picket fence for support, still feeling dizzy. The blond kid gently led me through the gate and down a short path that led to a small ramshackle farmhouse.

"See ya at school tomorrow, Jesse," he called over his shoulder. "You, too, Frank."

School? I thought, not certain I had heard him clearly. It was almost July. *Maybe they're going to summer school.*

The other two boys trudged away while we made our way up the wooden steps. "That you, Travis?" called out a female voice.

"Yessum," he answered, holding the door open for me.

I glanced around their living room. It was quaint, filled with what appeared to be hand-made furniture, and on the floor lay a thin blue rug, fringed around the edges. *Very retro*, I thought, *but I guess it was a step up from living in a trailer.* The windows had gray lace curtains with a delicate pattern, and there was a large old-fashioned mahogany grandfather clock against the right-hand wall. There was a faint scent of cinnamon in the air. A thin middle-aged woman emerged from a doorway to the right.

"My lord," she said, drying her hands on an apron. "Who've you dragged into my clean living room now, Travis?"

"He's hurt, Ma," he said, carefully placing my backpack down on a nearby table. "Got hit upside the head."

"I got Blue Cross, if that helps," I quipped.

She peered at my head wound, lifting my brown bangs out of the way, then inspected my lip with a bony finger, while tsk-tsking and shaking her head, then examined the cut above my left eye. I winced and let out a small hiss of pain.

"You fetch some water and let me tend to your friend, here," she said, then turned back to me. "What'd you say your name was?"

"Sorry," I said, sitting down on a hardwood chair. "I'm Jason. Jason Thomas."

"I'm Travis' momma, Mrs. Colt," she said as she patted her apron on my forehead, carefully wiping away some of the dirt and blood. "Thomas, you say?" she remarked, just as her son came back with a bowl of water. "Did you know Olivia Thomas?" she asked, placing the water on a nearby table.

I nodded. "Yeah," I said, then winced as she poked my wound again with the moist cloth. "My mom sent me out here to..." — I had to stop myself from saying "Misery" from force of habit — "...uh, here to *Mis-*

souri to stay with Aunt Olivia. Just for the summer. I'm staying over at her place."

Both Travis and his mother stared at me. "You... you don't know?" she asked.

"Know what?"

She put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, sweet Jesus," she said softly, then took my hand in hers and looked me in the eye. "Olivia died three weeks ago. Her farmhouse burned to the ground. She's with the angels now. I am so very sorry."

This was not happening. "You people are nuts," I said, struggling up to my feet. "I just saw her this morning!" I snapped, a little too loudly. "Sure, Aunt Olivia smokes like a chimney and she's temperamental, but other than that, she's just fine."

They looked at me blankly.

"Look, can you just let me use your phone?" I asked, looking around the room. "I can get her to pick me up in ten minutes. She'll tell you herself she's not dead. She's alive!"

Just then, my eyes fell upon a folded newspaper on a rocking chair next to me. It was the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, and the headline blared: "Grant Attacks Cold Harbor!" I checked the date at the top of the page, and immediately felt dizzy.

June 3, 1864!

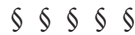
I pulled the newspaper closer. "*Lincoln Campaigns in Illinois*," read a smaller headline. "*Severe Losses for Union Army*," trumpeted another. "*Influenza Outbreak Claims 9 More*" headed a column right next to a display ad for "*Dr. Benton's Cooling Salve — The Elite Choice for Relief from Rheumatism*." My heart began to pound.

"Tell me this isn't a current newspaper," I muttered, quickly flipping through the pages.

"Heavens no," she said. "That one's very old. This is today's," she said, handing me another.

"Thursday," I read out loud. "October 13th, 1864." *Oh, shit.*

I couldn't focus on the newspaper anymore. The floor suddenly rushed up to my face with an enormous whoosh, and I descended into blackness.



I awoke lying on my back, and I could just barely make out a dull brown ceiling in the dim light. *I'm still buried in the cave*, I thought, trying to make out some detail. *I'm delirious. Gotta dig myself out and get some air.*

But there was a soft pillow under my head. I leaned forward, then groaned out loud and fell back, feeling very nauseous.

"Travis?" called a voice. "I think that's the Thomas boy again."

The door opened, letting in a dim light from the outer hallway, and a gray-haired man sauntered in. He was dressed in a dusty black jacket and a string tie, and carried a stethoscope in one hand and a black leather satchel in the other.

"That's a pretty bad knock on the head you got there, son," he said, as he bent over to inspect my wound.

"You're telling me," I said, gritting my teeth as I sat up. "Am I going to need stitches?"

"Naw." He turned up a kerosene lamp on the wall behind me, bathing the room in a flickering yellow glow. "Just a bandage. Keep it clean an' you'll be as good as new in a few days." He lit a match, then passed it back and forth as he peered into my eyes. "Eye movement looks fine. Prob'ly no brain injury to speak of. You still getting dizzy?"

"Oh, no," as the memory hit me again with a sharp jolt. "I'm... I'm in 1864. My aunt..." I fell backwards to the pillow, and the bedsprings squeaked beneath me.

"You've had a terrible shock, son," he said, soothingly. "We all loved Olivia. She was a fine woman."

"But she's alive!" I insisted, feeling thoroughly confused. "I just saw her less than two hours ago!"

"What do you think, Earl?" said another voice. A dark-haired man with a bushy salt-and-pepper beard appeared over the doctor's shoulder. "This boy's been speakin' in tongues for the better part of an hour. He's actin' as crazy as a box o' frogs." He stared at me with a grim expression.

The doctor bent lower. "So, you just arrived in town today?"

I stared back at them. The dull throbbing pain in my head told me this was no dream. I ran my tongue across the blood-blister on the inside

of my lower lip, and it stung. I was alive, but I definitely wasn't in the cave any more. I thought for a moment, then I began to relax as my acting gear kicked in. I had been through enough high school drama classes that I could play along with these yokels. After surviving my role in the freshman class musical as 'Curly' in *Oklahoma*, I could handle dealing with life in 1864 for awhile. *Piece of cake*, I thought. *Just a little improv.*

"Uh, yessir," I began. "I, ah, hitched a ride out here to stay with my Aunt Olivia. My mom... she couldn't take care of me any more."

Okay, that was close to the truth. The two of us had fought almost every day since my father died several months earlier. Our grief counselor told us we should spend some time apart. I kept on talking, my mind racing as I struggled to come up with a reasonable explanation.

"We had some hard times," I continued. "My dad died of a heart attack back in March. My mom figured Aunt Olivia could take care of me for the time being. I was gonna help her out, in her..." I almost said "apartment," but quickly corrected myself. "I mean, on her farm. Yeah."

The grim guy with the beard peered at me and raised an eyebrow. "I figgered you ain't from around here," he said. "You some kinda foreigner? With that accent, you must be from a long way's away."

I nodded, quickly putting together a story that would pass for the moment. "That's it," I said. "I'm from..." I glanced at the can of ginger ale from my backpack, sitting on the bedside table, and caught the brand name. "Uh, I'm from Canada." I said. "Eh?" I added, hopefully.

"You don't say," replied the doctor, slipping his stethoscope inside his vest pocket. "Whereabouts in Canada?"

"Vancouver," I said quickly. That was close enough to my real home town of Seattle that I felt it wasn't too far from the truth. I had at least visited Vancouver a dozen times, so I knew a few of the historical landmarks.

The bearded guy nodded. "Fort Vancouver," he said. "I heard of that. Lotta fur trade up north."

"That's a long way from St. Louis," said a voice behind them.

The three of us turned as Travis walked in. This was the first chance I had to take a good look at my rescuer. He was a little taller than me, and had shaggy blond hair, parted down the middle, with a tangle of loose bangs on his forehead. He had a firm jaw, with a splash of freckles

across his cheeks, and his eyes sparkled in the lantern's warm glow. Judging by his boyish features, I figured him to be maybe 13 or 14, a year or so younger than me, but definitely cute for a hillbilly. He was wearing overalls without a shirt, and I felt a little twinge as I glanced down at his chest and arms, which were tanned and muscular. *Whoa — definitely not boyish. Make that hot.*

"Yeah," I answered, trying not to stare, then gingerly felt the bandages the doctor had applied to my head, and a smaller one above my left eye. "Almost two thousand miles," I said. "Took me a long time to get down here." I had missed my original flight at Sea-Tac Airport yesterday morning due to a traffic jam, but I decided to omit that little detail.

The doctor sighed. "Well, I'm sorry to tell you, son, but Olivia Thomas is deceased. Died in a fire, not three weeks ago. Terrible thing."

I stared at him, disbelieving. "Are we talking about the same woman?" I asked. "About five feet tall? Mole on the right cheek? Late forties? Nags incessantly?"

"More like late fifties," said the doctor. "She said something to me last year about a nephew last year, so I figure you must be him." He patted my shoulder. "I'm truly sorry for your loss, son."

"I just can't... I can't believe she's dead," I said, half in truth, and half trying to cover my earlier slip-up.

"You think the boy's inherited Olivia's property?" the bearded man asked. But before the doctor could answer, Travis' mother rushed in.

"Sakes alive!" clucked Mrs. Colt, as she brought in a ceramic cup on a tray, shooing the others away. "This boy is ill! You all hush and leave him be, at least 'till the morning." She leaned over and handed me a warm mug. "There'll be time for conversation at breakfast. You drink this now and hush."

"But I..."

She wagged her finger at me. "You just hush." She looked over her shoulder. "Dr. Wells? We'll send Lemuel to fetch you if Jason here gets feverish."

I gratefully took the mug from her and took a tentative sip. It tasted a little like milk, but was sweeter, almost like cream. *Probably not homogenized, either*, I thought. *But it must still be drinkable.* They looked at me, expectantly.

"I'm feeling better," I said in a quiet voice. "But I gotta say, this has really been kind of a lower-case day."

She smiled. "You just set right here and rest until tomorrow. Drink that down. And holler if you need anything. My husband and I are in the room down the hall."

I nodded. "Uh, what about Travis?" I said. The good-looking boy peered around the door, which slowly creaked back open. "Hey. I never did thank you for helping me out today."

He smiled, and his whole face lit up. "No need," he replied, pushing the blond locks out of his eyes. "I'll just sleep out in the barn for tonight."

"No, no," I protested, trying to sit up. "I don't want to put you out..."

"Hush now," soothed Mrs. Colt. "Travis won't mind none."

"No, he won't," echoed the bearded man, whom I realized was Mr. Colt. "It's the Christian thing to do." He glared at the boy. "Job 31, verse 32 — *'but no stranger had to spend the night in the street, for my door was always open to the traveler.'*"

"Yes, sir," he said in a small voice. He looked back at me and I nodded my thanks, momentarily embarrassed.

The door closed with a thump and I was suddenly alone. I lay back in the bed and tried to take stock of what had happened to me over the past couple of hours. I heard the living-room clock chime softly in the distance; ten chimes. I glanced at my wristwatch, a black-and-silver Swatch Revitalize that my parents had given me for Christmas. It insisted that the time was 4:12 P.M., on Saturday, June 22nd, about five hours after I first entered the cave. *That was back in 2013.*

I let out a sigh and stared up at the ceiling. *But the newspaper said today was Thursday, October 13th, 1864.* I could still see the old-fashioned text, permanently seared into my memory as if by a branding iron. I glanced out the window on my left and could just make out a well-worn wooden fence in the moonlight. A faint drizzle of rain left soft streaks against the glass. The wind outside moaned briefly, and I heard a dog bark in the distance.

I touched the bandage on my head. *Shit!* My wound still hurt like hell, but it was a duller pain than before. Dull or not, the sensation was far too real for me to be dreaming all of this.

I sat up in bed, reached for the warm milk, and took another sip. I set the mug back on the table, then ran my finger across the hardwood bed frame, which was smooth and polished, handmade but solid. The room was small and sparse, with just a side table to my right, and a wooden rocking chair nearby. I lifted up the bedcovers and realized with some embarrassment that I was only wearing my underwear. I slid off the bed and tiptoed across the floor, trying not to squeak the floorboards too much. My pants, T-shirt and socks were neatly folded on the table next to my backpack, and most of the dirt had already been cleaned out.

The surrounding walls were rough-hewn brown log planks. Two brightly-patterned framed doilies hung on one wall, with the fabric spelling out the words "Billy James" and "Travis," respectively, in fancy curved letters. A kerosene lantern hung from a hook by the bed, and there was a well-worn gray and red rug on the floor. The mattress and comforter had a musty smell, and nearby was a ceramic bowl on the floor covered with a tin plate. My nose wrinkled at the faint odor of urine, and I winced with the realization that this was the 19th-century version of indoor plumbing. A *chamber pot*, I thought, remembering a Nathaniel Hawthorne novel I once read back in junior high.

"Well," I whispered out loud, "if this was a movie, I'd give the prop department an Oscar." Either I was really back in time, or else this was some kind of bizarre *Mission: Impossible* thing where somebody was trying to drive me batty. Or I was in another dimension, a parallel universe, like some bad imitation of *The Twilight Zone*. I momentarily whistled out the eight-note theme song, then stifled a laugh.

I thought back to every old episode of *Star Trek* I had ever seen, along with movies like *Back to the Future*, *Butterfly Effect*, and *Deja Vu*. I wasn't exactly a sci-fi fan, but I knew enough that whenever the characters went back in time, things usually got screwed-up royally. Like what if I accidentally killed my great-great-great grandfather? Then I'd never exist! Or what if I made some scientific discovery too early, like penicillin, or invented the DVD player?

Fat chance of that. Science and history were pretty much at the bottom of my high school priority list, along with girls and politics. I lived and breathed nothing but music and drama, which were the center of my

universe back in Seattle. *But I'm light years away from that world now*, I thought, as the enormity of my situation sank in.

Suddenly, I felt a wave of exhaustion, and I sat back on the bed, overwhelmed by it all. Whether or not this was all some kind of nightmare, I had to make the most of it.

"Tomorrow," I said out loud, yawning as I burrowed under the covers. "Gotta go back to the cave tomorrow. I'll figure this thing out. I'll get back home somehow."

And I let the sleep overtake me, like soothing waves of blackness, pulling me down to the depths of the sea.

Chapter 2

I grabbed another piece of bacon from the kitchen tray. “And that’s how wound up in the cave,” I said as I took a bite, then leaned back in my chair. 1864 or no, these people really knew how to cook. It wasn’t quite a Denny’s Grand Slam breakfast, but it was a heckuva lot better than my mom’s cooking. Don’t get me wrong — back home, my mom’s a great lady, but let’s just say that breakfast wasn’t exactly her forte.

It was early dawn. The kitchen windows were bathed in a pale blue light, but the Colt household started bustling the moment the roosters crowed. *Better than an alarm clock*, I mused. I glanced at my wristwatch, which insisted that the time was 12:30 A.M. Probably at least six hours off. I made a mental note to reset it.

“That’s some story,” said Lemuel, who was a perky 10 year-old. I had learned he was the youngest of the family, but also by far the most talkative. “What does *nik* mean?” he asked, inbetween mouthfuls.

“Huh?”

He pointed. “Them letters on your shirt. Is that Chinese?”

I looked down to see the familiar Nike wave logo on my T-shirt. “No,” I said. “It’s the company that made my sneakers. Nye-kee. Came free with the shoes. The head office is in Oregon somewhere, but they make all the stuff overseas in sweatshops. Slave labor.”

“Hush now, Lem,” muttered his brother, Travis. “Pass the grits.” He gave me an inquisitive glance. “So why’d you go down that cave in the first place? Some kinda treasure hunt?”

I grinned. “Far from it,” I answered. “I got interested in caves from my dad. He was into archeology — one of his things. He worked as a construction engineer, and he used to talk about how his buildings

might someday turn into a ‘great ruin,’ like the Egyptian pyramids or something.”

“Your papa from ‘round here?” asked Mrs. Colt, as she placed some hot rolls on the table.

“No — uh, no ma’am,” I said, helping myself to the bread. “He was born in Seattle. My family went on vacations a couple of times to caves and old ruins. We were going to visit the Midwest for vacation this summer anyway, before he... before he died. Thought I’d check out the cave for artifacts and stuff.”

Mr. Colt raised an eyebrow. “That cave’s more’n six miles from Olivia’s place.”

“I got lost when the, uh... wagon dropped me off,” I said quickly, hoping my story would sound believable. “I knew my aunt’s place was somewhere just outside of town, so I started walking and... well, the cave was there, and thought I’d drop in just for laughs.”

“For laughs?” asked Travis.

“It was on the way,” I said nonchalantly. “I mean, I’m not really that into archeology or geology, but I figured, hey, it’s just a little detour, y’know? Pretty cool place — I think it’s part of the Meramec Caverns formation, not too far from here. I’ve seen pictures of it, but never been there before.”

Lemuel giggled. “You talk real fast.”

I winced. *Mental note: these people talk slower. They’ve got a whole different pace from the world I knew. Gotta throttle back a gear or two, and try to fit in with the natives. At least, until I can get home.*

“Sorry,” I said. That’s just the way we talk... uh, back where I come from.”

“You be mindful of our guests, Lem,” warned Mr. Colt, who glowered at the boy. He turned to me. “Olivia was our neighbor. She kept to herself mostly, but we saw her at church on Sundays. Widow, she was.”

I had to stop myself from doing a spit-take. The Olivia from my time was a die hard lesbian and a political meddler — “a real shit-disturber,” as my dad would say — ready to picket and hand out petitions at a moment’s notice. She despised all organized religions. When I’d come out to my family two years earlier, when I was 13, my mom wondered aloud if I’d inherited the ‘gay gene’ from my father’s side of the family.

Olivia hadn't had a girlfriend in some time, but she was active in some local gay activist groups. She was loud and boisterous, but somehow, we'd always gotten along fine.

I wondered if the Olivia Thomas of 1864 was somehow related to her. "Could be a distant relative," I muttered, as I shoveled in another bite of eggs and stared off into space.

"Pardon?"

I cleared my throat and turned back to Mr. Colt. "Um, Aunt Olivia... she was kind of a distant relative. We didn't see each other very often. But we sent each other email once in awhile."

The bearded man raised an eyebrow. "Email?"

"Uh, *mail*, I mean. You know... with a stamp."

"I got a letter once," piped up young Lemuel, as he harpooned a piece of ham with his fork.

"Hush, Lem," said his mother.

"That's cool," I said to the little boy, who squirmed in his chair. "You can read and write?"

"Course," he replied, scooping a big clump of grits onto his fork. "I'm 10... I ain't stupid. My big brother Billy James wrote me from the war, four months ago."

Suddenly a chill descended over the room. "Ah, that's good," I said, reaching for a glass of milk. "Is he coming back soon?" I almost asked *which side is he fighting on*, but I hesitated, since I couldn't remember if Missouri fought for the North or the South in the Civil War.

There was a heavy silence at the table, a palpable change in the mood. Mrs. Colt froze in mid-step, an empty plate in her hand. Lem stared and blinked at me.

"Uh, you'll have to show me that sometime," I continued, trying to break the tension. "The letter, I mean."

"I got chores to do," said Travis abruptly, pushing himself back from the kitchen table. He pulled out a pocket watch and flipped open the silver-plated cover, which was dull and scratched, then snapped it shut. "I still got 40 minutes 'fore we gotta go ta school." He headed for the door.

"Aren't you forgettin' something?" chided Mrs. Colt.

Travis rolled his eyes but came back, then gave her a quick peck on the cheek. *There was something about him.* My instincts took over.

"Hey, Travis," I called, finishing the last of my breakfast and wiping my mouth. "You need some help? I mean, with your chores?"

He gave me a glance, a little surprised.

His mother shook her head. "Jason, you really should get back to bed until Doc Wells comes back to see you," she chided.

"I'm feeling okay," I replied, walking over to the blond teen. "It's all good. I mean, I'll just be out there for a few minutes."

"That's mighty nice of you, Jason," Mr. Colt said, and gave me the first genuine smile I'd seen since I'd arrived. "But you're our guest in this house. Wouldn't be Christian-like to have you workin' around here."

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Colt, I could use a little exercise," I said, as respectfully as I could. "Just for a few minutes. Y'know, stretch my legs. I slept almost 12 hours."

Travis looked at me expectantly.

His father finally nodded. "Alright," he said. "Just don't go exertin' yourself. And watch that head of yours. Don't want ya to go bleedin' all over the barn."

I followed Travis out the back door. I shivered slightly in the early morning air, as we approached the larger barn on the left. The orange fingers of sunrise were creeping over the horizon, casting amber streaks along the dirt path. I caught a whiff of the pungent aroma of farm animals; there was a large pile of fertilizer outside the barn door, and three cows murmured inside.

"Quite a menagerie you have out here," I said, casually.

"You a city boy?" he said, pushing his blond locks out of his eyes as he grabbed a burlap bag from a pile.

"I guess. My family's been around Seattle for a long time. We live about ten miles north of downtown."

He ripped open the feedbag and started pouring it into a tin bucket. "Thought you said you were from Can-a-da," he said, emphasizing the middle syllable.

Ooops, I thought, mentally smacking myself. *Better get my story straight.*

"Can-ada," I corrected. "Vancouver, actually. About three hours away from Seattle."

He gave me a suspicious stare.

"How 'bout those Canucks, eh?" I said hopefully, trying my best to approximate a Canadian accent.

Travis shrugged, then poured the last of the feed into the bucket. I grabbed a second feedbag and tried to rip it open with my hands. It held fast, as if it were sewn with iron.

I cursed under my breath. "Piece of shit," I muttered, biting the flap with my teeth. "Damn!" I yelled, as a stabbing pain reminded me of my injury in the cave. I gingerly touched the sore spot on my lip. "My mouth still hurts like crap."

"Lemme help," Travis said quietly. He produced a pocket knife and expertly slit the side, then handed the heavy bag to me. "There. Ya think you can handle that now?"

"Sorry. I'm kind of new to this farm thing. Uh, thang."

He was silent as I poured the feed in the bucket. "There," I said, when the last of it trickled in. "So, we a-gonna slop tha hawgs and all that?" I added, trying to approximate the Thomas family's drawl. I had prided myself on having a pretty good ear for accents in my last drama class; I got a B+ on that exam, and the only thing that held me back from an A was my so-so Irish brogue.

Travis glared at me over his shoulder. "You makin' fun of me?" he said, carrying the two buckets outside.

"No, no," I said running out to keep up with him. "Ah jes' thought... I mean, I just thought I'd try to fit in. Uh... with ya'll."

He barely looked up at me. "I seen city boys like you before in school," he said, carefully pouring the bucket into the horse trough. Two of the ponies in a nearby corral whinnied in the distance and started to trot over, eager for their breakfast. "You think we're a buncha hillbillies. Think you're better'n us."

Where had this come from? I wondered.

"No, no... you've got it all wrong," I protested. "Really."

He finished pouring the feed and let the bucket fall to the ground with a clank, then glared at me. "An' you know what's worse?" he said, taking a step towards me.

I was momentarily taken aback. Travis had a firm jaw, with a small cleft in his chin. His eyes were a deep shade of blue, and his shaggy blond hair caught the morning sun in just the right light, as if to give him a

halo. I saw for the first time that his nose was slightly crooked, as if it had once been broken and never healed quite right, but this small imperfection made him even more handsome, if that was possible.

“Well?” he snapped.

I cleared my head, tried to concentrate, then cleared my throat. “Uh, sorry. No. What’s worse?”

He lowered his voice. “I think you’re a liar. You ain’t from no Can-a-da. That’s a lotta bull.”

“Look, Travis,” I said, running after him as he quickly walked back to the barn. “My name really is Jason Thomas. And I came to Missouri to stay with my Aunt Olivia for the summer. Swear to god.”

Travis shoved a pitchfork in a nearby bale of hay, and began breaking it up. “How you gonna prove it? You might be a runaway... or a deserter.”

“Gimme a sec.” I thought for a minute, then grabbed my wallet. I didn’t have a driver’s license, because I didn’t have my learner’s permit yet, but I did have an ID card for my school. I slipped it out of the plastic holder and handed it to him. “See? It’s even got my picture on it.”

“Jason Zachary Thomas,” he said, reading out loud. “Student I-den-tifiction Card. Garfield High School, Class of 2013.” He peered closer. “2013? What in tarnation is that?”

“It’s a typo,” I said, quickly grabbing back the card. “They meant, uh, 1867. That’s when I graduate.”

He glared at me. “Thought you were about my age. 15.”

I looked closer at his face. I had previously thought he was at least a couple of years younger than I was, judging by his face, which was boyish and innocent. But his shirtless body under his overalls was a lot more filled-out and manly than my skinny frame, with wide shoulders, a broad chest, and strong, muscular arms. *A genuine corn-fed farm boy*, I thought, eyeing him from his toes back up to his head. *White-blond eyebrows and eyelashes, too. And that meant... whoa.*

I shook my head, trying to dissipate Travis’ naked image from my mind’s eye.

“Uh, yeah,” I said nervously, turning away. “I turned 15 just a month ago.”

His eyes narrowed. "I think that was the first honest thing you've said since ya got here."

Travis pushed past me, but I lightly grabbed his shoulder. He spun around, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Look, Travis," I protested. "Really, I'm not lying to you. At least about the important stuff. I'm not trying to hurt anybody here. I just want to..." I had to stop myself from saying *get myself back home*. "I just want to figure out what to do next. I mean, with my Aunt Olivia dead and all. And I really appreciate you helping me out at the cave yesterday, and letting me stay here overnight."

"Fine," he said, scooping another load of hay into a wheelbarrow. "Just don't hurt me or my family. Especially my little brother Lem. Leave him alone."

Is that what this was all about?

"Hey, wait," I said. "Look, Travis... I don't know what your family situation is. I'm sorry if I brought up anything painful. We got wars back where I come from, too."

He angrily slammed the pile of hay onto the wheelbarrow, making a sharp metallic clang. "My big brother Billy James has been gone for dang near six months," he said. "I know he's dead, I just know it. My momma and my stepdad... they don't wanna admit it. But I know it's true as the day is long."

I nodded to myself. "So Mr. Colt's your stepfather," I said.

"My real daddy died five years ago," he said in a quiet voice. "Split his head clean open when he was out plowin', spring of '59. Took him three days to die."

"I'm sorry," I said. "My father passed away, too." It was still hard for me to say that. "Died in a car... I mean, when his wagon crashed."

"Thought you said his heart gave out."

I sighed. "Every word I said is true," I said. *Except the stuff I'm leaving out that would make you think I was crazy*. "The doctors weren't sure if my dad had the heart attack first and then the wreck, or vice-versa. Either way, he died." I tried not to remember how his body had looked at the emergency room.

Travis stared at me. "You oughta at least try to get your story straight."

"Anyway," I continued, picking up a long strand of hay and using it to pick my teeth, "so Mr. Colt's not your biological father. That explains the blond hair, and why you don't look a thing like your younger brother." *Totally hot*, I thought.

He took a threatening step towards me. "What're you tryin' to say? I'm some kinda inbred hillbilly to you? My folks are ugly? Like we ain't as good as city folk from Can-a-da?" He emphasized the middle syllable.

"No, no," I said, raising my hands in a mock surrender. "I'm just sayin'..." I looked up again, and I was again distracted when I saw his face. *Jesus. He's even more attractive when he's angry.* "Listen, Travis. I apologize. I meant to say you're... well, a good-looking guy. Better than anybody I knew back home."

Travis stabbed the pitchfork in the dirt, where it fell to the ground, then held up his fist as if to deck me. "Don't ya go thinkin' I'm some kinda country bumpkin you can make fun of," he warned. "My momma didn't raise no fools. You just watch yourself. I got things to do."

And with that, he pushed past me and rolled the wheelbarrow back to the pen, leaving me alone in the barn. I sighed, then picked up the pitchfork where it lay on the dirt floor, then gently leaned it up against the edge of the barn door, and trudged back to the house.

Jesus, I mused, as I narrowly avoided a puddle.. *Well, mom always said I had a way with people.*

Just as I approached the back step leading up to the farmhouse, the door flew open and a little cyclone blew past me.

"Yo, Lem," I called after the little boy. "You know where I can find a..." I wanted to say 'bathroom,' but that wasn't the right word. "...um, a toilet? The facilities? A latrine?"

He stopped and trotted back. "Ya mean the outhouse?"

I nodded. *That was the word.* I'd heard it once in summer camp, when we stayed overnight by a lake, and had to use some Porta-Potties. To me, that was really roughing it, being without Internet access or satellite TV for an entire weekend.

"Privy's right over there." The boy continued out to the barn, where I heard him holler in the distance to his brother.

I followed his direction and approached a dilapidated 2-door wooden shed topped with a crudely-painted half-moon, located about

twenty feet behind the farmhouse. One whiff and I knew I was in the right place. I opened the door on the right and was greeted with a small swarm of flies.

“All the comforts of home,” I muttered.

§ § § § §

Twenty minutes later, the two brothers left for school, joining a couple of friends on the dirt road leading east towards town. Mr. Colt left to “take care of some trouble with the sharecroppers in the back twenty,” whatever that meant, and Mrs. Colt led me down the hallway to Travis’ bedroom and insisted I take a nap.

“I’ll be out by the back porch, workin’ on the laundry,” she said, picking up the ceramic bowl on the floor. “I’ll be gone for a few hours on my errands, but I’ll be back by lunchtime. You rest that head of yours ’til I get back.”

As I lay in bed, I mused over the events of the past 24 hours. My Northwest flight had landed at Lambert-St. Louis Airport around 7 P.M., when my real Aunt Olivia had picked me up in her battered old Celica, and I’d gotten to bed by 11 PM, pretty well zonked from the trip. I had awakened at about 8:00 AM, had a cup of tea and a bagel, and then helped my aunt lug an old computer monitor out to her car so she could give it to Goodwill. She’d be at work until a little after 6 P.M., but was going to bring home dinner from Wendy’s.

And that was the last I saw of her, I thought. I didn’t even get to give her a kiss goodbye.

I wondered what Aunt Olivia and my mother would think if I never came back. It would probably push my mom over the edge. She was already depressed after my dad died; this would really put her in a downward spiral. And my aunt would feel totally responsible.

“But it had nothing to do with you,” I said out loud. My eyes got a little watery.

Wait a minute, I thought, my mind momentarily clearing. None of this has to happen. All I have to do is to get back to the cave! If that accident — a time-warp, a black hole, or whatever the heck it was — if it could

happen once, it could happen again. At least, that's the way it worked on the old *Star Trek* show.

I leapt up from the bed and grabbed my backpack. I started to bolt out the door, but then stopped and looked back to the ceramic bowl on the ground, and the food tray by the bed. I whipped out my pad and scrawled a note:

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Colt –

Thanks for your hospitality, but I don't want to be a burden to your family. I'm going to try to find my home another way.

I really appreciate your kindness.

–Jason Thomas

Before I laid it down on my pillow, I made one last addition:

P.S. – Tell Travis I'm sorry about this morning. And please say goodbye to him and his brother Lem for me.

Maybe it wouldn't win any awards for creativity, but it got the point across. I slung the backpack across my shoulder and continued out to the living room, then reached for the front door.

The grandfather clock behind me chimed 9 A.M.. I remembered to reset my wristwatch, and then opened the front door, only to find a dark shadow blocking my exit.

It was a tall man with a full moustache, longish brown hair, and very bushy sideburns, almost a beard, except his chin was clean-shaven. He wore a gray vest and coat, with a silver star pinned on the right side. Twin revolvers were strapped to a leather belt around his waist.

Uh-oh.

"You that Thomas boy?" he asked. "Olivia's nephew?"

"That would be me," I replied.

"I'm Sheriff Baxter, Denton Baxter."

I shook his hand and tried to stay calm. *There's no way he knows who I really am*, I thought. *Or what time I'm from.*

“We got some questions for you. Official business from Judge Hamilton Shaw at the County seat. He’s waitin’ in his office at the courthouse.”

He gestured towards his horse and buggy, and I reluctantly got in, praying that the man wouldn’t realize how terrified I was.

§ § § § §

It seemed my “beloved Aunt Olivia” was a little more well-off than my real Aunt from 2013. Her property was just down the road, and in fact covered two thousand acres, nearly twice as large as the Colt’s farmland that adjoined it. Olivia’s property hadn’t been very well-maintained since the death of her husband about ten years before; the once-prosperous spread was now just a few square miles of dust and weeds. But somehow, it was still worth just under \$8000. I got the impression that was a good chunk of change here in 1864.

“House is pret’ near gone,” the sheriff said, as we kicked through the ashes and rubble.

A light wind scattered some of the fragments, bringing with it the stale odor of charred wood and soot. I could see that the blaze had started from the right side of the house, by her bedroom. The only thing left standing was a tower of blackened brick from what was left of the chimney. *Must’ve been a helluva fire*, I thought, examining a few fragments of melted pottery on the ground. It reminded me of a war documentary on Iraq I had just seen on TV before I left my home in Seattle.

“We found her body over here,” the sheriff called, and I shuffled through the blackened chips and broken glass to what remained of a corner of the house. “What was left of her, anyway. We buried the remains over there by the trees.”

I turned to see three white crosses in the distance, one of them faded and worn. I did some quick guesswork. “Ah,” I said. “One for my uncle, and the other for her dog.”

Baxter nodded. I had seen an old doghouse to the side of the farmhouse, and figured that was her whole family.

“Her husband died years ago. We also found this.” He opened up an envelope and handed it to me. “Picture of her and her kin — her only brother, I guess.”

“That’d be Walter,” I blurted, then mentally slapped myself for mentioning my father’s name. The small sepia-brown tin photograph showed a woman in her 30s, scowling at the camera, with a teenage boy standing beside her. They each had the same prominent nose. I took a chance. “Walt Thomas,” I continued, crossing my fingers. “He was my dad. Aunt Olivia was his sister.” The young man in the photograph really did bear a slight resemblance to the way my father looked in pictures taken in the 1980s.

Sheriff Baxter turned the picture frame over and showed it to me. “Ain’t no name written down. Can’t ‘member if Walter was his name or not, but it might’ve been. But Olivia had no local family to speak of. Far as I’m concerned, you might just be her only heir. Got any identification?” I nodded. *As long as they don’t ask too many questions about it.*

“If you’re feelin’ up to it, I think Judge Shaw would be interested in talkin’ to you.” He gave me a look like there was no way I could say no.

We rode the long way back into town in silence, the old wagon bouncing along the dirt road. *If I could pull this off without getting arrested, I thought, Mrs. Adams, my old drama teacher, is gonna have to give me an award.*

§ § § § §

As it turned out, the Judge was an amiable middle-aged man, balding, with enormous grey sideburns that protruded out several inches from each side of his jaw. I tried not to stare at his bulbous nose, which was crisscrossed with a patchwork of bright red veins. The stench from his cigar filled his chambers, which were located just behind the main county courtroom.

I had taken the precaution of carefully tearing the “2013” off the corner of my student I.D. card during a bathroom break earlier. I also had a laminated Pacific Theaters movie pass that had my name on it (and no date). Other than that, I had nothing else on me, save for \$17 in modern cash, a few coins, a pen, and my pocket notepad.

“Well, the picture looks like you,” Judge Poole said, examining my school ID, peering at it closely through his eyeglasses. “How’d they get the tintype under the paper like this?” He ran his finger over it, as if trying to figure out how to take it apart.

“Something new they came up with,” I said quickly. I took the card back and slipped it into my left pocket.

“What’s that you got there, son?” the judge asked, eyeing my pants pocket.

“Just my notebook,” I said, pulling it out half way to give him a glimpse.

“Mind if I take a look at it?”

I shrugged and handed it over, pretty certain there was nothing incriminating in it.

“Call Aunt Olivia at 2 P.M.,” he read, then looked up at me. “You wrote this when?”

“Yesterday morning,” I said truthfully. I had made a note before I went into the cave.

“And that was hours before you found out about what happened,” he mused.

I nodded. “I was supposed to stay with her, and...” I decided to let my acting gear rev up a little. “And, y’know, maybe help out on her farm. I mean, I’m from the city and all, but I figured I could help out a bit to, uh... earn my keep. Sir.”

The judge nodded. “Young people today don’t seem to have a mind t’ helping their elders. They seem more interested goin’ out and havin’ adventures in the war than stayin’ home and makin’ themselves useful. I’ll give this matter some thought.” He handed my notepad back to me. “You say that Olivia Thomas was your father’s sister. Do you have any other living relatives?”

I shook my head. “Only my mom. My grandparents on the Thomas side passed away in...” — I did some quick mental arithmetic — “...back in 1857. And my mom’s overseas.”

A wall clock chimed solemnly in the distance. “Well,” he said, “in Missouri, state law only recognizes a blood relative, so that seems to me you’d be the only living heir to Mrs. Thomas’ estate, tied through your father. I’ll make some inquiries over to Jefferson City and have the district

attorney check the land deeds on file. If nobody makes a claim after 30 days, as far as I'm concerned, the property's yours."

Like I'm gonna need that in 2013, I thought. But I had to go along with this for now.

"Thank you kindly, Judge," I said, trying to approximate his drawl. "I know Aunt Olivia would've appreciated that."

"That is," he said, peering over his glasses and leaning towards me, "if you're really who you say you are."

There was an uncomfortable pause.

I looked him right in the eye. "Sir," I began, in a calm, measured voice, "I've been Jason Zachary Thomas for 15 years that I know of. I'm supposed to be staying with my Aunt Olivia Thomas here in St. Louis. And I'm positive I'm her only living relative." *All the truth, minus a few details.* I mentally crossed my fingers.

Both the sheriff and the judge gave me the once-over.

"So help you God?" Judge Poole asked finally.

I raised my right hand. "I swear. So help me, God." I felt like I was in an episode of *Boston Legal*.

No one spoke for five long seconds. I held my breath, partly in suspense, partly from trying not to inhale the cigar fumes.

The judge took one last puff on his cigar and let out a long stream of acrid smoke, hissing like a snake. "That's good enough for me, son," he said finally, as he sat back and gave me a broad smile. "You can't get to be someone in my position without knowin' when a man's tellin' the truth. And you got an honest face, boy."

"Thanks, Judge," I said. "I'm... uh, much obliged to you." He extended his hand, and I shook it, trying not to choke on the blue cloud that hovered around his desk.

"Olivia didn't have much, after her husband Joshua died six or seven years back," he said, consulting some paperwork on his desk. "Little less than \$800 cash in the bank. Couple of old horses that died in the barn. The farm was almost gone, 'cept for the sharecroppers. She had to sell off the slaves awhile back, not long after Joshua passed away."

The sheriff turned to me. "The sharecroppers told us they didn't know about the fire until it was too late. They were pretty broken up about it. I think they've all moved on now."

Judge Shaw signed some papers on his desk and handed them to Baxter. "Sheriff, take this young man down to Boatmen's Savings across the street, and have him fill out the necessary forms for Olivia Thomas' accounts. By law, he can only withdraw up to eighty dollars, at least until the hearing next month. That should more than cover your living expenses for a while." He turned back to me. "Legally, Jason, you can't own property in Missouri until you're 18, married, or an Army veteran. But I'll see to it the property is put in a trust in your name until that time. And you can draw on the interest every few months."

I nodded, then started to get out of my seat.

"One more thing, son," the judge said. "We have a more serious problem."

I sat back down, bracing myself.

"As a minor in the state of Missouri," he continued, "you need a place to stay, and a temporary guardian to be responsible for you. Can't have you runnin' around, willy-nilly."

"My aunt's property..."

"No proper place for a boy like you to live on," the judge said, shaking his head. "You could stay in one of the boarding houses here in town, though technically, you might be better off in the city orphanage on the other side of town."

Uh-oh, I thought. *I'll never be able to get back to the cave if they do that.*

"What about the Colt's place?" I said quickly. "I mean, I've only known them for a day, but maybe I could stay there just, uh... for the duration."

"Only if'n Seth Colt would be willing to be your temporary guardian," observed the sheriff.

"I could pay them out of the estate money," I suggested. "Maybe \$20 a week?"

Both the judge and the sheriff guffawed. Apparently I had no clue as to what anything cost in this bizarre world.

"I think three dollars a week for room and board would be plenty," he said. "You best hang on to that money, because you'll need it for the months ahead." He turned to the sheriff. "Mr. Baxter, I'll prepare the pa-

perwork for the Colts to become this young man's temporary guardian for the next 90 days. Assuming they'll agree, of course."

The sheriff attempted a grin, but on his dour face, it looked more like a wince. "Knowin' Seth, three dollars a week would more than convince him."

"Then it's decided," the judge said, straightening out the papers on his desk. "I think that'd be for the best, anyway. Our orphanage is a mite overcrowded. Must be at least fifty children too many in that godforsaken place."

As the sheriff and I made our way out of the office, Judge Shaw called out to me. I turned.

"Olivia was a disagreeable woman," he said. "Kept mostly to herself. Her neighbors steered clear of her because of her infernal temper. I knew her years ago, before her husband died. Back then she was cantankerous, but fair-minded."

I nodded. "Yeah. She always had strong opinions. My dad always thought she was a little wacko — crazy, that is — but we loved her anyway."

The judge chuckled. "Yep, that was our Olivia. Good luck to ya, son. And I'll expect to see you back in my courtroom on..." He consulted a calendar book on his desk, and made a note in it. "Friday, November 25th. Purely a formality."

"Got it," I replied, then followed the sheriff out the door. Of course, there was no way I actually planned to stay here. I'd be back home in 2013 soon enough, but I'd have to put up with this peculiar world for just awhile longer.

§ § § § §

I waited an hour after the sheriff dropped me off back at the Colt farmhouse before making my move. I managed to avoid seeing Mrs. Colt, and luckily, she hadn't yet made the bed and seen my note. *No use getting them upset too early*, I thought.

I went through my plan in my head, one more time. There was no way I could possibly survive in this crazy place. I had to get back to the

cave, and hope that whatever bizarre phenomena that had led me here would send me back home.

And what if it didn't work? That was plan B. And I'd figure that out only after I had exhausted every other possibility underground. What other choices did I have?

I went through my backpack one more time to check my supplies, and remembered that my cellphone was still missing. I'd probably dropped it in the dirt outside the cave when I fell the day before. *Well, I thought, it's not as if somebody can run up my long-distance bill here.*

I walked through the living room and closed the door behind me and stood on the porch. The sky was gray and overcast, and the clouds on the western horizon looked menacing. I retraced my steps about half a mile back down the old dirt road that led to the river bank. I looked around to get my bearings. While I had been pretty groggy the day before, I was stone-cold wide awake now. *How could I not tell this wasn't 2013 anymore?* I thought. *It seemed so obvious now — the smell, the feel, everything about this place was wrong.* I checked my watch. It was already 1:10 P.M. Mrs. Colt had probably found my note by now. I felt a pang of guilt, but shook it off.

A small wind whipped up, and I shivered as a few cold drops of rain splattered on my back. I struggled back up the muddy path that led to the hill, which was a lot more difficult than it had been going down. After several frustrating minutes of searching, I finally reached the spot where I'd fallen the day before, when I'd tumbled out of the cave. Parts of my footprints were still visible in the dirt, my sneaker treads standing out from the bare feet of the boys from yesterday.

But where was the opening? All that was there now was a giant heap of mud and debris, fresh enough that it might have slid down the night before.

"Goddammit," I said, dropping my backpack to the ground. "How the hell am I ever gonna get back inside the cave now?" I yelled, to no one in particular.

"You mean *our* cave," said a voice behind me.

I turned to discover Frank and Jesse, the two boys I'd met the day before, along with a third boy I hadn't seen before.

They began walking towards me, and Frank pulled out a knife. "If ya think you're gonna git away with goin' in there alive, ya better think again."

I gulped.

Chapter 3

Just as I was about to answer him, there was a violent clap of thunder in the distance. I looked up just in time to see an enormous lightning bolt strike the other side of the hill in an explosion of sparks, along with a roar so thunderous, I felt the ground tremble in response.

The hillside was faintly glowing blue!

"Uh, listen guys," I said, my heart pounding, "I don't want any trouble. I left something of mine inside that cave. I just need to get in there and get it back. Is that a problem?"

Jesse eyed me warily for a moment, then turned back to the other boy. "If'n he wants to get into our cave, he's gonna have to pay us a tax."

"A what?"

"Fifty cents," he sneered. "Cash money."

"You got it," I replied. Without batting an eye, I reached in my pocket, peeled off a dollar bill, and handed it to him. *Vintage 1864 cash*, I thought with some amusement. *About as good as Monopoly money.*

"Oh, and you can keep the change," I said, trying not to grin.

They seemed too startled to respond.

"We got a deal?" I said, extending my hand. We shook on it.

The boys immediately started back down the hill.

"Hey!" I called, racing after them. "What about getting me inside the cave?"

"You'll never get in that way," Jesse called over his shoulder. "Follow me."

I stumbled down the sloped hill after him, nearly slipping in the mud, but catching myself before I fell. "What happened to the tunnel back there?" I called. "It was fine yesterday."

"Rained like the devil himself durin' the night. Mudslides happen 'round these parts all the time."

I ran up alongside Jesse and his brother, while the smaller boy tagged behind us. The faint trickle of rain was getting stronger now, and there was another low rumble in the distance.

"Could be dangerous," he continued. As if to echo his response, we had to do a hop-skip around a pile of oozing mud in order to keep a steady pace.

"That's what killed that Desmond boy last spring," said Frank, as he used his forearm to brush the raindrops off his face. "They found his body right 'round here. Suffocated in the mud."

"Sure did," added the smaller boy. "I saw his body when they done dug him out. Stone-cold dead he was."

"Who are you?" I asked, moving past him.

"Johnny Younger," he replied. "Me, Frank and Jesse are gonna start our own gang. Now that Bill Quantrill's on the run, we're gonna—"

"You talk too damn much, Johnny," snapped Frank. "Keep your damn fool mouth shut."

The rain was coming down more steadily, and my T-shirt was soaked. I was walking so fast, I was starting to pant.

"C'mon, guys," I protested. "Is this gonna take—"

"We're here," Jesse interrupted, as he abruptly stopped and pointed to a large clump of small trees and bushes by a steep hillside. There was a large tree stump in front, with a letter "Q" neatly carved in the bark. But there was no cave visible at all.

"Where?" I asked.

Jesse waded through the bushes and disappeared. "You comin', or what?" His voice sounded echoey and distant.

I took a few tentative steps forward and leaned over. Behind the thick shrubbery I could just make out a shadowy crevice, roughly three feet across. Jesse's face suddenly appeared out of the darkness. "This is another way to get ta the cave. It's what you wanted, ain't it?"

I looked past his face to the blackness behind him, and caught a flicker of a blue glow in the distance. My eyes widened. *It's gotta be the same thing I saw yesterday afternoon*, I thought, my heart racing. *The doorway that'll get me back home!*

I squirmed through the opening and pushed past him into a dirt tunnel that led downwards on a gradual slope. The other two boys pressed behind me, as we groped through the narrow passageway.

"Hold it," I said, and our group came to a halt. I reached in my backpack, felt for my flashlight, then pulled it out and hit the switch. I widened out the beam, which revealed two different adjoining tunnels.

"How in God's green earth didja do that?" Frank asked in disbelief.

I grinned. "It's sorta like a miniature kerosene lamp, only without the kerosene." I turned to Jesse. "Which way?"

He tapped his foot on a brown stone rock, which was embedded on the floor of the tunnel on the right. "This way. Anybody who goes left ain't never gonna come out alive."

I stopped for a moment and let the light flicker up to his face. "You weren't going to lead me that way, were you?"

Jesse was indignant. "My daddy done raised me to be a gentleman," he snapped. "I ain't no liar. Besides, that was our deal, fair an' square."

"Good to know. Let's go."

A narrow path slowly widened to reveal a vast cavern. It seemed much larger than I remembered it from the day before. The floor was littered with trash and debris, and the cave roof was covered with shadows and stalactites. I was puzzled. *Was this the same cave*, I thought, *or just a similar cave in the area?* There was a terrible stench of urine, along with a sharp aroma I couldn't quite identify.

"Pee-yooo!" cried Johnny, as he stepped past me. His voice echoed around the rocky walls, reverberating into the distance. "Them bats are shittin' up a storm today. Smells like a dead skunk crawled outta another dead skunk's ass."

"Bats?" I asked, widening out the flashlight beam to reveal the distant walls.

Frank and Jesse laughed uproariously, while the other boy made a gesture toward the cave ceiling. I swiveled the flashlight and cringed. What I had previously thought were stalactites were mostly small rat-

like creatures, clinging upside down to the dirt and rocks above our heads. The bats were bathed in an eerie blue glow, and some of their eyes reflected a dull gleam. I looked back down towards the source of the light, which radiated from the wall on the far right. My mouth fell open when I saw an irregular circle of energy about ten feet wide, the light pulsing in a steady rhythm from bright to dark.

Alright! I thought. *This is my cue to leave.*

"It's been fun, guys," I said, clapping Jesse on the shoulder. "But I gotta run."

"Run where?" he said, looking around. "Ain't nowhere to go. That tunnel behind us is the only way out."

Just as I started to explain, there was an enormous clap of thunder outside. The cavern trembled slightly, as if the hill above us had been directly struck again. The bats fluttered slightly as the thunder reverberated against the rocks around us.

"Back where I came from," I called over my shoulder, as I started quickly walking towards the glowing wall.

"Where in tarnation is that infernal light comin' from?" asked Johnny.

"Some kinda gas or somethin'," said Frank with a shrug. "I seen that happen a few times before. Those rocks start glowin' any time a pow'rful lightnin' storm comes in."

"What if it explodes or somethin'?" asked Jesse, sounding a little fearful. "Might be dangerous."

I ignored the boys, who were now about twenty feet behind me, and took a tentative step closer to the blue light. The walls didn't simply glow; it was as if an illuminated funhouse mirror was superimposed over the rocks, blurring and distorting the jagged surface beneath it. The waves of blue swirled and rippled like sunlight in a pool of water, and the smell of ozone was almost overpowering. As I grew closer, I felt a strong static charge that made all the little hairs on my arm stand up.

"This might not even work," I muttered to myself, my heart hammering furiously. "I might not even wind up back in 2013. I might land in ancient Rome, or somewhere in the distant future. Or in outer space." I turned back to look at the boys behind me, who stared at me curiously.

"You want us to help ya look for somethin' down here?" called Jesse. "Cost ya another fifty cents."

"Make it a dollar," suggested his brother.

Before I could answer, John took a step forward and turned to the left. "What in tarnation is that?" he cried. "It looks like a dead body!"

I inched towards the blue light, trying to gather my courage. *Ignore those guys, I told myself. It's now or never.*

But before I could move, Jesse darted over to the stone wall on the far left and dropped down his knees, then let out a cry.

"Lord have mercy!" he yelled. "Why, if it ain't a man's arm! Stickin' right out of solid rock!" The other boys rushed over to examine the wall.

I stopped. *A man's what?*

I darted over to where the boys were kneeling. There, bathed in the pale light of the nearby glowing wall, was a human arm sticking out of solid rock, the hand permanently bent in a claw-like gesture. The body wasn't just buried in rock: it was as if the arm and the rock were cast from a single seamless piece, like some kind of bizarre avant-garde sculpture.

"Holy shit," I whispered.

"What's that on his wrist?" said Frank.

Jesse reached out and pulled up the man's dark blue sleeve to reveal an expensive-looking chrome wristwatch. He slipped the strap off the body's fingers, and examined it. "Some kinda fancy clock, I think," he said, turning it over in the light. "Looks maybe like it's from France or somethin'."

"Let me take a look," I said, peering closer. It was a Rolex Oyster Perpetual model, similar to one my father used to wear. I looked at the back and read an engraved inscription: "Happy 15th Anniversary, Steven — Love, Jessica. June 11, 1971."

1971!

I felt slightly dizzy.

Jesse snatched the watch out of my hand. "I found it," he snapped. "My prize. Anybody tries to take it from me gets the business end o' my knife."

"That man surely ain't gonna have no use for it no more," said Johnny, still a little shaken.

I stared back at the disembodied arm, impaled in stone, as the blue light danced around and cast sharply-etched shadows against the cave wall. I touched the arm's spider-like fingers, which seemed to be frozen in a permanent state of agony, then I turned around and looked back at the circle of blue light, which seemed a little smaller than it had been seconds before.

My mind was racing. Whatever strange force had brought me here had also brought this man from 1971 to the same place — only in his case, he hadn't been as lucky as I'd been. The hand was pale and lifeless, cold to the touch. I examined his blue nylon jacket sleeve, its molecular fibers blending precisely into the limestone wall. Without even looking, I knew the rest of the man's body was entombed inside the rock. There was no way to say how long he'd been there — days, weeks, maybe even years. *Or maybe it just happened a few moments ago.*

"I just hope it didn't hurt too much when it happened," I said softly, trying not to think about what it'd be like to materialize inside solid rock.

"What?" asked Jesse. "You worried about that godforsaken fool?" The boy made a dismissive gesture, then lit a nearby torch. "He got buried in the cave. Happens all the time 'round these parts. Like I said... lotsa mudslides this time o' year." The boys continued to scrutinize the wristwatch, as if it was a priceless heirloom from a pirate's treasure.

I backed away from the lifeless arm, then turned around to gaze at the blue light, which was beginning to diminish in intensity. I clicked off my flashlight, plunging my side of the cave into darkness. There was another rumble of distant thunder, and I could hear the rain outside pouring down, as rivulets of water trickled down the dirt floor that led to the tunnel. I gathered my courage, secured my backpack on my shoulder, and began to walk steadily towards the glowing wall.

"Where's he goin'?" said Frank, looking up.

"He's gone plumb crazy!" shouted one of the others.

I began to walk faster, my heart pounding in my ears. Just as I got within ten feet of the wall, the light began to flicker and fade.

"NO!" I cried.

I pumped my legs faster and leaped into the light with all my strength. I immediately bounced off the solid rock wall and sprawled back into the dirt. I looked up just in time to see the blue glow disappear

with a slight 'pop,' and the room plunged into near-darkness. I shook my head and rolled over, then noticed I could just make out a trace of afternoon light from the tunnel opening.

"Why'd ya do a dang fool thing like that?" called Jesse.

I sat up woozily and rubbed my shoulder. This time, I'd bruised the hell out of my right arm. *Well, at least now I have a matched set*, I thought, wincing as I rubbed my aching shoulder.

"Let's get outta here," said Frank. "We gotta git home afor' dark. Johnny's mother tol' me she'd skin us alive if'n we didn't bring him home in time for supper."

Jesse shuffled over to me and leaned over, holding his torch. "Ya find what you're lookin' for?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I think I'm stuck here forever," I moaned.

"In the cave?"

"No, I mean, in —"

"What in blue blazes is goin' on down there?" yelled out a loud voice.

The four of us looked up to see Mr. Colt and Travis, standing just inside the cave entrance. Both were soaked to the skin. Mr. Colt held a lantern, and his face was red and angry. There was another clap of thunder outside. Jesse momentarily glared in my direction, then turned away.

"Jason!" the man cried. "You git your fanny outta this cave this instant and come back home with us right now."

"But I —"

"No buts," he said, walking briskly down the path and over to where I lay on the floor. "I got me a piece of paper in my pocket that says I'm legally responsible for you for the next ninety days."

I felt a wave of desperation wash over me as I looked back where the glowing blue light had been, then over to where the dead man's arm stuck out of the rock. It was as if the arm was giving me a silent warning: *Don't try this, or you'll end up like me.*

Mr. Colt held out his hand to me and glared. I finally sighed and let him help me up.

There was a sudden rumble from outside.

"Quickly, now!" Colt barked. "You boys get the hell outta here, now! 'Lest you want this to be your goddamned grave!"

We scrambled up the narrow dirt tunnel that led outside, into the torrential rain. Just as we exited through the brush, a nearby burst of thunder caused us all to jump. The top of the hill exploded in a shower of sparks, and we stepped backwards just as several large boulders and a massive wave of dirt and mud slid down the hill. We stood together from a safe distance and watched as the side of the hill was engulfed in a cloud of dust. In less than thirty seconds, the cave entrance had completely disappeared, submerged in a mass of muddy rocks and debris.

§ § § § §

Travis didn't say a word to me on the way back to the farmhouse, but his angry glances told me enough. His father harangued us both, chastising me for my "durn silly tomfoolery," then blasted his stepson for my attempt at running away earlier in the afternoon, somehow blaming him.

By the time we reached the family's front porch, Mrs. Colt let out a cry, telling me she'd been worried sick for the entire afternoon, and insisted that I take a hot bath. She boiled some water on the woodstove in the kitchen, and prepared a large metal bucket, about a third the size of my family's real bathtub back home. After admonishing me to be sure to wash behind my ears, she left the room, telling me I had ten minutes to scrape all the mud off. I sheepishly removed my dirty clothes and laid them on a kitchen chair, then stepped into the steaming water, which was hotter than I usually liked it, and slowly immersed myself.

Despite the soothing heat of the water, I felt utterly lost and numb. I had initially thought this entire experience was some kind of a mad dream, or at least something temporary. *If only the blue light had stayed on for a second longer*, I thought, reliving the events of the cave over and over again. *If only I had just run to the wall a little faster!* And now that the tunnel was obliterated, there was no chance I could ever get back inside.

I felt completely numb. *Now I was really stuck in 1864*, I thought, *with no possible way back*. My friends, my family, everyone and everything I ever knew... all utterly beyond my reach. The thought was like a nightmare, some impossible fantasy from which I couldn't possibly escape.

I sat there, soaking for several minutes, splashing my chest and arms, and nursing my injured shoulder. I thought of my friends and family back in Seattle. Up until the last 24 hours, I'd had my life completely mapped out: I was supposed to attend a three-week music camp on Vashon Island at the end of July, after I came home from visiting my aunt. School was supposed to start back in Seattle in September, and my mom had promised to let me take some vocal training classes, to help me prepare for my musical career — maybe even audition for *American Voice*, once I turned 16. My best friend, J.D., was going to try to find me a boyfriend, helping me move past a disastrous relationship I'd had last spring. And I was a shoo-in for getting the lead in our fall production of *High School Musical*.

I thought I knew exactly where I was going to be for the next year, I thought, letting my hands soak through the warm water. And instead, I'm stuck here in Misery, living with the Beverly Hillbillies.

I felt tears trickling down the left side of my face. "No," I muttered to myself. "I'm not gonna cry about this. I can survive this. I can survive anything."

Just as I reached out to grab a towel, I heard several loud voices arguing in the living room down the hallway. I stepped out of the tub onto the hardwood kitchen floor, hopping on one foot, wrapped the towel around my waist, then tip-toed down the hallway and peered around the doorway.

Mr. Colt was shaking his finger in Travis' face. "You'll do what I say, boy," he bellowed. "As long as I'm the man of this house, your job is to mind yer elders!"

"You ain't my father," said Travis quietly.

Colt slapped him — hard in the face. Travis head reeled, but he didn't make a sound. He slowly turned his head back and glared at the man.

Lem sniffled, trying to choke back his tears. "But poppa —" he started.

"Don't give me no lip, son," Mr. Colt snarled. "Go outside and fetch me a switch. And if you're not back in five seconds, you'll get a whippin' too, 'long with your brother."

The younger boy took off through the front door in a blur.

Travis stood, unblinking. "I didn't do nothin' wrong," he insisted.

"I won't have any member of this family dishonor us by insultin' our guests," Colt said. "From now on, you best treat that Thomas boy with respect!"

What? I was taken aback. *This was about me?*

"Uh, excuse me," I said, clearing my throat.

Travis and his parents turned to look at me, just as Lem reappeared with a gnarly branch in his hand.

"Mr. Colt, Travis had nothing to do with me leaving," I explained as I stepped into the room, adjusting my towel. "I didn't want to cause any trouble around here. I'm not planning to stay here for long."

The man reached in his pocket, then produced a piece of paper and waved it at me. "I got me a document here from Judge Shaw that says you're my legal responsibility," he said. "And I aim to live up to that." He took the branch from Lem and turned to his older son as he began plucking off some of the leaves, letting them flutter to the floor. "Like I told ya before, boy, Jason is livin' with us now. And the sooner you accept that, the better."

Travis' eyes flared, but he said nothing.

Colt held up the stick and gestured with it. "You know what to do, boy."

Travis nodded, then turned away and dropped his overalls to reveal his naked backside. Like the rest of him, it was beautiful, but I felt no sexual attraction at the moment — only the fear of what was about to happen.

Travis leaned over and gripped a nearby chair for support. His stepfather raised the branch and began whipping him, over and over again. I stood transfixed, wincing with each blow. Lem began blubbering, but his mother shushed him to silence. Travis didn't make a sound, but I could see him trembling, his hands squeezing the chair so tight they turned white, his powerful back muscles straining with the effort. Red welts began to appear on his white flesh.

Finally, after the man had administered half a dozen strokes, I had about enough.

"Stop, please," I begged, taking another step forward. "Mr. Colt... sir. Please don't hit him again. This was all my fault."

He paused in mid-stroke and gave me a steely glare. "Go read your Bible," he replied. "Proverbs 13, verse 24 — '*He that spareth the rod hates his son; but he that loves him chastens him.*' Git back to the kitchen, Jason. You and I'll have a conversation later."

I started to respond, but Travis' eyes darted towards me and he subtly shook his head. I meekly stepped back around the door, then returned to the kitchen and sat down on one of the chairs. In the next room, I heard the sounds of the branch whipping through the air and cracking against bare flesh, and I flinched at what Travis must be going through. I felt nauseous.

"Don't judge my husband too harshly," said Mrs. Colt, as she entered the kitchen and softly closed the door behind me. "Travis has been a mite contrary over the last few weeks. Just a young man growin' up. This'll all work out for the best."

"Yeah," I said, looking away. I knew if I said anything more, it would only make more trouble. "Uh... yes, ma'am," I said, correcting myself, remembering the language of the period.

"We should change that bandage on your head," she said soothingly. "I think it's startin' to bleed again." She inspected it carefully, tsk'd-tsk'd, and then removed it. She quickly made up a new one, and wrapped it around my head. "This should hold you 'til tomorrow," she said. "We'll stop by Dr. Wells' place in the mornin'. Maybe he can do somethin' for those bruises, too."

I thought about making a remark about Travis needing a doctor more than I did, but I thought better of it.

She handed me a pale blue long-sleeved shirt, some wool socks, and some jeans, then set a pair of work boots on the floor. "You're not near as tall as my oldest son Billy James," she said, "but you can wear his things for the time bein', until we can get you some proper clothes from the general store."

I nodded. In the distance, the whipping sounds finally ceased. There was a small sob, but I wasn't sure if it was Travis or Lem.

"My husband and I think it'd be best for you to sleep out in the big barn for the time bein'," she said, nodding towards the door. "It's still plenty warm out there, and you can stay up in the hayloft, away from the

animals. My son Billy James used to sleep out there some nights. Gave him some privacy.”

I nodded, then stopped her as she turned to leave. “Is Travis gonna be alright?” I asked.

She sighed. “That boy takes after my first husband, Micah. Travis and his brother Billy are two of a kind. They’re both as stubborn as mules, but they’ve got good hearts.”

“So Lem’s father is Mr. Colt,” I said, as I pulled on the shirt and buttoned up the front. It was about two sizes too large for me, but I rolled up the cuffs around my wrists.

“That’s right. Seth was a widower with a young son, and we knew each other from church.” She gave me a sad look. “Don’t judge my husband too harshly. He means well. That’s just his way, is all.”

I made a wry face. “Where I come from, that’s child abuse,” I said.

“You’re not in Canada any more, Jason,” she said firmly. “Best you start acceptin’ how we do things here in Missouri. Good or bad, it’s our way.”

With that, she left the kitchen, closing the door. I let my towel drop, stepped into the overalls and rolled up the cuffs, then slipped on the socks and boots, which fit me perfectly. I made a mental note to pick up some underwear — if such a thing existed in this crazy backwoods world — then grabbed my backpack and headed out the door and into the night air.

There was a light drizzle, but the worst of the storm had passed, and the temperature was cool but not chilly. I looked to the south, in the direction of the hillside, but saw no lightning. I felt exhausted from the events of the day and trudged wearily through the mud to the front of the barn.

Lem was waiting by the door. As he opened the gate for me, I noticed his eyes were red and watery. The inside of the barn glowed with the yellow warmth of his lantern, and the smell didn’t seem as overpowering as it did the previous morning. I followed him wordlessly past the three or four cow stalls to the very back of the barn. We climbed a rickety gray ladder that led up to the hayloft, and I stepped off the landing and saw that Mrs. Colt had already set up a makeshift bed on top of

the straw. She'd thoughtfully provided two blankets and a multicolored quilt, along with a patterned sheet and a pillow.

I laid down my backpack and looked around. There was a small wooden shelf on the far right, along with a box of matches, some writing paper, a pen, an inkwell, and three or four dusty leather-bound volumes. I picked one up: it was a copy of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, a second edition, published in 1863. *This would be worth a fortune on eBay*, I mused.

"Those belonged to my stepbrother Billy," Lem explained. "Startin' 'bout a year ago, he spent all his time up here. Before he enlisted, him and my poppa used to argue somethin' fierce."

"I can imagine."

The boy hung his kerosene lantern on a nearby hook. "Don't leave this on when you ain't up here," he warned. "Winds might come up and knock it clean off the hook, an' that might start a pow'rful fire."

I nodded, remembering the charred remains of Olivia's farmhouse. Lem turned away to step back down the ladder but I stopped him. "You sure there's no room back in the house?" I asked, nodding towards the Colt home.

He shook his head. "Poppa says you're a guest. No need for you ta stick your nose into Colt family business."

I thought about the terrible beating I had just witnessed and shuddered. "I won't. Hey, does it get cold out here?"

Lem shrugged. "Ain't much different up here than inside the farmhouse. Maybe a little warmer, 'long as you stay on this side, away from the winds."

That made sense. I knew better than to look for a thermostat. *What I would give for an electric blanket*, I thought.

"Lemuel!" called a voice. "You up there, boy?"

"Comin', poppa!" he said. He stepped off the landing onto the ladder, leaping down two rungs at a time.

I peered over the ledge and saw Mr. Colt, who gave me a glance. "Need to talk to you for a moment, Jason," he said. It was a command, not a request for a conversation.

I nodded and made my way down the ladder. Lem scampered out the barn door and into the night. Colt turned to me.

“Sheriff Baxter tells me you got two choices: find a family who’ll take you in until you’re of age, or you can sit on yer ass in the country orphanage for the next three years.”

Well, *he doesn’t waste any time*. “I’ll take door number one,” I said dryly.

“I don’t catch yer meanin’.” His lips were tight, his expression severe.

“I’ll stay here — for the time being. *Sir*.”

The man took a step closer and leaned down to me. His breath was foul, and I saw for the first time that his teeth were yellow, with a black gap on the right side where two teeth were decayed and partly missing. “You will if ya know what’s right. One wrong move...” — he snapped his fingers — “...and you’ll be at the mercy of St. Louis County, with all them other lost children.”

I returned his glare. “Three dollars a week, right?” I said, reaching into my backpack. I counted out three bills and pressed them into his hand. “I assume that’ll cover room and board for a week.”

His face brightened. “I knew ya would see it my way,” he said, glancing at the cash. “You feelin’ hungry, boy?” His face almost looked friendly.

I nodded.

“Sarah will bring you up a meal in a few minutes.”

He turned to leave, but I stopped him. “Mr. Colt... look, I meant what I said before. I’m not here to cause any trouble. Travis had nothing to do with me leaving.”

“I know that,” he said matter-of-factly. “Normally, *you’d* be on the other end of the switch instead of Travis.”

I winced.

“You jes’ be mindful of that,” he continued, “next time you think about runnin’ away.”

“One more thing,” I said. “How’d you find me?”

Colt shrugged. “Once Sarah found your note, I went by the school-house and fetched Travis. He ‘membered you talkin’ about the cave before,” he said. “Everybody ‘round these parts knows about Marsen’s Cavern. Foolish children been playin’ in there for generations.”

Marsen’s Cavern, I thought. *At least I have a name for that place now.*

“But don’t you be thinkin’ ‘bout goin’ back, now,” he continued. “Much too dangerous for anybody to be ‘round there. ‘Specially this time

o' year, with all them mudslides and rain. People've died in those caves, now and again. There ain't nothin' but death down there."

I flashed back to the grim vision of the time-traveler's arm imbedded in the cave wall, then nodded.

Mr. Colt leaned down. "And we wouldn't want anythin' to happen to ya," he said. His expression looked almost kindly, but there was a cruel look in his eyes.

Realization dawned on me. "At least, not before the hearing in a few weeks," I said slowly. "When I inherit my Aunt Olivia's estate."

Colt's eyes momentarily flickered. "Now that ya mention it, I reckon the Sheriff did say somethin' about a court date," he said, spitting to the side. "He surely did."

I followed him out the barn door and paused in the doorway. There was a half-moon at the horizon, bathing the area in a pale-blue wash. Colt stopped and stared at the empty fields, then gestured towards a distant fence. "See that marker out yonder?"

I nodded.

"That's where my property ends and Olivia's begins," he said, with growing excitement. "Why, what with the 1500 acres I have now, we'd have pret' near 3500 acres and then some — just right for plantin' in the spring. We'd be able to double, maybe even triple our harvest for next year. I only got five sharecroppers now; maybe we can get a few more, or take on some extra workers if we have ta."

Colt paused for a moment. "But there's time to talk about that later," he said. "We can be partners, you and me. Be part of our family... son."

He gripped my shoulder in what was supposed to be a friendly manner, but I still shuddered slightly. I didn't respond.

"Well, you think about it, anyway, Jason," he said, then spat again off to one side. "I'll see you bright 'n early at breakfast. Got a big day tomorrow."

He left me standing there by the barn. I stared up at the night sky, feeling a slight chill in the air. I looked down the dirt road, then back at the barn. I could just grab my stuff and make a run for it. But where would I go? How far would I get? And what's the point? I'd still be stuck in 1864, no matter where I wound up.

As if to answer me, my late father's words came back to me: "Don't ever make an important decision on an empty stomach or without sleeping on it overnight," he said. "If you still feel strongly about something the next morning, after a good meal, chances are, then that's the right way to go."

A dog howled in the distance, and the wind rustled through the trees. I sighed, then wearily turned around and trudged back into the barn, closing the door behind me.

Chapter 4

I awoke with a start several hours later to the plaintive whimperings of an animal, which began as a low murmur, then almost got loud enough to vibrate the floorboards of the hayloft in which I slept. I was so out of it, I couldn't decide if the sound emanated from a human, a wounded animal, or some strange kind of alien creature. I yawned, then rolled over and peered down through the railing just as the barn door creaked open and Mrs. Colt entered, still in her nightgown, carrying a lantern.

"Anything wrong?" I called, rubbing my eyes and trying to focus through the dim light below.

"Just about time for Agatha, Missie, and Matilda's milkin," she replied, grabbing a wooden stool as she headed towards the three cows in their pens. "They get mighty ornery if I'm even five minutes late."

I checked my wristwatch — it was a couple of minutes past 5:30 A.M. I pulled on my overalls, then softly crept down the ladder and walked over to where Mrs. Colt sat. I stared, fascinated by her nimble movements as she finished the first cow, then moved over to the next. The entire operation was amazing to me.

"You never seen anybody milk a cow before?" she asked, deftly squeezing one hand, then the other, causing a splattering sound into the bucket below.

I shook my head. To me, milk was one of those things that you bought from the neighborhood 7-11, then sat on a shelf in a refrigerator. I'd never even given a thought as to where it came from, or how it wound up inside the carton. The only cow I'd ever seen before was in a Disney cartoon.

Five minutes later, I found myself sitting on the stool and trying my hand at the next cow. I gave a tentative squeeze. The animal let out a grunt, then slowly turned its head and gave me the evil eye. I quickly jumped back, knocking over my stool as I tumbled to the ground, certain I was about to get a hoof in the face.

Mrs. Colt laughed. "Be a little more gentle-like. That's a very sensitive area, y'know. And Matilda's a mite picky about strangers grabbin' her, 'specially this early in the morning."

I felt a little embarrassed. Needless to say, this was the first time I'd ever put my hands on a female breast. *And probably the last time, too*, I thought.

I tried again, and was rewarded by a satisfying squirt into the bucket, and eventually figured out a rhythm, using both hands. About six or seven minutes later, the milk supply seemed to dwindle, as if an invisible faucet had slowly closed shut. "How do you know when to stop?" I asked, giving the teat a cautionary tug. Only a drop emerged.

Mrs. Colt picked up the two buckets carefully, so as not to slosh their contents, and walked towards the front of the barn. "Once you milk a few hundred times, believe me — you'll know."

"You want a hand with that?" I called after her, as she exited through the door.

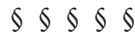
"Thanks just the same," she called over her shoulder. "I've gotta get to the kitchen and start workin' on breakfast. We got a big day today — we're going into town to get some things from McBillin's general store, and we need to stop by the doctor to have him look at that bump on your noggin."

"It's fine," I said, noticing for the first time that my bandage had fallen off during the night.

"You go on back to bed, now," she said in the distance. "I'll have breakfast ready in about an hour."

I heard the back door shut, then I glanced out at the dark blue horizon. The crickets were still singing merrily in the distant woods, and I caught just a faint sliver of daylight in the Eastern sky.

"I'll never get used to these rotten hours," I thought, as I stifled a yawn and stumbled back to the ladder that led up to my lumpy bed.



Three hours later, we were bouncing in the family wagon, riding along the dusty, twisting road that led into town. Travis still wouldn't talk to me, and in fact, wouldn't even look me in the eye. But his brother Lem chattered on happily, filling me in on the minutiae of this part of St. Louis, the other farms in the area, the families, and so on. The little boy seemed to be a treasure-trove of gossip, and Mrs. Colt beamed at her son's ongoing narration, prompting him for information whenever there was a lull. I glanced over at Travis, but he kept to the other side of the wagon and stared out at the Western sky, sullen and silent.

I was again struck by how handsome Travis was. Except for the slight crookedness of his nose, his face was nearly perfect, without a single blemish. From this angle, I took in his strong jaw, pouting lips, and piercing blue eyes, which sparkled as they reflected the pale light of the morning sky. Travis was wearing overalls with no shirt, and his muscular chest rippled slightly when he took in a deep breath. His shaggy blond hair was casually parted in the middle, looking almost immaculate as it splayed down his neck, and he leaned on one arm, causing a vein to pulse up in his bicep. I held my breath, almost hypnotized by his beauty.

I was momentarily embarrassed when I realized I must look like a total wreck, having barely had a chance to even brush my hair before we left the house. Unlike Travis, I was definitely not one of those people who could just roll out of bed and look like a million bucks. *Gotta remember to make the best of what I have*, I thought, remembering my best friend J.D.'s advice from back home; he always had strong opinions on how to hook up with new guys and make a good impression. Not that he was that successful at it.

As we made our way down the winding rural road, Lem's narration began to fade out to static, and I felt myself drifting off to sleep. Suddenly, the boy shook my shoulder and pointed. I turned my head and craned over Mr. Colt's shoulder to get a better view. I hadn't paid much attention to the town the day before, when I had ridden in with Sheriff Baxter. Now I was taken in by the rustic beauty of old St. Louis. The streets swarmed with shoppers and wagons, even at this early hour. Some of the women wore long, frilly skirts and twirled fancy umbrellas over their

heads — “parasols,” as Lem called them — and most of the men wore hats and coats. It all seemed very formal, especially for a Saturday morning. Every so often, Mr. Colt would curse quietly and slow the horses as a throng of people bustled their way through the muddy streets.

The shops were adorned with brightly-painted signs: a butcher shop here, a dress store there, then a tannery (whatever that was), followed by a “sundries” store, which had a banner sign that trumpeted its new soda fountain. Further down the street, I caught a whiff of the delicious aroma of fresh bread from a nearby bakery, combined with some other spicy concoction being prepared by a street vendor. The steady clip-clop of horses’ hooves made me flash back to the one time I visited Disneyland with my folks a few years ago — well, at least in my lifetime. I remembered Disney’s version of “Main Street U.S.A.” being similarly picturesque, with the same sort of quaint, colorful buildings and gabled, art-deco rooftops, though the turn-of-the-century theme park was considerably cleaner than the real thing.

My nostalgic admiration came to an abrupt halt when I saw a half-dozen miserable-looking black men and children being led down the street in chains. They were wearing ragged, torn clothing, and their eyes were wide, their faces terrified.

“Hurry up, the lot o’ ya!” bellowed a large white man. “Come on! Step lively, now!” He cracked a whip in the air for emphasis, and they all began to shuffle down the street a little faster.

I sat back in the wagon, dumbstruck. “Slaves,” I said out loud. *Actual slaves. We’re definitely not in Disneyland, Toto.*

“Slavery got abolished a year ago,” said Lem, in answer to my remark. “When the Yankees took over the gov’ment.”

“Then why would...” I began.

“They’re murderers,” explained Mrs. Colt. “It was all over the papers yesterday. Kentucky slaves killed an entire family. The law’s caught up with them and they’re taking them all back for trial — God have mercy on all of them.”

I looked away, wincing at the thought of what 1864 justice would be like. We turned the corner from the main street onto a large side road, the wagon wheels splashing noisily through some puddles that had built up in a narrow ditch on the right side of the street. Our wagon finally

came to a lurching stop in front of a store that occupied most of the block, emblazoned with an ornate hand-painted sign: "MacBillin's General Store — Est. 1855." I hopped out to the wooden step under the awning, trying to avoid the sea of mud that littered the street, and looked up at a nearby street marker, which revealed this was 4th Street. Across the filthy brown boulevard was a lavish stone block church with four white columns standing solemnly out in front. A small crowd of people milled around in front, all dressed in black.

"That's the Old Cathedral," piped up Lem, who skittered past me. "Buncha Catholics in there." He lowered his voice. "Course we don't pay them no never-mind, since we're Baptists."

I nodded, then stared back at the building, which seemed vaguely familiar. *It reminded me of something. But what?*

The boy started to run into the store, then gave me a wary eye. "Ya ain't Catholic, are ya?"

I shook my head. "To be honest, my folks weren't that much into religion," I answered. "Technically, I think we're Presbyterians, but we haven't been to church for awhile." More like four or five times in my life, the last one for my cousin's wedding a year ago.

"That'll change soon enough," boomed Mr. Colt, as he slipped the horses' reins around a hitching post and tied a knot. "We'll get you set up at the First Baptist Church first thing tomorrow mornin'. Can't have no godforsaken heathens under this family's roof. Wouldn't be proper."

I sighed. *So much for my late-Sunday-morning beauty sleep*, I thought. I turned to enter the store, then stopped. I looked up one end of the street and down the other, then stared up in the air. Something was missing. After a moment, it finally dawned on me: *this is where the St. Louis Gateway Arch stands!* Or, I corrected myself, *one end of it will be standing in another 100 years.* I stared up in the air, trying to remember how the massive 600-foot steel structure had looked, the last time I had seen it. The area seemed strangely empty without it.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" grumbled Travis, as he pushed past me. "See somethin' funny?"

"Nothing," I said, as my mind snapped back to 1864. "Just something... something that isn't there yet."

A little bell tinkled as I followed him through the door. The store was illuminated mainly from the sunlight that shined through a dozen large glass windows at the front. The glass was somewhat mottled and translucent, so the morning light coming through was dim and diffuse. I followed Lem through a maze of a dozen rows of shelves that nearly reached the ceiling, each filled with an incredible variety of items: spools of thread, boxes of bullets, socks, dinner plates, jewelry, bottles of liniment... all stacked willy-nilly, without any particular rhyme or reason.

The back row had shelf after shelf of random food items: cans of meat, vegetables, boxes of spices, bags of coffee beans, sacks of potatoes, all smelling fresh and appetizing. Here and there on the floor were scattered large wooden barrels open at the top, one filled with pickles in saltwater, another with what appeared to be tobacco, and still another with fresh fish. Farming tools were stacked along one side: rakes, saws, hammers, even a medium-sized plow on the floor. It was a completely schizophrenic array of merchandise, a bizarre combination of a grocery store, delicatessen, hardware store, clothing store, and farming supply emporium, with everything arranged almost at random. It made absolutely no sense.

Nearby, two old men were idly playing a game of checkers, one grumbling while the other jumped two pieces with a flourish. Mrs. Colt gently put her hand on my shoulder, then turned to her younger son.

"Lem, you go fetch everything on this list and meet me back here in five minutes," she said, handing him a piece of paper. "And Jason," she said, turning to me, "let's see if we can get you some proper clothes, just to tide you over until I have some time to get back to my sewing table."

She pulled out my old pair of ripped, muddy jeans and held them up, as if to guess the size. "You know," she said, a little puzzled, "I do believe these are the strangest clothes I've ever seen."

I tried not to react, and kept my voice very casual. "It's what everybody wears back home, in... uh, Canada."

"Levi Strauss," she read out loud, then gave me a quizzical look. "Are these made in Germany?"

"Uh, they're new," I said, pointing to the emblem on the back pocket. "San Francisco, California," I read out loud. "Established 1853. Well, kinda new." *Thank god I didn't wear anything more modern*, I thought.

She nodded. "But we still need to get you some real Missouri clothes. And you'll definitely need some proper underwear and a coat. Winter'll be here before you know it."

Ten minutes later, we'd manage to pick out my entire ensemble: two pairs of "dungarees" that almost fit me (not Levi jeans, which the proprietor claimed to have heard of but didn't stock), two gray long-sleeved shirts, a white button-down dress shirt, a leather belt, three pairs of wool socks, three pairs of regular underwear, three pairs of long underwear, and a pair of black leather work boots. Incredibly, the whole thing only came to \$17.50. *Abercrombie & Fitch it isn't*, I thought, holding one of the shirts up to my shoulders, *but you can't beat the discount prices.*

"Ya want that on your account, Mrs. Colt, or will it be cash?" the shopkeeper asked. He had a thick brogue — a mixture of Scottish and Irish, if my guess was right — and he and another clerk, apparently his wife, bustled back and forth behind the counter, wrapping up my purchases in brown paper, tied with twine.

"Cash," I said, reaching for the remaining dollars in my pocket. I still had \$77 left from 'Aunt' Olivia's money that the judge had allocated to me two days before. With luck, I might get access to the remaining \$800 in her account after the court hearing in a few weeks.

I took out the wad of bills from my pocket and smoothed them out on the counter, then gave one of them a closer look. *United States Treasury Note*, I read. *March 30th, 1863. Legal Tender for Five Dollars.* The paper was a pale green, and at least 25% larger than the 2013 currency I had back in my room at the barn. The face on the bill didn't look like any president I could identify.

"And here's the fifty cents," said Mr. Colt, as he snapped two quarters next to the bills on the counter and gave me a thin smile. "The least we can do for our new member of the family."

"Boarder," I corrected, my eyes narrowing. "Your new boarder."

"I heerd about that, Seth," said the old man playing checkers behind me, not bothering to look up. "Olivia Thomas' young nephew, is that right?"

"Sure is, Nathaniel," Colt said, squeezing a little too hard on my right shoulder, making me wince. "County's done placed him in foster care with us for awhile."

The second old man looked up, peered at me through his eyeglasses, then nodded. "Yep. I'd know that Thomas nose anywhere."

I felt my nose, a little self-consciously. I guess it was technically a "Thomas nose," even if I wasn't directly related to this particular Thomas.

As Mr. Colt and the checker players bantered back and forth, discussing everything from the weather to crop forecasts, I stole a glance back at Travis. He had a bored expression on his face, then he yawned and flexed his muscular arms behind his head. I felt a slight shiver at the sight of his underarms, which revealed a few tufts of blond hair. *Definitely a real blond*, I thought; one mystery solved. My mouth suddenly felt very dry.

"STOP!" roared a loud voice to my left.

All of us looked up to see the shopkeeper as he stormed down the aisle after a young boy, who giggled as he scampered away. The man was fast, but the kid was much more agile; the boy feinted to the left, then suddenly slipped through the man's fingers as the boy made an unexpected move to the right and tore out the front door in a blur and disappeared into the street.

"You blasted scoundrel!" the man cried, running after him. "Ya didn't pay for those sweets, didja now?" The storekeeper lumbered out to the front step, panting, then looked around for a few moments. Finally he cursed, threw his hands down in a dismissive gesture, then stormed back inside and slammed the door behind him, rattling the front windows to the point where I thought they might shatter.

All the shoppers around me stopped and stared at him.

"It's just penny candy, Angus," admonished the woman behind the counter, who I guessed was his wife, or possibly a sister. "I'll just add it to the Harrington's bill."

"That good-for-nothin' scalawag Tommy Harrington will be the very death of me yet," he muttered, then stepped back around the counter and glared at me. "Now, as for you — will that be all?" he asked, catching his breath.

"Uh... yes, sir," I said, going down my mental list of needed supplies. "No, wait — I also need some shampoo, a hair brush, a toothbrush, a small mirror, and some dental floss, if you have any."

The man's eyebrows shot up. "Well," he said, stroking his chin, "I do believe we have some of that shampoo soap in a bottle. It's expensive — came all the way from Paris, France. It'll cost ya thirty-five cents. Don't get much call for that 'round here."

"I think I saw a bottle last week," added the woman, as she disappeared through a door leading to a back room.

"I'm surprised it's not on display," I said, nodding to the rows of shelves behind me. "I bet you'd sell a lot more shampoo if you displayed it so people could see it."

McBillin snorted, then leaned towards me. "Very doubtful," he said rolling his r's. "My customers ain't exactly made o' money, y'know. Speakin' o' which, that'll be another seventy-five cents for the additional items. And we don't got nothin' called 'floss.' Never heard o' that one, lad."

I shrugged, figuring I could improvise with some string back at the Colt farmhouse. The woman came out from the back and set down an ornate white glass jar in front of me, along with a small hand mirror and a strange-looking wooden brush, which vaguely resembled my old Crest toothbrush back home.

I handed him one more dollar bill. "You know," I said, as the man turned to get my change from under the counter, "it's a little hard to find things in here. Have you ever thought about maybe reorganizing the merchandise — you know, grouping similar things together?"

The shopkeeper frowned. "My shopkeepin's worked for me for more than twenty years, includin' the last nine right here in Missouri." He seemed irritated.

I shrugged and pocketed the change. "Hey, it's just a suggestion," I said, remembering a Business 101 class I'd taken last semester. "Back where I come from, all the... uh, general stores put all the sewing products together, the clothing just on one side of the store, the tools on another, and so on. Then they put a sign over each area, so people can find what they want, even if they've never been in the store before."

He gave me a steely glare. "So," he said slowly, "you're wantin' to tell me howta run my store, do ya now? You got some suggestions for me?"

"Sure," I said, gathering up my packages, handing one to Lem, who had come up behind me. "For one, it's much too dark in here. Put up some kerosene lamps and make it brighter in the aisles. Maybe put in a

skylight in the roof. Let people see what they're trying to buy." I gestured near the front doors. "There's not nearly enough light coming in from the front."

"I said the very same thing not a week ago," the woman behind the counter idly commented, as she wrapped up the last few items.

I pointed to the store shelves. "And your shelves are much too high," I continued. "Nobody can reach the items on the top two shelves. You should chop them off right about here," I said, raising my hand about six feet high. "Keep as much as you can on display, then keep the rest of the inventory in a backroom and replace the stock as you sell it each day. That way, you can keep a better eye on the customers as they walk up and down the aisles."

McBillin drummed his fingers impatiently on the counter. "I see."

The man's wife looked over his shoulder. "The boy's makin' some good points, Angus."

He turned to her and raised an eyebrow. "I'll be the judge of that." He turned back to me. "Please, go on."

I picked up my last package. "You might want to move your cash box and counter from the back of the store up to the front," I said, pointing my finger from the counter to the front windows. "That way, anybody who leaves has to walk by you first. That'll solve your shoplifting problem. Nobody will be able to leave without you seeing what they're carrying."

His face was turning bright red now. "Anythin' else, lad?"

I thought for a moment. "Oh, yeah — point of purchase," I said, remembering a question on the Business 101 final exam. "You should display a bunch of small items by the cashier — little things like hard candy, handkerchiefs, pens... stuff like that. This'll make your customers want to buy more right before they leave, even if they hadn't come in here wanting them in the first place. You'll have them spending more money without having to lift a finger. They do it all the time back home."

McBillin began shaking with fury and waving his arms. "I've never heard a more ridiculous thing in all my born days!" he roared, his face red. "Get the hell outta my store! Ya got your bloody nerve, comin' in here and tellin' me how ta run ma place!"

I stood firm. "I'm a paying customer," I said. "And you asked my opinion."

"Come on," said Travis, grabbing me by my right arm. "You done caused enough trouble. Let's get outta here."

The woman held the shopkeeper back, while the two old men chuckled and continued their game.

"You always cause mischief like that?" Travis asked, as he stepped up into the wagon, where his father was already waiting.

I grinned. "My mom says I have a knack for it."

"Angus McBillin is the angriest man in three counties," said Mrs. Colt, as she got in and sat down next to her husband on the wagon's front seat. "But he's got the biggest general store 'round these parts, that's a fact."

"You should see a Wal-Mart," I muttered, then fell back on my seat, just as Mr. Colt giddyupped the horses and we took off at a fast clip.

§ § § § §

Doc Wells pronounced my head wound to be "healing nicely" and said I wouldn't have to wear the bandage any more. Apparently, it'd leave about a two-inch scar right at the hairline, but I figured my hair would cover it most of the time. *If it worked for Harry Potter, it'd work for me.*

Travis again ignored me on the bumpy ride back to the farm house.

"You'll look right nice in that new shirt at church tomorrow, Jason," Mrs. Colt said, as we bounced along the dirt road. "And I'll hem up those pants if they need it."

I started to reply, but Travis interrupted me.

"He thinks he's too good to wear farm clothes," he muttered, his face a mask of anger. "Gotta wear *store-bought* clothes, like a fancy boy."

"That's not so," Mr. Colt retorted, as he gently snapped the reins against the horses. "Ain't got no time for your momma to sew up a bunch of shirts and pants in time for church and school this week. You be mindful 'bout what I said yesterday, boy, lest you get another whippin'."

I winced, remembering the savage beating I'd witnessed the night before. I looked up at Travis. His face softened as our eyes met, but then

he looked away. I couldn't tell if he was angry or sorry, but I desperately hoped he at least understood I was sympathetic.

§ § § § §

Once we got back to the farmhouse, Travis and Mr. Colt worked out in the field, while Lem and I spent the entire sweltering afternoon feeding the livestock and cleaning out the barn, alternating as to who pitched and who handled the wheelbarrow. It was a dirty, filthy job, and I was actually relieved around sunset when Mrs. Colt set down two pails of warm water on the back porch and ordered the two of us to clean up and get ready for supper. It wasn't exactly what I'd call a good shower, but the water's warmth did ease my muscles, strained a little by the afternoon's chores.

Lem stripped off his clothes, then knelt by the pan and splashed water and suds onto his face and body. I modestly turned to the side, just to give the naked boy a little privacy. A minute or two later, I did the same thing, scraping off the filth of the day from my skin. I figured I'd shampoo my hair later.

The boy scrubbed furiously for a minute or two, then stepped over to the pump, stuck his head under the faucet, and began pumping the handle, letting the water rinse off the studs. I did the same, momentarily stunned by the temperature of the well water, which was near-freezing.

"So," I said while drying off, "how do you take a bath when it gets cold out here?"

"'Tain't no problem," he said, sucking in a big gulp of water, then spurting it out comically. "We only take baths on Saturdays, afor' church on Sunday mornin', usually out here if it's warm, or on the floor in the kitchen during the winter."

I was horrified. "Only one bath a week?"

"Yep. My grandma Lucy says ya might get the poo-moonya if'n you take more'n one bath a week."

I rolled my eyes. "That's not true," I said, wiping off my chest and wrapping the towel around my waist. "You only get diseases like that from a virus. And it's pronounced 'pneumonia.'"

“Don’t make no never-mind,” he replied, reaching for the soap. “Ya still won’t catch me takin’ baths more’n once a week. Why, that just wouldn’t be right.”

Mrs. Colt stuck her head out the back door. “And I do believe it’s time for Travis’ bath as well,” she said, looking over my shoulder.

The older boy and his stepfather pulled their plow beside the barn and unhooked it, then Mr. Colt took the horses inside. Lem refilled the pails with warm water from his mother’s kitchen stove.

“You wash up now, Travis,” called his mother. “And don’t you forget behind your ears.”

“Yes, momma,” he said, wiping the sweat and dirt from his face. He began to wriggle out of his overalls.

“And be sure to use the soap!” Mrs. Colt called through the kitchen window, amidst the clanking of pots and pans.

“Yeah, yeah,” Travis muttered, as he briskly stepped out of his overalls and hung them on the back porch railing.

No underwear, I thought, feeling a little dizzy. I tried to look away, forcing myself to become suddenly fascinated by a small flock of birds that circled lazily around a nearby maple tree. From the corner of my eye, I watched as Travis grabbed the bucket and let half of it trickle and splash around his head, like a classic Greek statue caught in a sudden summer storm. His legs were strong and lean, much paler than the rest of his body. His upper torso was hairless and rippled with taut muscles, his waist considerably leaner and flatter than mine, with a perfect belly button. Most of his skin had a golden-brown tan, except for two white stripes across his chest and shoulders, remnants from his overalls. Travis stood with his back to me, and I could see a series of red welts on his paper-white buttocks, evidence of the cruel whipping from the night before.

“I said, do ya want another towel?” asked Lem, shaking a roughly-sewn rag in my face. “Jason?”

I nodded vaguely, still transfixed by the naked vision nearby, then took the towel and began mopping up my damp face and hair, stealing glances as subtly as I could.

Travis seemed indifferent to his nudity, scouring his body vigorously with the bar of soap, rubbing under his arms and across his chest.

He swiveled to one side, and I caught a better glimpse of his front, which was etched by a shaft of sunlight through the trees. His groin was lathered up to the point I could barely make out the key details, but it was still tantalizing enough to cause me to suck in my breath. I felt almost hypnotized, watching in slow motion as Travis scrubbed his scalp, pausing only occasionally to wipe some stray suds off his face, his eyes shut tight. After a few moments, I looked away as he rinsed off, the water cascading down his muscular shoulders and onto the nearby grass.

“Say, Lem,” Travis hollered to the younger boy, one hand gesturing in the air. “Ya got a towel?” Without even looking, he caught the cloth effortlessly in the air and began to dry off. At that moment, Mr. Colt stepped out of the barn and walked over to the well pump, then started to unbutton his shirt.

And that’s my cue to leave, I thought, quickly turning around. *Show’s over*. “I’ll get dressed up in the loft,” I called over my shoulder.

“Chicken’s on the table in five minutes,” Mrs. Colt called. “You men-folk hurry, now. Get it while it’s hot.”

Definitely hot, I thought, as I tiptoed through the barn doors and up to my sanctuary, hoping my growing erection hadn’t been too visible through my towel. *Much, much too hot for comfort*.

§ § § § §

“That was a mighty fine supper, Sarah,” said Mr. Colt, rocking back and forth in a chair and puffing on his pipe, as we sat outside on the front porch. “Mighty fine, indeed.” He let out a small belch for emphasis.

The moon only gave out a faint illumination, but Mrs. Colt — I still couldn’t bring myself to call her “Ma,” as she asked twice during dinner — had lit a kerosene lantern beside the front door, which cast an amber glow on the five of us.

“The apple pie was excellent,” I said. I had to stop myself from adding that the fried chicken had far too much cholesterol, and it’d probably cut five years off our lifespan, but I figured the world wouldn’t figure that out for another century. “Thanks again, Mrs. Colt.”

I sat back and took a long deep breath. *Well*, I thought, *you can’t beat this clean country air*. My aunt’s apartment in modern-day St. Louis

had been surrounded by smog. Between the neighboring I-270 freeway and some nearby manufacturing plants, the air was downright smelly, and there was often a nasty yellowish-brown haze in the sky. *The world of 1864 is a lot cleaner than that.*

Mrs. Colt rocked back and forth in her rocking chair, while her husband sat on the step near me, exhaling a blue cloud of smoke.

She smiled at me. "Those new clothes fit you just fine, Jason," she said, as she picked up her knitting needle. "You'll look right nice at church in the mornin'."

I pulled at the collar. The material was a little scratchy, but I'd get used to it.

"By the way," she continued, "I was washing your old clothes, and I noticed something mighty strange. What is that below the waist? Some kind of fastener?"

I had to think for a minute. "Oh," I said, finally understanding. "The zipper. Yeah, it's very big back home."

"In Canada," said Travis dryly, giving me a glance.

I nodded. "Yeah. Um..." I fumbled, trying to quickly change the subject. "So, what do you guys do for fun? That is, after dinner."

"Billy James used ta play his guitar," Lem said, pronouncing guitar as 'gee-tar.'

Mrs. Colt sighed. "He had a very nice voice," she said, a little wistful. "We miss him so."

"I can play a little," I said. The family stared at me. "Well, I'm really better at keyboards. I've played keyboards for about ten years — piano and organ, that is. But I got a guitar for Christmas last year, and I figured out a few chords."

"You can sing?" asked Lem.

I grinned. Singing was the one thing I had done all my life. In fact, my folks used to tell me I was singing before I could talk, just humming along and singing nonsense words along with the radio when I was just two years old.

"Yeah," I said. "In fact, that's what I hope to do someday — act and sing for a living."

"Not much money in that," said Mr. Colt, spitting off to the side as the boy scurried away. "Not 'round here, anyways."

Before I could answer, Lem appeared with a guitar, the front door slamming behind him. He handed it to me, still a little out of breath.

"This is Billy's," he said. "It probably ain't nothin' fancy compared to what ya had back home."

I examined it. I had a cheap Les Paul electric Gibson that my mom had bought for me off eBay last Christmas. This one was a hand-made six-string acoustic, but I knew enough to see that there was some very nice workmanship in the fingerboard. I took a tentative strum. *Ouch. Definitely a bit out of tune.*

"Give me a sec," I said, then whistled a G as I turned the tuning key on the third string, then checked the others.

"Ya really know howta play that thing?" asked Mr. Colt, putting down his pipe in surprise.

I continued picking at the other strings for a few moments, then nodded. "Yeah," I said. "It helps that I have perfect pitch, so I can at least get it in tune. Hold on."

I felt in my pocket. I still had the piece of plastic I'd broken off my old high school ID card, with the words "Class of 2013" on it. I held it between my thumb and forefinger, balanced the guitar on my knee, and strummed a C chord. *Perfect, I thought.*

"Ya know some songs?" asked Travis, fascinated.

"Only a few thousand," I said, casually. The reality was, I was a 'walking/talking encyclopedia of pop culture,' as my dad used to call me. I only had so-so grades in science, barely made it through history, and higher mathematics made my eyes glaze over. I couldn't catch or throw a baseball worth a damn, and I was a total dolt when it came to most sports. But music was the one thing I knew backwards, forwards, and sideways.

"Let me think for a moment," I said, idly plucking a few strings with my improvised pick. I wasn't about to launch into some hot Justin Timberlake number. *Something more in touch with an 1864 audience.* I thought of the music my parents had listened to, from my dad's enormous CD library in the living room. They were huge 1960s and 1970s fans, and our house had always had music playing in the background for as long as I could remember.

“How about ‘My Old Kentucky Home,’” Mrs. Colt suggested. “That was one of my mother’s favorites.”

“The sun shines bright on my old Kentucky home... ‘tis summer, and darkies are gay...” croaked out Mr. Colt.

“Or ‘Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair,’” added Mrs. Colt. “That’s a good’n, all right.”

“Let me try one you haven’t heard before,” I said, remembering one of my mom’s favorite oldies by James Taylor. We’d sung along with that one in her car whenever it came on the radio. I tentatively picked out the opening chords, and the family leaned towards me.

*“When you’re down... and troubled...
and you need some love and care...
And nothin’... no, nothin’ is goin’ right.
Close your eyes and think of me...
and soon I will be there...
to brighten up even your darkest night.”*

*“You just call out my name
and you know, wherever I am
I’ll come runnin’... to see you again.
Winter, spring, summer or fall...
all you got to do is call...
And I’ll be there... yes, I will...
you’ve got a friend.”*

It was hard to play the guitar without a shoulder strap, and the frets felt a little uncomfortable beneath my fingers, forcing me to struggle with some of the chords. But my confidence grew as I continued with the second verse, and my voice rang out crystal-clear and echoed out into the trees. I gave it everything I had, filling the words with emotion, remembering all of Taylor’s nuances from his live DVD concert my dad used to watch every so often in our den back home.

I looked up, and was embarrassed to see that Travis was staring at me, his eyes soft, almost misty, with an expression of pure admiration.

My voice cracked for a moment, and I turned away, looking off into the moonlit forest, so I could concentrate on remembering the lyrics.

Finally, I made it through the last verse, and strummed the final chord.

I looked up, and the family stared at me. Lem began to clap, and the rest of them joined in enthusiastically.

"That was downright remarkable," said Mr. Colt, leaning back on the porch and taking a deep puff on his pipe. "You got a fine voice, boy. Fine voice, indeed. Never heard that one before."

"Just wonderful," enthused Mrs. Colt. "You really must join our church choir! Reverend Abrams will be so excited to hear you."

I winced. "I don't really know any church songs," I protested. "I mean... I'm really just a pop singer. And I'm a lot better at piano than I am at guitar. Here, let me try another one."

I went through an oldies set some friends of mine and I had done for a neighbor's birthday party the year before, for one of my parents' friends. I started off with Elvis' "Hound Dog," then slowed things down with The Beatles' "Yesterday" (fumbling on a few of the chords, which are tougher than they look), then launched into Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone," and ended up with Elton John's "Crocodile Rock." I got an enthusiastic ovation, and Mrs. Colt positively gushed, giving me a warm hug.

"Ya gotta do one more!" pleaded Lem. "Please?"

"That's enough for tonight," said Mr. Colt, checking his pocket watch. "It's already past your bedtime."

I nodded as I handed the guitar back to the boy. This was the first time I'd had a chance to exercise my voice in days, and it was great to sing again, even just for an audience of four. *They think these songs are all brand-new*, I thought. *So old, they're new again*. I felt a warm glow all over, then let out a sigh as I remembered where I was. Or rather, *when* I was.

I was halfway back to the barn when I heard a voice behind me. I turned, startled.

"You make up all them songs yourself?" asked Travis, who trotted up alongside me.

"Hardly," I said with a chuckle. "Those are really old songs where I come from, by a lot of great musicians. I haven't written any songs — not yet, anyway."

"You sing in public? In front o' people?"

"Yeah," I said, as we opened the barn door. "That's almost as natural to me as breathing. Music's my whole life — well, that plus acting. I haven't decided which to do as a career. Maybe I can find a way to do both someday."

We entered the barn, and Travis lit the kerosene lamp by the door, then turned it up slightly. He stepped over to me, his face bathed in the warm glow. He was close enough that I could smell him: he had a clean, masculine aroma, and the light caught his eyes at just the right angle, giving them almost a glow. His eyelashes were long, almost feminine, and his face was boyishly smooth. *Probably hasn't even shaved yet*, I thought.

Travis paused. "My... my brother Billy used to sing for us on Saturday nights," he said, looking down at his feet. "He was good, but you were..." His sentence trailed off, and he groped for the words. "Just amazin'," he said finally, almost in a whisper.

I tried to be nonchalant. "I had a bunch of lessons," I said. "I've been singing in the performance choir for the last few years. Some friends of mine even had me sing with their band a few times. But I think I'm really a solo act."

"I thought you were just some kinda city boy that never did any kinda work," he said, apologetically. "I'm... I'm sorry for what I said before."

"Don't be," I said. "You're right — I don't know squat about farming. About the only thing I really know how to do is act and sing," I said with a shrug. "I'm pretty useless otherwise."

"Why, I bet you could win the singin' recital at school," he continued. "We got one comin' up around Halloween."

I sighed. *Like I want to stay in 1864 long enough to do that*. "I'm going to enter another contest next year when I'm 16," I said. "Then I can compete on *American Voice*. It's a big show they have back home."

He looked at me suspiciously. "I thought you lived up in Canada."

"Does it really matter?" I said. "Listen, Travis," I said, reaching out and grabbing his muscular shoulder, which felt warm and solid. "I... I, uh, really want to be friends with you. As long as I'm staying here, anyway. If I ever do anything that pisses you off, just tell me, okay? And if you'll teach me what to do around here, I promise, I'll do whatever I have to do. Especially if it keeps your father calmed down."

“He ain’t my father,” he said, looking away. “He’s my *stepfather*. The bastard even made me take his damn name.”

“Your name isn’t Travis Colt?” I asked.

“It’s Travis *Finnigan*,” he corrected. “My mom made me change my last name when they first got hitched, five years ago. But as far as I’m concerned, that ain’t my real name. I don’t care what no piece o’ paper says.”

I gave his shoulder an affectionate squeeze. “Hey,” I said. “To me, you’re just Travis.”

He grinned, and his whole face lit up. Travis was normally good looking, but he completely glowed when he smiled, which was a rarity. *Dimples*, I thought. *Cutest damn dimples I’ve ever seen. Stunning.*

“You’ve got a friend,” he said shyly, remembering the words of the song. “I felt like you were singin’ it just to me.”

“Winter, spring, summer or fall,” I said softly, my heart beginning to hammer as I slipped my arm over his shoulder and gave him a small hug, without even thinking. *Jesus Christ*, I thought. *I’m totally falling for this guy.*

“Travis!” called a loud voice from the distance. “You better git your fanny to bed, boy! Else’n there’ll be hell ta pay!”

His expression evaporated, and he pulled away from me. “I better go,” he said. “G’night.”

“Night, Travis,” I called after him. I watched him disappear into the darkness, then closed the barn door behind him. One of the cows murmured as I dimmed the lantern, then I walked carefully across the sawdust-covered floor, avoiding any green lumps, and made my way up the ladder to the hayloft, and slid over to my makeshift bed.

I tossed and turned for several minutes, then finally realized there was only one way I was ever going to be able to sleep. “Nature’s sleeping pill,” I said quietly, remembering what a friend of mine’s older brother euphemistically called jacking off, when I’d gotten my first lesson about sex at the tender age of 11. I reached down beneath the covers and slid my fingers down to my erection, which was as rigid as steel. I hadn’t had an orgasm since... well, since 2013, I thought. *How many days ago has it been? Two? Three? Technically, about 150 years, depending on your point of view.*

It didn't matter. No way would I ever be able to sleep with this iron bar poking out from between my legs. I began stroking slowly, then built up to a measured pace, as fleeting images of Travis' soaking-wet body flickered through my mind. My heart pounded at the sight of his bare chest, his muscular arms, his handsome, innocent face. I stepped up the pace and began to gasp, remembering the quick glances I had stolen of his groin. *How big was his dick?* He was uncut, that much I could see, and had very little body hair, but it didn't matter. However he was equipped, it was more than enough for me.

I began to pant, and my strokes became faster, more frantic as I replayed the afternoon bath scene in slow-motion, with the intimate details of his muscular chest and arms. At last, the orgasm shot through me like a freight train. I cried out a guttural moan as I erupted twice, three times, my hips bucking uncontrollably, leaving a hot sticky pool across my chest. *Jesus*, I thought, wiping away a slimy trail across my chin and nose. *I actually shot all over my face!* I lay back on the bedcovers, my heart pounding, trying to catch my breath. *That was easily the best orgasm of my life.*

"Jason?" whispered a voice in the distance. "Ya alright up there?"

I stiffened. "Uh..." I stammered, then cleared my throat. "Uh, yeah. Travis? Is that you?"

"Yeah," he called from down below. "My stepfather sent me back out here to remind ya. We don't have to wake up until after dawn on Sundays, but we gotta be at church by 7:30. Mom'll wake ya in time for breakfast."

I leaned over the railing, hoping Travis couldn't see the mess. "Thanks," I said, praying I hadn't been too noisy.

He gave me a curious glance. "Heard you cry out."

"I was just having a dream," I said. "That's all."

He nodded, then walked away, closing the barn door behind him.

The most beautiful dream ever.

I lay back in bed, then stared up at the moon through a small hole in the barn roof, listening to the soft serenade of the frogs and crickets as their night symphony echoed in the distance.

Chapter 5

I'm glad I bought that shampoo yesterday, I thought, as I eyed my small arsenal of grooming equipment on the little shelf up in my makeshift hayloft bedroom. My hair was still wringing wet from the quick bath I had taken out in the yard a few minutes earlier. I glanced in the hand mirror and winced. *Hopeless*. If a drowned rat saw me, he'd think I was a distant cousin.

I sighed when I remembered the advice my best friend J.D. had given me back home in Seattle. Home seemed a thousand light-years away from 1864. I set the mirror down and thought back to the last time I had seen J.D., which was during the final week of school before the summer break. We were in the Math wing's bathroom, which was deserted at the moment.

"Girlfriend," he said, wagging his finger in my face, "your biggest problem is that you have much too low an opinion of yourself."

I hated it when he called me that, just to torment me. J.D. was the most "out" kid I knew. He always claimed he was already gay "in the womb," and I believed him. Some gay guys had a flame that burned a little brighter than anybody else, and J.D.'s was positively radiating. But he'd been my best friend — "BFF," we used to say — for almost three years, since I came to terms with my sexuality right after I turned 13.

"Shut up, *Jonathan*," I snapped, deliberately using his first name, which he despised for some mysterious reason. "You're not Oprah, and I'm not a girl." As if to emphasize my point, I zipped up my fly, then flushed with my elbow.

He giggled and made a fluttery gesture as we turned the corner to the sink. "Oh, honey, don't I know it."

I washed my hands while he chattered on, then followed as weaved our way through the bustling crowd in the hallway. Just as I was about to give him a retort to one of his snide comments, a handsome blond junior wearing a bright red team jersey stepped out from a nearby classroom and sauntered through the crowd. The boy gave me a sideways glance, but I immediately spun around in the opposite direction, dragging J.D. along with me.

“Here we go again,” he whined, letting me tug him away from our class. “Will you just get that moronic thug out of your head? Puh-lease!”

Leaning against the rough wood of the hayloft wall, almost 150 years away from the hallway, I felt tears stinging in my eyes at the memory. *Luke Martin. That fucking bastard.* Luke was easily the most popular guy in school — he was rich, he looked like an Abercrombie & Fitch model, and had won an entire display-case full of awards on the gymnastics team, plus he was an honor roll student. Good looks *and* brains... at least on the surface.

Less than a month ago, Luke had enticed me over to his house to hang out on a Friday afternoon. I didn't even know he knew my name, and I was stunned that he even deigned to talk to me — Luke being one of the great royalty of Garfield High's junior class, and me just one of the freshmen peons. I had a little notoriety for starring in a couple of school plays, plus winning our local school version of *American Voice* the month before, where Luke had first noticed me. But I was stupefied when we got to his kitchen and he handed me a Diet Coke, then gave me a long kiss. *Rich, handsome, athletic, smart... and gay!* That, despite going steady for all year with Lisa Woods, who was the queen to his king. We spent the entire weekend together, having sex in almost every room of his folks' lavish house, leaving me exhausted but exhilarated.

Unfortunately, as I learned by Monday morning, he had what J.D. called “the morality of a lawn chair, and not a very clean one, at that.” Luke utterly ignored me in our English A.P. class in third period, then wouldn't answer his cellphone when I called him later that afternoon. By Wednesday, it was clear I was out of his life — a used condom tossed unceremoniously in the garbage.

As I caught my breath by the water fountain near the History wing staircase, Luke and three of his jock friends sauntered by.

“Hey, I thought this was a no-fag zone!” one of them quipped. They all roared with laughter. And Luke laughed the loudest.

I stepped forward, my face red with fury, my fists balled and ready to clobber any of them, but J.D. held me back. “Not here, hon,” he said in a low voice, then put his arm around me. He turned back to the crowd. “We’re more manly than you’ll ever be, and more woman than you’ll ever get! Eat me, bitches!” he said in a loud voice, causing them to chortle even louder.

J.D. led me down the hall into an empty classroom, then closed the door and gently pushed me down in a desk in the front row. The din of the voices outside began to fade. I sat, shaking, my face still burning, my fists clenching and unclenching. I opened my mouth, but there weren’t any words to describe how... *abandoned* I felt.

“He isn’t worth it, Jase,” he said in a low voice, most of his femininity evaporating, and leaned close to my face. “You’re better than that.”

I started to answer, but my voice cracked, and I felt a stream of tears trickling down my face. “He — he said... he promised me...”

“...nothing but bullshit,” J.D. interrupted, giving my hand a quick squeeze. “If you’d just asked me, I would’ve warned you: Luke Martin will fuck anything that has a hole and a heartbeat. He’s a total slut.”

I glared at him.

“It’s true!” he insisted. “I knew he went both ways — you can always tell, by that little light behind the eyes — but I was never stupid enough to fall for it.”

I cleared my throat and wiped away the tears on my right cheek.

J.D. sat down beside me, then started to pick at an imaginary hang-nail. “Okay, except for that one blowjob about a year ago.”

“WHAT?” I yelled.

J.D. let both hands flutter momentarily up in the air. “Oh, it was just a quick booty-call,” he said, looking away. “Not like it was a big deal or anything.”

“You never told me about that one,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Hey,” he protested, raising his hands in mock indignation, “you know I maintain a strict ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy.” He pantomimed zipping his mouth and throwing away the key.

“What about the ten other guys you *did* tell me about?”

He gave me a hmmp. “Well, those guys were out already,” he said, as if that explained everything. “Closet cases like Luke are an exception.” He leaned towards me conspiratorially and held two fingers apart by about an inch. “But Luke was a pretty small case... if you know what I mean.”

I nodded glumly. Luke had looks and muscles to spare, but the gods of genetics had penalized him in at least one department. *The price of a pretty face, I guess.*

The 4th-period bell clanged in the distance, echoing along the concrete corridors and giving us a start. The scent of summer was in the air. I had already finished half my finals, and only had three more to go in the next two days before I was officially out of ninth grade. But what did I have to look forward to? Nursing a broken heart all summer long? At least I wasn't a virgin anymore... but for what?

“You've got that dreamy look in your eyes again,” J.D. warned, pulling me up by my arm and ushering me out the door. “Look, sweetie, it's like I told you before: you'll find somebody else. Luke's a jerk. Trust me, Mr. Right is out there, somewhere on this planet. Maybe even two or three if you're lucky. You're bound to meet him eventually. It's just a question of fate — fate and good timing.”

I stopped to grab a drink of water. My next class was physics, and the teacher, old Mr. Skowronski, was so genial that he didn't care if we were on time for his classes or not, as long as we passed his weekly quizzes.

“Fat chance of that,” I said, wiping my mouth on my sleeve. “There's nobody at this hellhole of a school I'd ever want.” *Or who would ever really want me.*

“Then maybe there'll be somebody in St. Louis who's more your style,” J.D. said, as we approached the Science wing. “One of those hunky corn-fed midwestern farmboys. Mmmm-mmmm. Meet me in St. Louis, Louie!” he sang out loud.

“Shaddup,” I whispered, as we took our seats at the back of the physics lab. *Fat chance I'll ever meet a hunky farmboy over the summer.*

“Jason!” called a voice from outside the barn. “Papa says we gotta leave in five minutes for church! Momma says we’ll burn in hell fire if’n we don’t get there on Sundays.”

Lem’s voice snapped me back to the reality of 1864. “Almost done,” I called down from the hayloft. I pulled up my pants and buttoned up my shirt — my one good “church shirt” as Mrs. Colt called it — then pulled on my socks and boots. I took one last look in the mirror and shuddered. I was definitely having a bad hair day.

“What I would give for a blow drier right about now,” I said wistfully, then stepped down the ladder to the sawdust and dirt below.

§ § § § §

The First Baptist Church of St. Louis was an enormous brick-and-wood cathedral, with an ornate bell tower that loomed above the front of the building. After tying off the cart’s horses with the other wagons on the side, Mr. Colt led us up the stone steps and around the chalky columns that guarded the main entry doors. As I walked in, I was surprised to see at least 500 parishioners already seated, forcing us to take the next to last row — which was fine by me.

The church smelled of cedar and sweat, and the seats creaked and moaned with even the slightest movement. The air was thick, and I began to feel a little sleepy. Despite the mid-October date on the calendar, it felt like July inside; most of the ladies fluttered lace fans near their faces, while the men tugged at their collars and looked utterly miserable. Mr. Colt had an ill-fitting black coat, but still wore his overalls underneath.

I dozed through most of the sermon, dreaming of air conditioning and my home back in 2013. Mrs. Colt had warned me that Reverend Lucius Abrams was known far and wide for his hellfire and brimstone lectures, but to me, his speech was an endless drone that rose and fell like an ocean wave, interrupted occasionally by the more avid churchgoers in the front row adding an “amen” or a “say it.” Apparently, Mr. Colt agreed with me, because I caught him snoring quietly once or twice. His wife rapped him sharply until he begrudgingly picked up one of the bibles in the pews to pretend to read along with the passage.

“Kinda boring, ain’t it?” whispered Travis, who sat next to me, right on the far right aisle.

I nodded and stifled a yawn. Over the next two hours, the reverend’s sermons were interrupted by a dozen mournful hymns from the choir, featuring a lead tenor who was painfully sharp. The organ at the front of the church wheezed as the organist pumped frantically on the pedals, filling the air with a gloomy dirge.

“After dinner, I’ll take ya huntin’ out by Miller’s farm,” Travis said in a low voice. “Prob’ly catch us some rabbits and ducks, mebbe even a deer. You ever had venison?”

A cartoon image of Disney’s *Bambi* entered my mind. “Not my favorite,” I said with a shudder.

“Rabbits then,” he said. “You know how ta shoot?”

I shook my head. “I’m kind of an ‘entertainment savant,’” I said, managing a slight smile. “I can sing and act, and I know enough dance moves to get by, but I’m not much good for anything else.”

“Good enough for me,” Travis whispered. He grinned and his whole face lit up. *God, he was dazzling.* I looked away, afraid he would notice me staring at him.

He leaned close to me. “We’ll get us a coupla rabbits and poultry, then maybe drop by the crick for some swimmin’. This is prob’ly our last chance, since winter’s comin’. Ya know how to swim, right?”

I gulped and nodded. *My swim trunks were still back in 2013, so that meant we’d have to... Yikes.*

“Course,” he said thoughtfully, “ya got that cut on your head, and the doctor said not to get it wet or nothin’, so you best be careful of that.”

“AND THE LORD SAID UNTO MOSES,” bellowed a deep voice to our right.

We looked up to see the face of Reverend Abrams, who, unbeknownst to us, had stepped down from his pulpit and walked to the back of the church.

The man eyed us warily and raised his hands heavenward for emphasis. “GO DOWN AND CHARGE THE PEOPLE,” he thundered, “LEST THEY BREAK THROUGH UNTO THE LORD TO GAZE, AND MANY OF THEM PERISH!” His voice echoed across

the wooden beams, and I looked up to see about 490 people staring at us. My face reddened.

Travis and I abruptly sat up straight and stared straight ahead as nonchalantly as we could. Reverend Abrams harrumphed, then continued his oratory as he strode back down the aisle to the pulpit. Mrs. Colt shot me a disapproving glance and shook her head. Lem giggled, and I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing.

§ § § § §

At last, just after 10AM, the sermon ended and we sang one last hymn, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." *Doesn't have much of a beat, I thought, but with the right arrangement, we might just have a hit, ladies and gentlemen.*

Travis and I were halfway down the aisle, weaving our way through the crowd when Mr. Colt's voice boomed after us. "Boys! Ain't you forgettin' Sunday School?"

"Awwww," muttered Travis. "We were gonna head out to the woods to fetch some rabbits for supper."

"That kin wait," insisted his stepfather. "You boys got some more Bible learnin' to do 'fore that. Take your brother and Jason here across the way to Miss Whiteley's. And don't you go nowhere else until noon."

"Your father and I have a meeting with the elders," added Mrs. Colt. "Then there's the 10:30 service for poor Mr. Elsworth, who died last Tuesday. You three go to Sunday School, and you learn your prayers, hear? We'll meet back at the house for dinner at noon sharp."

I still wasn't used to calling lunch 'dinner,' but I had to roll with the punches, 1864-style — at least until I figured out a way to get home.

"Ain't five days of schoolin' enough?" muttered Travis under his breath, as we pushed our way through the crowd and started down the stone steps.

"Apparently not," I whispered back.

We joined a crowd of other children and teenagers on the curved path, but as I took a step forward, a shadow fell across my face. I felt a chill and looked up to see Reverend Abrams, who was idly twisting his

string tie and staring down at me. He suddenly smiled and stuck out his hand.

“Hello, young man,” he said in a deep baritone. “I’m...”

“Reverend Abrams,” I said, reluctantly shaking his hand. “My name’s Jason Thomas.”

The man squeezed my hand a little too hard. “Yes,” he said thoughtfully. “Kin to Olivia Thomas, isn’t that right?”

“She was my aunt. I came out here from... from, uh, Vancouver to stay with her, but my mom didn’t know that she had...” I looked down, partly acting, but also trying to keep my story straight.

“...gone to her reward,” he said, finishing my sentence. “Yes, most tragic. I knew Olivia years ago when she was part of our congregation, but she chose a different life some time ago, after her husband died. Terrible thing, losing a member of our flock in that fire. Sorry you couldn’t be here for her funeral last month. It was quite beautiful — yes, it was.”

I nodded, but didn’t reply. The reverend’s weathered face crinkled like a burlap sack, and his eyes narrowed. I looked away, hoping I’d be able to get away with the mishmash of truth and lies I was weaving. An uncomfortable silence passed.

“Sarah Colt tells me you can sing,” he said, abruptly changing the subject as he stroked his sideburns with his long, sinewy fingers. “A voice like an angel,’ she says.”

I shrugged. “I sang back home — mostly pop songs, a little rock. Mostly contemporary, but I know a decent selection of oldies.”

The reverend looked confused.

“That is, I don’t know a lot of hymns,” I said quickly. “The music here in St. Louis is a lot different from... uh, what I know from back home.”

He seemed satisfied with that. “You interested in becoming part of our First Baptist choir? We rehearse Tuesdays and Thursdays, just an hour or so. Got a warm fire and apple cider, along with a heapin’ helpin’ of the Lord’s good blessings.”

“Gotta have that,” I said drily. “I’ll — uh... I’ll think about it, Reverend. Nice to meet you.”

He gave me a thin smile and clapped me on the shoulder, squeezing me a little too hard. “Hope to see you Tuesday evening, Jason. And welcome to our community. Christ be with you.”

I followed the curving path, now well behind Travis and Lem and a crowd of other teenagers, and walked to a smaller wooden building, which apparently had been rebuilt on the land occupied by the original church from the late 1700s. Our boots clattered on the floor, then we pulled our chairs in a circle, where a prim older woman held court.

“Turn your books to page 129,” she commanded. “Now, who can tell us the story of Lot’s wife?”

“She turned into a pillar of salt,” I said, my voice surprising me as much as everybody else. *Killer special effects*, I thought, remembering the last time I had seen *The Ten Commandments* on Blu-ray.

“Yes, after she looked back to watch the angels destroy the city of Sodom.” She nodded approvingly. “That was God’s fury to the Sodomites.”

I winced. *Don’t knock sodomy unless you’ve tried it*, I thought.

§ § § § §

The Sunday School discussion was at least a little more lively. I tried to sit back and let the other kids do the talking, but I caught a couple of girls eying me curiously, and caught one blonde whispering to another and pointed at me. I again cursed my lack of a blow drier. God knows, I wasn’t even close to being a male model, but in the right clothes and with the right hair, I was passable. But in my present state, I must’ve looked like a total retard.

Mr. and Mrs. Colt had left in the wagon half an hour earlier, leaving the three of us to trudge home on the 3-mile dirt road that led back to the farm. We walked briskly, but I figured it would still take us almost an hour to get there. Lem chattered on about a friend of his who was going to trade him a frog at school in the morning, while Travis kept silent. The sun peeked over the trees, and I loosened my collar and slung my coat over my shoulder. *Maybe the rains are gone for awhile*, I thought, wondering how long I’d have to wait before returning to Marsen’s Cavern in search of the mysterious blue light.

Just as the road began to bend eastward, I stopped dead in my tracks.

“Did you hear something?” I asked, looking around, straining my ears. “I thought I heard voices.” *Something beautiful — a song I’d never heard before.*

“I didn’t hear nothin,’” said Travis, kicking a rock along the ground.

“A bird, maybe?” suggested Lem.

Just as I started to respond, a ghostly wave of voices rose up in the distance, crying “Hallelujah!”

“Over there,” I pointed to an open section through the trees. “That sounded incredible!” I pushed my way through the thicket, narrowly avoiding a large clump of thorns, then stopped at a clearing.

At the bottom of a hill was a large dilapidated brown shack, bordered on one side by a makeshift picket fence. Several horses and carriages were nearby, and there was a sign in the distance that I couldn’t quite read. I started down to get a better look, but Travis held me back.

“That’s the nigger church,” he said, matter-of-factly. “Ain’t our kind.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, they sing a shitload better than those jerks we heard this morning.”

Lem’s eyes widened at my profanity and he let out a hoot. “Momma’ll wash your mouth out with soap if’n she hears ya say that.”

“She ain’t gonna find out if me or Jason says ‘shit’ or anything else, ya little nimrod,” Travis snapped. He turned back to me. “We gotta git goin’. C’mon — dinner’s waitin’”

I swayed for a minute, then closed my eyes and listened to the voices. I realized what was missing from the Baptist Choir was *passion* — something that pulsed from every note from the voices of the black church. The melody was unfamiliar to me, but it was beautiful nonetheless.

I felt a hand tugging at my arm, and I snapped out of my reverie.

“Let’s go.”

Travis and Lem scurried back up the path, and I followed at a distance, turning back every so often to savor the music that rippled through the leaves.

Strange, I thought. It seemed like there was no predicting where you might run into unexpected beauty in this bizarre world.



"You sure you know how to use that thing?" I asked, as Travis pulled the rifle from the gun rack over the fireplace.

He nodded. "This is a Henry .44," he said, confidently. "Billy James — my brother Billy, that is — me and him used it for the last couple years, huntin' on weekends. Used ta be my father's — my *real* father's, that is — but I only started shootin' when I turned 13."

"He's a great shot," added Lem breathlessly. "Tell him about the time you hit that fencepost 'cross Jeff Jacobson's backyard, Travis!"

He shrugged. "Just practice, is all. Ain't nothin' to shootin', 'cept for holdin' your breath and concentratin'. Aim careful at the head, squeeze the trigger, and hope for the best."

I picked up the weapon and hefted it. It was bulkier than I expected, at least ten pounds, with a dull metal cylinder at the front and a heavy carved wood base at the back. "Volcanic Repeating Firearms Company, 1864," I read on the engraved brass plate. "New Haven, Connecticut."

"Push this down," said Travis, indicating a metal release catch along the top, "then pull both sides towards you."

I did and the rifle effortlessly snapped open with a solid 'clank.'

"I got me ten shells, which should last us all day, if'n we're lucky." He jingled them in his hand.

"Are those dangerous?" I asked, examining one of the bullets. They didn't look anything like the ammunition I'd seen in *Die Hard* and other action movies.

"Depends on who's usin' 'em," he said, gently lifting the rifle out of my hands, then expertly loaded the arsenal. "They blue coats are usin' some rifles like this in the war. But you can only fire a couple dozen rounds 'fore it gets too hot to handle."

"Ya think Billy is usin' one of these against the Yankees?" asked Lem, caught up in the excitement.

Travis froze, started to reply, then thought better of it and snapped the rifle back in place. "Got no way of knowin'," he said. "But he'd be lucky to have a gun like this. Reckon they're usin' Enfield Muskets." He turned to me, then hoisted the rifle onto his shoulder. "Those're from England. Pea-shooters."

I started to ask why the Confederate Army was using guns from overseas, but decided to let that little detail of history go unanswered.

“Go fetch us a sack, Lem,” ordered Travis. “We’ll need ‘em for our catch this afternoon.”

The boy darted out of the room and reappeared seconds later with a cloth bag. “I’m comin’ along to help, right, Travis?” he said hopefully.

Travis shook his head. “Nope. You got chores with Momma,” he reminded. “Besides, me and Jason here got man-stuff to do. Nothin’ for little boys like you.”

“Am not!” cried Lem.

“Are so!”

“Am... ow!” There was a loud smack.

I turned, startled, to see Mr. Colt glaring, while Lemuel rubbed his head.

“You best let the older boys go off and do their huntin’, Lemuel,” the man ordered. “Go help your momma feed the pigs out back.”

Lem slinked out of the room, still rubbing his head and muttering to himself, and Travis and I made our way to the front door.

“You be careful with that, now,” Mr. Colt warned after us, “and don’t be shootin’ up the countryside like you did last week. Them bullets don’t grow on trees, Travis.”

“Yessir,” Travis mumbled, as our boots clattered across the wooden porch.

“And I expect at least five good’n’s for supper tonight,” Colt yelled, as we made our way across the front porch. “Be back ‘fore sunset, and your momma’ll have the stove all ready.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Yes Sir!” called the man.

Travis kept going. “Yes, sir,” he muttered. He clenched and unclenched his jaw, and I followed him through the orchard and off to the west, a part of the Colt farm property I hadn’t visited before. In seconds, the woods swallowed us up until the sun was only a vague orange light in the distance.

§ § § § §

“Hush,” Travis whispered. “Just hold your breath and squeeze the trigger.”

We were sprawled on our stomachs, using an overturned log as a makeshift gun mount. About 30 yards away I could just make out two furry ears twitching, as if the creature couldn't decide whether he was safe or not.

"Tell me again: do I close my left eye or my right?" I whispered. Either way, the blur in the distance seemed impossibly small through the gun sight.

"Keep your left shut!" he hissed. "Aim through your right!"

"I am, I am," I said, shifting my position slightly. Just then, a flock of overhead birds furiously fluttered, sounding like a giant feathered aircraft was about to crash on top of us. I squeezed the trigger and the gun exploded with a tremendous roar, sending me sprawling backwards into the dirt. I looked up and saw a blur of gray as the rabbit tore through the grass, darted past a nearby tree trunk, then vanished in the forest.

"Lost him!" Travis cried. "That's the second one today!"

I handed him back the gun, my ears still ringing with the shot. "I warned you, before, Travis: I'm a singer, not a hunter."

He shook his head, then checked the bloody sack to his right. "We've only got four rabbits for supper," he said. "Colt's gonna expect at least one more, maybe more."

I cocked my head. "Colt? You never call him, 'Dad'?"

"Told ya before — he ain't my daddy. Far as I'm concerned, he's just 'Sir.' Or 'Mr. Colt' to everybody else."

Travis slung the bag over his shoulder and started trudging off in our prey's general direction. I had to jog to keep up with him.

"But he's Lem's father?" I asked, nonchalantly.

He nodded his head. "My real daddy died almost five years ago," Travis said. The twigs cracked like firecrackers under our boots, and I almost slipped once or twice in the underbrush. "Lem was real little when his ma died. Seth Colt and my momma were both alone and decided to get hitched. But me and Billy James never liked him. Lem's okay, and I look out for him, but he ain't blood." He fell silent, then turned away.

I let the silence pass as we walked together in the forest. After a few minutes, the surrounding trees and vegetation seemed completely unfamiliar to me.

"You sure you know where we're going, Travis?" I asked, wiping some of the sweat and grime out of my eyes. For all I knew, we could be in the jungles of Vietnam, or somewhere deep in the Congo. *If an elephant charges out of the brush*, I thought, *I'll know for sure*.

The blond boy nodded, then looked around. "Reckon we can find some rabbit warrens 'round here someplace. Colt says they do a pow'ful lot o' damage to our crops."

The sound of croaking frogs and crickets was almost overpowering, giving the forest the eerie feel of a Disney Jungleland Cruise ride. I followed him through the tall weeds, which parted like a natural curtain that lead out to a small outcropping that overlooked a wide creek. There were voices and splashing noises in the distance.

"Is that the Missouri River?" I asked, stepping closer to get a better look.

"Not hardly," he said, then pointed off to his left. "The Missouri's way out yonder. This is just one of them little streams."

"A tributary," I added, remembering a random factoid from an old geology class.

"Somethin' like that." He peered in the distance, then broke out in a broad grin. "Why, if that ain't Jasper and Andy! And Johnny, too! C'mon, let's go skinny dippin'!"

"But I thought..."

"We got time for huntin' later!" he said, scrambling down the hill.

I followed him down to the muddy banks below, where about a dozen boys were frolicking in the water. Two of them were perched on wooden rafts, trying to jab each other with long wooden sticks. Another boy called out from above us.

"'Bout time you got here, Travis!"

I looked up to see a dark-haired boy, totally naked, perched in the limbs of an ancient tree, which hung over the water. He looked like he was about as old as Travis and myself, and was clinging to a rope tied to the uppermost tree limb. Travis led me over to a large shrub dotted with shirts and pants, along with several pairs of shoes parked in the dirt. As I took my clothes off, I felt my face redden at the thought that I was about to join a whole flock of naked boys in a river.

"Watch this!" yelled a loud voice.

I looked up just in time to see a blur as a rope arced out over the water and the boy leapt out into the air, then plunged at least 20 feet into the water with a tremendous splash.

“Good one!” called Travis. The other boys responded with whoops and whistles.

I looked up to see Travis standing naked beside me, casually hanging his shirt on a limb. I turned to avoid seeing him, but my heart was hammering so loudly I was sure he could hear it.

“You gonna come in, Jason,” he asked, “or is your head still hurtin’ ya?”

I shrugged, trying to seem casual, and avoided looking below his eyes. “Maybe in the shallow end.” *God knows what kind of germs they have in 1864*, I thought. *I’ll probably die of gangrene or worse*. I gingerly touched my bandage and was relieved when I felt almost no pain at all. I slipped out of my shoes and socks, hung my pants and shirt on a limb next to Travis’ clothes, and felt the cool air flutter around my naked body. I took a deep breath and headed towards the river. *Ready or not, here I come*.

My heart still pounding, I waded out until the water was about at knee level, then stopped. The muddy riverbed oozed beneath my feet felt like some kind of viscous glue, and I gingerly touched a few underwater plants with my toes. Back in my old life in Seattle, I’d never been in anything other than a swimming pool before, because the Pacific was usually too cold to swim in for me. The Missouri River wasn’t exactly warm, but it was a heckuva lot more comfortable than the beaches back home.

Still, I felt a sense of dread. Images of slimy reptiles suddenly filled my head, probably leftovers from watching old *National Geographic* specials on PBS with my father.

“There any snakes around here?” I nervously called to Travis.

He surfaced to my right, sprayed out some water from his mouth, then flipped his shaggy blond bangs out of his eyes.

“Mebbe a few,” he said. “But most snakes’re more a-skeered of us than we are of them. That’s what my brother taught me.” Turning to a boy on his left, Travis pointed to me. “Andy! This here’s my new friend Jason. He’s from Can-a-da.”

“Vancouver, actually,” I added splashing some of the water up on my body. I tried to avoid letting my eyes dart any lower than any of the other

boys' shoulders, fearful of an instant erection, and I prayed that the water's temperature would be the equivalent of a cold shower. "My family lived on the Northwest coast, just above Washington."

"Washington, what?" the boy asked.

I momentarily panicked, then tried to remember when Washington became a state. *Was it before or after the Civil War?* I had to make sure all my lies added up, or else these people would probably burn me at the stake.

"Washington territory, ya dang fool," said a third voice. "Anybody knows that."

The voices grew closer, and I looked up to see a half-dozen teenage boys paddling closer, eyeing me with curiosity. I decided to wade out a little deeper, feeling a little... well, exposed, then crouched down in the shallow water to my waist.

"I seen him," said one, who I recognized as one of the boys from the cave. "He was with me an' Frank 'n Jesse over at Marsen's Cavern on Friday night. We all nearly died in that cave-in. Gave us quite a fright."

I peered at him. "You're... John? Johnny?" I was terrible at associating names and faces, but his was one I remembered from the rocky cave with the blue light.

He nodded. "Johnny Younger. You're that Thomas boy, right?"

"Yeah, that's me. Jason Thomas."

"Didn't know there were any Jews in the Thomas family," said another boy to his right.

I looked up, momentarily taken aback.

"I saw you, just now," he said, accusingly. The other boys began to gather around in a half-circle, making the water ripple in circles around our thighs. "Jew."

I tried to avoid looking at them. Seeing a dozen naked teenage boys, especially in circumstances as casual as this, could have an immediate — and dangerous — effect on me.

"Stand up," he ordered. "You'll see."

I reluctantly stood up, letting the water trickle down my naked skin, momentarily gratified that my penis had barely stirred. Despite the visual stimulation, the cool water swirling around my knees made this situation anything but erotic.

“Actually, I’m... uh, a Presbyterian,” I said. “At least, my family was.”

Five of the boys stepped closer to get a better look. I suddenly realized that all of them were uncircumcised, and I clearly wasn’t. I began to blush.

“So what if his john-thomas ain’t like ours?” said Travis, wading over to my side and standing up. “That don’t make him no Jew.”

“Uh, everybody where I come from is... y’know, like this,” I explained, feeling my dick start to stir with the unwanted attention. “I mean, I didn’t exactly have any say in it, since the doctor did it to me when I was born. Removing my foreskin, that is.”

Johnny stepped forward, his penis dangling back and forth. “The only peters like that we ever saw ‘round these parts were from dirty Jews.” He leaned forward menacingly. “And we don’t cotton much to Christ-killers.”

I glared at him. “I’ll make a note of that,” I retorted. “Jews, blacks, and Yankees. Anything else I should add to the list? Aside from stupid assholes and ignorant hicks?”

With a loud cry, the boy launched himself at me and landed a solid punch on my shoulder, missing my face by inches. I howled with pain, then grabbed him by the neck and pulled him down into the water with all my strength.

“FIGHT!” yelled one of them.

All I could see was a flurry of bubbles and spray, as our fists flew back and forth. One blow hit me just below my right eye, but I managed to hook one of my legs behind his and pushed him backwards with a splash, then we began to roll around in the muddy water. He began to scream. His hand lashed out and tried to grab me, but only succeeded in scratching my chest. The water stung my eyes slightly, but it was too muddy to see clearly. I came up for air, grabbed a quick breath, then brought my knee up as hard as I could, prompting a satisfying scream from my opponent. When we broke back up to the surface, I began to flail at him with both hands, as hard as I could, pummeling him with a whirlwind of blows. There was a trickle of blood on his mouth, and a deadly look in his eyes. He cocked back his fist as if to hit me again.

“STOP THAT!” cried a voice.

Travis yanked me up out of the water, and two other boys dragged Johnny in the opposite direction, flailing and screaming.

"Ain't no Jew gonna get the best o' me!" he wailed.

"I told you, you schmuck — I'm not Jewish!" I called back. "Not that there's anything wrong with that."

Travis shot me a glance, but said nothing.

We sloshed out of the water and headed back to the bottom of the hill, where our clothes were stashed. The other boys silently stared at us as we dressed. By the time I turned back to the river, most of them had disappeared, one paddling away on a raft, another staring down at us from the perch of a tree hanging low over the water.

"C'mon," muttered Travis. "Let's get outta here. We still got us one more rabbit to catch."

I followed him through the woods, pushing past the weeds and vines, making our way back to the path. We kept silent for several minutes, and I was soon out of breath, just trying to keep up with him.

"Not a very good first impression with your friends," I said, jogging up next to him. "I'm sorry about that."

Travis wouldn't look at me. "You fight like a *girl*," he said, hefting the rifle up to his shoulder and walking a little faster. "Like some kinda sissy. Even Lem fights better'n that."

My face reddened. "Well, what do you expect, Travis? I got a concussion, my Aunt's dead, I've been in this..." — I stopped myself from saying, *this crazy Civil War nightmare* — "this place for four days, and now some doofus tries to punch me out because he doesn't like my *dick*! Where I come from, people don't act that way, especially to strangers."

"They do 'round these parts," he muttered.

I followed Travis as we made our way through a group of fresh new trees. I swatted two or three mosquitoes away from my face.

"Speaking of which, where exactly are we, anyway?" I asked.

"Coupla miles from the church. Me and Lem spotted a bunch of rabbits out here two weeks ago. Maybe we can scare up one more for supper."

I started to respond, but he held his index finger up to his lips and pointed to an oak tree about 50 yards away. I saw what could be a spec of gray fur, peeking out from behind the trunk. A few seconds later, two

furry ears popped into view. Travis quietly cracked open his rifle, ejected the spent shell, loaded in a new one, then slowly snapped it back, making almost no sound. He lifted the rifle up to his shoulder and took careful aim.

Suddenly, I became aware of a melody, almost an angelic choir.

Travis stopped. "You hear somethin'?"

I nodded. "What is it?"

He turned and looked back at the distant forest. "Oh, it's just the nigger church again. Don't pay them darkies no never-mind."

I started to respond, but the voices suddenly rose to a loud crescendo, then stopped abruptly, as if someone pulled the plug on the speakers. I followed the sound over to a large bush and peeked over it. In the distance was the same dilapidated building I had seen earlier that morning, only now a small crowd of worshippers was exiting out the front doors. All of them were black, some wearing very shabby clothes. Most of them shuffled down a dirt road leading south; one man went back inside and closed the door.

I waited for the last of the crowd to disappear, then took a few steps forward and began to climb down the hill.

"Where you think you're goin'?" Travis hissed.

"I just want to see the ni—... I mean, the black church," I said. "Just take me a second."

Travis grumbled but leaned the rifle up against a tree, near the bloody sack that contained the day's bounty, and followed me down the hill and over to the church.

Close-up, it wasn't quite the ramshackle building it had first appeared to be. The roof looked solid, and the porch was made of polished wood, very neatly finished. A hand-painted sign over the front doorway proclaimed it to be the "Gospel Hall All-Faith Church — est. 1860." I slowly pushed the door open. The room was dark and empty, with a few shafts of light poking through a window at the very back, to the left of the podium. I spotted an upright piano half in shadow off to the right, with a few scraps of paper on a stand above the keyboard.

My fingers twitched. I hadn't practiced piano for almost a week, since I had left home before my trip to St. Louis. I turned to Travis.

"I gotta do something," I said. "It's hard to explain, but... just give me a few minutes at the piano."

"This ain't no place for us, Jason," Travis whispered. "Not for any white man 'round these parts."

I grinned. "But I'm not from here, remember? Keep watch at the door and just give me five minutes."

I crept down the aisle past several rows of seats, far smaller than the First Baptist Church we had visited earlier that morning. The room smelled damp, but had a pleasant aroma of strange perfume and spices. The floor creaked beneath my feet as I approached the piano bench. There was an unlit candlestick on a shelf above the keyboard, and I instinctively felt for my Bic lighter, which was still in my pocket. Seconds later, the piano was bathed in a warm glow. I sat down at the keyboard and played a couple of introductory chords, then winced.

Ouch. The B-above middle-C was definitely flat. I'd have to avoid that one, or fix it if I could find the tools later.

I tried a few more tentative chords, then began quietly singing to myself.

*"When you're down and troubled...
and you need some lovin' care..."*

"That sounds even better than the guitar," said a voice behind me.

"Travis!" I gasped. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Do that again," he said, sliding next to me on the bench. "How do ya make them chords like that?"

"Like this?" I played a few little runs, then mixed in some major and minor scales, followed with a couple of tricky piano exercises I liked to use to limber up, leading up to a glissando with a dramatic flourish.

"That's amazin'," he said, his whole face grinning from ear to ear.

"It'd be even better if the thing was in tune. Listen to this." I tapped the B key. "That's at least a half-step flat. And this one." The lower G-sharp key was even worse. "Here's how it should sound." I whistled the right frequency, then kit the key again and shook my head. "Not even close."

"How do you know that?" he asked, clearly impressed.

I shrugged. "It's a curse," I said. "I have perfect pitch, or close to it. If I hear a note, I know immediately if it's on or off frequency. You have to be born with it. Drives me totally nuts when I hear something out of tune."

I continued to play a few practice lines I could remember, moving into a kind of bluesy jazz mode.

"I've been playing piano almost since I could walk," I said, shifting into a different key. "My mom loves to tell the story about how she found me playing piano at my grandmother's house when I was three years old. I just sort of naturally gravitated to it, and figured it out on my own, almost before I could talk."

"You didn't have a teacher or nothin'?"

I chuckled. "That came later. But every weekend, I'd bug my folks to take me over to my grandparents' house, just so I could play the piano. They eventually had to buy me a keyboard when I was 8, and then I actually took lessons a couple of times a month, when we could afford it."

I led into a few minor chords I stole from Chopin, and let the notes ring out in the darkness until they evaporated.

"I swear," he said, almost reverentially, "you got real talent."

"You swear, huh?" I grinned and played another quick run, followed by a syncopated intro, then began to sing.

*"I swear...
by the moon and the stars in the sky...
I'll be there..."*

*I swear...
like the shadow that's by your side,
I'll be there..."*

*For better or worse,
'till death do us part,
I'll love you with every beat of my heart...
I swear."*

I played a few concluding chords, then glanced over to him. I don't know if it was the flicker of the candle, but his face seemed to glow with

an expression of pure love and affection. I cleared my throat, feeling very embarrassed.

“That was... that was just plain beautiful,” he said, almost whispering. “How’d you make up a song like that, outta nothin’?”

I laughed and shook my head. “No, no. That one was sung by two different artists back where I come from. A country singer named John Michael Montgomery had a big hit with it, and then another group sang the same song and had a smash R&B hit with it all over again a few months later. Big song from almost twenty years ago.” *In my time, that is, I reminded myself.*

He shook his head, half in disbelief. “I still can’t believe you know this much about music. All I know is farmin’ and shootin’... dumb stuff like that. And you’re only fifteen, just like me.”

I chuckled. “I grinned. “Fifteen is older than you think,” I said. “Here’s another one.” I played the opening melody, then began to sing.

*“I’m 15 for a moment
Caught inbetween 10 and 20
And I’m just dreaming...
Counting the ways to where you are*

*15... there’s still time for you
Time to buy, and time to choose
Hey 15, there’s never a wish better than this...
When you only got a hundred years to live.”*

I finished the long instrumental close, then let the last notes of the piano ring out, reverberating against the wooden walls of the small church.

“That’s... that’s beautiful,” said Travis. “How you get your voice to sing so high like that?”

“That’s called falsetto,” I said. “It’s not exactly your real voice. It’s kind of a voice *above* your regular voice. It took me six months of lessons before I could figure out how to get any kind of decent vibrato in my falsetto range, and how to slide back down to my regular voice, which is

kind of a high baritone. I've got almost a three-octave range, which my teacher says is pretty good."

"It's really somethin', no matter what you call it."

Just then, there was a brief smattering of applause behind us. We turned to see a black man in a dark suit coming down the aisle. We quickly stood up and I slammed the keyboard cover down with a thud.

"Hi," I said, a little too loudly. "I'm, uh... I'm really sorry for trespassing, but I heard your choir and just wanted to see where all the music was coming from."

The man stood by the piano and eyed me warily.

"They sound great," I hastily added. "The... uh, the choir that is."

"Thank you," the man said, finally breaking out in a smile. "And you sing very well, yourself, young man. I'm Titus Meacham — I'm the pastor of this church. And you are?"

"Jason Thomas," I said, holding out my hand, which he gripped firmly.

"Thomas... Jason Thomas," he murmured. "You related to Miss Olivia Thomas?"

I nodded. "She was my aunt."

He smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Miss Olivia was a fine woman... a friend of this church. She wasn't exactly one of our parishioners, but she helped us in many other ways."

Travis shifted on his feet uncomfortably. "We gotta go," he said in a low voice.

The pastor nodded. "I understand. Please, feel free to come by anytime. Our church is open to anyone." He paused, then looked at Travis. "Regardless of color. Free man or slave, they're all welcome here at the Gospel Hall All-Faith Church."

I grinned. "Maybe I will. If nothing else," I said, nodding towards the piano, "I might be able to help you tune that piano."

"We could use some help at that," the man replied.

"C'mon," said Travis, who led me back down the aisle and half-shoved me out the front door. "Let's get back to huntin'!"

We returned to the small clearing where his rifle and bloody sack still lay. There were no signs of the rabbit anywhere.

"Damn," Travis muttered.

The sun was beginning to stain the sky with deep reddish hues. Travis pulled out his pocket watch and shook his head.

"It's almost five," he said. "Colt'll tan my hide if I don't bring back more food for the table."

I grinned. "I'm good for vegetarian tonight. Just give me a salad and some milk and I'll be okay."

"Make sure you tell him that."

"I will."

§ § § § §

When we were halfway through supper, there was a knock at the door.

"Who in tarnation can that be?" growled Mr. Colt. "Ain't expectin' nobody for dinner, are we, Sarah?"

"Go get the door, Lemuel," said Mrs. Colt.

The boy scurried out of the kitchen. I heard some voices, then Lem dashed back to the table. "It's Mr. McBillin from the general store," he said breathlessly. "He wants to talk to Jason."

My fork froze in mid-air. *What's this about?*

"Maybe he's come back to finish yellin' at ya," said Travis with a smirk.

I hadn't forgotten the confrontation I had with the angry Scotsman in town the day before.

"As long as it's not Johnny coming over to punch me out again, I'm okay," I said drily, and made my way over to the front door.

The man stood in the doorway, with a glowing lantern casting a weird amber glow on his face. His wife gave him a threatening glance.

"Go on, Angus," she prodded. "Say your peace to the young man."

I raised an eyebrow and looked at McBillin expectantly.

"I, ah... my wife and I wanted to ask you... that is... if it might not be expectin' too much..."

"Just say it, Angus!" prodded the woman.

He turned to her. "I'm gettin' there, Sally."

Mr. Colt stepped next to me. "Evenin', Angus. What brings you out to my farm? Trouble back in town?"

McBillin shook his head. "No, Seth. After meetin' this young man yesterday mornin', I thought maybe... well, perhaps I was a bit too hasty with our conversation."

"I'm sorry about that," I began. "You were right — I really shouldn't have butted in to your business."

"No need for apologies," Mrs. McBillin said. "Angus and I wanted to see if you might be interested in coming to work for us at the store. Just a few days a week after school, and all day on Saturdays."

"I canna pay ya much," Angus quickly added. "I figure maybe 50 cents a day would be fair. A dollar on Saturday."

Realization set in. "Tell you what," I said, trying not to smile too much. "I'll take that for a start, but I'd want a percentage of the gross if your sales go up."

The man raised an eyebrow. "What d'ya mean 'percentage'?"

I shrugged. "Say you're doing \$1000 a month in gross income now. If it goes up to, say, \$2000 a month for November, you give me ten percent of the difference. Ten percent of \$1000 would be an extra \$100."

He thought it over. "Not a penny over five percent!"

I did some quick math. "Okay, but then I'd want a raise to \$1 a day."

"Only if the profits go as high as you say they will."

"I'm pretty sure of it," I said with a grin. "In fact, I bet you'll do so much business you'll have to open up another store inside of a year."

Colt let out a laugh. "Angus," he said, wiping his eyes, "I never thought I'd see the day when a boy would out-negotiate you in business."

"Hey, I saw *Wall Street* three times," I said to him. "Greed is good. That was the guy's motto. Not a bad business philosophy, up to a point."

Mrs. Colt looked concerned. "But the boy's schooling..."

I raised my hands in mock surrender. "I promise, I'll do my homework and all that stuff." *How hard could school be in 1864?* I thought. *There's only what... 30 states to learn? And half as much world history? Plus no Computer Lab, which was the bane of my existence.*

"Then we have ourselves a deal?"

I shook the man's hand, and he clapped my shoulder. "I'll say this, m'boy — ya drive a hard bargain. Are you sure ya don't have any Scots in ya?"

"I think the Thomases are all English-Irish," I said, "but I'm not sure about my mother's side of the family. She was a Donaldson — Marie Donaldson."

McBillin's face brightened. "Aye," he said, "Donaldson's a good old Scottish clan. Goes back for generations, it does." He clapped my shoulder. "Ya just might be a Scotsman after all, boyo."

"Thanks, Mr. McBillin. I'll be by the store first thing after school on Tuesday."

"Tuesday's choir rehearsal," reminded Mrs. Colt.

"Wednesday, then. I'll work every day until 6, and then give you a full eight hours on Saturday."

He nodded. "And maybe we can talk about those changes ya come up with. Like movin' the counter up to the front."

"You got a deal."

We said our good-nights, then returned to the kitchen, where Mrs. Colt had made a fresh custard pie for dessert.

"Great dinner, Mrs. C," I said, pushing my chair back from the table. "Man, I'm gonna be gaining weight living with you guys."

She smiled. "Seems to me you could use a few more pounds. Sure you wouldn't like some rabbit stew? Lem left half his bowl. I can just warm it right up."

I shook my head, stifling a yawn. "No. Better get to bed."

"You boys got school tomorrow," reminded Mr. Colt, as we walked out the back door down the dirt path that led to the barn. "Get yer chores done at dawn, then on your way to some proper learnin'."

"A little red one-room schoolhouse?" I said, remembering an old 1940s movie I had seen in a film appreciation class.

"Not hardly. They got up to grade 12 over at the Jefferson School. Sixteen different classrooms. I 'spect you'll be goin' to 9th grade with Travis."

"That works for me."

Colt nodded, then walked away in the night.

Travis jogged up to me and helped me open the barn door, then started to walk back to the farmhouse.

"Hey," I said, touching his arm. "I'm sorry about the fight at the river. Guess I got off on the wrong foot with some of your friends."

He shrugged. "People 'round here don't always like newcomers. 'Specially people who're different."

Yeah, I thought. I'm different, alright — a gay kid from 2013. That'll go over real well with these ignorant bigots.

"I'll try not to be too different at school," I said, as we walked over to a nearby fence post and leaned against it. "Maybe you can help me fit in."

"Ya need to learn how to fight — that's for damn sure," he said. "Gotta take care of yourself."

I shook my head. "I'm not a fighter, Travis. Not my style. But I don't let anybody push me around, either."

He grinned. "Maybe I can at least teach ya to throw a good punch. My daddy knew how to fight. He taught me and Billy how to box when I was ten, the summer 'fore he passed away." He put up his fists, then made a few quick moves, missing my chin by inches. "Daddy used to say he was a 'student of pugilism,' whatever that was."

"I think that's something to do with boxing," I said with a sigh. "I know piano real well, and I can sing as well as anybody I've ever met, but fighting's not exactly my thing."

I glanced down at the ground and noticed several rabbits had come up to a fence post to chew on the grass. They were less than ten feet away, but paid no attention to us.

"Hey," I whispered, nodding towards the rabbits. "I bet you wish you had your rifle right now."

Travis shrugged. "We sorta have a truce after sunset. I say, they're fair game as long as there's light out. At night, they can run around all they want."

"Wish I could get a truce from Johnny," I said. "But I don't think he'll go for it."

"I wouldn't want nothin' bad to happen to you," he said in a low voice.

"Thanks," I said. "I've dealt with assholes like him before. But maybe you can teach me some moves, in case I have to clobber him."

He leaned in close, his face just inches from mine. The moonlight caught a gleam in his eye, and I had to catch my breath. For a desperate moment, I thought he was going to kiss me.

"You're... you're a good friend, Jason," he said, almost in a whisper. "Your music... it really makes you special."

"Thanks," I said, feeling overcome by a wave of emotion. We stood there, an uncomfortable silence between us. The crickets seemed to hesitate, their nightly symphony slowing for a moment. *Should I go for it?* My heart was hammering in my chest. I leaned forward. If I shifted my head just half a foot, I could kiss him.

But just before I could make a move, he stood up and began walking back towards the farmhouse. "I'll send Lem out to wake ya at dawn. We got a few chores to do, then we'll leave for school at 7:30."

"Thanks, Travis. Good night."

"And don't worry none about tomorrow," he called over his shoulder. "I'll make sure nobody bothers ya at school."

I was shaking a little as I closed the barn door, then I leaned against it and closed my eyes. *This is always my problem*, I thought. *Falling in love with a straight guy is the stupidest mistake I could make.* I could just hear J.D. taunting me with his list of Gay Do's and Don'ts. That one was number three on the hit parade, along with unsafe sex and hooking up with strangers on the Internet.

I climbed up the ladder, then pulled off my clothes and flopped down on my bed. I thought back to the naked boys I had seen back at the river earlier that afternoon and fought to keep the image out of my mind. I'd never get to sleep with the vision of those hot young guys from the river, dancing around in my head. But the dread of starting school in the morning was more than enough to kill any erotic fantasies for tonight. Still, I wondered how I'd survive going to school with kids from the 1860s — people that I had nothing in common with. *Could I really pull this off?*

As if to answer my question, one of the cows in the lower part of the barn let out a loud belch, followed by a long "moooooo."

"Thanks for the support, Matilda," I muttered, then pulled the covers up to my chin.

Chapter 6

The razor lay gleaming in the bowl. I rinsed it off, dabbed a little more soapy foam onto my upper lip, and braced myself.

“Ya sure you know how to use that thing?” Lem asked, leaning closer.

I nodded. “I usually use a Fusion razor, but I think I can get the hang of it.” The truth was, I used my father’s razor, which I guess I’d technically inherited after his death six months earlier.

At the ripe old age of 15, I only had to shave maybe once or twice a week. But Mrs. Colt warned me at breakfast that I had “best get my face clean for school,” and I thought it was wise not to argue with her.

The straight razor looked wicked, like something out of a *Freddie Kruger* movie. About the only time I had ever seen one before was when I’d been an understudy in *Sweeney Todd* at school a couple of years before. But that one was a rubber prop; this one was uncomfortably real.

My right hand was shaking slightly. I pushed my nose aside with my left, held my breath, and carefully scraped down, feeling the slight sting of the metal against my upper lip. It was easier than I thought, but I tried not to rush it. I rinsed off the blade and moved to the other side of my face.

“My brother Billy had to shave every other day,” Travis said, eating an apple while leaning against the kitchen window sill. He rubbed his face thoughtfully. “But he was 17. I only tried it twice.”

“You don’t got no moustache anyhow,” his brother quipped.

“Do so!” Travis snapped.

“Do not!”

"C'mon, you guys," I said, trying to get a grip on the straight razor. "I may totally slice my lip off here if you two don't keep quiet."

I finished one last swipe, then tentatively felt my upper lip. It was now completely smooth, but the right side stung a little.

"Think you're bleedin' a mite there," Travis said, nodding towards my chin.

"I'd ask for a Band-Aid, but I think it's the wrong century," I said, splashing water on my face. "We ready to go?"

He gave me an odd look, but nodded. Mr. Colt had to run an errand at one of the neighboring farms and pick up some supplies on the way, so about forty minutes later, he dropped us off at the school, which was about two-thirds down the dirt road that led into town. Jefferson High School was less than half the size of my old school back in Seattle, but was far bigger than the simple one-room schoolhouse I had envisioned. Travis and I stood together in front of the 40-year-old stone and brick building, with a large, curved facade that rambled down the street for at least fifty yards. I watched over my shoulder as the two Colts continued bouncing down the road, Lem waving to us until the wagon vanished over a hill.

"Miz Weeks is in that office over there," Travis said, indicating a small wing off to the left. "I think you gotta see her 'fore you can come to class."

"Hope there's no aptitude test to take," I quipped, remembering how a friend of mine had been studying his pre-SATs over the summer.

"If'n you can read and write and do some figurin', there won't be no problem," he said, walking towards the other building. "See if you can get into Mr. Twitly's class with me and my friends."

"Twitly?" I asked.

Minutes later, I found myself in the principal's office. Without any computer records to consult, or even any birth certificate to confirm my story, the principal somehow had no problem accepting my well-rehearsed explanation of how I came to find myself in St. Louis. Mrs. Weeks reacted favorably to my mention of meeting Judge Shaw the week before, which seemed to further convince her of my identity.

"Fort Vancouver, Canada," she said thoughtfully, sitting back in her chair and lightly touching her fingertips together. The room was filled

with the heavy scent of flowers, pungent enough to make me slightly nauseous. Her face was powdered white, giving her the menacing appearance of some kind of vampire, and a gaudy pearl necklace hung from her bony neck. "And you were in 9th grade there?" she asked, smiling sweetly.

"Yes ma'am." I started to add that I had actually just graduated from 9th grade, but I figured I'd just play along with the timeline I was stuck in for now. I had no choice but to bide my time for a few weeks until I could get back to Marsen's Cavern, find the mysterious blue light, and hope I could tumble back into the same bizarre time warp that got me here.

"Fill out this form," she said, sliding a piece of paper across the desk. She indicated an old-fashioned pen and inkwell in a stand. "Just to tell us a little more about yourself."

I instinctively reached for a Bic ballpoint in my pocket, then started to write.

"What is that?" she said, momentarily distracted.

"It's uh... something new," I said. "Just came over from... from France."

"May I see it?"

She examined the pen curiously. "How in the world do they get the ink to stay inside like that?"

"Those French scientists are amazing," I said, hoping my voice sounded convincing.

"Yes," she said, handing it back to me. "I have a book on Pasteur that I read recently."

I continued filling out the form, filling in "deceased" for my father, and giving the address of my nearest relative as "Olivia Thomas (deceased), Thomas Farm, St. Louis County, Missouri," and my current address as "Colt Farm, Old Country Road, c/o Seth & Sarah Colt."

Mrs. Weeks glanced over the form and nodded. "It all seems to be in order," she said, rising from her desk. "But — dear, dear, your handwriting is really quite poor, Jason."

"I'll work on that," I said. *And learn how to use those goofy pens they have in this whacked-out century.*

"Fort Vancouver," she said thoughtfully, then suddenly turned to me. "Je suppose vous pouvez comprendre tous, que je dis?"

I froze. Three years of French classes suddenly evaporated from my head.

She gave me a steely-eyed stare. “C’est-à-dire, si vous êtes qui vous avez écrit ici.”

Suddenly, I remembered. *She was asking me if I was really who I said I was.* But I remembered a little Canadian history.

“Vancouver is actually part of British Columbia,” I said slowly, “and we don’t like the French very much. But I really am who I say I am, Mrs. Weeks. Quoique mon Français n’est pas très grand.”

Even though my French isn’t so great.

Her face brightened. “Oh, that’s wonderful,” she said, ushering me out of her office and down the dimly lit corridor. “Perhaps you’ll bring some culture to our little school.” She paused and opened a door. The teacher inside stopped and looked, as did all the students.

“This is our new student, Jason Thomas,” the principal said as she marched me inside. “I hope all of you will make him welcome.”

Forty pairs of eyes stared at me. The class was made up of varying ages, most close to mine. I scanned their faces to see if Travis’ was among them. While the teacher spoke to the principal, I glanced up to see Travis sitting in the row nearest the windows. His face brightened, and I began to calm down a little bit. *Maybe this might work out okay after all.*

“So,” the teacher announced, as the principal left the room and closed the door, “Jason comes to us from Fort Vancouver, Canada. Welcome to Jefferson High School.” Twitly was very slender, with a pale face and a hawkish nose, and wore a tweed suit accented with a bow tie.

I started to extend my hand to shake his, but then caught the man’s expression. He was grim and unsmiling, and his arm stayed by his side. An uncomfortable silence passed, and I let my hand drop down.

“Thanks,” I said, a little nervously. “Should I take a seat?”

“Certainly,” he said. “But first... tell us a little about yourself, Mr. Thomas.”

I took a dramatic pause and told the story of my life — well, at least about the person I was pretending to be in 1864. I felt as if I was getting better at it as I went on, though I probably laid it on a little thick with some embellishments about the death of my father, along with my poor Aunt Olivia. One of the girls in the front row, a cute blonde I recognized

from church the day before, looked at me with some concern, clearly taken with my “tragic” story.

Twitly glanced at the piece of paper. “It says here you can sing. Is that right, Jason?”

Before I could answer, he went on. “Perhaps you can perform for us right now.”

I blanched. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.” He held out his hand, indicating a space just to the left of his desk, then sat down.

Jesus, I thought, as I stepped to the front of the class. *This was worse than auditioning for Simon Cowell and Howard Stern.*

“Give me a second,” I said. I glanced around the room. About half the kids were dressed in plain overalls and work clothes, most likely from nearby farms; the others were a little more upscale, and a couple of them even wore ties, with several of the girls in dresses of ribbon lace. Travis wore his usual denim overalls, but looked good in a pale yellow shirt.

Country, I thought. *This is more of a country crowd than pop.* I only knew a handful of country songs, but there was one that was my grandfather’s favorite. I took a deep breath and began.

*Suitcase packed with all his things
Car pulls up, the doorbell rings
He don’t want to go...
He thought he’d found his home.
But with circumstances he can’t change
Waves goodbye as they pull away
from the life he’s known
for the last seven months or so*

*“She said, we found the man who looks like you,
who cried and said he never knew
about the boy in pictures that we showed him
A rambler in his younger days
He knew he made a few mistakes
But he swore he would have been there
had he known it*

Son, we think we found your dad in Oklahoma.”

I continued on, filling the room with my voice, and hitting every note effortlessly. I knew every nuance of this song, having learned it as a kid back in 2006, and my grandfather — who was as tough a man as I ever met — was reduced to tears every time I sang it. I guess the lyrics struck a nerve with his own experience, since he'd been adopted early in his life and grew up in the Midwest.

I knew exactly how to pause, how to emote, how to breathe, and how to sell this song like nobody's business. I made it past the key change and on to the climax of the final verse, letting my voice swell a little louder.

*“One last turn, he held his breath
‘Til they reached the fifth house on the left
and all at once the tears came rolling in
And as they pulled into the drive
A man was waiting there outside
Who wiped the worry from his eyes,
smiled and took his hand...”*

*And he said, I'm the man who looks like you
who cried because I never knew
about that boy in pictures that they showed me.
A rambler in my younger days,
I knew I made a few mistakes
But I swear I would have been there had I known it
Never again will you ever be alone...
Son, welcome to your home in Oklahoma.”*

Just as I ended the vibrato on the last note, I instinctively bowed my head and, right on cue, the room exploded into applause and whistles. I looked up, and two of the girls in the front row were practically weeping!

Whoa, I thought. *I guess this means I passed the audition.* I grinned, letting the cheers wash over me.

“Settle down, settle down,” the teacher said to the class, then turned back to me. “That was... quite moving, Jason, even though the grammar

left a bit to be desired. Did your father hail from the Oklahoma Territory?"

"No," I said, catching my breath. "He was from the Northwest. That's just a song — but it was my grandfather's favorite."

"Ah," he said, seemingly unimpressed. "Please take a seat, Mr. Thomas. Perhaps over there," he said, indicating an empty desk towards the back.

"If it's okay with you, Mr., uh, Twitly, could I sit over here instead?" I said, walking towards Travis' row. "I'm sorta living with the Colt family now, and..."

He suddenly slammed the side of his desk with a long stick, which made a sound like a firecracker. I jumped.

"In my classroom, *I* choose where my students sit." He again pointed towards the distant chair in the back, and I meekly turned away from Travis, slinked down the row and sat down.

A few students gave me some curious stares, but I just shrugged and looked back at the teacher. As I glanced around the room, I saw in the back left corner what looked like an old stove, which I gathered was used to heat the class during the winter months. The air smelled of varnish, probably from all the woodwork on the floors, and the far left wall had five ceiling-high windows that revealed a grassy field by the school. Behind me were two large shelves, filled with lunch sacks, and I quietly added mine to one of the empty spots.

"We were on state capitals," Twitly said. "Now, as I was saying before we were interrupted, who can tell me the capitals of these states?"

No one responded.

"Mister..." He slowly pointed his finger around the classroom, then stopped in my direction. "Mr. Thomas." He used his pointer to indicate a spot on a pull-down map in front of the blackboard.

I felt a chill. The outlines of the states looked drastically different from what I remembered of North America. Everything from the middle of the continent to the West coast was shaded in gray, with few familiar landmarks. For all I knew, it could be deepest darkest Africa. But geography had never been one of my better subjects.

"Stand up, please. Can you tell us the capital of Kansas?"

I cleared my throat and stared at the distant map, but the characters were much too small to read. "Uh... Wichita?"

There were a few titters. The teacher shook his head. "Try again."

"Kansas City?" I said hopefully.

This time, there were moans and groans.

What I'd give for a lifeline, I thought. "I give up."

Twitly turned to a girl in my row who was holding her hand up, three seats ahead of me. "Faith," he said, "perhaps you can tell Jason the correct answer."

"The capital of Kansas is Topeka. Kansas was admitted to the Union on January 29, 1861. The current population is about 15,000, the governor's name is..."

"That's quite enough, Faith." Twitly pulled the map down a little further and turned back to me. "If United States geography is foreign to you, Jason, then perhaps you can tell us about your home country of Canada."

My face reddened. *This is going to be a very long day.*



The rest of the morning didn't go much better. Twitly seemed appalled at my lack of basic geography and history, but I redeemed myself right before lunch with a much better command of math and English.

"Don't mind Twitly," said Travis, as he slid onto the wooden bench beside me, then took a bite of his sandwich. "Nobody 'round here likes him much anyhow. He's got darkness in his soul."

A crowd of smaller boys ran by us, playing some kind of game with a stick and a rolling hoop that bounced along the grass.

"I did okay in school back home," I said with a shrug, reaching for an apple Mrs. Colt had left for me in my cloth lunch sack. "But I'm not exactly the scholastic type. If I ever went to college, it'd just be for music theory. Maybe piano and voice. Plus some electronics, for recording."

Travis started to reply, but we were suddenly surrounded by three girls, each dressed in frilly dresses and blouses. One of them was the blonde I'd seen in class earlier that morning.

"You sang wonderfully, Jason," she said, in almost a breathless voice. "I mean, it's not like opera, but I've never heard anything like it."

I stood up and smiled. "Thanks. My vocal coach back home told me I almost have a three-octave range. You're... Faith, right?"

"Faith Shaw. And these are my friends Emily and Louella."

"Good to meet you." I wasn't sure if I should bow, shake their hands, or what. Figuring out customs and body language was going to take some time, so I just waited for them to make the next move.

"Her daddy's the judge," Travis muttered in my right ear as he finished off the last of his sandwich. That rang a bell.

"Oh, yeah — Judge Shaw," I said, remembering the man I'd met in town a few days before. "So you're Judge Shaw's daughter. Yeah, he helped me last week with my Aunt Olivia's estate."

She took a step closer. Faith was very pretty, with long strawberry-blond hair that cascaded down her shoulders, and her eyes were shining. *Too bad for her I'm immune to her feminine charms*, I thought, sitting back down.

"Maybe you can pay us a visit sometime," she said. "My momma is a wonderful cook. She once got to see Jennie Lind herself at the opera house in town."

"That must've been, uh... nice," I said, as I began eating my own lunch.

"What? Don't tell me you've never heard of Jennie Lind!"

I started to answer, but a larger boy suddenly got in my face. "Don't be talkin' to no Jew, Faith," he snarled.

I looked up to see Johnny, the bully I had encountered at the swimming hole yesterday.

"Hey, good to see you, too, Johnny," I said brightly. "But as I told you before, my family's Presbyterian."

He held his fist up to my face. "Just stay away from Faith, if ya know what's good for ya."

"Johnny Younger," Faith snapped. "I told you before: we are just friends. And I'll thank you not to threaten my new friend Jason, or I'll never speak to you again."

Johnny started to reply, but then meekly took his fist away.

"I do declare," Faith continued, stamping her foot, "you are truly the most confounding person I have ever met."

Travis leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. "You best leave us alone, Johnny."

The other boy scowled and stormed off.

"Well, that was just a little slice of heaven," I said, checking to see if there was any dessert left in my lunch sack. "So, ah, Faith — is he, like, your boyfriend?"

Her eyelids fluttered in indignation. "You mean, are we sweethearts? Heavens no." She sat next to me, and I slid over to make a little more room on the bench, bumping into Travis. "Nothing of the sort."

"Sweethearts since fifth grade," Travis whispered under his breath. "Prob'ly get married once they come of age."

"I heard that, Travis Colt!" she snapped. "And that's nothing but a bunch of fiddle-dee-dee."

"But you are good friends," I said, finishing a small piece of cake.

She cocked her head. "Sometimes. But Johnny is just so..."

"Brash? Obnoxious?" I almost added "asshole," but I figured I'd avoid that in mixed company.

She gestured exasperatingly. "He's just not *artistic*. That's what I want in a boyfriend — a gentleman who has an appreciation for music and the arts. All the finer things in life."

Travis and I stood up. "Well," I said, heading over to the line of students being herded up by two teachers, "I'll let you know if I meet anybody like that. Nice meeting you, Faith."

She gave me a half-curtsy, then rushed off, giggling with her friends.

"Women," Travis muttered.

We made our way over to a nearby well, where one of the teachers was handing out scoops of water from a wooden bucket.

"So, you gonna court her?" Travis asked, almost indifferently.

I almost choked on my gulp of water. "Well, Faith's, uh... not exactly my type." *That's unless she had a brother who looked as good as she did.*

"You got a sweetheart back home?" he asked.

"Not exactly," I said. "I mean — I was with somebody for awhile, but we... we broke up."

Travis seemed to let that remark pass.

"How 'bout you?" I said, trying to sound casual.

He shrugged. "Haven't met anybody I'm interested in yet. My brother Billy James used ta say everybody on Earth's got somebody they were meant to be with someday. Only they don't know it 'till it happens."

I wiped the water off my chin, then patted dry the moist puddles on my shirt. "Sounds like a hopeless romantic. My friend J.D. back home used to say the exact same thing."

"Back to class, everyone!" Twitly called out, then clapped his hands together and indicated a place on the sidewalk for all of us to line up. As we approached the other teenagers, a horse-drawn carriage rode up, driven by Sheriff Baxter, trailing a cloud of dust. A sullen boy sat beside him, his arms folded, face scowling. Baxter pulled the wagon close to the stone steps that led to the school's entrance, then yanked the boy out and shoved him in line with the rest of us. I recognized him immediately: it was Jesse, the boy I had met on my arrival in 1864 and who had shown me the way back to the cave during my unsuccessful attempt to get home four days ago.

Twitly looked up. "Ah, Mr. James," he said, "so good of you to return to school."

"And he better *stay* in school, if'n he knows what's good for him," said Baxter. "We caught him tryin' to hop aboard a freight train headed east." He turned to the boy, whose face was red with anger. "You listen to me, Jesse: you got one more chance to straighten out, or it's back to the juvenile home with you and the rest of your hoodlum friends."

Wait a minute, I thought. *Jesse... James?* "That's Jesse James," I said, momentarily stunned.

Travis seemed bored. "Yeah. So?"

"No, no," I said, as we walked down the crowded corridor with the other students back to our classroom. "Jesse James is one of the most famous outlaws who ever lived!" *Or will be.*

Travis shrugged. "He told me he shot up some Yankees in the war last year. Even claimed he blew up a bridge and helped a gang that robbed a bank. But Jesse says a lotta things. He ain't no outlaw. Most people 'round here think he's just plum crazy."

I glanced at the other boy as we took our seats. *For all I know, it could be the same Jesse James from the movies, I thought. Maybe that's who he'll eventually become.*

I made a mental note to warn him about “the coward Robert Ford,” who was destined to shoot him in the back. Jesse might be a future killer, but he'd helped me out once. And I figured I needed all the friends I could get in this very, very strange place.

§ § § § §

After the final bell at 3 P.M., Travis and I made our way over to the elementary school, which was about two blocks away, to pick up Lem and walk home.

The overhead clouds were dark and foreboding. Behind us, I heard the rumble of distant thunder.

“Season's changin',” Travis said, munching on an apple as we trudged down the dirt road that led back to the farm. “Gonna get a lot colder now.”

Lem looked crestfallen. “Aw, heck,” he said. “I thought summer might stick around for awhile longer.” He kicked a rock on the path.

“Injun summer,” Travis replied. “We suddenly get a coupla days of summer, then it goes away, like that.” He snapped his fingers for emphasis.

“It don't hardly seem fair,” muttered Lem.

“Everything's gotta come to an end eventually,” I said.

“Not the damned war,” muttered Travis. “The Yankees aren't ever gonna let the Confederacy stand.”

“I thought this was a Union state,” I said, a little confused. “Shouldn't you guys be against the Confederates?”

Travis stopped and glared at me. “Missouri was part of the Confederacy when it all started. But the damned Yankees marched in and done took over the whole state. Half of St. Louis's still against 'em, if'n you ask me.”

“When did all this happen?” I asked. “The war's been going on for... what? Four years?”

Len and Travis both gave me a look like I was the stupidest person who ever lived.

"Alright, so I don't exactly keep up with the news," I said, exasperatedly.

"Don't they get newspapers up in Canada?" Travis asked.

I started to explain that what little news I got was mostly from CNN, but before I could get a word out, three boys charged out from the trees, yelling at the top of their lungs.

"That's him!" yelled the leader, who I recognized as Johnny. "GET THE JEW!"

Before I knew what was happening, I was struck in the stomach, doubling me up in pain, then another blow in my face knocked me down into the dirt. I instinctively curled into a ball, crying out in agony, while I was pummeled from every side. I tasted dirt and blood in my mouth. Another blow knocked the wind out of me, and I started to black out.

Travis was on my attacker in a second, smashing him with both fists. The boy screamed out in anger, then the third punch knocked him out completely. I heard a wailing in the background, and looked up to see that Lem had jumped on the back of the second boy, pounding and clawing at his face with both hands.

"Get him offa me!" the boy wailed. "This kid's some kinda wildcat!"

I felt another blow to my back, then looked up to see Johnny's angry face, howling with rage. In a blur, Travis knocked him to the ground, raining down a flurry of blows like an expert boxer. In moments, Johnny began to sob and frantically waved his hands in surrender.

I coughed, still dizzy, then rolled over. The right side of my face hurt like hell, and I was having trouble breathing.

Travis helped me up to my feet, then rushed over to where Lem was still yelling. The little boy didn't look like he needed any help. He and the older boy flailed around in the dirt, Lem's fists hammering into him like a punching bag.

"That's enough, Lem," his brother called, pulling him off the older boy, who was bawling like a baby.

"And here's one ta grow on!" Lem snapped, kicking the boy in the ass.

"I said, THAT'S ENOUGH!" Travis yelled, who yanked his brother back again and shook him.

Johnny was still lying face down in the dirt, moaning. We rolled him over and saw that his nose was bloody, and his right eye was already blackened and swollen shut. He opened his one good eye, spat out a mouthful of dirt, and stared at me.

"You're still a dirty Jew," he mumbled, sniffing.

We helped him up to his feet, while the other boys struggled to sit up.

I massaged my aching jaw. "Look, Johnny — I'm just a stranger in town, but you gotta give me a break here. You don't even know me."

"I know enough," he snapped. "And ya better stay away from Faith."

Travis leaned into his face. "If ya know what's good for ya, you'll stay away from Jason. He's part of us Colts now."

"And he goes to Baptist Church with us," added Lem.

"See?" I said, raising my hands in mock surrender. "Not a Jew."

Johnny staggered over to his friends. Although the fight had lasted less than a minute, their faces were bruised and bloody, and their clothes were torn and covered with dirt. One of them spat into the ground, then wiped a smudge off his face.

"This ain't over," Johnny called to me as they limped back into the trees. "Someday you won't have them Colt brothers to help ya. Then we'll see who wins the fight."

A cold breeze fluttered my shirt, and a couple of sprinkles splashed down my back, making me wish I had worn a coat.

"You okay?" Travis asked.

I felt my jaw again. "Nothing's broken," I said, "but I'll live. How's the cut on my head?"

Travis carefully inspected it, then nodded. "It ain't bleedin'. C'mon — we got chores waitin' at home."

My side still hurt from the kick I'd taken minutes before, and my tongue felt a new lump on the inside of my upper lip that still stung. I limped slightly, trying to keep up with Travis and Lem.

"Hey," I said. "Thanks for helping me back there. That's the second time you saved my life in two days."

He shrugged. "Hardly. That's just a little fist-fightin'. T'ain't nothin'."

"I should sue that asshole," I muttered. "Or call the sheriff or something. Get a restraining order."

"That's just the way things are 'round here," Travis said, as if that was all the explanation he needed. "But Johnny was right about one thing: ya gotta learn how to take care of yourself."

I blanched. "Hey, I already told you — I'm no fighter."

"We could see that," said Lem, giggling.

"Shut up, Lem."

I shook my head, still feeling a little woozy. "Is everybody this crazy in Missouri?"

"First," Travis said, "ya gotta learn to say it right. It's Missouri-*ah*, not Missouri-*ee*."

"What do you want from me? I'm Canadian, remember."

"You're in Missouri now," reminded Lem as we approached the farmhouse. The light spattering of rain was turning into a downpour. We caught the strong scent of bread from the kitchen window as we scrambled onto the front porch.

"Right. St. Lou-*ee*, Missouri-*ah*."

Lem grinned. "Now you're gettin' it."

"Mom's got supper on the stove now," said Travis. "After our chores, we'll eat. Then, you're gonna get some fightin' lessons."

I winced. *And I thought the worst part of my day was over with.*

§ § § § §

Travis said little to me for the next few hours. I felt embarrassed that, once again, I had been the wimpy kid he had to protect. After dinner, Mrs. Colt had me help her wash the dishes, which didn't do much for my feeling a little unmasculine.

"You boys and your roughhousing," she said reproachfully, shaking her head.

"It wasn't exactly my idea," I said, drying another dish and placing it on a stack. "The kid attacked me — and for nothing."

"That Younger boy is up to no damn good," said Mr. Colt, as he closed the kitchen door behind him. "Got a mean streak in him a mile

wide, that one does. Him and Jesse and all the others. Scoundrels, the lot of 'em."

"Tell me about it."

"You'd best stay away from him and keep out of trouble."

"Believe me, I will."

The living room clock chimed eight.

"I've homework to do," I said, putting the last of the dishes away. "Great dinner, Mrs. Colt."

Her face brightened. "Thank you, Jason. You have a good rest. We'll see you in the morning at breakfast."

The outside rain had stopped to a bare trickle, but the humidity hung in the air. I trudged wearily over to the main barn, stepping carefully to avoid the muddy puddles, and heard some footsteps in the darkness.

"Bout time you got here," said Travis, jogging up beside me.

I rolled my eyes. "Do we have to do this?"

He pulled the barn door open and lit the kerosene lamp.

"It's high time you learned how ta fight proper, Jason. Otherwise, Johnny and his friends'll be at ya every day. And I ain't always gonna be around ta help."

I sighed and nodded. He closed the door behind us, then began to take his shirt off.

I felt a little flush. "We're going to fight... naked?"

"Naw," he said, hanging his shirt on a nail. "I just don't wanna get my clothes dirty, is all. You do the same."

I reluctantly took my shirt off and hung it alongside his. He beckoned me closer, then held his fists up in the classic boxing pose and began rotating them in slow circles.

"Do what I do," he said. "Use your left hand to protect your face, and jab with the right. Like this."

For the next half hour, Travis gave me the basics: how to stand, how to hold my fists, when to duck, how to block, how to punch. I was surprised to learn there were at least four kinds of punches: a jab, a cross, a hook, and an uppercut.

"Naw, naw — put your weight behind it!" he said, pantomiming the motion again. "Move this way."

I tried it again, slowly pushing my fist out and leaning forward, then repeated it, faster.

Travis nodded. "That's better," he said. "I think you're gettin' the hang of it now."

I felt exhausted and was sweating from every pore. "Look, Travis, I'm really tired. And Twitly's gonna have my head if I don't get some more of those state capitals memorized for class tomorrow."

Travis grinned. "We're almost done for tonight. But first, we're gonna wrassle."

"You mean 'wrestle'? As in 'Wrestlemania 2'?"

"Lemme show ya."

He began circling around me, his arms spread wide, his feet darting first one way, then the other.

"Ya gotta learn to anticipate where the other guy's gonna be," he said. "That way, you'll be ready for anything."

Suddenly, without warning, he lunged at me and almost pulled me down to the sawdust-covered barn floor.

"HEY!" I cried. "What the hell was that?"

Travis laughed. "You're gettin' better," he said. "I bet yesterday ya couldn't dodge me like that."

I rubbed my side. "Still hurts like a bitch," I said, then showed him the bruises. "Look at this thing."

"I got one, too."

He turned and showed me a black-and-blue mark on his side. Travis' muscular body was as sweaty as mine and glistened in the light of the lantern. There was a deep ridge from his throat down to the middle of his broad chest, and his arms were thick and powerful. I felt a twinge.

"Come on," he said, beckoning with his hands. "Attack me."

"But I wouldn't want to..."

"Just do it. Ya ain't never gonna learn unless you try."

I nodded, then we cautiously circled each other, dipping in and out of shadows. Travis feinted to the left and I jumped back. He laughed.

"You're catchin' on to this," he said, moving back in position.

I caught my breath. "Is this supposed to be fun?" I asked.

"Me and Billy used ta do it out here in the barn. He taught me a coupla moves."

Without warning, I launched myself at him and dragged him to the ground, laughing. We rolled around in the hay, but he managed to flip me over face down and bent my arm behind my back.

"Hey!" I said, my face muffled in the straw. "I thought you weren't gonna hurt me!"

He let my arm go. "Sorry," he said. "You kinda surprised me. Let's try that again."

We stood up, dusted off the dirt from our bodies, then began the slow dance again.

"You ever lose a fight?" I asked, spitting a piece of hay out of my mouth.

"Not hardly," he replied. "Cept with some of the older boys, back when I was littler than Lem. But I reckon I'm stronger than they are now, least for the last coupla years. They usually steer clear of me."

I started to reply but he tackled me, and we went down in a tangle of bodies, rolling over and over in the hay until we came at rest next to the back wall, laughing and yelling.

"Not fair!" I yelled, trying to squirm out of his grasp. "I wasn't ready for that!"

"That's kinda the point," he said, pinning my outstretched arms against the floor. "Otherwise, ya ain't gonna be prepared for them ruffians at school."

We both stared at each other, breathing hard, our faces only a foot apart. Travis' body was covered with a sheen of sweat, and I could see a faint outline of light blondish hairs on his stomach, disappearing at his waistline. He moved against me again, and I felt a solid object pressing against me.

He was hard!

We were silent for a moment, breathing heavily.

"Hey," I said, my voice a little hoarse. "You can let me up now."

He nodded and freed my hands. I started to sit up, then I instinctively reached out and lightly touched his chest. He flinched slightly and looked at me, momentarily startled.

"You've... you've got a great body, Travis," I said. "Solid muscle." My other hand moved forward and I felt his broad shoulders and thick arms.

My cock twinged. "I guess with all this farm work, you don't even need to lift weights."

"You shoulda seen my brother Billy James. He was a lot bigger'n me, even though he's only two and a half years older."

A silence passed between us.

Travis seemed to hesitate for a moment, then broke out in a slight grin. "You wanna... have some fun?"

My heart was thumping so loud I was sure he could hear it. "What exactly do you mean?"

He reached out and lightly grasped the crotch of my jeans, which had a noticeable bulge.

Whoa!

"You... you sure you wanna do this?" I said in a half-whisper.

As if to answer, Travis stood up and wriggled out of his pants. His erection sprang up and smacked against his stomach.

"Jesus," I said, my mouth agape.

He looked at me expectantly. Shaking slightly, I slowly got to my feet and pulled my pants down. I was hard as a rock, and I found it a little hard to breathe.

"Get closer to the light," he said in a low voice. "Lemme see."

We stood facing each other, the warm glow of the lantern casting long shadows around us. Our erections pulsed side by side. Travis' penis was respectable, but it was at least an inch shorter than mine, and he only had a small sprinkling of body hair, as blond as his eyebrows.

Travis chuckled. "Well, you got me beat in one area," he said. "Are all Canadians that big?"

"I'm just average," I said, barely able to contain my excitement. My cock throbbed with my heartbeat, as if it had a life of its own.

He held his out, nearly touching me. "Mine is kinda funny," he said. "It bends to the right."

Travis was right: his endowment did have a noticeable curve to the right. He was paler than I was, and my penis was several shades darker than his.

He looked back up at me. "And you got more hair than me."

I grinned, barely able to contain my excitement. "Yours looks fine to me."

Travis sat down on a blanket atop a nearby bale of hay, and patted the area next to him. I kicked off my pants and hopped up next to him, and we leaned back against the rough barn wall. We casually began stroking. One of the cows mooed from her nearby stall, but we ignored her.

“Billy James used ta say this is the most fun a boy can have,” he said huskily.

“Well, everybody needs a hobby,” I said, trying to sound casual.

Our strokes became faster, our breathing more ragged. In less than a minute, I felt the warning tingles and began to moan.

“Oh, god,” I cried, and erupted three or four hot spurts all over my chest and neck. I fell back against the barn wall, completely spent.

“Good one?” whispered Travis, still stroking.

I nodded, then caught my breath. “Lemme help you with that,” I said as I gently pushed his hand away, then began stroking him with my right hand. His erection was rock-hard, like steel encased in velvet.

“That feels real good,” he murmured.

After a less than a minute, I was trembling with desire. “Let me try something,” I said, then leaned down and opened my mouth.

Travis moaned with pleasure. I felt the soft skin against my tongue and drank in his scent. I’d only done this a half-dozen times, mostly with Luke, but this was one area in which I bet I knew a lot more than Travis. I gently squeezed in the right places and kept him close to the edge for several minutes.

Travis’ dick was slightly smaller than Luke’s, so it was a lot easier to control. When I sensed he was getting close, I took my mouth away.

“Why’d ya stop?” he said, panting.

“Give it a few more seconds,” I said, gripping him firmly. “It’s better this way.” In the long weekend I’d spent at Luke’s house, he’d given me a crash course in Sex 101. I think we’d made it just about halfway through *The Joy of Gay Sex* before Monday morning. In our last night together, Luke dragged out one of my orgasms to nearly an hour, and it was easily the most intense experience of my life.

Travis panted. “Please,” he begged. “I just gotta...”

“Okay,” I said, giving it a little wiggle. “But next time, we’re going to take a lot longer.”

I went back to work, inhaling him completely, gripping his butt with my left hand, using my right to fondle him. In less than a minute, I felt his balls contract. His hips thrust uncontrollably, and I felt a familiar warm sensation at the back of my throat. Travis cried out, then fell back, exhausted.

“Lord almighty,” he whispered, gasping for breath.

I wiped off my mouth and lay next to him, our shoulders touching. “You’re welcome,” I said.

Travis lay there for a moment, his muscular chest heaving. I noticed a red blotchy pattern spreading through his skin on his upper torso.

“Hey,” I said, laughing with realization. “You’re blushing!”

He looked down. “Yeah,” he admitted. “I do that sometimes when I... you know.” He caught his breath. “You... you done that before?”

“A few times. Only with special friends.”

Travis sighed. “I ain’t never done much with anybody. ‘Cept maybe with Billy.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Your *brother*?”

He looked away. “I guess that’s wrong.”

“Hey,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. “It’s your business. Brothers fool around sometimes. I mean, I never had a brother, but I’ve heard about stuff like this. It’s not a big deal, Travis. It’s just a little sex.”

He gave me an odd look. “You an’ me were just havin’ fun,” he protested. “That ain’t sex. Sex is matin’ — like animals makin’ babies.”

“Yeah, we had a president say the same thing, back where I come from.”

In the distance, there was a clap of thunder. Seconds later, rain began pouring down on the barn roof. It was a gentle sound, almost comforting, rattling softly against the wood in waves.

Travis turned to me and shyly smiled.

I smiled back. “Doesn’t the rain sound great?”

A couple of streams began to drip inside from the roof, spattering into a puddle. One of the cows mooed, apparently irritated by the rain-water, and stepped aside, closer to the corral fence.

Travis nodded over our heads. “I’ll tell Colt we gotta patch the barn again. Dang roof leaks like a sieve.”

"It's not so bad with you here," I said. "Hey, I know a song about this."

I leaned closer to him and sang softly in his ear.

*"You and me and rain on the roof
Caught up in a summer shower
drying while it soaks the flowers
maybe we'll be caught for hours
Waiting now, the sun."*

"Never heard that one before."

I grinned. "It's an oldie but a goodie."

He started to respond, but a voice called out from outside the barn.

"Travis! You git your fanny out here! Time to get to bed, boy!"

We both jumped up and hurriedly pulled our clothes back on.

"You won't tell nobody about this," he said, stepping into his boots.

"Jesus, no," I said. "I mean, we were just..."

"Just wrasslin'."

"Right."

Travis finished buttoning his shirt, then opened the barn door. I reached out to stop him.

"Hey," I said. "I meant what I said earlier today. Thanks for not letting Johnny and his goons kick the crap out of me."

He nodded. "You still need some more fightin' lessons. I got a book my daddy used to read — "The Noble Art of Pugilism."

"Bring it out here with you tomorrow night. I'll read it — on one condition."

He looked at me suspiciously. "What?"

I leaned closer. "As long as we can do some more 'wrasslin'."

He broke out in a broad grin. Travis was a handsome guy, but when he smiled like this, he positively glowed.

"You got yourself a deal."

I watched him as he ran through the rain, dodging several puddles, then I latched the barn door shut. I lugged the lantern up to the hayloft, my schoolbooks tucked under one arm. Luckily, it seemed dry in this upper corner of the barn, but I could feel a cold gust seep through the thick

wooden walls. I made a mental note to get another quilt from Mrs. Colt in the morning. *That's unless I had Travis to keep me warm.*

“Wrassling,” I thought, smiling to myself. I sighed, then opened up my geography textbook, adjusted the lantern, and began absorbing the bewildering world of 1864.

Chapter 7

There was a chill in the early morning air the next day as we trudged down Old Country Road towards the high school, which I estimated to be about three miles from the Colt farm. We dodged several narrow puddles on the way, left over from the rains of the night before. A flurry of dead leaves swirled alongside the road, caught in an icy breeze like a mini-cyclone.

“Gonna snow afore too long,” Lem said, as he scampered to keep up with us.

Travis had been strangely silent since breakfast, and had barely paid any attention to me. I worried that maybe he had some regrets about our brief experience the night before in the barn. But he’d seemed so casual, so matter-of-fact about it, as if it wasn’t a big deal. Maybe it bothered him more than he’d let on.

Don’t ever fool around with breeders, as my friend J.D. used to remind me. You’ll just lose your heart, along with 20 minutes of your life you’ll never be able to get back again. J.D. always seemed to have a snappy bit of advice for any situation, as if he were the gay “Dear Abby.”

I pulled my wool coat around me and buttoned the top button. Lem was right: it was noticeably colder than it had been in the last week.

One week, I thought. I’d been stuck in the Missouri of 1864 for six whole days, and it seemed more and more like I’d never see 2013 again. But I’d resolved to make the most of it and just bide my time until a better option came up.

“What I need is a plan,” I muttered out loud.

“What?” Travis said, breaking his silence and eyeing me momentarily.

“Sorry,” I said, stopping to yank my book bag higher on my shoulder. “Just thinking out loud. Uh... so, you all straight on that geography test we’ve got with Twitly this morning?”

Travis shrugged, but said nothing. I fought the urge to stop and find out what was eating him, but I figured now wasn’t the time or place, especially with his ten-year-old brother around. We kept walking at a brisk pace, and I felt a shiver — both from the chill of the early morning, as well as Travis’ frosty attitude.

About forty minutes later, we reached the school and Lem continued on to St. Louis Elementary, which I gathered was another half-mile down the road.

“Listen, Travis,” I began, gently grabbing his shoulder and bringing him to a halt. But before I could get any further, I heard a voice call from the side road.

“You there! Jason!”

I looked up across the schoolyard to see a familiar face. It was an older woman unloading sacks of flour and eggs from a wooden wagon. I recognized her as Mrs. McBillin, whom I had met over the weekend, waving me towards her.

Travis ignored me and continued walking indifferently towards the hallway at the front of the school. He obviously was in no mood to talk, so I jogged over to the woman as she struggled to drag a bulky sack of potatoes off the back of the wagon.

“Let me help you with that,” I said, setting down my book bag and helping her with the burlap bag. It was much heavier than it looked, and I nearly toppled over in my attempt to set it down gently on the sidewalk, next to a wheeled cart.

“Thank you,” she said, catching her breath. “Our regular boy didn’t make it in for mornin’ deliveries today.” She cocked her head. “You have a chance to think about Angus’ offer? To work for us over at the store, that is?”

I had almost forgotten about it. “Uh, sure,” I said, trying to decide how working at the store might fit into my eventual escape plan. “What time would be...”

“Right after school this afternoon would be fine,” she said. “If you could give us even a couple of hours every other weekday, that’d be a blessing. We could certainly use the help.”

I tugged at the last burlap sack and set it down with the others onto the step. In the distance, I heard the school bell clang in the tower in the main building.

“You got all that okay, Mrs. McBillin?” I asked, hefting my book bag to my shoulder.

She nodded as she took hold of the cart handle. “You get on to class, Jason. We’ll see you later on this afternoon.”

As I turned to go, she touched my arm. “Angus is a mite stubborn about some things,” she said, “but I think you have the right attitude. Just be sure to watch your words with him.”

“Gotcha,” I said with a grin. “No attitude.”

By the time I made it into the classroom, everybody was already seated, and Twitly gave me an annoyed glare. Another bell clanged in the distance.

“Ten more seconds and I would have given you an ‘F’ on this test,” he growled.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

And we’re off to a flying start, I thought.

§ § § § §

As it turned out, I managed to survive the geography test and even got some extra credit by knowing most of the Confederate state capitals as well. Twitly gave me a B+, which was marginally better than I’d been averaging in Geography back at my real school.

“Think you’re so smart, don’tcha?” Johnny muttered, as we took our test papers back to our seats.

I grinned. “Not bad for a Canadian, eh?”

He snarled and returned to his seat, which was thankfully on the other side of the classroom. I leaned forward and tried to catch Travis’ eye, but he seemed to deliberately look away, idly staring at something outside the window.

I sighed. I probably wasn't going to be in 1864 for much longer anyway. I'd had my quickie with him, but it was pretty obvious Travis had some issues. *Definitely not the boyfriend type*. Even if we had both been from the same century, it didn't seem as if we had connected as much as I'd thought.

As I continued to try to come up with a plan, Twitly began lecturing the class, droning on about some Revolutionary War incident. I glanced at the other students, who looked as bored as I did. I tried to remember some of their names, based on comments that Travis and the teacher had made the day before. The brown-haired boy at the head of my row was named Quincy; another boy behind him, dressed in overalls, was Lucius. I didn't know the dark-haired girl to my left, but the blonde in front of me was Louella, a friend of the Judge's daughter that I'd met the day before.

Eying the faces of the other teens, I smirked to myself at how radically different they looked from the class of 2013 that I'd left behind. Some of the girls' hairstyles were festooned with elaborate ribbons and baubles, while half the boys looked like they'd been assaulted with scissors and a bowl. But for some reason, Travis — who at the moment, happened to be sitting in a shaft of sunlight that slanted down from the side window — looked as dazzling as ever. *He'd fit in even in an upscale Malibu classroom*, I thought, feeling simultaneously envious and more than a little lustful.

As the hours inched by, I dutifully made notes on the history lesson, trying to jog my memory of a class I had had a year before in 8th grade. Suddenly, I noticed my ballpoint had stopped working. "Piece of crap," I muttered under my breath. I leaned forward to the girl in the desk in front of me. "Hey, uh... Louella," I whispered, "you got a spare pen?"

She looked back at me with a little shock, then gave me a small smile. "Why, I believe I do," she said, reaching for a small pocketbook under her chair. She pulled out a steel pen and handed it to me.

"You're a lifesaver," I said, smiling.

I took the old-fashioned pen and stared at it. It was a bare wooden stick with a flared metal flange at one end. My desk was equipped with two black inkwells, one on each side. I glanced at a boy on my left, who was writing feverishly, effortlessly dipping in the pen for a refill every

three words or so. I duplicated his movements and continued making my notes. The results were readable, but it was a weird experience, almost like scratching the words rather than writing them, and the page was spattered with black blotches, marring where I'd let the pen sit too long on the page.

What I would give for my laptop and Microsoft Word right about now, I mused.

§ § § § §

By lunchtime, my stomach was growling ferociously. The large oak clock on the wall to the right of the blackboard ticked like a metronome, but I could swear its hands were permanently glued at 11:45. A quick glance at my wristwatch confirmed the time, but my hunger pangs insisted it was later. I was feeling drowsy. Aside from being awake since dawn, I felt a little flush from the classroom stove, which made the air warm and humid. I stared down at my paper, on which I had been idly scratching notes, still working out how to best use an 1864 pen.

Suddenly, I was aware of voices being raised. Twitly was barking at an abnormally tall, lumpy boy at the head of the row next to mine.

"Say it again, Edward!" he bellowed. "You know the name of this battle!"

I prodded Louella gently with my pen. "Who's that?" I whispered.

"That's Eddie DePeller," she whispered back. "He's a mite... slow. Doesn't understand things too well. Not quite right in the head, if you ask me."

I glanced towards the boy. From the pained look on his face, and his halting, slow delivery, it was clear he was retarded — excuse me... mentally challenged. Either way, I was puzzled as to why he was put in a class of normal kids, which made no sense to me. Apparently "special ed" didn't exist in 1864.

"Stand up!" Twitly roared. He jerked the boy to his feet.

Eddie seemed on the verge of tears. "I don't... I don't..." His voice had a slow drawl, like a record playing at the wrong speed, and he had trouble staying on his feet.

Twitly began shaking him. "You knew the answer just last week!" he cried, pointing towards the Revolutionary War map at the front of the room. "You can't possibly have forgotten it already!" The teacher slapped him, hard, in the face.

The class tittered. I was a little stunned. I'd never seen a teacher get so abusive in any of my schools before. Back home in Seattle, there'd be about ten lawsuits and news stories if anything like this happened.

"Shut up!" Twitly cried, turning to the rest of us, his voice creeping up an octave. "There will be no lunch unless and until Edward can answer this simple question." He spun back to the boy. "Now, Edward — please name the battle in which Cornwallis was defeated!"

Eddie looked like a drowning puppy, tears streaming down his face. His mouth opened and closed, but no sounds emerged except for a strangled whimper.

"It was the deciding battle of the entire Revolutionary War!" Twitly said, his face so close to Eddie's that the boy began leaning backward. The teacher began shaking him violently. "Answer me! ANSWER ME!"

Everyone around me seemed frozen in shock, as if they watching a train careen down a track to a certain wreck. I couldn't take anymore.

"Stop it!" I cried, leaping up to my feet. "Leave him alone!"

The entire class stopped and stared at me. Eddie's head turned, his eyes still brimming with tears, his mouth open in a wide "O" of surprise. Twitly's hand was frozen in mid-air, ready to strike the boy again.

"Can't you see he's mentally handicapped?" I said, taking a step forward, my heart pounding in my ears. "You have no right to bully people this way! He's still a human being! Stop it! Stop it right now!"

Twitly's face was beet red. He let go of Eddie, who fell back into his chair with a thud. The classroom was utterly silent except for the steady ticking of the clock by the door. Several uncomfortable seconds passed by.

"Mister... Mister Thomas," he said finally, catching his breath. "You will stay here in this classroom on detention. The rest of you," he said, nodding to the class, "are dismissed for lunch for the next hour. Go!"

The other students leapt up from their seats, grabbed their lunch sacks in a blur, and made a beeline for the door. I briefly made eye con-

tact with Travis as he walked by; he gave me an odd look, a concerned expression in his eyes.

"You're gonna get a real whuppin' now," muttered one boy as he shoved past me. I recognized him as one of Johnny's cronies who tried to attack us on the way home the day before. He closed the door behind him, leaving me and the teacher completely alone. The echoes and laughter of the students faded into the distance.

Twitly stood by his desk. "Come here, Mr. Thomas," he said in a cold voice. "Now!" He picked up his long pointing stick, which I could see would make an excellent whip. *Or a switch*, as Mr. Colt had called it when he beat Travis several nights earlier.

I didn't care. I walked defiantly up to the front of the classroom, never once breaking eye contact with him.

"Are you going to beat me with that, Mr. Twitly?" I asked, keeping my voice steady.

He started to answer, but I interrupted.

"Because if you do, I just want you to know: you can beat the living crap out of me, even put me in the hospital, but it still won't make you *right*. What you were doing to Eddie was totally cruel, like kicking a defenseless dog. Where I come from, they'd fire any teacher who violently attacked a kid in class... and probably toss them in jail, to boot. To attack a kid like Eddie, well... that's even worse."

Twitly raised the stick over his head, then stopped, obviously letting my words sink in. I braced myself.

"Sit down, Jason," he said at last, pointing towards the chair in the front row. I did so, and he leaned back against the desk and let out a long sigh. He let the end of the pointer drop to the floor with a small thunk, then leaned on it like a cane.

"You haven't been here in St. Louis long enough to know our ways," he said in a quiet voice. "In my class, discipline is the very backbone of the knowledge we teach."

"Do you honestly think you can beat the facts of history into a brain-damaged kid?" I said, accusingly. "Sir?" I added, with a note of sarcasm. "I mean... what's the point?"

What Twitly did next shocked me. His shoulders sagged, then he rubbed his eyes and looked back down at me wearily. "I ask myself that

very question every day," he said, with a touch of sadness. "Edward DePeller could barely speak a complete sentence when I first began teaching him two years ago. His doctors believed him to be a complete idiot and wanted to have him institutionalized. What you don't know is that his mother begged me to let him attend this school. She insisted that although, as you say, Edward is..." he made a vague hand gesture.

"Mentally disabled," I said.

"A bit feeble-minded, yes, but he has great potential," he continued. "He's below average compared to most of my other students, but has managed to score as high as a C on several tests as recently as last week. I've been tutoring Edward on my own time three times a week — twice after school on Monday and Wednesday, and once each Sunday evening. He's made remarkable progress. But sometimes, his retention is... frustratingly limited."

I was taken aback. "So you don't beat him every day?" I said.

"Good Lord, no," he retorted. "Edward and I had just gone over the Battle of Yorktown yesterday after class. He can recite most of the facts from memory, when no other students are in the room. In fact, it's uncanny: I can give him any date in history, and he can tell me the exact day of the calendar on which it took place."

Realization set in. "Autism," I said, slowly nodding. "He's autistic, like a savant. His brain isn't quite wired the way the rest of ours are, but he's a genius with numbers. But he has more trouble remembering verbal facts, like history or English." *Like the 1864 version of Rain Man*, I thought.

Twitly raised an eyebrow. "I haven't heard that term for feeble-mindedness before," he said, "but what you say is indeed very close to the truth."

So it's not so much that Twitly a bully, I mused. *He's just a frustrated teacher who let the situation get out of control.*

"My hope," he continued, "is that if I can somehow help students like Edward, perhaps I can keep more of them out of madhouses. Perhaps they can find work, eventually lead useful lives. It's been the greatest challenge of my teaching career."

My stomach growled again. "Look, Mr. Twitly, if you're still going to beat me," I said, as politely as I could, "can we please get it over with?"

With all due respect, I'm really starved, and I'm supposed to go to work later on this afternoon at McBillin's General Store. Sir."

The man looked me in the eye. "Eat your lunch in here," he said quietly. "I'll have Mrs. Green from the school kitchen fetch you a glass of milk. For today, there'll be no punishment. But I'll thank you not to interrupt my class again. And I expect you to address me with respect."

I tried not to grin. "Alright," I said. "And if anybody asks, I'll tell them that you — how do you guys put it? — 'slapped the tarnation out of me.' Does that work for you? Sir?"

Twitly stood up and smoothed out his bowtie. "Yes," he said finally. "It will have to do. Just heed my warning, Mr. Thomas. I am most certainly not a bully, not in my classroom, or anywhere else. You'll find I'm more than fair, as long as you obey the rules here. Do we have an understanding?"

I stuck my hand out. "Deal."

The man took my hand and shook it warily. His grip was moist and shaking slightly, but he seemed somewhat relieved.



A few of the students stared at me curiously when they returned to the classroom after lunch, but I was otherwise ignored for the rest of the day, which was taken up with more of the history lesson along with some fairly simple mathematics exercises. *It's like living through 7th-grade algebra all over again*, I thought, relieved that this would be one test I could easily ace without any studying.

After school, I met up with Travis and we walked down the hall and out to the dirt road. Lem was already waiting for us, gathered with a small crowd of young boys by the courtyard flagpole, poking at something in the dirt. He looked up and grinned.

"Looky here!" he chirped, swinging something black and furry on the end of a rope. "I got me a dead cat!"

I winced. Sure enough, it was the carcass of a dead animal, its eyes staring open, flies buzzing around its head. It was still recognizable as a cat, but only barely.

"Won it at marbles, I did, fair an' square!" he said. "S'posed to be the luckiest thing in the world."

"Not for the cat," I muttered.

Travis was nonplussed. "Momma ain't gonna let you keep it in the house," he warned.

I caught a whiff. It smelled sour and musty, like an old moldy cushion that'd been left out in the rain for weeks. The tail was stiff, and stuck out at an odd angle.

"Then maybe I could..." he began.

"And not out in the barn, either," I said. "No way. Not as long as I'm sleeping in there."

Lem shrugged. "Maybe in the shed, then, out by the tomato patch. That should be alright, I reckon."

They started walking, but I held back, looking to the left, on the way into town.

"You comin'?" Travis asked, somewhat impatiently.

"I told Mrs. McBillin that I'd start helping them at the store after school," I said. "I think I can still be back at the farm by sundown. Tell your mom I'll try to be home by seven."

"Suit yourself."

Lem held back a little bit. "Don'tcha wanna look at this?" He swung the cat around his head tentatively, the flies still buzzing. "Ain't it some-thin'?"

"Maybe later," I said with a slight shudder, then started off to the road that led into town.

§ § § § §

Mr. McBillin proved to be a lot more receptive to my ideas than I had expected. For the first hour or so, I helped his wife bring in barrels of fresh fish from the back of a wagon in the alley behind the store, then I sketched out a new floor plan that would organize the store's items a little more logically.

"See, the fruits and vegetables could all go over on this side," I said, using a pencil to indicate the wall on the right. "Eggs and breakables

would be over here. Meat stays behind the glass case where it is now. You could even have a few shelves here for fresh bread and rolls.”

“Why in tarnation would we do that?” asked McBillin. “There’s already a bakery less than two blocks away.”

“Convenience,” I said. “People will be more likely to buy a bunch of food items at the same time, instead of having to come here only for meat and vegetables. One-stop shopping.”

“One stop,” he mused. “So they could buy everything under one roof.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Like a supermarket.” *Well, more like a very large 7-11, I thought, but at least that’s the general idea.*

“Alright,” he said at last. “We could bring in a few bakery items twice a day on consignment. You got any other bright ideas? I’d especially like to hear how we can bring in more customers.”

I thought for a moment. “Advertising,” I said, remembering a business class I’d had less than two months ago, in my previous life at Garfield High back in Seattle. “Put ads in the local newspaper, and post them outside the store, on the wall. Find a few items you can sell at cost, then promote them to bring people in. That’ll get you more customers.”

“At COST?” he thundered. “Now ya tryin’ ta take away all me profits!”

I grinned. “No, no,” I said, as soothingly as I could. “Just get a half-dozen items that will grab people’s attention. Stock up a lot of them, and sell them for exactly what you’re paying for them. You won’t make a dime on them. That’s what a loss-leader is.”

“That makes no bloody sense...” he began.

“But you’ll make loads of money on all the *other* stuff they buy,” I continued. “Once they come in the store for the sale items, they’re bound to buy more. I bet for every item you break even on, they’ll buy three more things that make you money.”

McBillin frowned. His wife leaned over. “The boy’s making sense, Angus. Maybe you should give it a try.”

“I never heard as big a load of nonsense in my life,” he muttered.

“Mr. McBillin, I swear, all the stores back in my home town do this,” I said, truthfully. “They hook the customers with the cheap sale items,

then reel them in like a fish and they wind up buying more than they planned to. It's human nature. That's the way business works."

His eyes flickered. "Like fishin'," McBillin mused. "Reelin' them in."

"In fact," I said casually, grabbing an apple from a wicker basket and taking a bite, "I'd put the sale items at the back of the store, and make the customers walk all the way through it to get them. That way, they can't help but see the rest of what you have to sell."

McBillin rubbed his chin, his brow wrinkled in thought. "Y'know," he said at last, "that just might work at that."

"Try it for a week or two," I said, pointing to a folded copy of today's *St. Louis Dispatch* on the counter. "Put an ad in tomorrow's paper. I bet business will pick up within two days."

"The ad'll cost money," he mused.

"It'll pay for itself over time, Mr. McBillin. Just make it as big an ad as you can afford, and feature just the sale items in bold letters. Add a few others at the regular price if you want."

I looked over his shoulder as he perused some of the other advertisements in the newspaper. Most of them were oddly written, with certain words inexplicably capitalized and weird typefaces, as if they were made by a crazy geek who went nuts with ransom-note fonts on a computer. But they looked kind of retro-cool in an odd, 1864 kind of way.

"Alright," he said, resignedly. "We'll try a couple of advertisements, then." He turned to me and shook his finger in my face. "But mind you, boy, if we don't get any new customers out of it, those ads will be comin' out of your pay!"

"Just don't forget I get ten percent if your profits go up for the month," I reminded him.

He glared at me, then his stern expression slowly dissolved to a smile, then he chuckled. "Are you sure you don't have some Scot in ya, boy? Because ya certainly know the value of a dollar."

His wife and I both laughed. It looked like McBillin's General Store was on its way to becoming "McBillin's Supermarket."

§ § § § §

By seven, the sun had already disappeared from the street, and a man came by in a wagon to light the street lamps, bathing the area in a warm yellow light. Mrs. McBillin was kind enough to give me a lift back to the farm in the store wagon.

"You take care now," she said, as I reached up to grab my book bag and some groceries from behind the seat. She touched my arm gently. "Thank you again for helping us with the store. Angus is a good man, but sometime he's... well, a mite stubborn when it comes to business." She smiled warmly. "Thanks to you, I think perhaps we can try some new ideas."

"There's a lot more where those came from," I said, hopping down to the dirt road in front of the Colt farmhouse. "See if you can have a sign painter come by tomorrow afternoon, and I'll work with him on labeling some of the aisles. This weekend, maybe we can talk about moving the cashier desk to the front of the store."

She nodded. "We'll see you tomorrow around four o'clock again. Goodnight, Jason."

I gave her a brief wave as I walked past the picket fence and up to the front porch, as the wagon creaked down the dirt road. As I trudged up the steps, I noticed an odd reddish glow in the darkness and I stopped in my tracks. Mr. Colt leaned forward, his face momentarily illuminated by a match as he relit his pipe.

"Bout time ya got here, boy," he said. "Ya missed supper."

"I had to work at McBillin's store." I held up a brown paper package. "McBillin's going to let me buy groceries at cost, so I can bring home some food for us once in awhile."

The man snorted, then spat to the side. "We grow pret' near all we need here. Don't need much more."

"I'll talk to Mrs. Colt about it," I said. "There's some stuff we used to eat back home — pizza and hamburgers and stuff — trust me, you'll love 'em — and I'll work it out with Mrs. Colt in the kitchen. And it won't cost you anything."

"We'll see about that." He leaned back into the shadows and glared at me as I walked through a cloud of sour smoke.

§ § § § §

Mrs. Colt was initially annoyed with me, since I had missed out on veal cutlets and string beans, but she definitely brightened when she saw the canned goods and ham I'd brought with me. She chattered on as she warmed up the leftovers and I told her a little about what had gone on that day, omitting the story about the handicapped boy. After I finished my meal, I stifled a burp and let out a long sigh.

"Man, am I beat," I said, as I wiped off my mouth and slid my chair back. "Long day." I looked around. "Is Travis outside?"

Mrs. Colt looked up from the sink, where she had put the last of the dishes in a stack on the counter. "He was out for an hour helping his father feed the livestock, but he should be back in his room by now. Might be asleep already."

I glanced down the hallway and saw Travis' door shut. *Just as well*, I thought. Travis was stubborn enough that I probably should just avoid trying to talk to him until the morning.

I let the back kitchen door close behind me, then lugged my book bag on my shoulder as I approached the barn. The door was open slightly, and a yellow glow flickered from the inside. As I trudged inside, I saw a figure sitting by the cow stall, flipping through a book.

"*The Noble Art of Pugilism*," I said, eying the cover. "Good to know you can read."

Travis looked up, momentarily startled.

"Look," I began, "I wanted to talk to you about something. We need to talk."

He scowled and tossed the book aside. "We're here to learn ya how to fight, not to have no conversation," he snapped.

That only made me angry. "Fine," I said, dumping my bag on the ground, then I unbuttoned my shirt and tossed it onto a nearby bale of hay. "Alright. Bring it on, tough guy."

For the next twenty minutes, we sparred back and forth. "Good one," Travis said, pulling his head back a split second before my fist flew through the air. "You're catchin' on." He was panting slightly.

Just as I started to reply, his left fist shot out and grazed my jaw. "Ow!" I yelped, jumping backward. "That fucking hurt!" I winced and rubbed my mouth.

Travis stopped. "I was pullin' my punch," he said, his voice filled with concern. "I didn't hit ya that hard. Listen to me: ya gotta start gettin' used to gettin' hit. That way, ya won't get scared when it happens. Even in all the fights I won, I still took a punch now and again. But I was the only one standin' when it was all over."

"I think I need a stuntman," I muttered, clearing my head. I reluctantly raised my fists again.

Travis feinted to the left, then swung hard with his right. I leaned back just in time, and his fist flew harmlessly through the air. Almost in slow motion, I saw my opportunity and socked him in the stomach as hard as I could. Travis let out a loud "oooof" of surprise, then doubled up and fell to the floor.

"Jesus!" I cried, then jumped forward to help him back up.

"I ain't hurt," he said, wheezing slightly. "Ya just... just caught me by surprise, is all." He got back up to his feet, then grinned. "I think you're comin' along pretty well. Pretty soon, them bullies are gonna be the ones to have ta worry."

I shook my head, then yawned and sat down on an overturned bucket. "I told you before, Travis — I'm a singer, not a fighter."

He sat next to me. "Thought you said you were gonna be some kinda actor, like in the theater."

I shrugged. "I go back and forth. My vocal coach back home, Mrs. Rawlings, says you have to be a decent actor to be a good singer, so the audience really believes the lyrics."

"Vocal coach?"

"Sorry — my singing teacher. My folks paid for lessons twice a week after school for the last few years. A little piano, some music theory, but mainly voice. She actually had a minor hit back in the..." — I stopped myself from saying *the 80s* — "uh, about 20 years ago."

"A hit?" he said, confused. "You mean she hit somebody?"

"No, no," I said. "A hit as in a *song* — a song that everybody knows, one that makes a lot of money. We call that a hit."

Travis frowned, then held out his hand and closed it into a fist. "This is the only kinda hit 'round these parts. Ain't never heard a song I could throw a punch at."

I laughed. "No, we usually dance to hit songs."

Travis sniffed. "Dancin' is stupid," he said. "Big waste o' time, if ya ask me. That's for sissies."

"Oh, yeah?" I said. "Choreography is hard work — almost as hard as fighting." I thought for a minute. "Here's a routine I learned last year. I did it in front of the school and brought the house down."

"House?" he asked, clearly confused.

"I mean the other kids at school liked it," I explained. "Got a standing ovation."

I walked over to the nearby kerosene lantern on the wall, then snapped my fingers to a beat and hummed the intro.

*You're insecure
Don't know what for
You're turning heads when you walk through the door
Don't need make up
To cover up
Being the way that you are is enough.*

*Everyone else in the room can see it...
Everyone else but you-ooo...*

*Baby, you light up my world like nobody else
The way that you flip your hair gets me overwhelmed
But when you smile at the ground it ain't hard to tell
You don't know — oh-oh
You don't know you're beautiful.*

I did my bump and grind in time to the beat, spinning around and stopping on a dime, then clapping at the chorus and humming the guitar parts. I even threw in a little moonwalk, sliding across the dusty barn floor, which made Travis laugh.

I danced right around him, occasionally dropping my voice to sing into his ear, then jumped back for some of the more energetic parts of the song.

*So come on
You got it wrong...*

*To prove I'm right I put it in a so-o-ong.
I don't why...
You're being shy
And turn away when I look into your eye-eye-eyes.*

As I sang, I let my finger trace an imaginary line from Travis' chin down to his chest, which was slightly damp with sweat. I hit all the notes expertly, right on pitch, then momentarily dropped down to my knees before hopping up again for the final verse.

*Baby you light up my world like nobody else
The way that you flip your hair gets me overwhelmed
But when you smile at the ground it ain't hard to tell
You don't know — oh-oh
You don't know you're beautiful.*

*If only you saw what I can see
You'll understand why I want you so desperately
Right now I'm looking at you and I can't believe
You don't know — oh-oh
You don't know you're beautiful — oh-oh...
That's what makes you beautiful!*

I stopped, catching my breath, only a couple of feet away from Travis' face, frozen in a precise pose.

"That was... uh, real interestin,'" he said, almost shyly.

"You didn't like it?" I said, catching my breath, then I stood up and dusted off my knees. "Trust me, that routine totally wowed 'em back home."

He looked away, slightly embarrassed. "I dunno... I never seen nobody do that before — the way you moved. It made me feel kinda... funny."

I grinned. "Back where I come from, people do that for a living. I'm a better singer than I am a dancer, but I know a few steps."

Travis finally turned back to me. He looked a little nervous, and his eyes were very wide.

“Hey,” I said quietly, putting my hand on his shoulder and giving him an affectionate squeeze. “It’s not a big deal.”

There was an uncomfortable silence between us. Travis was having a hard time looking at me. But I was too turned on to stop.

I leaned closer to him. “You want to, uh... you know, ‘wrassle’?” I said in a low voice. “Maybe just for a few minutes?”

Travis seemed to consider it for a moment, then shook his head. “I gotta get back to the farmhouse,” he said, backing away, his voice a little hoarse. “Colt’ll get suspicious if I spend too much time out here.”

I sighed and watched him slip his shirt back on. He buttoned it up, then walked to the barn door and unlatched it.

“You want your book back?” I asked, holding up the boxing guide.

“Naw,” he said. “I practic’ly got it memorized. You keep it. Ya never know — ya might need it someday. Sooner than ya think.”

I turned away. *Fine*, I thought, as the door closed behind me. *If that’s the way he wants it.* I flipped through the pages of the book and looked at the line drawings of shirtless athletes in classic boxing positions. *Well, it’s not quite internet porn, but at least these guys are pretty hot.*

Seconds later, the door creaked open again and Travis peered in. “Tomorrow night,” he said, in a whisper. “You up for some fun then?”

I looked up from the book, my mouth opening slightly in surprise. “Uh... sure,” I said, trying to keep my voice casual. “Yeah, if... if you want to.”

He grinned. “Lookin’ forward to it. G’night.”

The door closed again. One of the sleeping cows nearby stirred, then let out a soft ‘moooo.’

“You can say that again,” I quipped. *I guess maybe Travis might be interested after all.* I felt my heart give a little leap, already anticipating Tuesday night.

I extinguished the kerosene lamp by the stall and made my way through the darkness over to the back of the barn and wearily crept up the ladder, my book bag weighing heavily on my shoulder. I reached the hayloft, fumbled for a match, and lit the lamp next to my makeshift bed. I stacked the books carefully on the little shelf that had formerly been used by Billy James, Travis’ brother.

I glanced up through the rickety barn eaves, where I could just make out the glint of a new moon, shining faintly in the eastern sky. Crickets were merrily chirping in the nearby meadow, while a stray dog howled in the distance, and a cold wind rattled through narrow gaps in the wooden walls. I was suddenly overcome with a wave of exhaustion and helplessness, and my eyes filled with tears. *God*, I thought. *It looks like the exact same moon I saw in 2013. Will I ever get back home?* My memories of life at home in Seattle seemed to be sputtering, like a lantern flame running out of fuel.

As I wearily undressed, I obsessed over my situation: stranded in the wrong century, light years away from all my friends and relatives. I still didn't have a plan, not even a clue as to what to do next. What tools did I have? Aside from my vague skills as a fledgling actor and singer, what did I have that would help me survive — or even better, get me out of here? I slid my North Face backpack out from under the quilt, unzipped the velcro flap, and dumped out all my worldly possessions onto the bedspread. I felt like James Bond taking stock of the weapons he was going to use on his next top secret mission.

Fat chance of that, I thought, as I thoughtfully arranged each item in a straight line: a slightly-dented flashlight... but the batteries and bulb were still good. A broken Thermos bottle... worthless. A Bic cigarette lighter... almost full of butane. My spelunking tools were still there, including a small folding shovel, and a small pickaxe. A spare ballpoint pen; I'd have to decide whether to take it back to school or continue to struggle with the old-fashioned metal-tipped ink pens in the classroom. A pair of Rayban Predator sunglasses, which my friend J.D. had given me for Christmas after we saw *Men in Black 3*. My iPod Touch was still there, along with the broken earbuds, but its battery indicator was on the last click. *Even if I had some AC*, I thought ruefully, *I still don't have an iPod dock*. And I sincerely doubted that McBillin's General Store would have USB adapters for at least another century or two.

I shoved my fingers deep into the backpack, checking all the little nooks and crannies, and felt a lump in one of the small side pockets. My heart raced as I unzipped it only to find a 5" pocket knife, the deluxe \$40 Victorinox Swiss Army model — “with 32 different tools, including compass, pliers, and screwdriver,” as the enthusiastic salesman at Best

Buy had told me when I bought it before my St. Louis trip. *That might come in handy*, I thought.

But something was still missing. *My cellphone!* I knew it couldn't possibly work in 1864, but I still felt a sense of loss. The phone was a very real connection to my life back in 2013. Even though it was just a burner, a cheap Motorola my father had almost tossed out two years earlier, the battery worked fine and it got great reception. More importantly, it still held all my text messages from the last two weeks I was in Seattle, along with a few photos of my family, including one of my father waving goodbye from what was to be his last business trip. *If somebody finds the phone*, I thought, *they'll wear out the battery for sure. Or even worse, put me over my available minutes, and then Mom will kill me for sure.* I grinned at the thought. Reception 150 years in the past was unlikely, but I still clung to the notion that the phone was some kind of connection to my real life.

Gotta get the cell back, I thought, as I yawned and stretched out on the blanket. The cloth felt rough against my skin, but the exhausting events of the day began to evaporate as I fell into much-needed sleep.

Chapter 8

The next morning passed quickly. Back at school, Twitly seemed a little more under control, and Eddie actually raised his hand a couple of times during a discussion of European geography, pleasing the teacher to no end.

Travis seemed much less moody. He was almost talkative at lunch, explaining the finer points of one of the stickball games a group of boys was playing in an open field, about twenty yards away from our table.

"I get it," I said, as we wolfed down the hard-roll ham sandwich Mrs. Colt had made for lunch earlier that morning. "Sorta like baseball, but no bat and no gloves."

"Gloves?" Travis asked, a little confused. "You mean like what a lady wears? Ain't suitable for no proper boy games. Besides, that'd make ya look like a sissy."

I frowned. "Yeah, we wouldn't want that," I muttered.

"Don't forget," Travis said, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "We got some wrasslin' to do tonight."

I grinned. But before I could answer, I heard a female voice in the distance.

"Jason! You, there... Jason!"

I looked up as Faith strolled up, looking like she'd stepped out of *Gone with the Wind* in an eye-catching white and blue lace dress, casually resting a parasol on her shoulder.

"I was wondering if you'd be so kind as to call on me at home after school today," she said breathlessly. "If I'm not being too forward," she added quickly.

I looked at Travis helplessly. "I, uh..."

"My mother is planning a recital this Saturday for the St. Louis Women's Club," she said, "and I'd be very much obliged if perhaps you could accompany me on harpsichord."

"Uh," I said, trying not to stammer, "I've never exactly played a harpsichord. I mean, I know the piano, and I've played a Hammond organ quite a few times. Plus a little guitar." I omitted the Korg Synthesizer and the Kurzweil samplers I had back in my bedroom in Seattle, which were the keyboards I played the most.

"That's fine," she said. "Our harpsichord has fewer keys than a grand piano, but it sounds lovely."

"I dunno, Faith," I said, warily glancing around for any sign of her angry boyfriend. "I gotta work at McBillin's store in town after school, and..."

"It'd be just for a few minutes," she insisted. "And our house is only a half mile away from Mr. McBillin's, just down Walnut Street, not far from South Broadway. You simply must come. Why, I've told my dear mother all about you, and father says you're a fine, upstanding young man. They'd love to hear you sing in our parlor."

I sighed and glanced at Travis, who shrugged his shoulders. "Alright, I guess," I said, resignedly. "But only for fifteen minutes. We're still doing a lot of reorganizing at the store."

She beamed. "Oh, this will be grand!" she said. "See you after school, then. 221 Walnut Street. It's the big white house with the fir trees out front."

Travis and I watched her as she hurried away to a group of giggling friends, her frilly skirt skimming lightly over the fallen leaves on the schoolyard.

"If'n you ain't careful," Travis said, as we walked over to the nearby water pump, "you might just find yourself a sweetheart."

"Give me a break," I muttered. "Chicks aren't exactly my thing."

He gave me a quizzical look as I stopped to scoop up some water in my hands.

"I mean, I'm not particularly interested in girls," I said, trying not to gurgle. "They're kind of an alien race, y'know?"

He shook his head and laughed. It was the first time I'd ever heard him laugh, and I was a little taken aback.

“I swear, Jason, I don’t know what you’re sayin’ half the time,” Travis said, brushing his long blond bangs out of his eyes. “But I think I’m startin’ ta catch yer meanin’. It’s like yer speakin’ another language sometimes.”

“Well,” I said with an exaggerated drawl, “mebbe I kin sorta translate it to the way ya’ll talk in *Missorah*.”

He laughed again. “Now *that* I can understand.”

§ § § § §

After school, I made my way down the dirt road that led into the city and took a right on Walnut Street. Four blocks later, I found myself in front of a sprawling white Victorian mansion, fronted by a lush green lawn with a tree-lined path that led to three enormous stone columns. A girl on a front-porch swing jumped up and waved at me as I walked through the open gates and down the grassy path.

“I do declare — you did come, after all!” Faith exclaimed, fanning herself. “I was beginning to worry.”

A tall, thin black man in a distinguished-looking suit opened the front doors behind her and bowed.

“A gentleman caller, Miss Faith?” asked the man, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, Willie,” she said, a little breathlessly. “This is Mr. Jason Thomas from Canada. We go to Jefferson High School together.” She took my arm and led me to the doorway.

The man tipped his hat to me. “Welcome to the Shaw residence, Mas’ Jason,” he said in a deep voice.

I stepped into the foyer and gaped at the ornate stairway, which arched to the right and curved upwards to the second floor. I ran my hands across hand-carved marble angels that lined the stairway railings, then looked up at a large crystal chandelier filled with candles. It looked like something out of an episode of *Dallas*.

“Wow,” I said, a little stunned by the opulence of the room. After having lived on the Colt’s modest farm for the previous week, this was quite a culture shock — like going from a modest motel to a 5-star hotel suite.

“And here is the parlor,” Faith said, leading me over to a door on the left.

The room was elegant, with a white harpsichord dominating the room. The air had a strong scent of fresh flowers, and the walls were lined from floor to ceiling with hardwood shelves and books, with a colorful Oriental rug on the floor. Light streamed in from the windows at the back, which revealed a much larger back yard behind the house.

The harpsichord stood in a position of prominence near the center of the room. I was struck by its odd appearance, since its keys were reversed from normal keyboards: black for the main keys, and white for the sharp and flat keys. I sat down on the bench and struck a few tentative chords. The instrument had an interesting sound: staccato and precise, but with an abrupt kind of feel lacking the usual full tone and ring-out I was accustomed to hearing with a piano, or even a sampled keyboard, almost like a plucked guitar string. But I had to admit it sounded amazingly clear and clean, and the room’s acoustics were great.

“How do you play this thing without foot pedals?” I asked, feeling underneath with my right toes and finding only a bare floor.

“I don’t really know,” Faith said, sidling up beside me on the bench. “My only instrument is my voice.” She watched as I ran some scales, doodled a few little exercises, then finished with a two-octave run and a showy flourish.

“You play wonderfully,” she gushed. “Do you know anything by Rossini? Wagner? Or certainly Verdi. I do so adore Verdi.”

“Uh, no,” I said, idly playing a little bluesy riff. The keyboard action was stiff, not nearly as smooth as the high-tech electronic synths and samplers I had at home, and required more pressure than I was used to. I also found it strange that whether I hit the keys hard or soft, the notes had the exact same loudness, which threw me a little. “I’m into more contemporary stuff. Those guys wrote a bunch of operas, right? Classical?”

I had dozed through some of my music-appreciation classes last year, but I had heard a few of my mom’s Pavarotti and “Three Tenors” CDs, and some of them weren’t bad, even if their vibrato was a little intense for my tastes.

“Well,” she said with a little annoyance, “perhaps you didn’t get exposed to the arts very much north of the border in Fort Vancouver. We’re

much more cosmopolitan here in St. Louis. My mother gets the latest music from London and Paris." She shuffled through some sheet music on the top of the harpsichord. "Try this," she said, arranging a sheet on the stand above the keyboard.

"*Rigoletto*," I said, reading the top of the page. The charts were a little unfamiliar, and I tentatively played a few notes, transposing some chords in my head.

"Here," she said, indicating the intro to a measure a few pages in. "Play the beginning of Act 3, starting with this section."

I played the opening chords and Faith stood up and began to sing, her voice ringing out, enunciating every syllable.

*"La donna è mobile
Qual piuma al vento,
Muta d'accento — e di pensiero.
Sempre un amabile,
Leggiadro viso,
In pianto o in riso... è menzognero."*

I was pleasantly surprised: she was actually pretty good. Okay, maybe not exactly *Lady Gaga* good, but it was clear that Faith had genuine talent. After another minute, we came to the end of the movement, and I added on a little flourish, and we both laughed.

"Hey, that was great," I said. "It's... well, different from the kind of music we listen to back home. But your technique is really good."

"You really think so?" she said shyly, sitting back beside me on the bench. "Mother makes me take lessons twice a week, and I sing at church sometimes. She wants to have a recital this weekend, and frankly... I'm a little nervous. All those people and everything."

I grinned. "I once got to meet Billy Joel backstage when I was 10," I said. "I asked him if he still got nervous getting up in front of a lot of people and singing. He told me it got better the more often he did it, but he said a little fear is a good thing. It gives you a kick in the ass to make you sing better."

Her face momentarily reddened and she turned away, looking a little uncomfortable.

“Sorry,” I said, remembering my manners. “I mean, a kick in the posterior.”

Faith laughed, her voice musical, her face brightening. “I’ve never heard of Mr. Joel,” she said.

“Great pianist and songwriter from where I come from,” I said, playing the intro of one of my favorite songs.

*“Sing me a song, piano man...
Sing me a song tonight.
‘Cause we’re all in the mood for a melody
and you’ve got us feelin’ alright.”*

She moved closer to me. I could smell her perfume, feel the softness of her taffeta and lace dress brush my arm. I momentarily faltered and stumbled over a couple of bad notes.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “Still getting over this keyboard. It’s, uh... kinda stiff.”

“Do you have any ideas on what we could perform together this Saturday?” she asked.

“Look, Faith, I really have to work at McBillin’s store this weekend...” I began.

“It’s only for fifteen minutes,” she said quickly. “We’re having a luncheon here at the house for mother’s Ladies Auxiliary. There must be something we could sing together, just for a few minutes. You know — a duet.”

A duet. I flashed back to the rehearsals for the production of *High School Musical* back home in Seattle just two months earlier, where I had to understudy the lead role of Troy. I’d lost out to Brian Weingarten, only because he was a senior — the asshole. Okay, he was also taller and better looking than me, so I admit he worked better as the romantic lead, but I still bristled at having to play Ryan’s part instead, since I could sing rings around Weingarten.

“Gimme a second,” I said, reaching for my ballpoint in my pocket. “You got a piece of paper handy?”

She pulled a blank piece of foolscap from a table to the left, then smoothed it out on the table. The pen worked this time, and I quickly scribbled down the words.

“Here’s the lyrics,” I said. “I’ll circle your parts and put a bracket on the ones both of us sing together. I’ll take the high harmonies on the duets, and you take the lead.”

“But how will I know the melody without notation?” she asked, momentarily dismayed.

“I’ll teach you how to fake it,” I said, quickly jotting down the rest of the lyrics. Luckily, I knew every word and every note of the musical backwards and forwards, having survived at least a dozen rehearsals and three performances at our school auditorium, along with watching the DVD about a hundred times.

“Here’s the main part of the melody,” I said, tapping out the main notes on the harpsichord with my left hand, while handing her the lyric sheet with the other. “The chorus has a couple of twists, but just follow my lead. And go with a little less vibrato, a little more in your lower range — this is more casual than opera.”

“More casual?” she asked, a little unsure.

“It’s what we call pop music.” I started the intro, then began to sing.

*“Living in my own world
Didn’t understand...
That anything can happen
When you take a chance.”*

I nodded to Faith, and she sang her part.

*“I never believed in
what I couldn’t see
I never opened my heart
to all the possibilities...”*

And we began to sing together.

*"I know that something has changed
Never felt this way
And right here tonight*

*"This could be the start of something new
It feels so right to be here with you... oh...
And now ... looking in your eyes
I feel in my heart
The start of something new."*

As we sang, our voices blended together, filling the room with a warm resonance, accompanied by the harpsichord. Faith made a perfect Gabriella, and she grew more confident as the song built to a climax.

*"I never knew that it could happen
'till it happened to me...
oh, yeah...
I didn't know it before
But now it's easy to see... oh..."*

"Key change here!" I warned, then continued.

*"It's a start of something new
It feels so right to be here with you
And now looking in your eyes
I feel in my heart*

*"That it's the start of something new
It feels so right to be here with you.
And now looking in your eyes
I feel in my heart
The start of something new."*

"Faith?" called a voice from behind us. We turned to see a tall blond woman, very elegantly dressed.

I stood up immediately, almost toppling off the harpsichord bench.

"Mother," said Faith, dropping the lyric sheet in surprise. "I didn't know you'd be home early."

The woman eyed me warily as she approached us. "I'm Mrs. Shaw," she said, extending her hand.

I did my best to channel Clark Gable from *Gone with the Wind*. "Hello, ma'am," I said, making an attempt at a disarming smile as I felt her soft grip. "Very good to meet you. I'm Jason Thomas. I, uh... go to school with Faith."

"This is the new boy you told us about?" the woman asked, turning away from me. "The singer?"

"Yes, mother," Faith said, giving me a little squeeze. "Isn't Jason wonderful? I thought perhaps we could sing a duet together on Saturday for your tea party."

Mrs. Shaw sniffed. "I thought you would be performing Verdi."

"This is, uh... something new," I explained. "In fact, that's the name of the song."

"Is it?" she said drily. "Never heard of it. Well, I suppose it will have to do." She looked at me from head to toe, as if she was examining a peculiar specimen at a zoo. "My husband told me you were staying with the Colt family."

"Just temporarily," I said. "I was supposed to stay with my Aunt Olivia, but..."

"Yes," she interrupted. "So very unfortunate. Anyway, nice to meet you. Faith, I'll be home for dinner by 6 o'clock. Make sure that Willie Mae takes the turkey out of the oven by 5:30. You know how she likes to overcook things. And see to it that she watches the rice this time."

"Nice to meet you, Jeffrey," she called over her shoulder.

"It's Jason," I muttered. I glanced down at my watch. "Shit," I muttered under my breath. "It's almost 4:00. I gotta get to work."

"Can we do this again tomorrow?" Faith called after me, as I sprinted back to the foyer.

"We'll see," I answered, almost slipping on the foyer's polished floor, just as the servant opened the front door for me. "Maybe we can find a piano at school and do some more rehearsals there during lunch."

She caught up with me in the doorway and held me by my left elbow. "I'm ever so grateful that you'd sing with me, Jason," she said softly. "I hope we can be very good friends."

"Yeah," I said, looking down the path towards the street, trying desperately to remember if McBillin's store was to the left or the right. "That'd be great."

Before I could move, she kissed my cheek. "See you tomorrow in school," she whispered. "I'll be thinking of you until then."

I glanced back at the black man at the door, who gave me a knowing smile. I shrugged, then hurried on my way down the sidewalk and out to the street. Suddenly, I was conscious of a strange feeling. *Was I getting an erection?* Jesus. I'd been kissed by girls at least a dozen times before, even made out with a couple, but this was a first for me. I surreptitiously moved my book bag to my front, hoping to hide the obvious bulge.

"This is great," I muttered to myself as I scurried down the sidewalk. "I'm trapped 150 years in the past, before even my great-grandparents were born, and now I'm turning straight." The whole thing was too bizarre to even laugh at.

As I made my way down the dusty road, I finally glimpsed a few familiar buildings on Walnut Street and finally pushed through the front doors of the store.

"Where ya been, boy?" cried McBillin, surrounded by customers waving dollar bills in the air. "It's been like this all bloody day!"

There must've been at least forty customers crowded in the aisles, all of them talking at once, trying to push up to the counter.

"Hang on, folks," I called, fastening on an apron. "We'll take care of you all, one at a time."

"Pandemonium!" McBillin said, counting out change to two customers on the left. "I never seen such a madhouse!"

"Who's next?" I called, and two old women started arguing amongst themselves. "You, then," I said, gesturing to a younger woman right next to them, who had just two items.

"We need an express lane," I muttered, mentally adding up her receipt. "That'll be sixty-five cents."

"It's been like this all day," Mrs. McBillin lamented as she bustled past me to replace some items in the center aisle.

I grinned at the older man. "Looks like you just might owe me a bonus after all."

He scowled, then ran a weary hand through his hair. "Let's see if we're both alive at the end of the day, and we'll talk about it."

§ § § § §

I had made it halfway through the living room when the floor gave out a loud creak. The Colt's living-room clock told me it was half-past nine. The house was completely silent. Luckily for me, everybody seemed to be asleep; all the bedroom doors were closed.

I lit a candle in the kitchen and made a quick sandwich using a slightly-stale crust of bread left over from breakfast and the last of the ham from yesterday. *Good thing the ham kept overnight*, I thought, wondering how anybody in 1864 could keep kitchen food from spoiling without a refrigerator.

"Who's there?" called a gruff voice.

I turned to see Mr. Colt in his nightshirt, carrying a lantern. "Late again. That ain't proper behavior for anybody livin' under my roof. It's damn near ten o'clock."

"Sorry, Mr. Colt," I said, wiping off my mouth. "We were swamped with customers at McBillin's. Normally, he closes at seven, but he..."

"Shut up!" he snarled, slapping me hard across the face.

I was so stunned, I dropped the uneaten half of my sandwich and fell backwards against the counter.

"Ya ain't showin' me the proper respect," Colt said, his voice slightly slurred.

I got back up to my feet, shook my head to clear it, then reached in my pocket. "If it's respect you want, take this," I said.

He peered at the bills. "Five dollars," he said, momentarily distracted.

"McBillin's already gave me a raise," I said, fighting to keep the quaver out of my voice. "That's this week's \$3 for my room and board, plus a little extra to help out with the meals."

Colt eyed me warily. My jaw still ached a little, but I didn't seem to be bleeding. I looked him right in the eye.

“From now on, you’re going to have to let me stay out until at least 9PM,” I said, my voice strong and steady. “I told McBillin I’d only work three weekday afternoons at the store so I can still get my homework done. Plus a full day on Saturday.”

I waited for him to respond. He looked momentarily confused, clearly caught off-guard.

“Do we have a deal?” I asked.

Colt glared at me, then shoved the bills in his pocket. “Yer lucky I’m too damned tired to give ya a good thrashin,” he said, stumbling drunkenly as he walked away. “You best mend your ways, boy.”

That was a close one, I muttered, wearily plodding through the dirt path between the farmhouse and the barn. I felt utterly exhausted by the events of the day. I was halfway up the ladder to the hayloft when I heard a voice from above.

“Jason? That you?”

I pulled up to the ledge and grinned. “Hey, Travis. Sorry I’m late.”

I set down my books on the floor, then lit the kerosene lamp. Travis stepped aside, but I caught him and turned him slowly into the light. There was a large purple welt on the right side of his face, along with the beginnings of a black eye.

“Shit!” I muttered. “Colt did this to you?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” he said quietly.

He stood there, his eyes brimming with tears. Travis was already shirtless, and I was immediately aroused.

“Come ‘ere,” I said.

We embraced, and I kissed him long and hard as we tumbled into the bed.

§ § § § §

Afterwards, we lay alongside each other, our breathing slowly settling down into a rhythm that matched the steady chirps from the crickets outside the barn.

I felt sleepy, dreamy, and utterly satisfied. If anything, the sex this time had been faster, more intense, almost animalistic, our hands and mouths exploring every inch of our bodies. It left me completely ex-

hausted, warming me a feeling of satisfaction that that almost made me forget how cold it was in the barn.

“Jason?” he whispered.

“Mmmmmmm?” I murmured, snuggling closer to him. I pulled my leg over his and draped my arm across his muscular chest.

“I gotta get back to the farmhouse. Colt’ll be...”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said with a yawn. “He’ll tan your hide if you don’t get back. Why does he care where you sleep, as long as you go to school and do your chores?”

Travis didn’t answer, but instead rolled off the makeshift bed and began pulling on his overalls.

“Colt damned nearly kicked *my* ass a few minutes ago, when I came in late,” I continued, still feeling the bruise on my lower lip. I put my hands behind my head and leaned back, admiring Travis’ powerful back. His skin looked yellow-gold in the warm lantern light, and I felt something stir.

“You sure you don’t wanna... you know?” I said, slyly. “One more for the road?”

Travis stopped as he pulled on his boots, then turned to me and smiled shyly. “I think I’m startin’ to get feelin’s for ya, Jason.”

I blanched. J.D. back home had always admonished me never to tell anybody I loved them. “*Always observe the three-month boyfriend rule,*” he had warned. “*Don’t ever use the ‘L’ word until you get a chance to really know somebody. And even then, be careful, or they’ll just tear your heart up like it was made of paper.*”

Back home, I had made the mistake of blurting out to Luke that I loved him on that last night we were together at his house. It happened in the throes of passion, about five minutes after I lost my virginity to him. One glance at the shocked look on his face told me I’d made a mistake, but Luke had kissed me and told me how great I was. It was only the next day at school that I’d realized it’d all been a sham — 47 hours and twenty minutes of great sex, three movies, and five meals together. And then... nothing.

Travis sat down on the quilt next to me and gently touched my chest. I put my hand on his and gave him a little squeeze.

“Hey,” I said, “this doesn’t have to be a serious thing. I don’t really belong here. I’m gonna have to go back home eventually.”

Travis leaned down over me, his shaggy blond bangs grazing my nose. “But we’re together now,” he said in a half-whisper. “I ain’t never felt like this about anybody before. ‘Cept maybe for Billy.”

He turned away, but I could see a tear trickle out of his left eye.

“Listen, Travis,” I said. “You don’t really know a thing about me.” I reached for my pants and pulled them up, now feeling a little chilly lying naked on the bed.

He sniffled, then managed a grin. “I know enough about ya. You care about me, and that’s more ’n most people do.”

I sat up and shook my head. “That’s not what I mean. Listen, Travis, as long as we’re... well, together, there’s something I gotta tell you. It’s important.”

“What?” he snorted. “You’re from Canada, you’re fifteen like me, and you talk funny.”

I shook my head, then hesitated. I wanted to say this as directly as I could.

Finally, I let out a long sigh. “There’s more to it. I’m not exactly who you think I am.”

He gave me a quizzical look. “Don’t tell me you’re no damned Yankee.”

I laughed. “No. Nothing that terrible. It’s like this: you know I’m not really from Canada. I’m actually from Seattle — Seattle, Washington. But my name really is Jason Thomas. And I did come to stay in St. Louis with my aunt Olivia for a few weeks. Only I lied about a couple of other things. Well, maybe not quite ‘lie.’ It’s more like an exaggeration.”

Travis leaned against the wooden railing and nodded. “Alright. Like what?”

I made a vague gesture, then shook my head. “It’s... complicated.”

Travis’ eyes narrowed. “You think I ain’t smart enough to understand?”

“No, no,” I said, reassuringly. “It’s just... alright, I’ll just say it.” I took a deep breath and took a step closer. “I’m not from 1864. I’m from almost 150 years in the future, from the year 2013. In fact, I wasn’t even born

until 1998. My parents weren't born until the 1960s — almost exactly a hundred years from now."

There was a long silence. Finally, Travis began to grin. "You're crazy as a loon."

"Think so?" I reached for the shelf filled with my handful of worldly possessions. "You ever see something like this?" I handed him the knife. "It's got thirty-two different tools — stainless steel with a fifty-year guarantee. Cost me almost forty bucks. They can't even make something like this in 1864."

Travis carefully examined the knife, figuring out how to snap out a couple of the blades. "Made in Switzerland," he read. "So? I seen a cuckoo clock made in Switzerland, over at my grandma's house."

"How about these?" I said, handing him over the sunglasses. "They're made of polarized plastic. That won't even be invented for about sixty years. In fact, I don't even think they have plastic in 1864."

He slipped the sunglasses on. "Looks real dark." He turned to the lantern. "Hey, I can see the flame inside that lamp." Travis took the glasses off and tossed them gently to the bed. "So what? That don't prove nothin'."

Frustrated, I looked around for more proof, then remembered my wristwatch. "Look at this," I said, pushing my left arm under his nose. "This is an electronic watch. You don't ever have to wind it. Nothing like this exists in 1864."

He shrugged. "So, it's a little clock. I seen clocks before."

"Alright," I said, going for the pièce de résistance. "Then explain this." I clicked a couple of buttons on the iPod and it lit up, filling the hayloft with a shaft of cool blue light.

Travis' mouth dropped open.

"Read what it says on the front panel," I said, scrolling through a couple of menus.

He peered at the display, his eyes narrowing. "Legal notices. Copyright 1983-2010 Apple Inc. All Rights Reserved. Apple, the Apple logo, iPod..."

"It's pronounced 'EYE-pod,'" I corrected.

"Alright, 'EYE-pod, and EYE-tunes are trademarks of Apple Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries." He looked up at me. "So?"

“Don’t you get it? That’s a 2010 copyright date!”

He sniffed. “Just ‘cause it says 2010 don’t mean nothin.”

“Look at this thing,” I said, a little loudly, my hands shaking a little as I pressed a couple of buttons and showed him the various readouts on the display. “This can’t possibly exist in 1864! They’re not going to have MP3 players for almost 140 years!”

“What’s an ‘empty-three?’” he asked, clearly skeptical.

“It’s a music file... it’s like a music box. You’ve seen those, right?”

He nodded.

“Alright,” I said, pressing the sleep button to extinguish the display. “Now imagine a music box that holds not just one song, but thousands of different songs — all in a little metal case you can hold in your hand like this. Millions of people have these, back where I come from. Actually, *when* I come from.”

He looked suspicious. “If that’s a music box, then play somethin.”

“I can’t.” I held out the broken earbuds. “The plug’s toasted. Normally, the iPod plays into these little tiny speakers. You stick them in your ears, and then you can walk around and listen to music.”

Travis begin to laugh. “That’s the most dangfool thing I ever heard,” he said. “Why would anybody wanna listen to music all alone?”

I was indignant. “Don’t you see this kind of technology isn’t possible in 1864?” I said, exasperatedly. It’s a glass display, it’s got a lithium ion battery, it lights up... Don’t you get it? It’s from the future. How else can you explain it?”

“I gotta go,” he said, turning to step down on the ladder.

“Wait,” I said. “Read the back panel.”

He took the iPod out of my hand and held it up to the lantern and squinted. “These letters are real small.”

“Look at what it says.”

After a pause, Travis said, “iPod, sixteen gee-bee. Copyright Apple Inc. 2010.” He rolled his eyes. “What kinda company name is ‘Apple,’ anyway? This thing ain’t got nothin’ to do with fruit.”

“You think I’m lying to you?” I said.

“Ain’t no proper name for a company, is all.” He turned away again and grabbed hold of the ladder.

"Apple is a great company!" I yelled. "Look, Travis, can you just fucking listen to me for a second?"

I grabbed his shoulder and spun him around, then took a step towards him, my face less than a foot from his.

"Listen to me," I said quietly, fighting to control myself. "I've wanted to tell you this for days, but I didn't think you'd believe me."

"You sure got that right," he said, starting down the ladder towards the barn floor.

"Why the hell would I lie?" I yelled over the ledge. "I'm from the future! I live in Seattle, and I got stuck in St. Louis, 150 years in the past!"

"How'd that happen?" he asked, halfway down the ladder.

"I have no idea!" I snapped. "I was in a cave in St. Louis, in the summer of 2013. The floor collapsed, I hit my head, and the next thing I knew, I woke up here. I've been going through this nightmare for a week! What's so hard to believe about that?"

Travis hopped down to the dirt and straw floor below, sending up a small cloud of dust, then started to laugh again. "Musta hit your head harder than ya thought. You're just plumb crazy, is what I believe."

My face turned bright red. "After everything we just did, that's all you have to say about me?" I cried. "You practically said you loved me five minutes ago! Now, you think I'm nuts!"

Travis started to respond, then a muffled voice from outside the barn door called out. "Travis? You better git your fanny to bed, boy! You got chores to do in the mornin'!"

"I gotta..."

"I know, I know," I said, waving him off. "Just get the hell out of here," I snapped.

He thought for a minute. "I remember my brother Billy James used ta play jokes on me all the time," he said, starting to laugh again. "One time he had me convinced there was a live raccoon livin' under our bed — scared the everlovin' beejeezus outta me when I was little."

"I'm not trying to scare you, you asshole," I retorted. "I'm just trying to be real here!"

"TRAVIS!" hollered Mr. Colt from outside the barn.

"Go!" I hissed, waving him away. I flopped back on the bed, then heard the barn door creak open and then slam shut.

Fucking jerk, I thought, as I heard Travis' footsteps retreat into the night. *Won't even listen to logic!*

"This isn't over," I muttered to myself as I pulled off my pants. "I'm gonna prove to him I'm from 2013. Even if it kills me."

I leaned up, extinguished the kerosene lantern, then fell back into bed and pulled the covers up to my chin, surrounded only by the darkness and the cold barn air.

Even if it kills me.

Chapter 9

The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. *How could Travis possibly think I was a liar?* I tossed and turned for most of the night, pulling the blankets tight in a desperate attempt to keep out the cold. Sleep seemed to be as far away as my home back in Seattle — impossible to reach, and nothing but a fading memory at this point.

My insomnia wasn't helped by one of the cows across the barn, who bellowed out noises that sounded like the anguished cries of a dying monster from a low-budget sci-fi movie.

"Hey, toots, can you please hold it down to a mild roar?" I mumbled, as I slid another pillow over my head to help muffle down the noise. I must've finally drifted off to sleep, because some time later, I heard Mrs. Colt call up to me.

"Travis! I'm 'fraid I need your help down here. Looks like Matilda's 'bout ready to drop her calf."

I sat up, trying to decipher what she'd said. *Calf? As in a baby cow?*

"What do you need me to do?" I called, quickly pulling on my pants and a shirt as I approached the hayloft railing. "I don't exactly know anything about giving birth."

"She's done this before," she called. "I'll boil some water on the stove and have Lem bring in some fresh hay and a shovel. This can get a bit messy."

I peered down over the ledge to the barn floor, which was now brightly illuminated by two kerosene lanterns. "What do I do if she gets cranky, Mrs. C?" I called as the woman hurried towards the front gate.

“Just pet her head and talk to her nice and low,” she called over her shoulder as she walked briskly towards the farmhouse. “Keep her calm. I’ll be right back.”

“I’m not so good as a cow whisperer,” I retorted as I hopped down off the ladder. The animal looked at me with an almost human expression of worry and discomfort in her eyes. I approached her warily.

“Hey,” I said in a quiet voice close to her ear, petting the rough coat on her forehead and letting my other hand slip soothingly through her fur. “I know how you feel. OK, maybe not exactly, but I’m kinda having a lousy day myself.”

I felt something warm trickling on my leg and looked down to see a stream of blood puddling down my bare foot to the floor, along with a smell almost beyond description.

I shuddered. “This is now officially a *really* lousy day.”

I’d seen TV specials on animals giving birth on a few Bravo TV specials, and I vaguely remembered some 7th grade biology lessons. The real thing appeared to be a lot messier, but I dutifully held the cow’s head and continued talking to her in a soothing voice. Minutes after Mrs. Colt returned, the cow gave a shudder, then opened up its eyes very wide and let out what sounded like a scream, roughly an octave above middle C. A cloud of steam belched out from her mouth into the cold barn air.

“It’s comin’ out now,” Mrs. Colt said from the side, reaching underneath and pulling gently. “Bout time.”

I took a quick glance in back, then glimpsed far more than I ever wanted to see. I felt a little woozy. The cow let out a long sigh, and I petted her head again. “Hey,” I said, as reassuringly as I could. “You did great, Matilda. It’s all over now.”

“I think there’s one more,” Mrs. Colt said, setting the calf aside on a soft pile of hay, then sloshing her hands in the bucket. “Fraid she’s not quite done yet.”

There’s more?

Matilda made another startled expression. I held her head and she seemed momentarily grateful, then closed her eyes and grunted. I heard a thud onto the barn floor, along with a faint bleating of a small animal, roughly the size of a dog. It swayed unsteadily on its feet as Mrs. Colt washed the blood off.

“Two of ‘em, Momma!” Lem said excitedly as he trotted up alongside us with a bucket of water.

“Don’t you get any of this blood on your clean clothes, now,” Mrs. Colt warned, “else you’ll have to take a bath before school.”

“Aw, maw...”

Ten minutes later, the calves were eagerly enjoying their breakfast and Matilda seemed no worse for wear, the only casualty being my appetite. After I’d washed off and changed my clothes, I told the Colts I thought I’d try to get to school early. It was just as well; Twitly had dropped some hints that there might be a test today on the first half of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, which I had seen as a British mini-series on cable a couple of years ago, but I still hadn’t made it through the book.

Travis gave me an annoyed look as I left the kitchen, trying not to let the door slam behind me. *Good*, I thought as I trudged away from the farmhouse. *Serves the asshole right*. I might think about forgiving him for calling me a liar if he begged me enough. In fact, I could think of quite a few ways he could get back in my good graces. My groin throbbed at the thought, but I put those aside for the moment and continued down the Old Country Road, thumbing through the Dickens novel as I walked. At 15, I was horny all the time, but sex was the last thing I had time to think about at the moment.

The Missouri countryside was bleak and damp, and I glimpsed some ugly clouds through the trees, a warning that the first snows were probably on their way. I pulled my bulky wool coat tighter and made a mental note to buy a cap and maybe even a scarf from McBillin’s store when I went in for work later on that afternoon.

Just then, a few drops of rain spattered my face. *And add a raincoat and umbrella to the list*, I mused, quickening my pace as I went around the bend that led to the school grounds. My stomach grumbled. I’d made a strategic mistake in not having breakfast with the Colts just because I was pissed off at Travis. I knew the school had a makeshift lunchroom at the back of the building where some of the students had breakfast — no doubt some miserable kind of oatmeal swill and milk, along with hard rolls.

What I wouldn't give for a Mocha Grande and an Egg McMuffin right about now, I thought ruefully.

I kept up a brisk pace as I strode down the tree-lined road, turning the pages and wiping off the occasional raindrops. The book was old and musty — published in July of 1862, according to the title page — but I figured once I got to class I could get to my desk early and speed-read for another half hour or so, enough to cram through the assigned chapters and fake my way through the test.

I made it to the front of the school just after 8:00AM, surprised to see there were already a dozen or more students milling around the flagpole, some strolling down the corridor that led to the lunchroom out back. Just as my foot reached the top step, I saw a crowd of older boys in a circle, talking animatedly.

“What in tarnation is it?” one asked.

“I dunno,” the other said. “But ya press over here and dang if it don't light up! Must have some kinda fire inside somehow.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, then slowly turned and peered over one of the boy's shoulders.

It was my cellphone.

“HEY!” I shouted. “That's mine!”

They looked up at me, startled. “No 'taint,” insisted the boy, who drew the phone back, holding it close to his chest as though it was a piece of gold. “I done found it fair and square.”

I took a step forward. “Don't tell me — you found it in the mud outside Marsen's Cave. Right?”

The boy narrowed his eyes. “And what if I did? It's mine now.”

I tossed my book bag to the ground, shaking with fury. “Listen to me. That's my phone! Hand it over and I'll show you my name inside it.”

“Who are you, anyway?” he asked, giving me a suspicious look. “You that new boy with the Colts?”

“Yeah, Jason Thomas. Look, just give me five seconds, and I'll prove it's mine.”

I knew the phone had four or five JPEG stills of me and my friends in it, along with the only photo I had of my late father. The phone's camera was broken — that was one of the reasons my father had tossed it — but it still held a few stills I'd downloaded weeks ago from my laptop.

The boy defiantly slipped the phone in his pocket, then grinned and held out his hands. "You want it? Then yer gonna have to take it away from me."

"Dipshit," I muttered. "I oughta call Sheriff Baxter and have him throw your ass in jail."

"Baxter ain't here now," said another boy, apparently one of his cronies. "It's just you and us."

The other onlookers took a step back. I heard cries of "Fight! Fight!" in the background.

I gulped. *Alright*, I thought. *Now's my chance to try out some of Travis' boxing lessons.* I slipped off my wool jacket, laid it on my schoolbooks, then balled up my fists and took a boxing stance that I remembered from Travis' lessons.

"Hit me with your best shot, tough guy," I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking. "I'll kick your ass from here to Kansas City."

He slowly nodded, then raised his fists. I gave him a quick once-over. My opponent was a good half a foot taller than I was and probably outweighed me by at least 20 or 30 pounds. He was even bigger than Travis, probably at least 17. His face was littered with acne, and his angry sneer revealed an ugly gap among his lower teeth. Clearly, this was a guy who had kicked his share of asses before.

Back home in Seattle, I almost never got into fights, at least nothing physical. Once, I let my temper get the best of me and shoved a kid into a swing set in fifth grade, and got sent home from school for an "anger management" lecture by my parents. Two years after that, I had gotten so mad at my best female friend, Linda Rosselini, that I'd kicked her in the shin — not hard enough to hurt her, mind you, but enough to show her I was really pissed off. Linda responded by dumping a cup of yogurt over my head in the lunchroom. We eventually made up, and I quickly realized it's a major faux pas for a boy to fight a girl, even if you're gay: if you win, people will say you're a bully, and if you lose, they'll call you a wimp since a girl beat you up. *You gotta know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em.*

But I didn't have that option this time. We warily circled each other while the crowd of onlookers pelted us with jeers and insults, like an 1864 version of a World Wrestling grudge match.

"You show that damn Yankee, Jed," called one of the crowd.

"I'm Canadian," I said, not taking my eyes off my opponent, trying to decide second-by-second if I should throw the first punch or let him swing and then try to clobber him after I dodged it. "We're neutral."

"Jew boy!" called another.

I glanced up at the crowd. It was Johnny Younger, the angry, shrimpy kid from the fight I'd had three days before. "Nice to see you, too, Johnny," I barked. "But I told you before, I'm Presbyterian, you moron!"

At that precise moment, Jed took a swing but I leaned back at just the right moment, his knuckles swishing harmlessly through the air, missing my chin by inches. Almost by instinct, I slammed my right fist down into his unprotected abdomen with all my strength, leaning into the punch and letting my weight carry me through. He groaned and staggered back.

"There's more where that came from, pea-brain," I cried, my adrenalin surging. "Bring it on!"

Jed coughed once, then regained his stance, his face red. "You got lucky. But you're gonna pay for that now."

Before I could come up with a snappy retort, he was suddenly on me, battering me once in the face, then smashing again in my stomach. I almost fell backwards, then quickly jumped up and danced around the circle of onlookers.

"You're gonna have to do better than that, asshole," I wheezed, trying not to let the pain show. "This is your last chance. Just give me my phone back, and I'll try not to rearrange your face too badly. Not that you wouldn't look a lot better with some major plastic surgery."

"You gonna talk or fight?" he said, taking another couple of swings, while I deftly ducked and weaved out of the way. "Stand still, ya horn-toad!"

"Like this?" I asked, coming to an abrupt halt.

He blinked, then I shot forward and belted him as hard as I could in the mouth. He let out a cry of rage and held his face.

"OWWW!" he screamed. "I think you done busted one of my teeth out!" He spat, and a tear of blood trickled down his chin.

"Good. One down, thirty-one to go. Sorry — make that thirty," I said, remembering he was already missing at least one tooth.

My mind was racing. If I was lucky, I could tire the guy out just by staying one step ahead of him. No doubt the teachers or the principal would be showing up any minute, and they'd break up the fight.

Jed now looked like a wild bull. His nostrils momentarily flared, letting out a steady stream of breath in the cold winter air, and I flashed back to the cow I'd seen giving birth only two hours earlier.

Suddenly, two arms grabbed me from behind, the hands clamped tightly behind my neck.

"What the hell?" I cried, trying to look around.

It was Jed's cohort, who had me locked in a strong Full Nelson. I was paralyzed, my head twisting from side to side as I tried to wriggle away, like a helpless insect snared in a spider's web.

"That's it," Jed called. "You hold him still, Eli, and stop him from dancin' around!"

"Hey, that's not fair!" I cried. "Lemme go, you jerkwad!"

Jed took a step forward and leaned into my face. His breath smelled worse than Matilda's, and I got a closer look at his ragged complexion, which had enough pockmarks to resemble the dark side of the moon. He wiped a puddle of blood off his lower lip.

"You're gonna wish you never seen my face, you hooligan," he said in a low voice.

"I may be a hooligan, but at least I'm not a thief!" I spat back at him.

His fist shot forward and hit me square in the nose. My head snapped back and I saw a momentary flash of white, leaving me momentarily stunned.

"Hold him up, Eli!" he called, raising his fist for another punch. "I'm gonna teach this boy a lesson he ain't soon gonna forget."

Another punch, and I tasted blood in my mouth. Then another, more of a slap.

I sagged in the other boy's arms, my head lolling to the side. He punched again, this time in my chest. I lurched forward, fighting the urge to pass out. A few of the onlookers laughed.

My eyes cleared for a moment. I'd seen a hundred action movies with guys like Daniel Craig and Matt Damon. What would they do in a situation like this? *Probably ask for a stunt double, a frappuccino, and a nap in their trailer*, I thought.

“Stop,” I said, gasping for breath. “Jed, listen to me. You don’t even know what that thing is in your pocket. Only I know how to use it. If you just give me one second, I can prove it’s mine. I swear to god.”

Jed stopped, cocked his head, then pulled the phone out of his overalls. Once glance told me it looked pretty clean, given that it’d been buried in mud for the last week. He turned it around in his hands, examining it from every angle.

“Ain’t no name on it anywhere,” he said, opening and closing it. “Unless your name’s... Mo-to-ro-la. What kinda name is that, anyway? Chinese?”

“My name’s on the screen,” I croaked, trying to catch my breath. “It’s in the main menu. Just hand it over and I’ll show you.”

He put it back in his pocket. “And let you dance away with it? My momma didn’t raise no fools.”

“I’ll... I’ll pay you for it,” I said, suddenly remembering the cash I still had in my wallet. “It’s worth a dollar to me.”

Jed raised an eyebrow. “You got that much on ya? Eli, grab his money.”

“Back right pocket,” I said, while the other boy deftly reached for my wallet. The instant he took his right arm off me, I remembered a Jackie Chan movie I had seen several years before. *This might actually work.*

As he flipped open my wallet, he let out a low whistle. “Why, I do believe we got ourselves a rich boy! Must be eight, nine dollars here!”

“Eleven fifty,” I said, trying to decide which direction to move. “Plus a Visa charge card that won’t do you any good.”

“Charge what?” Jed said, as he and Eli eagerly flipped through the bills.

With that, I let out a war cry, then lifted my right foot up and stomped the heel of my boot down as hard as I could on Eli’s toes. He shrieked at the top of his lungs and fell back in the dirt, causing the crowd to scurry out of the way.

Jed looked up, startled. I kicked him in the groin as hard as I could. He doubled up, screaming in agony. As he fell to his knees, I belted him in the face — again, again, and again. On the third punch, I felt his nose crack under my fist and he squealed even louder, clutching his face as a torrent of blood erupted down his face.

"I'll take that," I said, pulling the wallet out of his hands as he fell backwards. "And this, too," I said, yanking the phone out of his pants pocket. He rolled over on his side, and I kicked him in the ass. "That one's no extra change."

The crowd let out a buzz of admiration.

"That ain't fair," cried Eli, still lying on his back and cradling his left leg, sobbing with pain. "I think you done broke my dang foot!"

"Yeah," I said, slipping my wallet back into my pants pocket as I reached for my coat. "Like two against one is fair, right?"

"He got ya there, Eli," called a voice.

I turned to see Travis and Lem, beaming from the crowd.

"Jesus. It's about time you got here," I said. "I sure could've used some help about five minutes ago."

Travis laughed as he handed me my books from the ground. "Looks like ya did pretty good by yourself."

"I learned it all from Jackie Chan," I said with shrug. "*Twin Dragons*. Got some major kick-ass action. Great movie."

"Great what?"

I made a helpless gesture. "It's kinda like a stage play, only... I'll explain later."

As we made our way through the crowd, a few onlookers slapped me on the back. "Never seen anybody fight like that before!" one said. "Jed had it comin' to him," said another. "Thought you were gonna turn tail and run, but done you licked him good!"

"You were just wonderful!" gushed a female voice.

I turned to see Faith, dressed in a pink dress and a white sweater. She gave me a kiss on the cheek. Johnny scowled over her shoulder, then gave me a reluctant nod.

"So that's how they fight in Can-Ay-da, huh?" He gave me a wary eye, but I could see he was both surprised and impressed.

"More like Hong Kong," I said with a grin, then wiped my mouth. "Ow!" I grimaced, feeling a jolt of pain on my lower right jaw, along with the sharp tang of blood. "Shit. I think I have a loose tooth."

Great, I thought, gingerly feeling one of my side molars. Well, I always wanted caps anyway. I'd need them just to make sure my teeth looked good on TV if I ever got to sing on *American Voice*. Granted, I

wasn't the best-looking guy around, but I wasn't quite as geeky as Clay Aiken. And I was at least as good voice-wise, according to my singing coach back in Seattle.

"That thing really yours?" asked Lem, pointing to the phone, which was half-sticking out of my pants.

"Yeah," I said, flipping it open. "Lemme show you."

I hit a couple of buttons and displayed a picture of me and Dad from last summer. I held it to Travis and Lem, who peered at it curiously.

"This is some kinda picture box?"

"Something like that. That's me and my dad, when we went on a ski vacation to Lake Roosevelt. And here's my name." I clicked back to the main menu showed him the display. "See?"

"'Jason Thomas,'" Lem read out loud. "That's you, I guess. '206-802-9922.' What's all them numbers mean?"

"It's my phone number... it's..." I made a vague gesture, then gave up. "It's complicated. I'll explain some other time."

In the distance, the school warning bell rang.

"We gotta git movin'," Travis said, gently pushing me forward, then turned to his brother. "Lem, you run on down to school, now."

I checked the display. The phone still had a 90% charge, probably because it'd been in sleep mode for six days. I killed the power and turned it off. I still wasn't sure why I needed the phone; but if nothing else, it was concrete evidence that I really was from the future. And at least it gave me some pictures I could look at to help me remember my old life.

And if I leave it here in 1864, I mused, the people here might take it apart, figure it out, and invent faster-than-light travel in a couple more years. The next thing you know, Captain Kirk will be fighting World War I and screw everything up. I'd seen enough sci-fi movies to know that anything could happen when you messed around with time travel.

Travis looked over my shoulder and I turned to see Jed and Eli in the distance, staggering up to their feet. Jed let out a sob when Eli tried to touch his nose. The school principal, Mrs. Weeks, ran up and began scolding them.

"You think they'll leave me alone now?" I said, as we made our way down the crowded hallway to the 9th grade classrooms.

Travis shrugged. “Ya never know. Them two are bad apples. You best watch out for ‘em — ‘specially Jed. Folks say his daddy’s in jail back in Arkansas for killin’ a man.”

“Thanks for the important safety tip,” I said. “With luck, maybe Jed’ll be in an adjoining cell by the end of the year, sharing a bunk with Bubba as his husband. C’mon, let’s get to class before Twitly kills us.”

“As long as Twitly goes to jail, it might be worth it,” Travis said with a grin.

§ § § § §

Between the schoolyard fight and my singing performance in class on Monday, I was suddenly the most popular kid in the entire 9th grade. A dozen teens I hadn’t previously met sat with me and Travis at the lunch table, and I regaled them with the highlights of several action films that had inspired me to kick some ass that morning.

“So this guy swung on a rope right through a window when it done exploded?” asked my new friend Jacob, thoroughly caught up with my story.

“No, no,” I said, trying hard not to chew on my sore tooth. “McClane had to swing off the top of the building when the roof exploded because of the bombs planted by terrorists. He actually used a fire hose — that’s normally used to put out fires — and swung down from the top of a 40-story building and smashed right through a glass window by shooting it out with a handgun. Incredible stunt work. And he did it all in his bare feet.”

The kids murmured with appreciation.

I left out the climax in *Die Hard* where the shrapnel also took out a helicopter, since that would be a little too hard to explain to my current audience, along with the police cars, the computer-controlled bank vault timer and so on. Call it the “1864 rewrite.”

“That’s some story,” said Travis, taking a sip of water from a wooden cup. “Jason’s got a lotta stories.” He rolled his eyes knowingly.

“Do tell,” said Zeke, a tall, black-haired boy who was apparently Jacob’s best friend.

I glared at Travis. "Hey, what I told you last night is true, lame-brain. How else do you explain this thing?" I said, waving the phone under his nose.

He shrugged. "That's just some kinda picture-box. Ain't nothin' special 'bout it."

"Yeah, well... you just let me know where you can buy plastic, an LCD screen, and lithium batteries in 1864."

Before he could respond, there was a clatter of hooves about a hundred yards away, as a buggy pulled up to the curb by the schoolyard.

Uh-oh, I thought, looking up to see a familiar face in the distance. *Sheriff Baxter again.*

I began rehearsing my speech as to how I didn't start the fight, and hoped I could afford a good defense attorney. With my luck, I'd spend the rest of my life paying off the settlement — that's assuming Jed and Eli could invent the personal-injury lawsuit a hundred years early.

Baxter yelled something unintelligible, and several teachers came running out of the main school office to find out what the disturbance was all about.

"I bet somebody's in big trouble," Zeke said, staring at the melee.

"The sheriff looks powerful angry," added Jacob.

"Shit," I muttered. "Baxter probably wants to drag me off to the county orphanage now."

"Naw," said Travis, as we jogged up to get a better look. "I think he's yellin' at Jesse."

"Ya got no damned proof!" yelled a voice. Sure enough, it was Jesse James, glowering, while the sheriff shook him by his shoulders.

"There's two Union soldiers dead and a whole wagon full o' weapons and artillery gone missin' last night," Baxter snapped, his face reddened with anger. "General Lyon seems to think Quantrill's Raiders were behind it. Ain't that so?"

"I don't know nothin' 'bout any of that," Jesse protested, looking away. "Why, I ain't even seen Quantrill in months. Newspaper says they're all split up, maybe gone back to Texas."

"That man's a bloody murderer and you know it," the sheriff snarled. "Them bushwackers killed two hundred innocent men and boys in the Lawrence Massacre a year ago August."

Jesse eyed the man coolly. "Some people say Quantrill's a hero."

The sheriff's eyes flickered for a moment, then decided to change the subject. "Where you been since Tuesday, son?"

"Livin' at my sister's house," he said with a shrug. "My family wants me to stay in school, get some book-learnin'."

Baxter pulled Jesse's face closer. "You listen to me, you foolish boy — if you see hide or hair of that old gang of yours, you best tell 'em to stay clean out of St. Louis. This is my town. You give me one excuse, just one, and I'll see to it you get clamped in irons down at the Camp Jackson prison faster than you can whistle 'Dixie.' They already got a whole bunch o' you Rebel scum, and take me at my word: they're gonna rot in there for the next hundred years. That's unless they hang by the neck first, the traitorous bastards."

The boy almost yawned with indifference. "I told ya before: I been here in school the whole time. Got a whole classroom full o' witnesses. Besides," he added thoughtfully, "seems to me that whether somebody's a traitor or a patriot rightly depends on which side you're on... don't it, sheriff?"

Baxter raised a hand as if to strike Jesse, but Twitly's voice called out.

"Mr. Baxter," he said, stepping forward. "I'll let you know if Mr. James gives us any trouble." He turned to Jesse. "I think we can be certain that he'll not get into any mischief. He'll be my responsibility as long as he attends this school and completes all his lessons."

The man slowly let his hand drop. "Just you let me or my deputies know, Mr. Twitly. I'd appreciate the opportunity to get this hoodlum behind bars." The sheriff turned back to Jesse. "By the way, son — you happen to see your brother Frank anytime recent? We got a few questions we'd like to ask."

Jesse shrugged. "He ain't livin' with us. Frank's of age, and I ain't his keeper. Far as I know, why, he ain't even in the state."

I thought back to the cave, that fateful Friday night only six days earlier. It had been Frank and Jesse James who'd led me to Marsen's Cavern, its secret entrance marked by the "Q" carved on the tree. *The mark of Quantrill's Raiders?*

Jesse glanced up at the crowd and looked askance when he recognized my face, about ten feet behind Baxter's. I shook my head then lightly touched my lips with my index finger and pantomimed a "shhh." Jesse gave me an imperceptible nod. I saw no reason to get either of the James brothers in trouble, since they had actually helped me — OK, only after I gave them a cash bribe — and maybe they might help me again, once I could figure out how to dig through the mudslide that currently blocked the cave entrance. I was still convinced that was my only chance to get back to 2013, through the time tunnel or doorway or whatever it was.

Baxter let out a snort, then stepped back up on his wagon. "You best watch yourself, Jesse," he warned. "I'm keepin' my eye on you. There are people in this world who'd like nothing better than to see you and the rest of your gang at the bad end of a rope."

Jesse grinned. "I reckon I feel safer already, knowin' you're watchin' out for me, Sheriff."

The man cracked his whip and the wagon clattered down the street. Just as the sheriff's back disappeared over the hill, Twitly herded us together and marched us silently down the hallway back to class.

"Didn't you say you saw Frank and Jesse the other night?" whispered Travis.

I nodded as we turned the corner with the rest of the class. "Yeah, back at the cave. They mentioned Quantrill, too."

Travis sniffed. "I think you're tellin' stories again. You're as big a fiber as Jesse."

"I AM NOT A LIAR!" I bellowed, my voice ringing down the hallway.

"Mr. Thomas! Mr. Colt!"

I felt myself being dragged by the scruff of my neck. Twitly shoved us both up against the brick wall.

"You know the rules, gentlemen. Absolutely no talking in the hallways on the way to class! That'll be a half-hour detention for both of you after school."

"But I can't!" I protested. "I've gotta go to work this afternoon at McBillin's store!"

"Let's make it an hour, just for that tone of voice," he retorted. "I will not tolerate disrespect from my students."

I started to object, then thought better of it and snapped my mouth shut.

Twitly crooked his finger at me and leaned closer. "And there's also the matter of two of our 12th grade students who just had to go to Doctor Wells for a badly broken nose and three injured toes, respectively. We have very strict rules about fighting on school grounds."

I started to say something about getting an attorney, but Travis gently nudged the back of my leg and I stayed silent.

"Yes sir," Travis said quickly. "We heard about that fight this morning but didn't get here until just after it was all over. Too bad there weren't any teachers around to stop it."

Twitly gave him a steely-eyed glare and raised an eyebrow. "Yes. It was unfortunate that our staff didn't witness who else was involved. We have no tolerance for ruffians breaking rules here at Jefferson High."

My jaw tightened. "We'll remember that. Sir."

Travis kept a wary eye on both of us all the way back to class, where we returned to the world of Charles Dickens and the London and Paris of 1789. *Definitely the best of times, and the worst of times.*

§ § § § §

"Colt's gonna whup the tar outta me when I get home," Travis muttered as we trudged wearily down the dirt road.

The shadows were already long and the late afternoon sun hung low, like a bronzed penny on the distant horizon. My wristwatch told me it was already well past 5PM. Twitly had originally said he was only going to keep us in detention until 4:30, but he'd decided to have us write ten pages each of "I will obey the rules of Jefferson High" and "No fighting is allowed on school property," repeated fifty times on each page, which took us another half hour. My hand ached from the endless repetition of manually scratching out the words on lined paper, dipping the steel-tipped pen into the inkwell every other word. I sighed and longed for the days of cut-and-paste.

"I told you a hundred times: I'll explain to Colt it was all my fault," I said, still feeling the bruise on my jaw. "Shit!" I cried, sucking in my breath.

"How's the tooth?" Travis asked, momentarily concerned. "Still bleedin'?"

"Hurts like a mofo," I said, gingerly wiggling the molar with my tongue. "Is there a dentist around here? Maybe I can have him take a look at it tomorrow."

"Doc Gibbons. He's in the same building as Doctor Wells, not two blocks from the school. Had him pull one of my baby teeth once, back when I was eight. Kept it under my pillow for a week, but I never got nothin' for it."

I stopped Travis. "Lemme take a look at your teeth."

He gave me a curious look, then opened his mouth.

"Jesus," I said, incredulous. "Damn near perfect teeth. No cavities. I bet that's because there's no soft drinks in this century."

"What's that? I heard o' hard liquor."

"It's a drink anybody can buy — flavored soda water with sugar, caffeine, and artificial flavors, like Coca-Cola. Tastes great, but it rots your teeth. People love it back home."

"They carry that at McBillin's store?"

I stopped dead in my tracks. "Shit!" I yelled, slapping my forehead. "I totally forgot about working today! McBillin's gonna kill me!"

Travis stopped me from turning around and heading back into town. "By the time you get there, they'll practic'ly be closin'. Ain't no point, if ya ask me."

I sighed, then sadly nodded my head. I'd have to give my excuses to the Scotsman tomorrow. Maybe things wouldn't be as hectic at the store today, after yesterday's madhouse after the ad. And there was a good chance McBillin would cool off once he added up the pile of profits they made over the last couple of days.

"I guess I can make it up to them over the weekend," I mused. "We still gotta put up some new signs, rearrange the back shelves, and..."

"Shhhh!" Travis hissed, skidding to a halt and glancing towards the woods. "What was that? Sounds like somethin's hurt, some kinda animal."

To our right was a large forest, the trees billowing slightly in the cold wintry air, their branches rippling in waves. To the left was a dense clump of dead tree trunks and bushes that led down to a path, strewn

with leaves and rocks. The sounds seemed to be coming from farther down the hill.

"Could be dangerous," I said. "Lions, tigers and bears — oh, my."

"Ain't none of them varmints out here in these woods," Travis answered in a low voice. "Saw a coyote once, but it was stone-cold dead, lyin' by the railroad tracks 'bout a mile yonder. Looked like a pile of rancid meat." He shuddered at the memory.

We cautiously made our way down the hill, the twigs and underbrush scraping against our legs, and the sounds grew louder. Something was moaning — and it definitely sounded human.

Travis and I crept over to a small outcropping and peered over the edge. What we saw made my jaw drop.

Less than fifty feet away were two teenage boys, stark naked, their clothes strewn haphazardly in a heap nearby. One was bent over, face down on a rock, his head resting on his forearm. The other was positioned behind him, standing up and leaning forward. There was no question what they were doing.

"Fuck," I whispered, stunned.

"I said hold still!" the first boy cried. "I've almost got it in."

"Then get a move on," whimpered the other. "Get it over with."

The other one spat, then thrust forward and gave a satisfied sigh. "That's it. This ain't gonna take long."

The boy on the rock let out a yelp, then began to gasp. They began to settle into a slow rhythm, their bodies slapping together like a metronome.

Travis and I were too shocked to move.

"Whoa," I said with a gulp. "Jesus... this is like watching live porno."

This was the first time in my life I'd actually seen two guys *do* it — well, except for an occasional porno on the net, plus that one weekend I had with Luke in March back home in Seattle. The last afternoon we were together, he somehow convinced me to let him fuck me, but I did it only with great reluctance. Luke eased me into it, clearly having a lot of experience with this sort of thing, and even used a condom. It was tough for the first few minutes, but Luke knew every button to push and was patient, passionate, and enthusiastic. By the time we'd finished, I got into it so much I had the biggest orgasm of my life; I'm amazed the neighbors

didn't call the police from all the noise we made. Afterwards, he and I couldn't do anything but just lie there for ten minutes, thoroughly spent, exhausted but exhilarated. It was a hundred times better than anything I'd ever expected. It was as if a door to a whole new world opened up, and after that weekend, I felt like I knew what my life as a gay guy was going to be like from then on.

I guess if I had to lose my virginity to somebody, I could've done a lot worse than Luke Martin — a cute blond with the body of an athlete and the dazzling smile of an Abercrombie & Fitch model. Luke always knew the right things to say: he was funny, he paid attention to me, and he made me feel as though I was the most fascinating person he'd ever met. How could I not fall head over heels in love? But the experience had left me feeling utterly lost and empty, especially the next day when he completely ignored me, both on the phone and in school. One moment, I was sure Luke and I would be together for the next couple of years at least; the next, I found out I was just the latest in a long line of conquests — guys and girls. Luke was insatiable, irresistible, and completely incorrigible.

"Luke Martin treats everybody as if they were his personal receptacle," explained my best friend, J.D., after I'd tearfully disclosed the intimate details of my close encounters of the Luke kind. As much as I hated Luke for using me, I had to admit he'd been the subject of my fantasies every single night afterwards, and probably would be for years to come. Sure, he broke my heart into about seventeen pieces. But I gained something positive from the experience, and I'd vowed to be a lot more careful from then on.

I stared at the boys going at it. The one on top was panting, grunting with each thrust, clearly overcome with lust. His back was strong and muscular, and despite the cool weather, there were beads of sweat trickling down his skin. I guessed he was at least 17 or 18, a little taller than Travis, but every bit as powerfully built, almost like a bodybuilder. His hair was dark brown, but I couldn't quite make out his face from this distance. The boy on the bottom was smaller, but clearly enjoying every minute of it. Every so often, the top boy leaned down and kissed him, then used his hands to caress his body, causing him to let out little squeaks of pleasure.

"You know these guys?" I whispered. "They go to Jefferson High?"

Travis shook his head, then turned away. "I don't know either of 'em. C'mon... we gotta get outta here."

"Wait!" I said, unable to take my eyes off the stallions on the rocks. My underarms felt damp, my heart was racing, and my pants felt much too tight. *Who knew guys were having sex like this during the Civil War, I thought. And here I thought gay pride didn't happen until at least 1969.* My groin began to twitch.

The young men below continued to writhe and contort. The guy on top began to quicken his pace, bucking his hips faster and faster, then reached down and began to massage the other's erection. They began to groan in unison. The sexual energy radiating from their bodies almost made me dizzy.

"Jesus, this is so hot," I whispered, my mouth suddenly feeling very dry.

"It's nasty," said Travis, taking me by the shoulder and dragging me back towards the hill.

"What do you mean?" I snapped, a little too loudly, pulling away and crouching back behind the rocks.

"Shhhhhhh!" he hissed. "Let's get back up to the road. Momma's gonna have dinner on the table in fifteen minutes."

Travis' footsteps scurried back up the path behind me as I stood up to get a better view. Below, the two boys were building to a climax. They pistoned together in unison like some kind of amazing sexual machine, their bodies grinding in perfect sync, their voices moaning together. I was stiff as a board.

"I'm almost done, Johnny!" the taller boy cried.

My mouth fell open. The boy on the bottom turned his face, then cried out and pointed in my direction.

It was Johnny Younger!

I fell back behind the rocks and frantically stumbled up the path, desperately ripping up pieces of shrubbery on the way, clawing at the dirt as fast as I could, finally gaining speed as the ground flattened out.

In the distance behind me, I thought I heard another voice cry out. *That would be the money shot, I thought.*

As I scurried back up to the dirt road, I saw Travis about a hundred feet away and quickly ran past him.

“Why’re you in such a dang-fool hurry?” he called.

“Just shut up and run!” I yelled. We ran east for another mile on Old Country Road towards the general direction of the Colt farm.

“Since when are you so all-fired up to get home for dinner?” he said, as we finally slowed our pace.

“Watching hot sex makes me hungry,” I said, wheezing as I took a furtive glance over my shoulder. *Maybe the other boys won’t come after me*, I thought. Still, we had a good ten-minute head start on them, and I doubted they’d want to get close to the Colt farm, knowing Mr. Colt’s penchant for firearms. Chances are, Johnny didn’t get a good look at me, anyway, since I’d been partly hidden by shadow. In fact, the more I thought of it, I wasn’t 100% sure it was him at all. Johnny was a common name, after all.

Travis stayed silent. A sudden breeze rattled the leaves and sent a shiver down my spine.

“So what’s the big deal?” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. “I mean... you’ve seen animals mating before, right?”

Travis wouldn’t look at me. “I been on a farm all my life,” he said. “I seen pret’ near everything animals do, since I was three years old.”

“Well,” I said, trying to sound casual, “I’m just saying, there’s nothing wrong with... well, what those guys were doing back there. I mean, as long as you love the person. And you use protection.”

“Protection?”

I started to explain about condoms and safe sex, but then remembered AIDS wouldn’t exist for another century. “Well, you know... there’s diseases and stuff — syphilis, gonorrhea, crabs. Those are sexually transmitted diseases that’ve been around since like ancient Egypt. They taught us about all this last year in Natural Science 201.”

He sniffed and nodded towards the road behind us. “Ain’t nothin’ natural ‘bout that.”

I sighed. “Listen, Travis. Where I come from, what two people do together privately... it’s all good. They aren’t hurting anybody. They’re making love. It’s their business.”

He stopped dead in his tracks. "There ain't no love in that," he said, almost angrily. "It ain't right, and it ain't natural. They ain't makin' babies."

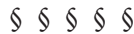
I started to argue, but he started walking faster. "Move it along," he called over his shoulder. "Rain's comin' in again."

I stared as he disappeared around the bend where the path grew narrower, less than a mile away from the Colt farm. "You comin' or not?" he called in a louder voice, as he continued walking away.

I felt a couple of cold raindrops splash against the back of my neck. I turned back to the road behind me and felt a pang.

Maybe next time you guys oughta try fooling around indoors, I thought. *And keep the door locked.* I buttoned the top button of my coat, then turned towards the Colt farm and reluctantly followed Travis through the forest clearing.

A freeze-frame of the scene I'd just witnessed flashed before my eyes, and I couldn't help but smile a little. *Well, at least I have a new late-night fantasy to try out in the next few days.*



Travis practically acted like I didn't exist for the rest of the walk home. He refused to respond when I tried again to talk about what we'd seen down the hill. Since he already thought I was a liar, it was clear to me that Travis was not only stupid, but bigoted as well. My friend J.D. had a whole theory about "self-hating gays," with that old joke about Denial not just being a river in Egypt.

"I once met a guy who I swear was only gay when he was in the middle of having sex," J.D. once told me in an unguarded moment. "The moment he was done — 'slam, bam, thank you, sir' — suddenly he was as straight as an arrow, with the wife, the 2.5 kids, the dog, the station wagon, the whole thing. Couldn't wait to get away from me, like I was Kryptonite." J.D. shook his head sadly. "Guys like this are what I call 'homo-schizos': deny, deny, deny. The idea of being gay scares them so badly, it's like a light switch they can just turn off — *click!* — just like that. They turn it on only when they need something they can't get from their wives or girlfriends. Take my advice: stay away from these jerks. If

they hate part of themselves, they're eventually gonna wind up hating you, too, honey. Because they just can't handle it."

Well, what did you expect? I asked myself two hours later, as I got ready to climb into my hayloft bed. Gay sex wouldn't be legal for another hundred years — maybe longer, in the case of Texas and Georgia and a few other third-world countries — and gay marriage was still years away, at least for every state. Hell, the word "gay" wouldn't even exist for at least another half a century. How could I expect some confused 1864 church-going kid to realize what we knew in my time: that people are different everywhere and you had to have tolerance and respect for them, even if you didn't exactly gravitate in that direction.

Maybe the immediate problem was to at least convince Travis that I was telling the truth. If I could somehow make him believe I really was from the future, maybe I could eventually make him see that two guys making love wasn't necessarily a big deal. And that sex was as natural and easy as you wanted it to be. I knew I could make him understand.

But why? Just so I could have sex with him? Clearly, I had ulterior motives here. And maybe it wasn't fair to Travis. After all, I had already accepted that I was gay; it might take Travis years to figure out what he wanted out of life — and whether he was straight or gay for that matter, or somewhere in-between. It wasn't fair to push him into a relationship he couldn't handle. Or even worse, for me to use him just so I could get my rocks off.

Like Luke did to me.

The realization hit me hard.

Jesus. *That's the last thing I'd ever want to do to Travis.*

"No," I whispered out loud, as I sat on the bed and pulled up the blankets, the rough threads tickling my neck. I was determined that he was going to have to come to me. I wasn't going to force him to do anything. If it happens, great; if not, I'll just let it go. There's plenty of guys back in 2013 who'll want to go out with me someday. But Travis was gonna have to make up his mind first as to who he is. Until then, he was off limits.

As I lay back, the kerosene lantern flickering beside me, I gazed up at the dark walls and ceiling in the upper part of the barn, watching the amber light as it scattered across the wooden boards. My jaw still

hurt like shit, but at least the tooth felt a little better. I pulled down the blanket and looked at my bare chest and stomach, which had a bunch of black and blue marks, like a relief map of Hawaii. My right hand hurt like hell, too, with scrapes on the knuckles where I'd socked Jed that morning. *Better than a broken nose and some busted toes*, I thought, feeling more than a little triumphant. *That's sure as shit something I never would've tried back in Seattle.*

I yawned, then reached up to pull my copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* down off the shelf. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a cockeyed wooden slat on the barn wall just below the far right side of the shelf. Curious, I unhooked the lantern above my head and brought it down closer, then tentatively nudged the board. The wood creaked backwards a little bit, so I pushed a little harder. It opened to reveal a small compartment. The dim yellow light flickered on a folded piece of school parchment, written in very neat handwriting:

January 10th, 1864

Dearest Travis —

I am leaving this behind so's you will no what has happend to me. I am fed up with the Union in our great state of Missouri, and am gone to do what I always said I would: I am gone down to the Tennessee border by the morning train and I am enlisting in the righteous Confederate army.

I am sorry I could not tell you in person, but I reckoned you would fight me like the blazes, so this way is best. Momma won't approve, neither, but as I am now 18 years of age, I am sure they will take me. Say goodbye to Lem for me. I hope to see battel soon, and we are surly fighting on God's side.

As long as there is a blue sky above, I will see you again, so don't you worry none. When the War Between the States is over, I will do everything I can to come home and get you away from Colt.

For now, please protekt Ma and Lem as best you can.

Travis, you will always be in my heart, every day that I live. I promise I will write again soon as I reach the Army base in Clarksville, and will send home what money I can.

Your brother,

—Billy

There were several cross-outs, misspellings, and scrawls in the letter, so it was clearly written in a hurry. I knew Travis' brother had slept up here in the hayloft long before I arrived, so it figured that he'd have a secret stash where he kept his private possessions. But why didn't he tell Travis about it? Why not just mail the letter on the way out of town? Maybe he left in a hurry, or somehow forgot to give him some clues where the letter was hidden up here in the barn.

But what about the letters that had already arrived? Lem had shown me one of Billy's letters postmarked from two months earlier. The handwriting was cruder than what was on this paper, but that figured, given that Billy was probably writing on the battlefield somewhere, dodging bullets and cannonballs while crouching in a foxhole. Still, at least this letter would finally answer Travis' question on why Billy never said goodbye when he left.

Let's see him try to say I'm lying about this, I thought smugly. Even if Travis and I never wind up having any kind of relationship — and it would be crazy for me to even try, since I probably wouldn't be stuck here in 1864 for much longer — at least he'd know I'd never lie to him. Just being friends with him would be enough for now.

I looked back at the letter. *You'll always be in my heart, every day that I live.*

I thought about all the young soldiers that went off to war in my world, some never to return home. At least they had email, telephones, and iPods where they were in Iraq and Afghanistan. I remembered a grim fact from my 8th grade American History class last year: more Americans died in the Civil War than World War I, World War II, Vietnam, and Afghanistan combined — more than 600,000 men. That terrible number stuck in my head after we had to write a report on the Ken Burns PBS documentary. I vividly remembered the montage of some of the faces of the soldiers, some of which weren't much older than I was right now.

Maybe Billy James would be one of the lucky ones.

"Keep your head down, Bill," I whispered to the letter. I carefully folded it back up and returned it to its hiding place. I settled back on my bed and turned the lantern down until the hayloft was enveloped in black velvet, the night soothing and peaceful, blotting out all the exhausting events of the day until they were only a distant roar.

Chapter 10

Friday morning greeted me like a cold punch in the stomach. It was snowing. OK, maybe not exactly a blizzard, but it still seemed far worse than what I was used to back in Seattle.

“Billy James always said, ‘Missouri winters are a vile mistress,’” said Lem as we trudged down the dirt road to school. The path through the forest was icy, and snow scattered down in light flakes.

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked, wiping a few stray flakes from my cheek.

Lem shrugged. “Got no idea. I think he heard it from Reverend Abrams.”

I was about to respond with my opinion of the good reverend when Travis pulled out a corncob pipe from inside his jacket, then lit a match and inhaled deeply.

“Since when do you smoke?” I said, suppressing a cough from the acrid blue cloud.

Travis took the pipe out of his mouth, then spat. “I do some smokin’ now and then. Ain’t no sin in it.”

“He got it from Billy,” Lem confided. “Billy James smoked all of last year.”

I took a strong whiff. *That doesn’t smell like tobacco, I thought. In fact, that smells sweet. Almost like...*

I skidded to a halt. “Don’t tell me you smoke POT!” I cried, incredulously.

They stopped and stared at me. “Billy smoked hemp all the time,” Travis said, as he took another long puff, then exhaled. “Ain’t no harm in

it. We got bales of it up to the ceiling in the storage barn out back. Makes me feel relaxed-like.”

I rolled my eyes. “Great. Now I have to deal with a pot-head.” I turned to the younger boy. “Lem, let me talk to your brother for a minute. Alone.”

He started to object, but Travis snapped, “Just skedaddle on down the road! We’ll be right behind ya. And stay outta mischief, hear?”

The boy sullenly marched ahead of us on the path. Travis struck another match and relit his pipe, which had momentarily gone out. The flame made the snowflakes around him seem to dance and glow.

“So, uh, that was Billy James’ pipe,” I said, trying to get the conversation started, as we continued walking down the path.

“What of it? You gonna lecture me about smokin’ now?”

I rolled my eyes. “Hey, it’s your lungs and your brain, not mine. But I’ve got something more important than that. Look, I found this last night in the barn.” I stopped him and handed him the letter.

At first, his eyes seemed cloudy. As he read, his right hand began to shake and he dropped his pipe to the ground, where it continued to smolder in the snow. We stood in silence as a few wisps of smoke slowly rose around us.

“How long you had this?” he whispered, reading the words over again.

“I found it five minutes before I went to sleep last night,” I said. “It was hidden behind a loose board by the bookshelf up in the hayloft. I couldn’t exactly give it to you at breakfast, with Lem and your folks around, so I figured now was the best time to tell you about it.”

An uncomfortable silence passed.

“That’s it?” I snapped. “Not even a thank you? Well, I hope you’ll at least believe me this time. Or do you think the letter is a lie, too? Screw this shit!” I stormed down the road after Lem, who had almost disappeared over the hill that marked the halfway point to school.

“Hey, hold on!” Travis called, then jogged up to meet me and touched my back.

“Well?” I asked as I whirled around and narrowed my eyes.

“Well... I guess I’m sorry. If that’s what you want me to say.”

His expression seemed truly apologetic, but I wasn't about to let him off easy.

"Do you get the point, Travis?" I said. "If I'd been lying to you all this time, I'd either have torn this letter up and thrown it away or just never given it to you. You do trust me that it's real, right?"

"What letter?" piped up Lem from twenty feet away, as he tossed a rock that narrowly missed a crow in a nearby tree.

Travis ignored him, then nodded to me, his expression grave. "I'd know Billy's handwritin' anywhere," he said in a low voice, still staring at the paper.

My temper dissipated when I saw the terrible sadness in his eyes. "Hey," I said, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "At least now you know why he left and didn't tell you. He'll eventually come home." *One way or the other*, I thought, remembering some of the faces of the fallen soldiers from the Civil War documentary.

Travis seemed lost in thought as we continued walking past the rolling hills and trees. Lem continued down the road towards the elementary school, while the two of us stepped onto the high school grounds, which were completely empty. I glanced around to make sure that Jed and Eli weren't waiting in the shadows. I was a little nervous they might want a rematch after yesterday's fight, though it might take them another week or two to recover.

"You sure this is a good idea?" he asked, as we made our way down the hall towards the 9th-grade classroom.

"Sure," I said. "Like I said at breakfast, we'll go over the first ten chapters of the novel together, cram all the facts, and I guarantee you'll be able to pass Twitly's test. Piece of cake." My mom and I had seen a road show version of *A Tale of Two Cities* at the Seattle Musical Theater about three years ago, and I hoped I'd be able to remember enough of the plot and character names to help me fake the answers. The songs weren't bad — that much I could remember.

Just then, Jesse blew past us down the hall, nearly knocking us down, his laughter echoing down the stone walls.

"Where in tarnation is he goin' this early?" asked Travis, craning his neck as we reached the classroom doorway. "You know he ain't up to no good."

The kerosene lanterns were already lit, and the stove on the back left corner kept the room warm and almost cheery. We walked over to Travis' row, then sat down and I opened my copy of the Dickens novel and pulled out some folded papers.

"OK," I said, leaning against a desk, "so here's my notes on the first few chapters. The story's divided up between Paris and London, so you have to..."

Travis stared over my shoulder, his eyes wide. I snapped my fingers by his nose a couple of times. "Yo! Earth to Travis. You need to listen to this if you wanna pass the test."

"Titly," he said.

"What?"

"Titly," he repeated, pointing over my head.

I spun around and gaped. There on the blackboard were written the words:

TITLY BURN IN HELL

along with a crude drawing of two pendulous women's breasts dangling below, almost like cow's udders, complete with protruding nipples.

"Jesus!" I cried.

"Somebody's comin'!"

Voices echoed from down the hall. The two of us tore up to the blackboard, filled with panic.

"They're gonna think we did it!"

"Where's the erasers?" I asked, frantically searching all around the wall. "Where could he hide them?"

"They're almost here!" Travis hissed.

Thinking quickly, I grabbed the mechanical roll-down map positioned in front of the blackboard and yanked it down, revealing the standard Mercator diagram of the world. *Just big enough to cover up the evidence*, I thought with relief.

Travis and I quickly scurried away from the blackboard as the other students began to trickle in. We ignored them while we concentrated on the book.

“Who woulda done such a dang fool thing?” Travis muttered under his breath as he sat back at his desk. “Must’ve been Jesse.”

“Shut up and keep reading my outline,” I said. “If we’re lucky, we’ll make it to lunch and figure out a way to erase the blackboard later.”

After less than five minutes, the classroom was almost filled. In the meantime, I’d managed to give Travis a crash course on Dickens’ classic.

“You make it sound a lot more interestin’ than the book,” he said, turning over my notes. “Kinda like your other stories.”

“Oh, I got a million of ‘em,” I said, gathering up my books just as Twitly entered the room, wearing his ever-present bow tie and sour expression. The teacher gave me a brief nod as I slid down the aisle and into my seat.

The school bell rang in the distance. Twitly clapped his hands together.

“Alright, everyone,” he said, walking around his desk. “You’ve had an additional day to study the first third of Mr. Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, ‘Recalled to Life.’ I pray you will have used your time wisely, and I expect each one of you to at least pass the test you’re about to take.”

Several of the students grumbled, apparently having forgotten his quiz announcement at the end of yesterday’s class.

“There will be twenty questions,” the man continued, as he reached for the map behind him.

Oh, shit, I thought.

“Each one will count as five points, for a total of 100.” The map snapped up behind him, then rolled around a few times and stopped.

The class was momentarily stunned.

“Are there any questions?” Twitly asked, oblivious to the scrawled graffiti behind him.

Suddenly, the entire room let out an enormous explosion of laughter and howls of mirth, amid cries of bewilderment. Several of the girls screamed and hid their faces. One student — I think his name was Joey — literally fell out of his chair in hysterics. Travis and I couldn’t help but grin.

Twitly looked momentarily puzzled, then turned around to the blackboard. His mouth fell open. He reached into his desk, pulled out an eraser, then raised his voice.

“Edward! Close your mouth and get up here.”

He tossed the boy the eraser. “Clean off that chalkboard. Now.”

Twitly stepped to the front of the class, his face red with anger, then picked up his wooden pointer and glowered. The room grew very quiet.

“Who did this?” he asked.

Silence.

He slammed the pointer down on his desk, making a sound like a rifle shot. All of us shuddered and froze.

“It will go very badly for all of you if you don’t tell me who’s responsible for this,” he said, walking up and down the rows of students. “Was it you?” he barked at Jacob, who sat in the first seat in the row next to me.

“No, sir,” the boy mumbled, sinking down in his chair.

“How about you?” Twitly said to Zeke, who sat just behind him.

Just out of Twitly’s eye, I saw Jesse James, who was fighting the desperate urge to laugh.

That moron, I thought. He did this. Now he’s going to blow it and get expelled from school and go to jail! All for an idiotic stunt!

Zeke shook his head. “I never even seen it until just now,” he said firmly.

Twitly took two steps down the row. “Mr. James,” he said, in a calm voice. “Do you have anything to say about the writing on the blackboard?”

Jesse began to shake. I wasn’t sure if it was from fear or just a desperate attempt to stifle his laughter.

“Well?”

Jesse’s face was turning red. *This is like watching a train wreck, I thought, my mind racing.* Before I knew what I was doing, I leapt out of my chair. “I did it!” I cried.

The entire class sucked in their breath.

“Mr. Thomas?” he said, spinning on his heel. “You? Come up to my desk.”

I meekly followed him to the front of the room, where he impatiently tapped the stick against the side of his leg. His eyes were dark

and menacing, and his Adam's apple furiously bobbed up and down as he spoke.

"I warned you before," he said, his voice slightly higher-pitched than usual. "There are severe punishments for disrespectful pupils at Jefferson High School, Mr. Thomas."

I nodded. "I apologize. I... I don't know what got into me."

"Hold out your hands, please. Palms up."

I did so, trying not to shake. *This was undoubtedly the stupidest thing I've done so far*, I thought. *OK, between that and exploring that cave in the first place.*

"Perhaps this will remind you to put your hands to better use in the future," he said. "Idle hands are the devil's tools." With that, he began whipping my hands and wrists unmercifully.

I flinched, instinctively pulling back my right hand.

"Hold still!" he cried. "Or else it will go much worse for you!"

I nodded and held my hands out again and braced myself. *I'm not going to cry*, I said, jerking again at the next whack, steadying my hands in position. *I'm not going to give this jerk the satisfaction.*

By the tenth stroke, I winced, then met his eyes. He hesitated, then stopped.

"Go back to your seat," he said, slightly out of breath. "I'm going to take ten points off from your test as well." He turned back to the class. "Now, here are the questions."

He began to scribble on the blackboard. I returned to my desk, wincing and rubbing my hands, which were red and raw. My left palm was actually scratched and bleeding.

I looked over at Travis, who gave me a sympathetic look, then shook his head. I made a helpless gesture, then carefully picked up a pen, dabbed it in the inkwell and began to write.

§ § § § §

Twitly ignored me for the rest of the morning. After we turned in our literature test, he moved on to physics — all fairly basic stuff I had learned back in 8th grade. At noon, the hallway lunch bell clanged and everyone scurried out the door.

“Mr. Thomas!” he called, just before I reached the door. A few other students pushed past me into the hallway. “A word, please.”

I froze, then turned around and walked up to his desk, doing my best to keep my expression a complete blank. “Yes, sir?” *A poker face, my father had called it.*

Twitly pulled out my test paper, then adjusted his glasses. After a moment, he looked up at me. “You have unusual handwriting, Jason,” he mused, pursing his lips. “Completely different from what was on the blackboard this morning.”

“I apologized for that,” I said, matter-of-factly. “It’s wrong to disrespect a teacher — I know that.”

He leaned back in his chair. “It’s also wrong to *lie*, isn’t it, Mr. Thomas? Don’t think for a moment you fooled me.”

“Fooled you?” I said, raising my eyebrows in an innocent expression.

Twitly looked up at me and smiled grimly. “You’re covering for someone else. Travis Colt, perhaps?”

“No!” I said sharply. “I swear — Travis had nothing to do with this.”

“Then who did?”

I sighed. “My hand to God, Mr. Twitly, the writing was already there when I walked in the door.”

“Then why lie about it?” he said, laying his pointer across his desk.

“Look, Mr. Twitly — I apologized, I’ve been punished... isn’t that enough?”

The teacher shook his head. “I suspect the person or persons truly responsible will ultimately get their just reward. The Lord has a way of righting wrongs, sooner or later.”

I nodded. “Karma,” I said. “That’s what the Buddhists call it.”

Twitly lightly touched his fingertips together several times, then raised an eyebrow. “Alright, then. Go on to lunch. But in the future, I suggest you be much more cautious about choosing your friends. Karma or not, you may well live to regret it.”

I nodded, then darted out the door and made my way out to the schoolyard, where I met Travis by our usual bench. *Dodged that bullet*, I thought.

“Why’dya do that for?” he muttered, pushing some stray clumps of melted snow off the table. “Twitly coulda whupped ya somethin’ fierce.”

"Pants down, I hope," I said sarcastically, reaching for my sandwich.

"Pure foolishness," said a voice to my left. I looked up as Faith sidled up to the bench and sat down, smoothing out her dress. "Why, that was almost obscene!"

I started to protest, but she giggled.

"And so very wicked," she said, grabbing a bite from my apple. "Scandalously amusing."

"Funniest thing we've seen in school all year," agreed Jacob, as he slid in on the other side of me. "Dang near split my sides laughin'."

"The look on Twitly's face!" said a friend of Faith's, who I vaguely remembered as Mary-Ann. "Oh, that was surely a sight to see."

"Absolutely inspired," added Jacob's friend, Zeke. "That was somethin'. Most fun we had since I can remember."

Well, I guess that makes me Mr. Big Shot, I thought. Several students I'd never met before slapped me on the back and congratulated me. As we ate, I glanced around to see if I could spot Jesse. It took me a few minutes, but I eventually caught a glimpse of him standing across the schoolyard, talking to Johnny and another boy I didn't know. Jesse glanced once or twice in my direction, but otherwise ignored me.

"Now, don't you forget, Jason," Faith said, as she finished her meal. "We have our recital tomorrow afternoon for Mother's social group — noon sharp at my house. You should be there at least a half-hour early so we can rehearse a little. I hope your hands will be up to playing."

"They'll be fine," I said, painfully wiggling my fingers, one of which still had several pink blisters and a nasty reddish-brown scab. "The pain helps stimulate my artistic temperament."

"Oh, dear," she said, gently grasping my left hand, then kissing it. "I'm sure you'll feel better tomorrow."

"Looks like Jason's got hisself a girlfriend," Jacob said, elbowing Zeke in the ribs.

I gave a wan smile. "Just singing partners," I said. "It's all showbiz."

On our way back to class, Travis nudged me. "Why'd ya stick your neck out for Jesse like that?" he whispered as we walked down the sidewalk. "It's not like you're best buddies or nothin'."

"Later," I said.

As we entered the classroom, Jesse caught up with me and walked with me back to my seat. "Thanks for what you did this mornin'," he said, a little out of breath. "I guess I get a little crazy sometimes. Didn't think about the consequences of my actions, if ya know my meanin'."

I shrugged. "Yeah. Me, too."

He glanced around, then leaned forward. "I'm beholdin' to ya, Jason," he said in a low voice. "I can't afford to get in trouble just yet. Friends of the South respect a man who knows how to protect his friends."

I held up my reddened and bruised hands. "What I could really use is a bandaid," I muttered, nodding at the sores across my palms.

"A what?"

"Never mind."

§ § § § §

"Tooth doesn't look too bad," said the dentist, as he clinked through my mouth with what looked like medieval torture devices. "You're mighty lucky, son."

Dr. Gibbons was in the same one-story duplex-style building as the main neighborhood physician, Dr. Wells, whom I had met on my first day in St. Louis, after recovering from my injuries after my time-trip in the cave. The office was on the outskirts of the city, just a block and a half from school.

"Are you going to have to do an extraction?" I asked, wondering how they'd knock me out for the surgery. "Maybe a crown?"

The man gave me a curious glance, then gave the tooth a tentative wiggle. "No," he said at last. "I think if you leave it alone for a couple of weeks, it should heal on its own. Best take care not to chew on it, and I'd stay out of any more fights if I were you. You call on me at once if it starts hurting again, or if you start running a fever."

"You got anything for the pain?" I wondered if aspirin even existed in 1864.

"I'll give you some clove oil you can apply to the tooth. If it gets any worse, I could give you a prescription for the apothecary shop down the road," Gibbons said. "A tincture of opium or some absinthe would be

enough to stop the pain and help you sleep, but let's see how you feel by tomorrow."

I started to get out of the dentist's chair, which looked like some kind of weird archaic contraption out of the movie *Brazil*. The man reached up to stop me.

"I must ask, Jason: who worked on your teeth prior to you living here in St. Louis? Those are some of the most unusual fillings I've ever seen. Amazing precision."

I winced. I hadn't considered the dentist might figure out that I wasn't actually from this century. I made another mental note to try to avoid saying or doing anything that drew too much attention to me.

"Uh, I had a dentist back home in, uh... Vancouver, British Columbia," I said. "It's... it's something new they're trying up there."

"I've never seen work like it," he said, clearly puzzled.

"So, uh... how much do I owe you for the visit?" I said, trying to change the subject.

"Leave my assistant 50 cents for the examination," he said, as we walked down the hall and into his lobby. He handed me a small vial filled with yellow liquid. "That should cover it for now. Two drops, no more than four times a day."

"Thanks, doc," I said, dropping the coins on the counter and quickly rushing out the door and down the street.

As I scurried down South Broadway, I mulled over how lucky I'd been over the last week. Maybe I'd been wrong to try to tell Travis the truth. If the people of 1864 realized I was really from the future, my life could turn into a living hell. They'd expect me to know everything that was going to happen in the years to come: who was going to win the war, what businesses would succeed, what technologies would start changing the world.

"Or worse," I muttered to myself, "they'd burn me at the stake." That was far more likely. Some kid in the Civil War, spouting off about planes, trains and automobiles, let alone computers and movies and MP3 players... they'd lock me in a cage and put me on exhibit in the zoo. Or worse.

I resolved to keep my mouth shut. *Gotta fit in*, I thought, as I made my way down the St. Louis sidewalk. *No more slip-ups*. I thought about my backstory: I was an 1864 kid, so that meant I must've been born in

1849, in Vancouver. I resolved to keep my cellphone and all my other 2013 artifacts away from prying eyes.

"There you are!" cried a voice. "Bout damned time you got here, boy! We got work to do!"

Mr. McBillin took me by the arm and dragged me through the entrance into his store. "Now," he said, rubbing his hands with glee. "We need to get started on those signs you were talkin' about. 'McBillin's Supermarket' — I like the sound o' that. You ready? Get yer apron on, and let's get a move on."

I sighed. *Okay, I thought. Maybe one futuristic innovation wouldn't cause too many problems.*

§ § § § §

"Here ya are, Mas' Jason," said the black man as we pulled up to the farmhouse shortly after dusk. Rufus was a part time helper at the store, but the McBillins usually kept him out of sight in the back room, helping with restocking the inventory and carrying in the heavier items delivered from the alley in back.

"Thanks, Rufus," I said. "I appreciate the lift."

He pulled the horses to a stop and waited for me to jump off and grab my books. "Your aunt, Miz Olivia — she was a very good woman. One o' the few that stuck up for Negroes in this town." He looked around nervously and dropped his voice. "She was an ab'litionist, y'know."

I had to think for a moment. "You mean... she was against slavery, right?"

He nodded. "That's a right dangerous position for a white woman here in Missouri. Most people called her crazy, s'pecially after the war started. Gov'ment done come in and put an end to slavery for the time bein', not two years ago. But Miz Olivia helped us quite a bit before that. Some o' my family owe her their very lives, and that's a fact."

I looked at him curiously. *Maybe there was a lot more to my dearly departed Aunt Olivia than I knew.* "How'd she do that?"

Rufus started to speak but then looked up in a panic.

"You there! Jason! 'Bout time you got home!" Mrs. Colt called, standing on the porch. "Got potatoes on the stove."

I gave an apologetic look to Rufus and hopped off the wagon. "I've got some ground meat for supper," I said, holding up a bag. "From Jacob the butcher, two doors down from McBillin's."

Rufus clucked the horses and they began to trot away.

"Thanks, Rufus," I called. "See you tomorrow morning at the store!"

The man waved back as the wagon disappeared around the bend.

"Why you talkin' to that darky?" asked Mr. Colt with a scowl, as he came out from the side of the house. "Nigra like that's beneath you. You should show him his place, lest he get uppity."

"Ground beef," I said, hoping to distract him by holding up the bag. "Got a great meal for us tonight. Something new."

Colt's face brightened. "Why didn't you say so, boy? Ya best skedad-dle into the kitchen and have Sarah get it on the stove! Time's a-wastin'!"

§ § § § §

"What'd ya call them sandwiches again?" Travis asked, as we trudged back to the barn after dinner.

"Big Macs," I said. "Or a close approximation. The buns weren't quite right, but it's pretty close to what we had back home: 'Two All-Beef Patties, Special Sauce, Lettuce, Cheese, Pickles, Onion, on a Sesame Seed Bun.' One of my favorites."

"I don't remember no sesame seeds," he replied, as we opened the barn door and walked inside. "But Momma's pickles were good. I never thought o' puttin' all that on a sandwich before."

I grinned. "That's nothing. If I can figure out how to do it, I'll see if we can invent pizza tomorrow night."

"Pizza?"

As I reached the ladder, I hesitated. Travis looked a little nervous.

"Hey," I said quietly, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze. "You wanna... I dunno, hang out up in the hayloft?" I wiggled my eyebrows and grinned. "Y'know, for some wrestling?"

Travis looked away. Apparently, he was still a little freaked-out about seeing the two boys having sex yesterday.

"I really oughta..."

"I know, chores and so on. No problem." I started to step up the ladder, but Travis stopped me.

"I wanna thank you again for givin' me Billy's letter," he said quietly. "It made me feel a lot better."

"No problem," I said.

Travis leaned closer. I could smell his breath, with just a hint of the sweet cooking spices Mrs. Colt had back in the kitchen.

"You must think I'm some kinda natural born fool or somethin'.." he said, his voice trailing off.

I grinned. "Listen, there's tons of stuff you know that I don't. I couldn't have survived over the last week without you. I owe you a lot."

Travis looked up at me, his eyes shining from the lantern's reflection. "I know I been kinda ornery to ya lately. Lem's been houndin' me about it. Don't rightly know what got into me." He pulled out the letter from his pocket and stared at it. "Specially now. You don't know what this means to me."

I gently slid my arm around his shoulders. "Hey, it's no big deal," I said. "I mean, that's what friends are for, right?"

Our faces almost touched. *Was he going to kiss me?*

I closed my eyes for a moment and leaned forward, but he abruptly turned and walked away. "See ya in the mornin', Jason," he mumbled. "G'night."

I watched the barn door close, then sighed. I adjusted my groin, which was hard as a rock. It'd been awhile since I had relieved the pressure, and I definitely couldn't go another day without letting off some steam. *Guess I'll have to take matters into my own hands.*

I had my pants off before I fell into my hayloft bed, and quickly relived the highlights of yesterday afternoon, remembering the vivid details of the two teens going at it on the rock. In less than a minute, I let out a satisfied moan and felt several warm drops spatter up to my chin. *I think I just set a new land speed record.* I lay back and panted, momentarily exhausted.

One of the cows let out a low bellow, followed by a higher-pitched squeal from her calf.

"Hey," I called, "can't a guy take care of himself without an audience? Jesus!"

I cleaned up, turned out the lamp, and was asleep in minutes.

§ § § § §

Hours later, I felt the call of nature. I yawned, slid out of bed and stepped down the ladder, the blanket wrapped precariously around me. The cows were quiet, the mother leaning slightly against the barn wall, her calf curled up contentedly at her feet.

The cold winter air was brisk but still well above freezing. I crept silently across the farmyard, using my flashlight to avoid stepping in any stray horse patties that Lem had missed clearing out earlier that afternoon, and made my way over to the outhouse. As I approached the back of the farmhouse I heard a sound and froze.

There was a sharp cry, then some muffled conversation. A dim light was on in one of the bedrooms — possibly Travis', but I wasn't sure.

I waited, partly out of curiosity, partly out of fear that a fight was about to break out. I heard someone sobbing, then the light went out.

I shook my head. *Family troubles*, I thought to myself, as I opened the outhouse door. *It's none of my business.*

Still, I wondered what secrets the old farmhouse held. The Colts weren't the first family to live there. Mrs. Colt had told me a couple of days earlier at dinner that the place was at least 60 years old, so that dated back at least to the early 1800s.

As I stepped lightly back to the barn, I heard a low moan from the eaves of the house. *Ghosts from the 1800s, no doubt*, I thought with a shiver. *In the right light, this old farm could look pretty creepy.* The trees' shadows cast long fingers down the path that led to the barn. The shutters rattled as a cold wind blew from the east, and the nearby crickets suddenly stopped. I walked a little faster. *Cue the theramin music and bring in Freddie Kruger.*

I closed the barn door behind me and climbed back up to the hayloft. I tossed and turned for several minutes, desperately hoping for sleep to overtake me. I finally let out a defeated sigh, cursed, then lit a match and fired up the kerosene lamp next to my bed.

Something was bothering me. I'd been troubled about the whole time-travel thing since I'd grabbed back my cellphone from Jed and Eli after my fight the day before.

"What I really oughta do," I muttered to myself, "is write down everything I know about the mid-1800s." I'd made a B+ on the American History final a year ago in 8th grade, so this should be a cinch. And history was always boring; this might be enough to make me sleep.

I grabbed my spiral notebook from my backpack and my last working ballpoint pen. After scribbling for several minutes, I looked over the list I had made:

*April 1861: War begins at Ft. Sumter.
January 1863: Lincoln's Emancipation
Proclamation.
July 1863: Fall of Vicksburg — turning point
of the war.
November 1863: Lincoln's Gettysburg
Address.*

I got extra points for knowing the first paragraph of Lincoln's speech. One know-it-all in my class had memorized the whole thing.

*November 1864: Sherman destroys Atlanta
(filmed with great special effects in *Gone
with the Wind*). Example of the phrase
"scorched earth policy."*

*April 1865: 13th Amendment abolishes
slavery. Lee surrenders at Appomattox. Less
than a week later, Lincoln gets assassinated
at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C.*

Not much of a list, I thought as I held it closer to the lamp, trying to remember the finer points of the last week or so of class lectures. I knew there was more, like the specific dates, but a lot of that final test had been multiple choice, plus a couple of essays. *If I just had access to my old notes, or Google, or Wikipedia, or something, I could...*

I could what? *Change history?*

“Bad idea,” I said out loud. I felt an unease at the certainty that anything I tried to do to alter this world might lead to trouble. I resolved to try again to return to the cave over the weekend. Maybe the weather would improve and I might find another entrance, reach the portal, and get back to 2013. The sooner I got out of here, the fewer chances I had of making a mistake and permanently screwing up history.

I sighed. My old life back in Seattle seemed light years away — *maybe literally*, I thought with a wan smile — but as long as I was alive, there was always the hope I could make the jump back through time.

I did it once, I thought, as I shoved the paper and my cellphone in the cubbyhole by the bed. *I could do it again. I mean, how hard could it be?* I yawned and let my head fall back to my pillow, then turned down the lamp.

Chapter 11

Just after dawn, I headed back into town while Lem and Travis went about their morning chores, Mr. Colt barking over their shoulders. I had agreed to work all day at McBillin's general store, but I'd get off by sundown — too late to check out Marsen's Cavern, but I was sure I'd have time on Sunday afternoon for that. I'd have to figure out a way to sneak away from the house.

In the meantime, I still had Faith to deal with. McBillin had reluctantly given me two hours off from the store, warning me that 'there'd be the devil to pay' if I didn't get back by 1PM. Luckily for me, our late-morning rehearsal at her house went better than I had expected.

"That was wonderful," Faith gushed. "If we can perform it just that way in an hour, I think mother will be very pleased."

"I've actually heard this one before," I said, adding a little keyboard flourish and nodded towards the sheet music. "That's actually a song my parents used to play. A couple of guys named Simon & Garfunkel sang it."

She frowned. "I don't believe I've heard of them. This is an old English tune, one of my favorites."

I noodled on the keyboard again. "Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme," I sang. "Yeah, the harpsichord is perfect for this." I sniffed, then looked around in search of the delicious aroma. "Hey, are we getting close to lunch?"

Faith nodded. "They'll have sandwiches prepared in a few minutes. But those are for mother's guests. I can get you something from the kitchen if you like."

As I followed her out of the parlor, I glanced out another window that gave me a clearer look at Shaw family's enormous backyard.

"Wow," I said, gaping at the view. "This is a pretty amazing house you have here."

Faith nodded, then handed me a sandwich. "I believe we have 10 acres. It's quite lovely. Would you like to see it? We still have half an hour before mother's friends arrive."

The gardens were incredible, like something out of a movie. A path of trees lined some steps that led out to a small pond. Large shrubs wound down a hill to the right, with a few horses visible in a distant stable. The landscaping was lush and beautiful, like an upscale country club — or, at least, an 1864 version. Yesterday's brief snowfall had melted, so the ground was a little damp, but the tree leaves were still thick and full. *Their landscaping bill must be enormous, I thought. With or without slaves.*

"What's that over there?" I asked, pointing to a rough mound of dirt and wooden planks just to the left of the path.

"Oh," she said, "that's just an old well we had taken out. We have a new one closer to the house. Don't get too close. We really should have Willie put up a sign or something as a warning. Oh, look — the geese are on the pond. Don't they look lovely?"

I agreed. Their estate looked like a theme park, with a bright foliage to our left and a gentle slope that led down to a small lake. As Faith and I reached the bank, I skimmed a rock across the gentle ripples, causing the geese to honk in protest and dart away. I glanced back at the house, with its magnificent stone columns and shrubberies, noticing for the first time that it was actually a three-story mansion. *It looks even bigger from here, I thought, judging the distance to be at least a good 200 yards. Majestic, almost like a smaller version of the White House.*

Faith smiled. "You sing remarkably well," she said, her blonde hair rippling slightly in the breeze. "And you're a very fine musician."

"For a farmboy, you mean," I said, grinning.

She shook her head. "No, you're definitely not that. I declare, Jason Thomas, you are possibly the most unusual boy I believe I've ever met."

I finished my sandwich, then licked a few stray crumbs off my fingertips. "Not really that unusual," I said with a shrug. "I mean... I'm just a guy."

She took my hand in hers. Her skin was soft and her lace blouse brushed against my arm. "You're so different from the other boys, Jason," she said. "They're all so... so coarse, so unrefined. Why, you have a sense of culture. Mother says that's very important."

I looked away nervously, watching the geese as they waddled up onto the distant bank and off to their nests.

She was close enough now that I could smell her perfume. "And you're very attractive," she said. "In a most unusual way."

"No," I protested. "I'm barely passable. Travis is good-looking, not me."

Faith giggled. "Fiddle-dee-dee. Why, Travis Colt looks more like a girl, if you ask me. His face is too delicate, almost pretty. Travis isn't manly at all — he's just a child. But you, Jason..." She took my hand and kissed it. "You're very masculine, yet you have an appreciation for art and music. That means so very much to me. And you're very sensitive and intelligent. You have all the right qualities for a gentleman."

I stepped back, my feet splashing momentarily into the pond. "Uh, listen, Faith... isn't it close to noon? Shouldn't we be getting back to the parlor for the recital?"

She took me by the arm and led me over to a nearby platform that overlooked the lake. "This is the gazebo," she said, a little breathlessly. "I believe we have almost fifteen minutes before mother's friends arrive. Why don't you show me how you kiss all the girls back home?"

"I don't really..."

"Jason, please. I don't want to beg you."

She pulled me up the steps and locked me into an embrace, then kissed me forcibly.

I think I'm about to be raped, I thought, my mind racing.

"Listen, uh, Faith... I appreciate the compliment, but really... I'm not interested."

She took my hand and placed it against her breast. "Just for ten minutes," she said breathlessly. "Surely you can't refuse a request by a lady?"

I started to reply, but then she pulled me close again, grinding our bodies together. She began to pant slightly. "Oh, Jason," she whispered. "Forgive me for being so forward, but I do so want you to take me."

"Here?" I said, incredulously. "On the gazebo? But the geese..."

"The geese won't mind," she said, pulling me down to the floor. "And no one can see from the house. We're all alone out here."

"But..."

Faith shushed me and began unbuttoning my pants then slid them down. "I've never done this before," she said, reaching for my underwear, "but I do so want to become a woman."

"NO!" I cried, pulling my pants back up and rolling away from her. "This is a really bad idea, Faith!"

Her face reddened. "Don't tell me you don't want to do this. Don't you find me beautiful?"

I stared at her. Her breasts were heaving, and her lace dress left little to the imagination. I had to admit, she was pretty good-looking — almost like a less-slutty 1864 version of Britney Spears, but maybe a little taller, and with much less eye makeup.

"You... you look great, Faith. Really. But I can't be with you. I'm... well, the truth is, I'm actually..." I stood there, fumbling. *How was I going to explain that I was gay?*

"Is there someone else?" she asked. "That must be it. Is that what you were trying to say?"

I decided that was as good a lie as any. I gently took her hand off my thigh. "Yeah, something like that. I'm... involved. I can't have a girlfriend right now. I'm really sorry."

"How dare you lead me on like this!" she shrieked, getting up to her feet. "Why, I believe you deliberately misled me!"

"I did not!" I snapped. "Look, you asked me to play at your recital, and I agreed to do that, just as a friend."

"A friend?" she sputtered.

"That's all," I said, calmly. "Come on, Faith — your mom's guests are going to be here any minute. We really should be getting back to the house, and..."

"To hell with you, Jason Thomas," she snapped, pushing past me and down the gazebo steps. "You boys are all alike! You don't understand that women have needs just like you do! You're all so very selfish, so cruel. It's just unfair, that's what it is. So very unfair!"

She made her way onto the path, continuing to argue. She was clearly on the verge of tears. "You just deluded me into thinking I was in love!"

"I did no such thing!" I yelled back. "Look, we sing well together, but that's it, OK? Let's just get back inside and get this recital over with."

"Damn the recital!" Faith cried, storming off down the path. "And damn you, Jason Thomas! You are not a gentleman! You're nothing but a cad!" She was almost running now, her dress now slightly muddy at the bottom as we jogged back up the hill.

"Slow down, willya?" I yelled. I almost caught up with her, but she suddenly veered off the path.

"How could I have been so stupid?" she cried, choking back tears. "It's clear that music was all you were interested in! You should just go back to your... your farm, and those Colts, and just stay far away from me. I never should have asked you here in the first place. In fact..."

Suddenly, she let out a loud scream as the ground beneath her feet gave way. Her hands clawed at the dirt and she plunged down a black hole, disappearing into the darkness.

"SHIT!" I yelled. "Faith!" I leaped forward and leaned down into the abyss.

She had crashed through the thin boards covering up the old well. There was just enough light for me to see that she was dangling about 20 feet above the muddy water at the bottom of a stone shaft. Her dress had snagged on a jagged wooden plank at the top.

She let out another shriek. "My ankle!" she screamed. "I think I've broken it!"

"Give me your hand!" I yelled.

She waved frantically, then our hands met and I held on tight, giving her a tentative yank. She slipped and dropped down another half a foot.

"Oh, Christ," I said, trying to get a better grip. "Can you push up against the wall?"

Faith began to sob. "I'm going to die in here!" she wailed. "All because of a stupid boy! This is so unfair!"

"Stop wiggling around, or you're going to fall!" I cried. Her weight was starting to drag me down the narrow shaft. If we both slid down the well, chances are it could be hours before we were found — that's as-

suming we survived the fall, or didn't drown. And the underground walls were beginning to give way. I dug my feet into the dirt, in a vain attempt to gain some traction. I looked around, desperately hoping to catch a glimpse of someone, anyone, who could help.

"Get me out of here!" she hollered. "My dress is totally ruined!"

The ground gave a sudden lurch, and a large slab of mud began to ooze down onto my right side.

"Hell with your dress," I cried. "This whole thing is getting ready to collapse!"

Now Faith was really shrieking. A clump of mud fell on her face, turning her hair and dress brown and runny. She spat out the dirt and swung around.

"Do something!" she shrieked.

My grip was slipping. I looked up and saw a figure in the distance by the stables. "HELP!" I cried. "Over here! Faith's fallen down the well!"

A man ran up. It was Willie, the butler who had let me in the house an hour earlier.

"What happened here?" he said, crouching down beside me in the dirt and reaching down. "Lord amighty! What have you and Miss Faith gotten into? Oh, the judge gonna be pow'rful unhappy about dis."

"He'll be even more unhappy if we die in here!" I yelled. A large chunk of the stone wall began to collapse, raining down a shower of pebbles and rocks onto Faith, who screamed bloody murder.

"C'mon," I cried. "Just pull, as hard as you can! Or else we're all dead!"

§ § § § §

I sat back in the kitchen, my hair wringing wet, and took another sip of coffee. It had taken nearly five minutes, but luckily for us, Willie and I were able to pull Faith up just before the rest of the well collapsed. Faith shrieked at the top of her lungs the entire time — partly from the sheer terror of being trapped underground in a mud hole, partly from the pain of her broken ankle, but also from her embarrassment at my rejection. That plus ruining what she insisted was "her finest dress, imported from a shop in Rome, Italy."

“You want another cup?” asked Willie. “I kin make some more if’n you want some.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “Hey, listen — thanks again for helping us. Faith was really out of control back there. I appreciate you keeping a cool head.”

The man started to answer, then he stiffened and stood up. I turned to see the scowling face of Judge Shaw.

“This is quite a mess,” he said, as he entered the kitchen. “Doctor Wells has put Faith to sleep with a sedative. It appears her ankle has a small fracture, but at least there’s no other damage.”

“I’m... I’m very sorry about that, Judge,” I mumbled. “We were just walking along, and I guess we just forgot where we were, and...”

“Yes, yes, yes. I heard all about it from Faith” His face brightened. “Sounds to me like you were quite the gallant gentleman.”

My eyebrows shot up.

“Why, if you hadn’t been there, Faith might have fallen all the way to the bottom and drowned.” He turned to the servant. “Willie, I thought I had told you and Toby to fill up that old well a month ago! Damned infernal thing is unsafe.”

Willie nodded. “Yassuh,” he said. “Toby was sick for the last week, then the snow come in. We were goin’ to get to it first thing Monday mornin’.”

“You get on it right this minute, you hear me? I want that old well completely filled in so it’s no longer a danger to any of my family.” The judge turned to me. “And as for you, young man,” he said, “it would appear I owe you a debt of gratitude. You saved my daughter’s life.”

I shook my head. “No sir,” I said. “Willie helped just as much as I did.”

“Nonsense. Faith said you held onto her for several minutes until Willie came over to help. She would certainly have perished had you not been there.”

“I didn’t even think about it,” I said truthfully. “I mean... I’d do the same thing for anyone.”

“But as luck would have it, you did it for my only daughter,” he said, slapping me on the back. “Take some political advice from me, young man: a man of my position can be of great benefit to a young man like

yourself coming up in the world. You ever need some help, you just let me know.”

As I made my way down the street to McBillin’s store on South Broadway, less than half a mile away, I mused over the dramatic events of the afternoon. Like it or not, I had saved a life. *But what if Faith was meant to die*, I thought. *Now, history would be irrevocably changed!*

For all I knew, Faith would eventually grow up, get married, have children. Maybe some of them would become important. Maybe they’d wind up as the ancestors of a President... or a great inventor, like Henry Ford or Thomas Edison. *Or it could go the other way*, I thought. *What if their kids grew up to be monsters, like Hannibal Lector? Or Adolf Hitler?*

I’ve been in 1864 almost exactly a week, and I’d already managed to change history, causing god know’s how many ripples in time. “When I get back to 2013,” I mumbled ruefully, “if there’s T-Rexes roaming the streets of Seattle, then I’ll know for sure I screwed up.”

I grimaced at the bizarre thought, then trudged back into the general store — now emblazoned with an elaborate sign proclaiming it “McBillin’s Supermarket.” I let out a sigh and stepped up onto the sidewalk.

§ § § § §

Mrs. McBillin was shocked at my muddy appearance and was kind enough to get me a change of clothes, back in the stockroom. As we were closing up the store at about 6:30PM, I heard the tinkle of the front bell.

“Sorry, we’re closed,” I said, not looking up. “But if you just need something...”

“I was lookin’ for you,” said a familiar voice.

“Travis!” I said, wiping off my hands. “What’re you doing out here?”

“Mom sent me into town to pick up a coupla things. Figured I’d give you a ride home in the wagon.”

“Gimme a sec.”

I took off my apron and finished putting the last of the stock on the shelves. Five minutes later, we were bouncing back down Old Country Road.

“Heard tell you’re some kinda hero,” Travis said, as we took the curve around some low-lying branches. “It’s already in the evenin’ paper.”

“News travels fast,” I said. “It wasn’t that big a deal. Faith fell down a well in her backyard, and I guess I sorta saved her.”

I filled him in on the sordid details, including how Faith nearly raped me in her back yard, which amused Travis to no end.

“They say Judge Shaw’s pretty rich,” he said. “He gonna give ya a reward?”

“He said he owed me a favor,” I said. “You never know — maybe that’ll come in handy someday. Might even be worth more than money.”

“That’d have ta be some kinda favor,” he replied.

The wagon gave a lurch.

“Hey, where we going?” I said, momentarily confused. “I thought the way to the farm was that way.” I nodded towards the path to the left.

“Got one quick stop to make. Won’t take long.”

A few hundred yards down the dirt road, the wagon slowed as we rattled noisily across some railroad tracks.

“The Missouri-Pacific Railroad comes right through here, more’n a dozen times a day,” he explained, giving the horses a gentle nudge with the reins as the buggy cleared the tracks. “You mighta heard the train whistle late at night. I figure this is prob’ly how Billy left town and went into Tennessee to enlist.”

After another half mile down the road, Travis pulled the wagon to a stop.

“We meeting somebody here?” I asked, looking around.

“In a manner of speakin,” Travis said as he hopped off the wagon and walked over to a metal gate by the side of the road. He held up a lantern.

“St. Louis County Cemetery,” I read on the wrought iron gate. “You sure it’s OK to go in this late?” The stone wall looked foreboding, and the surrounding trees were bare and forlorn.

“I don’t think the folks in there are gonna mind.”

The night air was chilly, and there was an unpleasant smell in the air. Travis swung the gate open, and I followed him down several rows of gravestones, which seemed to date all the way back to the late 1700s. We finally came to a stop at a small marker on the far left side, just a plain grey cross surrounded by unkempt weeds.

“Micah Artemis Finnegan,” I read off the stone. “Your father, right?”

Travis nodded. "It's his birthday today. He's been dead almost six years now, but I try to come visit every October 22nd, just to remember him."

He took his hat off and we stared at the grave.

"I know how you feel," I said quietly. "It's been less than a year since my father passed away, too."

"You ever visit his restin' place?"

I shook my head. "He loved the ocean, about two miles from our house in Seattle, so we scattered his ashes in the Pacific. Figured he'd like that somehow."

Travis stood silent. I couldn't tell if he was on the verge of tears, or just thinking about something. At last, he turned away. "We gotta get back," he said.

"By the way," I said, hopping up on the wagon next to him, "are we anywhere close to Marsen's Cavern?"

Travis rolled his eyes. "You ain't gonna try that again, are ya? Colt will beat the beejeezus outta both of us if he finds out."

"At least let me take a look around," I said. "It'll only take me a few minutes."

He glared at me.

"I'll just *look*, I swear." I held up two fingers. "Scout's honor."

A short time later, we rolled up to the hill. "That's where we found ya," Travis said, pointing to a path on the right. "Ain't much o' nothin' up there now. See where the mud's slid down?"

I scrambled up the side of the hill at the exact spot where Jesse James had led me a week earlier. It seemed impenetrable, a rock-hard wall of mud, ice and snow. I cursed. *It'd be impossible to dig through this*, I thought, *at least in this weather*.

"How long you think before the rains wash all this away?" I said, giving the ground a few tentative pokes with my toe.

"Not 'til spring at the earliest," Travis said, chewing on an apple he'd grabbed back at the store. "Rains come in April. Should be back the way it was by early May. But you got a good five, six-month wait at least."

"Great," I said, letting out a long sigh. "My little three-week vacation to St. Louis is turning out to be permanent."

“Least ya got a place to sleep,” he said, taking another bite and spitting out some seeds.

“Speaking of which,” I said, as we hopped back up on the wagon, “you wanna come out and sleep up in the hayloft with me tonight?” I tried to keep my voice casual, but the truth was, I really missed being close with Travis.

He didn’t say anything for almost a minute as the horses clopped their way down Old Country Road. I was about to ask again when he turned to me.

“I been thinkin’ about it every day,” he said quietly. “Sometimes, it’s like that’s all I can think of — bein’ with you, that is.”

“Cool,” I said, sliding a little closer and putting my arm around his shoulders.

“It surely is,” he said, tossing the apple core off to the side. “Must be just above freezin’.”

“No, no,” I said, grinning. “Back where I come from, ‘cool’ means ‘good.’”

Travis seemed puzzled. “Wait a minute. You said I looked ‘hot’ the other day. Does that mean bad?”

“No, no. That means you’re... real attractive. You know — *hot*, as in...” I panted and wiggled my eyebrows for effect.

A sly grin appeared on Travis’ face. “Seems like you got a different word for everythin’. Makes no damn sense, if ya ask me.”

“Trust me,” I said, “it’ll make a lot more sense later on when we’re alone.” My groin throbbed in anticipation.

§ § § § §

Much to my surprise, Mr. and Mrs. Colt already knew most of the details about the Faith Shaw incident at the well. Apparently, I’d managed to become something of a local town hero, though the story had gotten somewhat inflated since that afternoon. Lem was convinced I had managed to single-handedly drag Faith out of a watery grave and bring her back to life. While we ate dinner, he stared at me with a combination of awe and wonder. I reassured him it was all luck and timing, and I had just been fortunate enough to catch Faith at the right moment.

I omitted the little detail that we'd had a screaming match two minutes earlier, where she'd unsuccessfully tried to grab my dick. I figure I'd save that colorful addition for my autobiography, which might make a great story — assuming I ever made it back home.

Travis seemed to forget our earlier conversation and headed off to bed before I could ask him out to the hayloft, not even making eye contact with me as he left the kitchen. I sighed, then took the path from the back door, down the porch, then across the dirt path that led out to the barn. I was completely exhausted by the day's events, having been awake since 5:30AM.

And these clothes don't work for me at all, I thought, tossing them in a pile by my bed. Plaid was definitely not one of my better looks. I made a mental note to get some replacements once McBillin gave me my next paycheck.

I don't know how long I had been asleep, but I was suddenly conscious of something warm touching my arm. I bolted upright, letting out a small cry, but a hand quickly covered my mouth.

"It's me," Travis hissed. "Keep quiet. Don't want Colt to know I'm out here."

My fingers fumbled for the shelf nearby, grabbed a match, then lit the kerosene lantern, filling the hayloft with a soft warm glow. Travis was kneeling beside me and already had his shirt off.

"I figure we got at least a coupla hours," he said, letting his overalls drop to the floor. He was completely hard.

My heart began to pound and my groin gave a little twinge. "Oh, that'll be more than enough time," I said, tearing off my night shirt and underwear.

I kissed him on the mouth and we rolled together onto my bed. After a few moments, he lifted his face up.

"I ain't never had anybody kiss me before," he said, catching his breath. "Specially like this."

"Is it okay?" I asked.

As if to answer, he pulled me close to him and kissed me harder, more passionately.

"I'm gonna take that for a yes," I mumbled.

Our groins began to thrust together. He rolled over on his back and I slid my mouth down his chin to his neck, stopping at his taut, muscular chest, making little swirls around each nipple.

“Who taught you how to do that?” he moaned.

“Shut up and enjoy it,” I said. I reached down to fondle him, and he immediately groaned in response.

I pulled myself up again and he leaned forward, kissing me roughly. Our bodies began to instinctively thrust together, our erections throbbing against our bellies. Despite the cold, within minutes we were both slick with sweat. Travis’ movements became faster, more insistent. I slipped my right hand behind his head, combing my fingers through his thick blond hair, while our tongues parried and intertwined. I used my left hand to feel his tight, sinewy body. His arm was thick with muscle, and I reached back to caress his shoulder, feeling his warm body slide back against mine. He used both hands to squeeze my bare buttocks, pulling me tight, and we settled into a faster rhythm.

“Lord almighty,” he mumbled.

I moved my mouth off his and began to suck and nibble on his neck. He tilted his head back and began to whimper. Suddenly, he began to grind faster, more intently, then let out a loud cry and I felt a sticky warm dampness on my stomach. Travis fell back, his head lolling on my pillow, and he let out a long, satisfied sigh.

“I won’t ask if that was good for you,” I quipped, sitting up beside him.

“Mmmmm?” he asked, still in a daze.

“Let me just finish myself off here.” I gave myself a few strokes with my right hand, using my left to feel the warmth of his powerful chest. Travis looked so perfect, lying in the dim lantern light. He moved his arms up over his head and smiled at me and let out a satisfied sigh. I saw just a few wisps of dark blond hair in his underarms. He lay there, posed like a dazzling figure from a Renaissance painting.

God, he was beautiful.

In less than a minute, I felt a surge, then erupted and fell beside him, still panting.

“God, I needed that,” I said, snuggling closer. “We’ll clean up in a minute. Just give me a second.”

Travis reached out and touched my face. "I ain't never felt like this before, Jason," he whispered. "It's gettin' so I think about ya all the time, bein' with ya. And now..." his voice trailed off. "Is this what love is?"

I gently kissed his nose. "Hey, look," I said. "Let's just enjoy what we've got right now. Faith thought she was in love with me earlier today."

He shook his head. "This ain't like that," he said. "I know you got feelin's for me."

I sighed. *This can't work*, I thought. *Travis and I are two different people, from two completely different centuries. What do we possibly have in common?*

He looked at me expectantly.

At last I kissed him lightly on the lips and lay my arm across his muscular chest, feeling it rise and fall with each breath. "It's close enough for jazz," I said. "I love you, too."

He put his head close to mine and I pulled up the blanket, then reached up to dim the lantern. True love or not, it was the most blissful moment of my life.

Chapter 12

I awoke some hours later to find my arm lying across an empty bed. Travis had slipped away sometime during the night, apparently to get back to the farmhouse before morning.

I yawned and glanced at my Swatch wristwatch. It was 6:14AM. Technically, I still had about fifteen minutes before the Colts would awaken to have breakfast and get ready for church.

Oh, joy — another two hours of Reverend Abrams' fine hellfire-and-brimstone sermons, I thought with a wince. That's only slightly less entertaining than an episode of Hell's Kitchen.

My chest and stomach resembled a glazed doughnut, the remnants of last night's quickie with Travis. *Definitely time for a shower.* I slid down the creaky wooden ladder, then trudged out into the chilly morning air, grabbed two empty wooden buckets, and filled them from the water pump by the back porch. I shivered as I maneuvered the pump handle, then lugged the buckets back to the barn and closed the door behind me.

I stripped off, gritted my teeth, and dunked the first bucket over my head. I let out a soft curse and shivered as the water gushed down my back. Unlike Travis, who had the uncanny ability to look dazzling just by rolling out of bed, I needed a lot of finesse and tweaking just to look halfway decent. I reached for the shampoo and began to scrub. My fingers were still slightly sore from the punishment I had endured from Twitly in class two days ago, and I still had a few bruises and scrapes from rescuing Faith in the well, but they seemed to be healing okay.

Without thinking, I began idly lathering up my groin, and I was hard in seconds. I seemed to be horny all the time these days, and last night's session with Travis had only whetted my appetite. *God, he looked*

incredible. I gave a few tentative strokes, then jumped when I heard a noise behind me.

"Ya already havin' fun without me?" chided a familiar voice.

"Jesus!" I said, pulling a towel around my waist as he closed the barn door behind him. "You scared the shit out of me, Travis! Don't do that to a guy, especially this early in the morning."

He laughed. "Don't let me interrupt," he said as he walked over to the cows' pen and filled their feeding troughs. "Momma says she'll have bacon and eggs on the table in five minutes."

He looked at me and gave me a sly smile, his lips slightly parted.

"Stop doing that," I said, adjusting my towel.

"Stop doin' what?" he said, with a lopsided grin.

"That totally sexy thing you do with your mouth," I said, walking up to him. "If you keep turning me on like that, I'm never gonna be able to leave the barn."

Travis laughed. "I declare, half the time I don't know what you're talkin' about."

I reached around his waist and pulled him to me. "And what about the other half?"

He smiled shyly and leaned his head closer to mine. "I know ya well enough."

"So now you believe that I'm telling the truth?"

Travis let out a long sigh, then laid the empty feed bag down on the sawdust floor and looked me in the eye. "I think you hit your head pretty damn hard inside that cave last week."

"But I didn't..."

"Hear me out," he continued. "Whether you're really from here or some other place..."

"...or some other *time*, like 2013," I reminded him.

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say. I'll give ya this much: I reckon *you* believe you're tellin' the truth, so as far as I'm concerned, you ain't lyin'. That's enough for now. That don't make me like ya any less."

Before I could answer, Mrs. Colt clanged the bell from the kitchen door at the back of the house. "Travis! Jason! You boys come inside and get it while it's still hot."

I leaned over and kissed Travis. "Not as hot as you are," I said.

He giggled, then darted outside and slammed the door, and I reached for the other bucket and began to rinse off.

§ § § § §

Forty minutes later, we were bouncing along the Old Country Road towards downtown St. Louis. The previous day's light snowfall had melted, and the wagon wheels cut through the muddy slush.

"Now, what in the Sam Hill are you boys laughing about now?" Mrs. Colt admonished, as she adjusted Lem's collar. "The way you two are carryin' on... you best not be up to any foolishness. Hold still now, Lem!"

I grinned. Travis looked like an entirely different person when he smiled. He was usually so grim, as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders. It was great to see him laugh. And he looked totally hot in his Sunday clothes — a striking change from his usual denim overalls.

I didn't relish going along with the family again to church, but I decided to avoid risking the wrath of Mr. Colt. The five of us rode down the dirt road in the family wagon, Travis and I talking quietly in the back, trying to keep our voices low. He wanted more details about yesterday's adventures.

"So, did Faith actually grab your John Thomas?" he asked in a low voice.

"Well, she got pretty close," I whispered back. "One more minute, and let's just say I might've had my hands on more Faith than anybody's ever experienced inside a church."

Travis let out a loud hoot.

"Settle down back there," Mr. Colt warned. "I want no tomfoolery during this mornin's service."

"What're ya'll talkin' about?" asked Lem, giving us a curious look. "You plannin' on somethin' for later?"

"You hush now, Lem," snapped Mrs. Colt. "Read your Bible."

Travis continued to prod me for details.

"I told you last night," I whispered. "I'm into guys, not girls."

He seemed perplexed. "But what you and me do... that's just for fun."

I shook my head. “To some people, it’s how they live every day. There’re millions of us back where I come from: whole neighborhoods with guys who go out with other guys, women with women, even getting married... or at least living together. They’re all just ordinary people. It’s not so bad in the right parts of the world.”

“Don’t sound natural to me.”

I sighed. “Well, it’s not accepted everywhere. They only just started allowing same-sex couples to go to the proms at my school. But it’s not nearly as big a deal as it used to be, at least in America.”

“Same-sex couples,” he repeated, lost in thought.

I let him mull that over for a while. I didn’t want to overwhelm Travis too much with the details of life back in my world. More than likely, his destiny was to stay here in the Missouri of 1864. For all I knew, he was probably meant to marry somebody — most likely a cute girl like Faith — and the two of them would have great-looking kids who would grow up and maybe someday do something important with their lives in the 1800s.

But not me, I thought. *My place is back in 2013*. And the sooner I got back where I belonged, the better. *But how?*

I leaned back against the rough wood of the wagon and glanced toward Travis as he stared off into the woods. I sighed, thinking back to our escapades in the hayloft. Last night was probably the first real kiss of my life — well, the first one where I was sure the other person actually loved me, anyway. I guess that was worth remembering.

It took us nearly an hour to reach the First Baptist Church, thanks to some fresh potholes, along with several flooded-out sections that threatened to turn the Old Country Road into a muddy river. A crowd milled around the front of the main sanctuary as we arrived. I caught a glimpse of Faith in the distance, just as several people helped her limp up the steps and enter through the large white doorway.

We took our seats by the aisle, towards the back section of the pews. The air inside the cathedral was warm, giving the atmosphere a drowsy, misty quality. My slumber was occasionally broken when we stood to join in one of the gospel songs, with Travis and I sharing a hymnal tucked in a pocket carved into the back of the hardwood seats.

I dozed through Reverend Abrams' sermon, jumping every so often when his voice suddenly blared out, emphasizing one phrase or another. Over the next couple of hours, I reflected on the events I'd experienced in Missouri. Today was October 23rd, which meant I'd been in 1864 for almost ten days. I felt as though I had a foot firmly in two different centuries at the same time. But the world of 2013 was growing dimmer, and the reality of this world felt overwhelming.

As my mind began to wander, I began to drift off to sleep. I'm not sure how long I'd been unconscious — it could've been as little as five minutes or as long as a half hour — but I was suddenly aware of a dozen eyes staring at me from the nearest row. I looked up to see Reverend Abrams walking towards our row from more than twenty feet away, his eyes burning into me like laser beams.

"He's talkin' 'bout ya, Jason!" Travis hissed, elbowing me on my left side. "Stand up!"

"Wha?" I said, dizzily getting up to my feet, grabbing the seat in front of me for support.

"This boy," he blared, his voice thundering through the church, "Jason Thomas, is a stranger to our town. But he is not a stranger in the eyes of the Lord! This young man very nearly sacrificed his own life for that of another. By any definition, I believe Jason Thomas, nephew of our own recently-departed Olivia, is an angel upon this earth! The very epitome of unselfishness and heroism... a true Christian!"

Reverend Abrams suddenly leaned forward and smiled, revealing a neat row of teeth, but there was no smile in his eyes.

"Thanks to young Jason here, Faith Shaw is still alive and walks among us. For that, we owe you many thanks."

I smiled meekly as several church members broke out into applause. Faith suddenly appeared in the aisle, hobbling with a white cane and aided by her mother and a young black servant girl. The reverend put his arm around Faith as she stood beside me.

"God bless you, Jason," he said, gesturing his arms theatrically. "And may good tidings shine on you for all the days of your life!"

I nodded my thanks and waved to the cheering crowd. Faith looked slightly embarrassed. I gave her a little shrug and she giggled.

The choir broke out into song and we joined in. Faith's voice was powerful and blended perfectly with the crowd, ringing through the church like a bell. *She's almost an 1864 version of a young Mariah Carey, I mused, only with a little more attitude.*

§ § § § §

As we left the main hall following the service, Faith caught up to me and pulled me down a corridor and into a small room, then closed the door behind us.

"I'm so very sorry for yesterday," she said breathlessly. "My behavior was absolutely horrid! I hope you can find a way in your heart to forgive me."

"It's okay, Faith," I said. "No big deal. We were just lucky I was there to catch you."

She stepped a little closer, her face slightly reddening. "And I'm also very sorry I acted so indecently. You... you haven't told anyone what happened — the details, I mean."

I grinned. "I'm flattered you liked me that much, Faith. But I'm already involved with somebody else. And I won't say a word."

"I appreciate your honor. And your discretion." She gazed at me, her eyes shining slightly. "I was wrong about you, Jason. You're truly a gentleman after all. Your young lady is certainly lucky to have you... whoever she is."

"Nice accessorizing," I said, quickly changing the subject and gesturing to the white ribbon on her cane, giving it a little tug. "Definitely a touch of glamour. Did the doctor say you were alright?"

"Oh, yes. I have a few cuts and bruises and my ankle will be in a cast for a few weeks, but at least my leg is all right. It could have been so much worse."

"Jason!" yelled a voice from outside the door. "You in there, boy?"

"That's Colt," I said, pulling away from her. "Gotta go."

As I opened the door, Faith half stumbled, the cane slipping on the wooden floor. I caught her from falling, her face only a few inches from mine.

“Stealin’ kisses,” Colt muttered, as he reached in and pulled me into the hallway. “In a church, no less! Git along with ya, boy.”

Mrs. Colt clucked at us as we joined the crowd at the stone steps in front of the main hall.

“Should I be jealous?” whispered Travis, as we jogged along the path to Sunday school, Lem at our heels.

“Not unless Faith gets a sex change in the near future,” I said in a low voice.

Travis gave me an odd look. “You’re gonna have to explain that one to me sometime.”

“I mean, you’re safe as long as Faith stays a girl. It’s a joke.”

“I know a joke!” cried Lem, who’d caught up to us. “What has a bed, but doesn’t sleep; has a mouth, but doesn’t speak; and always runs, but never walks?”

“That’s not a joke — that’s a riddle.”

“Same difference.”

“A river! Now, I’ll tell you one,” Travis replied, as we started up the steps. “There was a man from Nantucket...”

“Ah, better not tell that one in church, dude,” I said, as we reached the class. “Save it for the R-rated ride home.”

§ § § § §

“But sir,” Travis began, “I did my chores all day yesterday, and I already got the hogs ready to take to town tomorrow morning. We’re only gonna be gone an hour or two.”

It was around 2PM. Mr. Colt eyed us both suspiciously. Travis and I had already changed clothes and planned to head out to what he called his ‘secret spot.’ Back in the barn, Travis had acted very mysteriously and would only laugh when I asked him for details.

Colt gave us a wary glance. “There’s still more work ‘round here to be done afore supper,” he warned. He spat on the ground and pointed to the wet glob glistening in the afternoon sun. “You best be back home before that dries, hear?”

Thanks for the visual, I thought, as Travis nodded glumly and herded me down the dirt path that led out to the woods on the south side of the

farm. The day had warmed up, the sun chasing away the chilly remnants of the late-October air. A low wind rustled through the trees, scattering the orange and brown leaves, which rained down like a curtain. The forest began to thicken, and I nearly tripped over an overgrown root that abruptly jutted out of the ground like a sidewalk curb.

“So where’re we going?” I asked, pushing my way through the bushes and branches, ducking just as a limb thwacked back. This was a part of the Colt farm property I had never been through before, well off the main road.

“You’ll see,” said Travis, taking a sharp turn to the right.

After about ten minutes, the ground began to slope upwards and we emerged from the trees and into the sunlight. Travis ran up to the top of a nearby grassy hill and held his hands out.

“Come see!” he shouted. “Quick, else you’ll miss it!”

I charged up the hill and stood beside him, half out of breath. Below was a majestic view of the vast Missouri River, the waves choppy with activity, the banks sprinkled with wooden platforms and port workers. Several large boats were tied up at the main dock about half a mile away, and we watched as burly men maneuvered large rope nets bulging with cargo. In the distance, a white-and-blue riverboat tooted its horn, shooting a white puff of smoke high in the air. The paddlewheels sliced effortlessly through the water, and I watched as deck hands scurried around on the bow.

Travis grinned ear to ear. “Ain’t it beautiful? Looks like the whole world’s out there.”

I had to admit, it was. “You come here often?”

“This was me ‘n Billy’s secret. We’d come up here and watch the boats for hours on end.” He gave me a slightly shy smile. “I never let anybody else up here before. Not even Lem.”

I grinned. “I’m honored.”

Travis turned and pointed to a wide stream that led to the right. “That way yonder leads to the Mississippi River. This route goes practic’ly all the way from New Orleans to Montana. Lotsa ships come through here, comin’ from everywhere and goin’ to anywhere.”

He paused, then nodded towards a large freighter that was pulling around the bend. I turned to see a dozen men frantically scurrying

around on the deck, apparently concerned because a paddlewheel ship was coming a little too close on the right.

“Mark Ta-Ree!” yelled one, yanking a long rope out of the water.

I felt confused. “Is that guy speaking Klingon?” I asked.

“That means the water’s ‘bout eighteen feet deep out there,” he said. “It’s the sounding line. Look, they’re about to make a turn. Ain’t that somethin’?”

The freighter slowly slid to the left, giving the paddlewheel boat a wide berth. The steamboat gave two sharp toots in response and continued on its path.

Travis sat down on the grassy hill, then grabbed a weed and began idly chewing it. I sat alongside him and leaned back on my elbows. We stared out at the water, which was turquoise blue in the center, fading to a rusty color as it lapped against the muddy banks. A warm breeze rippled the trees in back of us, and the twin flags of the riverboat flapped in the wind as the ship roared down the river.

This boat was broadly decorated in red and white, and the center section was dominated by two enormous black cylinders that jutted up towards the sky. Three decks were crowded with passengers, many wearing fancy clothes and carrying umbrellas. I had seen a theme park replica of a ship like it at Disneyland in California a couple of years before — in my old life, that is — but that was like a movie prop compared to the real thing. A sign on the left side declared that it was the S.S. *Westwind*, owned by something called the Boonville Steamboat Company. Travis and I waved, and a couple of the passengers leaning on the railing waved back.

“Beautiful, ain’t it? Ya got any ships like that back home?”

I shrugged. “They’re different back in Seattle,” I said. “Mostly diesel freighters. I’ve seen some come in from China, Japan, places like that, bringing them into the Port of Seattle.”

Travis seemed impressed. “Ya’ll got rivers like this?”

“Better than that. Seattle’s right on the Pacific Ocean. More water you can imagine — all the way to the horizon. Goes on forever, once you get around Puget Sound, like 6000 miles to Hong Kong.”

“The ocean!” He let out a reverential sigh. “I’d surely like to see that someday. Must be mighty beautiful.”

“That’s nothing,” I said. “You oughta see Malibu and Santa Monica, out in California. I’ve been there twice — people having fun at the beach during the summer. My father’s boss had a place down there, and we got invited a couple of times. Even water skied, though I fell off most of the time. Still a lotta fun.”

Noticing Travis’ quizzical expression, I explained, pantomiming the experience. “Skiing is when you stand on two flat sticks and hold onto a rope. A boat tows you real fast and you sort of skim on the surface of the water, like skipping a stone. Takes some practice, though, and it’s embarrassing when you fall down. But it’s a lotta fun in the summer.”

“Summer’s over with here,” he said, staring at the steamboat, as it rumbled by, then arced around and continued further south down the river. “Gonna get colder soon.”

I wiped some sweat off my brow. “Weather feels warm to me at the moment,” I said.

“‘Tis for now,” he said, chewing thoughtfully on a piece of grass. “But it ain’t nothin’ but Injun summer.”

“Indian summer?”

He nodded. “Yep. Mother Nature fools us at the end of October: gives us just one more taste of summer, then snatches it back just when winter comes in. It’ll be hailin’ and snowin’ somethin’ fierce before long. Kinda cruel, if ya ask me.”

We stared out at the riverboat as it faded into the distance, the paddlewheels churning the water into a murky white foam in the back.

“Me and Billy talked about runnin’ away on a steamboat like that,” Travis said, nodding at the sight in front of us. “Maybe get jobs on the deck crew. Even be captains someday.” He had a dreamy, faraway look in his eyes.

“Where would you go?” I asked.

Travis spat the weed out then picked another. “Anyplace but here, I reckon,” he said with a sigh. “My brother’s been gone almost ten months now. Momma thinks he died in Atlanta. His letters stopped comin’ in June, but I think he’s still alive somehow. Maybe a Yankee prisoner at Camp Morton in Indiana.”

“The war’s not gonna last that much longer,” I said. “Six months, tops. Guaranteed.”

Travis snorted. "People 'round here been sayin' that for more'n four years now."

I leaned on my elbow, my face only a foot or so away from his. "Hey, don't think about the war," I said. "You've gotta hang on to the good things in life. Things can always be a lot worse."

"That's what my Grandma used ta say. I'm just tired of waitin' for things to get better. I ain't never gonna be nothin', anyway."

"Don't say that."

He looked away. "I think sodbustin' is the only thing I'm ever gonna be good for. Ain't gonna amount to nothin' more than just a farmboy."

I gently turned his head back and brushed his blond bangs out of his eyes. "C'mon. It doesn't have to be that way, Travis," I said quietly. "You could study, go to school... make something of yourself. Even be a doctor or lawyer or something. Just because you grew up on a farm doesn't mean you have to stay here forever." *Hell, I thought. He could easily be a top model in 2013, on the cover of GQ.*

Travis stared off in the distance. "Not long after Billy ran away and joined the Confederates, I 'member somethin' that happened: I was cleanin' out the barn by myself, with the doors partly open. Dang if a bird didn't fly inside, right out of the blue. It looked mighty confused — started flyin' this way and that, squawkin' up a storm, thrashin' about. Poor thing finally started smashin' itself into the walls. It did it over and over again, just in a state, like it was tryin' to kill itself."

"What'd you do?"

He made a hapless gesture. "I tried to shoo it out, opened the barn door as wide as I could. But it could hardly see straight. It was like it was so panicked that it *wanted* to die. Once it believed it was never gonna be able to escape, it'd rather kill itself than live another day."

Travis hesitated, then stared at me. "Sometimes I know just how that bird felt: like I'm trapped here forever and I ain't never gonna be able to get away from Colt's farm."

I shook my head. "No, no," I said reassuringly. "Travis, listen to me. You've got a roof over your head and a warm bed. You're learning stuff in school. Your mom seems pretty nice, and she's a great cook. I know Colt is an asshole sometimes, but your brother's a good kid."

"Lem's alright. But that man Colt is the devil hisself, through and through. And Momma..." He let his voice trail off and looked away. "She turns a blind eye to all the evil things he done." He was nearly in tears.

"Come on, Travis," I started. "It's not that bad."

"You remember him thrashin' me, not a week ago?" he cried, his voice shaking. "She's never lifted a finger to stop him! And there's worse'n that."

His face was full of anguish, and I reached out to his shoulder and gave him a gentle squeeze. Travis froze at my touch, momentarily panicked. By his expression I could see he was trying to decide if he should say more. We stood there silent for more than thirty seconds, but I waited to give him a chance to continue.

Suddenly, we were both startled as a steamboat about a hundred yards offshore sounded its mournful horn, sending up a tall column of vapor. That seemed to break the mood.

"We gotta get home," he said, pulling away and letting my hand fall back. "Colt's spit is prob'bly dry by now. He'll give us both a whippin' for sure if we're late." He stood up and patted some of the loose grass off his overalls, then turned and started back for the trees.

I trotted up behind him and touched his shoulder. "Hey," I said. "We might be able to come up with a positive solution here."

"I got no options," he said matter-of-factly as he brushed the leaves off his pants. "I'm a prisoner on that farm, surely as a slave tied up in chains. Nowhere to run."

I followed him down the hill. "Nowhere to run to, baby... nowhere to hide," I sang.

"Does everything have to be a song to you?" he snapped over his shoulder.

"Sorry — bad habit. One of my favorite oldies." I caught up to him and pulled him short.

"What?" he looked angry, almost on the verge of tears.

"Travis, we always have options. Look, I've got some money... it isn't much, but I'm supposed to get the rest of it once Judge Shaw rules in a few more weeks. Plus I got my job at the store."

"How's that supposed to help me?" he snarled.

I shrugged. "Look, if you're that miserable with the Colts, you could always leave — live somewhere else. People do it all the time."

"Tried it once before, more'n four months ago. That's when Colt gave me this for my trouble." He pointed to his nose. "Hurt like hell."

I peered at it closely. Travis' face was nearly perfect, with hardly a blemish or a freckle, and his blond hair glowed in the afternoon sun, naturally parted in the middle and slightly tousled as if it were expertly styled by a salon. His eyelashes were long, almost feminine, and his features were as good as any male model I'd ever seen — better, actually — but his nose was slightly crooked, and I could see a slight crease halfway down, showing where it'd been broken.

"It's not that bad," I insisted. "Hell, I know actors who'd say that gives them more character." If anything, it actually did make Travis even more handsome in an odd way. *Though I bet a good plastic surgeon could probably fix it in twenty minutes*, I thought.

"It weren't just that," he said, his voice getting louder. "He threatened to kill me if'n I ever try it again. And you know what?" Travis leaned closer. He was breathing rapidly, almost hyperventilating. "I know'd he do it, sure as we're standin' here. Colt don't bluff."

"We could get away," I said, my mind racing ahead. "We could come up with a plan. I bet the McBillins would let us live in the little back room over their store. And once I get the Thomas estate money..."

"Ain't gonna happen until you're an a-dult," he said, mispronouncing the word. "I overheard Colt and Momma talkin' about it a few days ago. He's already got plans for that Thomas farmland of yours, ya know. That man is pure crazy."

Travis was beginning to sound a little nutty himself.

"Hey, listen to me," I said soothingly. "I think I might be able to convince the Judge to make me a deal. He owes me a favor now — he told me so yesterday, after I saved his daughter." I pulled my face close to his. "We can get through this, I promise. We'll find a way."

"Just SHUT UP!" he screamed. "You're just like Billy! He got all my hopes up... told me he would leave and then send for me a few weeks later. Only it never happened! Why should I trust you more'n my own brother?"

Jesus, I thought. *Travis has got serious abandonment issues.* “Look,” I said, holding up my hands in mock surrender. “I’m just saying we can talk about this. There’s gotta be a way to get you away from the farm, if that’s what you really want.”

“I don’t wanna talk about nothin’!” he cried, pushing through the trees. “You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about!” He started to run. “Just get away from me! Hell with you and your damnfool nonsense!”

“Travis!” I cried. “Hold on!”

But he disappeared into the brush, moving at top speed. I heard twigs and branches snapping in the distance as he scurried through the forest. I tore after him, calling out his name, my face pushing through the underbrush, scratching my face and arms. In less than thirty seconds, I came to a clearing and found myself completely alone.

“How the hell am I supposed to get back?” I called.

Silence.

I let out a sigh and looked around at the forest around me. “Terrific,” I said out loud. “So now I’m starring in this week’s exciting episode of *Survivor: St. Louis, 1864*. At last, my network television debut.” A few crickets chirped in response, and a distant crow echoed in the wind.

I picked one of the few obvious paths in between the close-knit trees, noting the flattened grass, and pushed my way through. With luck, it might lead to one of the many country roads that dotted the area, or maybe I could at least get a bearing using the sun as a guide. I knew the Colt farm was about four miles north, give or take. But which direction?

“What I’d give for a compass,” I muttered. *A compass...* I thought. *Wait a minute!* I felt around in my pockets and found something hard and metallic. For some reason, I had stashed my Swiss Army knife in my jeans when I’d changed my clothes after church. I pulled it out and fumbled with the blades.

Flat-headed screwdriver... nope. *Bottle-opener...* useless. After several unsuccessful tries, I finally remembered to slide a small metal clasp at the top. There was a satisfying metallic click and a half-inch wide round gizmo sprung up. *Eureka!*

The tiny compass sat at the top of the knife, the needle glinting sharply in the dim forest light. I whirled around. *North was directly behind me!* My mom always said I had the worst sense of direction of any-

body she knew. With my luck, I probably would've kept walking all the way to Arkansas and wound up in the middle of a Civil War battlefield.

I pressed on through the trees and low-lying scrub brush, hoping I'd eventually run into some familiar sights. There was one particularly tall tree on the southern outskirts of the Colt farm, one that adjoined the Thomas property. *If I could just make it to that tree, I thought, I'd have a chance to get home by 5:30PM. 6PM at the latest.*

Half an hour later, I was beginning to lose hope. The stray sunlight coming through the trees was beginning to dim. I was sweaty, and my left arm was scratched and bleeding slightly from a savage encounter with a thorn bush a couple of miles back. I sat down on a nearby stump, brushed aside some ants, then consulted my compass again. I was annoyed to see that I'd managed to stray slightly off course, going a little southwest.

"Shit," I muttered. "I knew I should've brought along a GPS for this trip." I had left my Garmin Nuvi on my Aunt Olivia's kitchen counter back in 2013, knowing it would've been useless inside the cave. "Like it's gonna work with 1864 satellites," I muttered sarcastically. I was screwed either way. What I needed was a miracle — either the Biblical kind or technological, I didn't care which.

Just as I began to give up, my ears perked at the sound of a heavenly choir. "I was just kidding about the miracle," I said out loud, half expecting angels to appear in a shaft of special-effects lighting. But nothing happened. I followed the sound through a thick clump of trees and bushes that led out to a wide clearing. Below, in a small weed-strewn valley, was a large brown shack, partly surrounded by a picket fence. *The Gospel Hall Church!*

At least I knew where I was now. The black church was only a few miles away from the Colt farm, just off the Old Country Road. *If I really moved my ass, I thought, I could be home by dinner time for sure.*

I made my way over to the fence. The voices were louder now, almost celestial, but with a bluesy feel.

"Wow," I said, draping my arms over the fence's top railing. I paused and let the voices wash over me. The front door was wide open and the sound filled my ears, echoing through the trees. The choir began to clap their hands, and I nodded along with the rhythm. I picked up the melody

and hummed along, but couldn't quite make out the words. *Beautiful*, I thought, half closing my eyes and smiling. It was the best thing I'd heard since starting my journey almost two weeks earlier.

"You there!" called out a voice over my left shoulder.

I froze.

"We ain't lookin' for any trouble, now."

I slowly turned and saw a dimly-lit figure carrying a shotgun. I slowly raised my hands.

"Ya move an inch, you'll die right where ya stand."

The man moved out of the shadows. As he approached, his dark face finally leaned into sunlight, his eyes shaded by a large floppy hat.

My mouth fell open. It was Rufus, the stock man from McBillin's store!

"Mas' Jason!" he said with a start, immediately lowering the gun. "Lord, I'm very sorry. We got word that somebody was gon' be givin' us trouble tonight at the church. Pastor Meacham put a couple of us on watch, jes' in case the devil decides to pay us a visit."

I slowly lowered my hands. "There's no devils around here, Rufus," I said. "Just me. I'm just trying to get back to the Colt farm."

He dragged a hand across his sweaty face. "Man can't be too careful these days. There's lotsa enemies out in the world, some you can't even see."

A voice called out from the distance. "Rufus! You alright there?"

"Git back to your post, Jim! I know this white boy — Jason Thomas, Miss Olivia's nephew. He's alright."

Before he turned back to me, I heard the church piano klink a few sour notes. "Hey," I said with a wince. "If you guys can get me some tools, I bet I can get that piano in tune. Assuming all the strings are still intact, that is."

The large black man arced his head towards the church then turned back to me and nodded. "Why, that'd be mighty kind of you, Jason. But ya best wait until later. If you can come back tomorrow, I'll let ya in and will get you what ya need. We'd be most 'preciative."

I gestured to a dirt path just visible through a gap of distant trees. "That's the Old Country Road, right?"

“That it is. Go west about three and a half miles, and you’ll wind up at the Colt’s. Straight as the crow flies.”

“Thanks, Rufus.”

The man gently put out a hand to stop me and lowered his voice. “Mas’ Jason... you best forget you saw me with a gun. St. Louis got laws about niggers and guns.”

“What gun?” I said, raising my eyebrows and feigning innocence. “No gun here that I can see.”

He broke out in a wide grin, then clapped me on my shoulder. “Thank ya, kindly. Come by at sunset tomorrow.”

§ § § § §

“Where in tarnation have you been, boy?” snapped Mrs. Colt, who was clearly in a foul mood when I ran up to the back porch. She was busy with a cleaver, chopping slabs of meat on a wooden table, then placing them in a large box to the side filled with salt.

“Uh, Travis and I got separated out in woods...” I began.

She slammed the cleaver down with a loud thunk. “Never mind that,” she said, wiping off her hands. “Would you mind going over to the Harper’s farm? They’re having a birthday celebration for Lem’s friend Joseph — turns ten today. Can’t believe that boy is already ten. Anyway, see if you can get him home in time for dinner. Lem will surely forget, and it’s gettin’ dark out.”

I knew the Harper farm, since it was just past the Thomas property, about a half mile away.

“Where’s Travis?”

She shrugged and gestured out to the back. “He and Seth are having trouble rounding up the rest of the pigs. I’d lend you the wagon if I could, but they’re still loading it up.” She picked up the cleaver and waved towards the dirt road. “Get along with you, now. Before you know it, I’ll have meatloaf and potatoes and beans on the table.”

I glanced to the west. The sun was blood-red and hanging low in the horizon. Despite the exhausting events of the day, the thought of a big meal gave me a fresh surge of energy.

“On my way!” I said, banging out the kitchen door.

Fifteen minutes later, I knocked at the entrance of the Harper farmhouse, but there was no answer. I heard a commotion off to the side, so I darted around to discover a group of about a dozen little kids, all about Lem's age, gathered by a small fire. The remnants of a birthday cake and a few presents lay scattered on the ground nearby. The boys seemed to be playing some kind of game with small stones. Half of them groaned when Lem's rock knocked another out of the ring, while several others cheered.

"Ha!" he cried. "I gotcha now!"

"Hey, Lem," I called. "Your mom says it's time to go."

"Cain't go until we tell stories," insisted a black-haired boy beside him. "Lem's got some great ones."

"I heard 'em all before," piped up another kid. "Ain't there any new stories?"

I caught up with the children, and in the flickering firelight I could see they were playing some kind of game with a handful of multi-colored marbles, not rocks, each about half an inch in diameter. I'd always heard kids did this in the old days, long before TV and video games, but it looked incomprehensible to me.

"Hey, Jason," Lem said, tugging on my sleeve. "You got any stories from where you come from?"

I thought for a moment. "Okay, maybe a quick one. Lemme think for a second."

The boys stared at me expectantly.

I took a deep breath. "Here we go," I said. "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..."

The black-haired boy stopped me. "What's a galaxy?"

I pointed up to some of the early evening stars in the eastern sky. "See those pinpoints of light over there? Each one of those is a star, just like the sun. Some of them even have planets spinning around them like the Earth. A bunch of stars is a galaxy. Okay? So, there's this farmboy named Luke, who dreams of fighting in a war against an evil empire..."

§ § § § §

"Why, I reckon that was the best dang story I ever heard," Lem said breathlessly, as we hurried back down the road that led back to the Colt farm.

"And that was just the ten-minute abridged version," I said, hopping over a muddy puddle. "The sequel was even better." *Well, some of the sequels, anyway.*

"What happened to that Darth Vader man? Did he die?"

I grinned. "Oh, no. Darth's a lot tougher than that. It turns out he's actually Luke Skywalker's father."

Lem's mouth fell open. "That cain't be!"

"Yeah, that's what Luke thought, too. But the Force told him it was true."

The boy was silent as we made the turn down the road. The moon pale glow gave the road a dim light, but one glance at my illuminated watch told me it was just a few minutes before 7PM. *Not as late as I feared, I thought. At least under the circumstances. The farmhouse was less than a mile away.*

"Bout damn time you two got back," called a familiar voice from the darkness.

"Travis! Jason just told me and my friends a great story," Lem began.

"Ain't no time for that," Travis replied, jogging up to us on the road. "Colt's gonna wallop all of us if you make him wait any longer for dinner."

He ignored me, but pushed his brother faster, in the general direction of the farm.

"Best get movin' along, now. Skedaddle!"

§ § § § §

Ten minutes later, Mr. Colt met us with a scowl by the front door, but before he could begin lambasting the three of us, I stopped him.

"Sit," I said, "can I have a word with you? I think we have some business to discuss."

He frowned. "You got a good reason why I shouldn't whip your fan-nies, the lot o' ya, for being damn near forty-five minutes late for supper?"

"I had an idea about the Thomas property."

Colt practically dragged me back out to the front porch. I quietly explained to him about Judge Shaw owing me a favor. Colt's face noticeably brightened when I told him I suspected that the good Judge might be able to push through my land inheritance before the end of the year, a month or two early. I told him that I'd be willing to sell the property to the Colt family at a good price, and he could pay me back over time, with no interest.

"How cheap?" he mused. "I'm not a rich man, y'know. Far from it."

I told him I'd think about it. Inside, I grinned. At least I'd manage to disarm Colt for tonight. I figure as long as I could defuse his anger with money, I could use my inheritance as a defense. *For the time being, anyway.*

We finished our dinner in silence. Travis continued to ignore me but shot me an angry glance when I asked him to pass the mashed potatoes. Lem chattered amiably about my story and seemed fascinated by the *Star Wars* universe.

"Can ya tell me another story about Luke Skywalker?" the boy asked.

"Hush now," Mrs. Colt said, as she cleared our plates. "Don't bother Jason. Time you boys went off to bed."

"Don't make no never-mind," muttered Travis. "Ain't no such thing as flyin' machines."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh, yeah?" I turned to his brother. "Hand me that piece of newspaper from the trash, Lem." He did so, and I carefully tore a small strip off the back page — one that I was pleased to see had a new ad for this week's specials at McBillin's Supermarket. Using the edge of the kitchen table as a guide, I folded the paper into segments, made a few adjustments to the wings, then held it between my thumb and forefinger.

"Watch this," I said, and let it go.

The entire Colt family stared as the plane looped a perfect circle, arced up to the farmhouse ceiling, barely missing a kerosene lamp, then zoomed around the room, and finally glided back down for a near-perfect landing on the kitchen table. They all seemed momentarily stunned.

"He shoots, he scores! Now, imagine a much bigger version of that," I said, widening my hands above the glider. "Like with a motor. People could even ride inside it. Trust me, it'll happen someday."

Lem's mouth hung open in sheer astonishment.

Travis recovered quickly. "Why, that ain't nothin' but a toy," he said.

I grinned. "Maybe so," I said thoughtfully then turned to Lem. "But you gotta admit: it makes a great story."

Lem grabbed the paper plane and tossed it up in the air like a ball, but it quickly plummeted to the floor. He looked crestfallen.

"No, no," I said. "Like this." I demonstrated the right technique and he immediately got the hang of it.

"I gotta show this to the other boys at school," he said breathlessly. "Why, I bet I can get me two aggies and a cat's-eye for this, easy!"

"Don't forget," I called after him as he dashed out of the kitchen in a blur. "You can always make more. It's just paper."

With that, I said my goodnights to the family. Mr. Colt made a grunt, while his wife kissed me on the cheek. I trudged back out to the barn. Travis caught up with me, but I was really getting tired of his manic-depressive attitude.

"I'm not gonna apologize," I began. "I swear, Travis, I didn't mean anything..."

"I know," he said quietly. "I just got too much on my mind, is all."

I felt exhausted. I'd been running around non-stop all day, literally since the crack of dawn, and I still had to memorize part of Poe's "Annabel Lee" for class in the morning. Between dealing with Twitly and my after-school job at the general store, Monday was going to be a total bitch-and-a-half.

"I'm kinda tired, Travis," I said, stifling a yawn. "Can we maybe take a raincheck?" To be more honest, I was still a little hurt by his attitude from that afternoon. It'd taken me nearly two hours to find my way home after getting lost in the woods by the Missouri riverbank, and I might still be wandering out there if I hadn't run into Rufus at the church.

"Sides," he said, darting in front of me and forcing me lurch to a stop, "it's me that should be doin' the apologizin'." He stared at me with those striking blue eyes and I melted. "I swear."

“Alright,” I said, closing the barn door behind us. “But I’m not gonna look like a jerk in Twitly’s class tomorrow. And neither are you.” I picked up the 9th-grade English primer from where I’d left it, flipped to the section on Edgar Allan Poe and handed it to him. “Let’s go over this thing we have to recite from memory in class in the morning.”

“Ain’t nothin’ more foolish than poetry,” Travis grumbled as we sat down on a bale of hay. “Waste of time.”

I glared at him. “It’s useful if it could inspire me to write a hit song. Shut up and read.”

He let out a long sigh, then held the book closer to the lantern and began to recite. “*It was many and many a year ago, in a kingdom by the sea...*”

I think we already had our clothes off by the third stanza.

Chapter 13

Over the next week, there was no question about it: I was officially the coolest guy in school.

Everybody I saw on Monday couldn't wait to slap the back and shake the hand of "the guy who saved Faith." I guess that was better than keeping *up* the faith, but still, it was a weird feeling for me. I always kind of flew under the radar back at school in Seattle. The kids at Garfield High were kind of cliquish: the jocks travelled in herds, grazing in the grass near the main phys-ed building; the geeks milled around with the nerds, loitering in the hall outside the science wing, flocking to the computer servers like gulls on a beach. The stoners skulked around and smoked in back of the stadium grandstand seats, blitzed out of their minds, and the skaters hung out by the concrete steps to the sides, each trying to one-up the next death-defying stunt. Meanwhile, the rich kids loitered in the parking lot, comparing Beemers to Mercedes, showing off their hot designer clothes and looking down their noses at any of the peons with a Prius (or less).

As for me, I was always firmly planted in the twilight zone midway between the chorus building and the school auditorium, part of the small crowd of singers, actors, and musicians — a category that fit me just fine. I had my small circle of friends, but I think a lot of the drama kids were completely wrapped up into their own little fantasy worlds; some of them I'd only actually spoken to when we did scenes together in class. The singers weren't much better; I was convinced a lot of the performance choir kids were jealous of me. Maybe that sounds a little egotistical, but the truth was, for the last three years, I was always the one singled out for the solos at festivals and school performances. Still,

whenever our teacher, Mr. Rawlings, praised my work and said I had the best potential of anyone in Seattle to make it on *American Voice*, I got a lot of catcalls and boos. Bitches.

Now, in my new life in the St. Louis of 1864, I had the double-whammy of not only rescuing a damsel in distress, but also having made our much-hated teacher, Mr. Twitly, look like a total ass a few days earlier. Because of my confession to writing the obscene graffiti on the blackboard in his class, I also had the reputation of being an outlaw... even though Travis, Jesse James and I knew the truth: that I was just a poseur. On the other hand, they'd also witnessed my stunning victory a week ago in a fistfight against two older boys at once. So on some level, they knew I wasn't a pussy.

Fighter... hero... singer... bad boy. Oh, yeah, I thought with a laugh. *That's totally me.*

Travis looked on my newfound popularity with some amusement.

"Well, ain't you somethin'," he drawled, as we made our way back from the lunchroom. It was too cold outside for our usual noontime hangout, so we'd huddled around the wood stove in the kitchen at the back of the school, escaping the cold drizzle of late October.

"From what I hear tell, you were thrashin' two boys with one hand an' rescuin' Faith with the other... all while singin' a tune."

"Yeah, right," I said, rolling my eyes. "Most of that was just dumb luck."

"You still got lots ta learn about fisticuffs," he warned. "But luck is a mighty pow'rful weapon. Pow'rful, indeed."

"Mr. Thomas!" cried a voice to our right. "Just the young man I'm looking for!"

An overpowering aroma of fragrant flowers hit me, and I knew instantly who it was, even without turning around. *Mrs. Weeks*, I thought with some alarm. *The school principal. Had she finally seen through my fake I.D.?* My heart began to beat a little faster, but I willed myself to stay calm.

"Uh... hello ma'm," I said, struggling up to my feet. "Good to see you."

"I was absolutely delighted to read about your heroism in the newspaper over the weekend," the matronly woman said. "Most dramatic! But

I've come to talk to you about something else. We're having a Halloween celebration and recital this coming Saturday night at the Harper Farm. They've volunteered to host it, since it's less than a mile from school, and their barn is so much larger than our little auditorium here."

"Sounds great," I said, a little confused. "But what do you—"

"We've heard so much about your singing ability," she interrupted, putting her arm around me and leading me down the hall.

I shot Travis a 'what can I do?' glance and continued alongside her, watching him disappear behind us as we moved forward into the crowd.

"We were hoping you'd honor us with a little concert," she continued. "Several of the students from some of the neighboring schools are going to be performing as well. We'll have a recitation of several poems, and we'll also have musical entertainment. I have three other students, older boys from our eleventh- and twelfth-grade classes, who will be performing with you, representing all of us at Jefferson High School."

I shook my head and held my hand up. "Mrs. Weeks, I'm really a solo singer," I protested. "It's usually just me and the piano, maybe a little guitar, but I—"

"Nonsense," she said, waving her hand and ushering me down a new hallway. "I'm sure the four of you will sound wonderful together."

"The *four* of us?" I said, completely perplexed, as we stopped at a doorway that led into an empty classroom.

I heard some squawks from a flat-sounding trumpet, and a couple of snare drum riffs, then I looked up to see three older teenagers staring at me. A pock-faced boy in the middle put down his horn and waved. A red-haired teen on the left fidgeted with the tuning pegs on his violin, and a smaller kid on the right gave a little drum roll. An old-fashioned upright piano stood off to the side.

"Hello, boys," Mrs. Weeks said, leading me into the room and making a fluttery gesture in my direction. "This is Jason Thomas. He'll be singing with you this coming Saturday night at our recital. I want the four of you to come up with at least two or three songs to perform. Something nice — and not too common," she admonished. "Make it uplifting and artistic, something to raise our spirits."

Mrs. Weeks paused and stared at me expectantly.

"Uh, don't I have to get to class?" I asked, nodding towards the clock. "Mr. Twitly will be angry if I'm late."

"Never you mind," she said. "This is far more important than your lessons. I want all of you to practice together at least an hour every day until the performance on Saturday night. You boys must present our school in the very best light."

I shrugged. *Why not*, I thought. *At least this would at least give me a chance to perform for a big audience, which I hadn't done for months.*

"On one condition," I said, turning to Mrs. Weeks as she began to leave. "If that's okay with you, that is."

She frowned and looked at me. "And that would be?"

"Let me sing with Faith Shaw on one song," I said. I still felt a little guilty about the accident at her house over the weekend, and I figured this might make it up in some small way. *And she did have a helluva good voice.* "A duet. And we'll make it upbeat... uh, uplifting."

Her face brightened. "That's exactly what we want!" she enthused. "Something to brighten our spirits while this terrible war goes on." She glanced at the wall clock. "I want you boys to practice together until 2PM this afternoon. And I want to hear what you've come up with tomorrow afternoon at this same time." She stopped at the doorway and gave us a stern glare. "Don't disappoint me, Jason! I so dislike being disappointed."

"Yes, ma'm."

I turned to the other boys. "Okay," I said, rubbing my hands together. "You guys got any ideas?"

"I'm Perry Davis," said the trumpet player in a strong southern drawl. "This here's Bobby Ellison," he continued, pointing towards the drummer, who did a little introductory rattle on his snare, then held out his hand.

"Hi," he said.

I grinned and shook his hand. My smile faded when I glanced down and saw his pant leg ended below the knee and realized he was leaning against a crutch. There was nothing but air where the rest of his leg should be.

He caught my expression. "Got my leg blown clean off at Paducah, nigh on six months ago. I was the drummer boy in the 96th Infantry

under Colonel Hicks. Johnny Reb done beat us pretty good. But we got 'em the next time."

I gulped. I'd forgotten that in the world of 1864, boys not much older than me were getting killed on the battlefield. Even boys without guns.

"Does it, uh... hurt?" I asked, immediately regretting my question.

Bobby shrugged. "Sure did when it happened. All's I know is, I was drummin' away. The fight had only gone on 'bout a half hour, when suddenly, there was a big explosion off to my left. Next thing I know, I woke up in a ditch with three dead men and my leg was missin'. I hollered somethin' fierce that day, I can tell ya! Doctor took care of it pretty quick, though, then they sent me back home. Anyhow, it didn't affect my drummin' none." He did a little paradiddle and added a flourish.

I tried to smile. "Not bad." I turned to the violinist, a skinny, wide-eyed red-haired boy. "Hi," I said, holding out my hand. "I'm Jason."

The boy stared at me blankly.

"That's Gunther," said Perry. "He's from Germany. He don't talk much."

I pointed towards myself. "I'm Jason," I said, carefully enunciating. "I'm a singer."

"Ja," he replied. "Ich freue mich, sie zu treffen! Mein name ist Gunther Heinlein."

I smiled wanly and turned to the trumpet player, who shrugged. Perry had an enormous mole just to the left of his nose, roughly the size of a quarter. I tried not to stare at it.

I sighed and took in a brief look at our motley crew. *This was not going to be easy*, I thought. "OK, guys," I said. "I got a couple of song ideas. You ever heard of jazz?"

They shook their heads.

"It's the latest thing," I said, as enthusiastically as I could. "I can come up with an arrangement that'll work for piano, trumpet, violin, and drums... Let's make some music."

§ § § § §

Over the next hour, I came up with a few good song choices. It was harder than I expected since I had to find simple tunes they could learn quickly, without the benefit of hearing the original on an iPod or a boom box. I also had to eliminate any songs with modern lyrics — no references to cars, airplanes, or telephones, and I knew better than to include any even remotely sexual lyrics. No way any of those would get by Mrs. Weeks.

“No, no,” I said, turning to my right. “You gotta lighten up, Bobby! It’s gotta be a lot more subtle than that.”

The drummer glared at me. “I always hadta drum loud with the Army,” he snapped. “Ain’t never got a complaint.”

“This isn’t the battlefield,” I said. “C’mon, it’s just a recital! Gimme a second.”

I looked around the empty classroom hoping to find a solution. All the desks had been moved out, and the walls were faded and peeling. Clouds of dust hung in the air, illuminated by rays of the afternoon sun shining through several open windows. To the side were a pile of paint cans lying on a drop cloth with some flat wooden brushes nearby, oozing a faint odor of turpentine.

“Perfect!” I said. I dashed over and grabbed a couple of clean paint brushes, then thrust them into his hands.

Bobby stared at them and then looked up at me. “What in the Sam Hill am I s’posed to do with these?”

“Try using the brushes instead of the sticks,” I said, pantomiming a drum roll. “You’ll get a totally different kind of sound out of the snare.”

“Brushes?” he said, perplexed. He stuffed the drumsticks into his waistband, then gave a couple of tentative pats with the brushes. The sound was soft but staccato, very smooth. He continued on, then settled into a regular beat.

I nodded. “Not bad. It’s not exactly Buddy Rich, but it’ll do.”

“It ain’t like what I’m used ta. And they’re kinda hard ta hold.”

“I’ll get you some better brushes from McBillin’s store later on today,” I promised. “I’m sure I can find some thinner ones that’ll be perfect. Maybe even some stiffer metal bristles so you can get a little louder.”

I turned to Gunther. “OK, so the countermelody is more like this.” I sang the first couple of bars, then gestured for him to play. He nod-

ded and picked it up. “Too fast,” I cautioned, making a stretching sound. “Slower — *adagio*.”

“Ja, ja. *Langsam*. Slow.”

He played the notes perfectly, right on the beat. I grinned. “That’s it! OK, let’s take it again from the top.”

This time, we got halfway through before Perry let out a meager squawk on his trumpet.

“What’d ya do that for?” snapped Bobby. “Cain’t ya hit the right notes on that thing?”

“You shut up!” he retorted. “I ain’t tellin’ *you* what to do, like singer-boy over there.”

Just then, the school’s bell tower chimed. It was already 2PM. Over an hour had passed by in what felt like only a few minutes.

“Hey, we’re getting there, guys,” I said. “You all sound really good, and we’re gonna be great together on Saturday. We just need some more rehearsal time. I’ll tell you what: I’ve got some errands to take care of this afternoon, but I should be back home at the Colt farm tonight by 8PM. Meet me out in the barn, and we’ll try this again.”

“I dunno,” Bobby muttered.

“I’ll get us some free food,” I offered. “We’ll only be there for an hour or so. Sound like a plan?”

The two boys mulled it over. Gunther looked confused. I made a mental note to get my hands on an English-to-German dictionary, if one existed in this century.

“Alright,” Perry said at last. “I think my folks’ll let me borrow the wagon. Gunther’s place is out in your direction, so I’ll fetch him, too.”

“Great. See you then.”

As I rushed back down the hall to Twitly’s classroom, I ran down the list of chores I had to do that day. I still had to make it to McBillin’s General Store — excuse me, McBillin’s *Supermarket* — for that afternoon’s chores. I’d promised Rufus I’d help tune the piano at the black church. Now, I had to rehearse our little quartet. *Oh, this is gonna be a fun day*, I thought, feeling the beginnings of a solid headache.

§ § § § §

The general store's remodeling was coming along well. McBillin was just directing the carpenter where to position the last sign when I jogged through the front doors.

"That's it, Bill. The dried meats sign will go here, and the produce over there." He looked up and grinned. "Ah, Jason! Good to have another hand aboard to help, son. Put on your apron, and help Mrs. McBillin at the counter. We're almost done here."

There was already a line of customers waiting.

"I'll take you over here," I said, helping an older woman lug a large bag of potatoes onto the counter. I made a mental note to tell McBillin we should look into making some shopping carts. *Man*, I thought. *If I could patent those, I could be a millionaire by 1870.*

"Bout dang time," the woman sniffed haughtily. "Seems like you need more clerks around here."

"It's been like this every day for over a week, since that advertisement went in the paper," said Mrs. McBillin with a sigh, as she snapped the cash register shut with a clang. "Not that I'm complainin', mind you."

I grinned. "Better to have too much business than not enough," I quipped, remembering a line my father used to say. I did some quick mental arithmetic, adding up the purchases and handing the customer her change. "Did Mr. McBillin agree to move the counter up to the front?"

She nodded. "We've got to close the store on Saturday and Sunday to bring the carpenters in, but it should all be done by Monday morning." She lightly touched my shoulder. "You sure this is the right thing to do?"

"I swear, that's the way almost every store back home does it, and it works. We just have to make sure people know which way to go once they're inside the store. It's all about signage."

"Signage?"

"Put up signs that show 'Entrance' and 'Exit,' along with the new ones for the merchandise areas, and people will get it."

She let out an 'oof' as she gathered together a large pile of cans from the next customer. "I just hope we can afford it."

"Trust me, Mrs. McBillin," I said confidently. "In another couple of months, you might have to take over the tannery shop next door and the druggist's place, too. You might wind up with the whole city block —

maybe even open up another store on the other side of town. A whole chain of supermarkets.”

She looked confused. “A chain?”

“I heered tell o’ that,” said a middle-aged man, who was my next customer. “That Macy store in New York City. They’ve got a couple of different places. But St. Louis ain’t New York.”

“Damn Yankees,” muttered the young man behind him.

“North or South, they still need to spend money,” Mr. McBillin remarked, stepping up beside me.

“As long as it’s Union currency, you mean,” corrected his wife. “Backed by real gold.”

I knew from previous conversations that, even in late 1864, the Confederate dollars were looked down upon in town. By next year, they’d be as worthless as Monopoly money, once the war ended.

“I’ll take over from here,” my boss said, tossing the goods into a bag. “Go help Rufus in the back room with the dried meats that just came in, boy. We’ll need to store ‘em all down in the basement so they’ll keep proper.”

I scurried through the curtains that led to the storeroom and out the back door to the alley, and caught up with the black man, who was tying his wagon’s mule to a wooden post. The flat-bed carriage was almost overflowing with cans and boxes and creaking with the heavy load.

Rufus wiped a hand across his sweaty forehead. “Afternoon, mas’ Jason. This is my third trip today. I’d be much obliged if’n you could help with these boxes of dried goods, and we’ll take ‘em down the cellar.”

We worked for a solid half-hour, huffing and puffing with the large crates. The meats were packed in rock salt, which was apparently the 1864 method for keeping the food from spoiling. I started to ask Rufus if they had a way of storing ice for long periods of time, but he went off on a different subject.

“You still comin’ by the church to help tune the *pi-ana*?” he asked.

I nodded. “I’ve got to be here until 5:30, but I’ll stop by on my way home. I already told Travis to tell Mr. and Mrs. Colt I’d probably be late for dinner.” I looked around. “Can you get some tools? A wrench? Maybe some small pliers?”

His face brightened. "Ain't no problem. We'll get what ya need. You need a ride there this evenin'?"

I thought for a moment, then gestured towards the animal. "Seems to me you need a bigger delivery wagon. At the rate we're selling this merchandise, you might need an assistant. And another donkey."

Rufus laughed and rubbed his chin. "We do at that. Maybe you kin suggest that to Mr. McBillin. By the way, this here's a mule. Ain't no use gettin' a donkey to pull a wagon. They ain't much for work."

"Mules and donkeys aren't the same?" I asked, as we hefted a 50-pound barrel of flour down to the alley and onto a wheelbarrow.

"No sir," he said, as we bumped down the rickety staircase. "No sirree. Mules are born of a horse and a donkey. That gives 'em the strength of one and the brains of th' other. Good for workin' and haulin', but they ain't much for ridin'."

"So they're bred for that," I mused.

"Why, I thought ever'body knew that," he exclaimed, as we reached the bottom step. He eyed me curiously. "Mules been 'round for thousands o' years... since the time of Jesus, even 'fore that."

I shrugged. "I gotta tell you, Rufus," I said, as we stacked the boxes, "I'm just a city kid. Pretty much everything I know about farm animals has been from talking to Travis and Lem at the Colt's place over the last couple of weeks."

"Where you from again?" he asked, as we trudged back up the cellar steps.

"Seatt... uh, Vancouver. That is, Canada."

Rufus stopped and raised an eyebrow. "Miz Olivia did say she had some kinfolk out West somewhere," he said thoughtfully. "Didn't say nothin' about Canada. Not that I'm doubtin' you none." His eyes momentarily bore into mine.

I felt my face redden. "Alright, I'm really from Seattle, Washington," I admitted, steeling myself for the half-truths to follow. "Olivia's my aunt — on my father's side. I didn't know her that well, but my mom sent me out here to St. Louis for the summer."

The black man gave me a long stare, then nodded. "I do b'lieve you're tellin' the truth," he said at last. "I kin see somethin' of Miz Olivia in your eyes."

He started to move towards the wagon to get the last of the supplies, but I touched his shoulder to stop him.

"Hey, Rufus," I said, "I'd appreciate it if you could keep this between us. Kind of a secret. I, uh... I don't exactly fit in with people around here, and so I kinda made up the story about Vancouver just as an excuse. Sorta 'cause I talk a little differently than most people."

He gave me an odd look. "We all got our share of secrets 'round here," he said. He gave a couple of glances around, then took a step closer. "You knew 'bout your Aunt Olivia?"

Now it was my turn to be surprised. "Well, I know she was stubborn and opinionated, and she had a heckuva temper."

He let out a loud snort. "That she did, that she did. But she helped a lot of folks like me." Rufus mopped his face, then lowered his voice. "You ever hear tell of the underground railroad?"

I nodded. "Sure. I saw a..." I stopped myself from blurting out that I'd seen a PBS documentary on the Civil War. "I mean, I read a book about it. The underground railroad helped escaped slaves escape from the south and across the Mason-Dixon line." That'd been worth five points on my last American History exam.

"You got the gist of it. Miz Olivia... she helped folks from Arkansas, Mississippi, and Kentucky get through Missouri and points north. Some of 'em went all the way up to Canada, one step ahead of the slave traders."

I was momentarily stunned. "I thought there wasn't any slavery in Missouri."

"Gov'ner Fletcher promised that back in July. But that ain't gonna be a law until January. 'Til then, we got 'mancipated slaves, and reg'lar slaves. I got this paper that says I'm free." He reached inside his shirt pocket and pulled out a weathered document, dated February 12th, 1862. "I can't read all of it, but I know my name."

"Certificate of Freedom," I read. "Rufus Whittington Jones."

The man nodded. "Took me ten whole years to pay for that — five hundred and fifty dollars. Miz Olivia loaned me some of it, and I helped her at her ranch, after her husband died five years ago." He gave me a sad stare. "She got all fired up after Dred Scott tried to go to court to get free, back in '57. That jes' got everybody here in town pow'ful angry

'bout slavery. After Mas' Thomas died, she spent most of her time helpin' slaves get to safety."

"Why didn't you leave?"

He smiled sadly. "I still got more work to do here. Lord won't let me rest until all my people are free."

I nodded sympathetically. "Back where I come from, people still have prejudice. It's getting better, but people like you and me — not everybody wants to accept who we are."

"A 'spectable white boy like you? Ain't nothin' to accept."

This time it was my turn to smile sadly. "Anytime people are different, there are jerks out there that want to make your life miserable. It's happened to me sometimes, too."

A loud voice bellowed from inside the storeroom. "Rufus! Jason! I need ya both back here in the store! Got more'n me and the missus can handle! Come along, now!"

Rufus' eyes widened. "You ain't gonna say nothin' 'bout this, right?"

I held my hand out and shook his hand. Rufus was a big man, well over two hundred pounds, and I felt like I was shaking hands with a catcher's mitt. "We Thomases know how to keep a secret. Especially for friends."

§ § § § §

Just after sundown, I clucked and gently brushed the reins behind the mule's backside as we clattered down Walnut Street and towards the general direction of Old Country Road. Rufus had given me ten minutes of instruction on how to handle the mule, whom he called "Dandy." McBillin had agreed to loan me the wagon each evening, provided I got it back to the store before school by 8AM, and he said he'd think about making me a deal to buy the mule and wagon outright once Rufus bought a bigger replacement wagon in a few weeks.

The mule clip-clopped down Walnut Street, then made a turn down Cherokee Avenue on the outskirts of town, heading towards the woods. The setting sun burned a deep red over the horizon, and I could smell the faint odor of kerosene in the air as the town merchants lit the street lights along the wooden sidewalk. The fall air made me shiver slightly as I buttoned my coat up to my neck.

Less than twenty minutes later, I pulled the wagon up to the Gospel Hall All-Faith Church. I tied Dandy's reins to the hitching post to the side of the ramshackle wooden building and yanked the hand brake up tight, then grabbed my tools, hopped off and walked up to the mule.

"Give me a few minutes, Dandy," I said, scratching him behind the ears. "I promise, you'll have dinner at the barn by 7PM, maybe sooner."

The mule snorted and looked away. I dragged over a nearby bucket of water, and he gratefully slurped down a mouthful.

"Don't bother to thank me," I called over my shoulder. "Be right back."

The door was unlocked, and the main chapel was empty.

"Hello?" I called. "Anybody here? It's me, Jason Thomas! I'm uh... here to fix the piano! Rufus sent me... okay?"

Nobody here but us crickets.

My boots clomped loudly on the wooden floor as I crossed the room towards the upright piano, which stood against the far right wall. I carefully set my tools down on the bench, lit a nearby lantern, and opened up the top of the piano cabinet, letting it rest against the wall, revealing the wires and soundboard. Surprisingly, the felt hammers were in pretty good shape, and none of the strings were broken. I started with middle C, remembering my lessons from Mrs. Rawlings, and worked my way up — first whistling the note's exact pitch, then gradually tightening the pins until each set of string perfectly matched my note. The lower keys were harder to reach, and some of notes were woefully flat, but twenty minutes later, I managed to get through all 88 keys. I closed the lid, then played a couple of trial chords and checked the sustain and soft pedals: *perfect!*

"That's more like it," I said with some satisfaction, and did a quick glissando riff. "Dead nuts on!"

Suddenly, I noticed a flicker of light in the distance to my left. It was a little girl, maybe eight or nine, wearing a grey dress and a sweater, bathed in the yellow glow of a candle in her hands as she walked down the church aisle. "What ya doin' here? You ain't s'posed to be in my daddy's church, 'ceptin' on Sunday."

"Sorry!" I said, quickly standing and holding up my hands. "I told Rufus I'd tune the piano for you guys."

She came closer and gave me a accusatory glare. "Ain't nothin' in here for ya to take. That's unless you're just tryin' ta'cause trouble."

I shook my head and sat back down on the bench and gave her a sincere grin. "Trouble's the last thing on my mind." I skittered my fingers across a few keys, then hit a couple of minor chords and added a little jazzy riff. "I'm Jason, and I'm the piano man."

She was immediately fascinated. "Why, I ain't never heard that before. Play that again!" She sat beside me on the bench. "Please, sir!"

"This is blues," I said, dropping in a couple minor chords with a little flourish. "Very big where I come from." I played the first couple of bars of B.B. King's "How Blue Can You Get."

*"I ain't downhearted baby...
I ain't downhearted baby...
Ever since the day...
Ever since the day we met..."*

The little girl frowned. "Sounds too sad to me. Reminds me when I got the influenza last year. Reckon my momma 'bout cried herself sick."

"That's the point. Here's something a little happier." I launched into a little boogie-woogie, kind of a 1950s thing.

*"I wanna jump but I'm afraid I'll fall...
I wanna holler but the joint's too small...
Young man rhythm's got a hold of me, too
I got the rockin' pneumonia and the boogie woogie flu..."*

She laughed and clapped her hands. "I ain't never heard of a happy song about bein' sick before! Do some more!"

"Rose! What are you doin' in here?"

We turned just as Pastor Meacham came up to our side of the hall, joined by an attractive middle-aged black woman.

"Mr. Meacham," I said, momentarily flustered. "Uh, Pastor. I fixed up your piano, just as I promised Rufus."

The large man raised an eyebrow, then slid the little girl another foot away from me on the bench. An awkward silence passed.

“You remember me — I’m Jason Thomas, Olivia’s nephew. Rufus Jones and I work together at McBillin’s General Store in town.”

“This better not cost me nothin,” he warned.

“On the house,” I said, raising my hands palms up. “Totally free. And it’s dead-*nnn*... uh, I mean — the piano’s now perfectly in tune, guaranteed. Well, at least until the weather changes. I think the high-D string will have to be replaced in a few weeks, but I’ll see if I can order one for you.”

He seemed to relax. “What was that you were playin’ just then?” he said, somewhat curious.

“That was a little boogie-woogie, an old song. I know all kinds of tunes — I’m actually kinda self-taught on the piano.”

“That’s not Jesus’ music,” the woman beside him muttered.

“This is my mama,” said the little girl. “This is Jason. I like his songs!”

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am,” I said, momentarily standing, then I gently shook her hand. Her mouth dropped open with surprise, and I was again conscious of the racial problems of this crazy world.

“You know any gospel music?” she asked, recovering quickly.

I thought for a moment. “Well, the closest thing I can think of is this one.” I sat back down, cleared my throat, and played a few introductory chords.

*“Mother, mother
There’s too many of you crying
Brother, brother, brother
There’s far too many of you dying
You know we’ve got to find a way
To bring some lovin’ here today... yeah...”*

*“Father, father
We don’t need to escalate.
You see, war is not the answer...
For only love can conquer hate.
You know we’ve got to find a way
To bring some lovin’ here today.”*

*"Picket lines and picket signs,
Don't punish me with brutality.
Talk to me, so you can see,
Oh, what's going on...
What's going on...
Yeah, what's going on...
Tell me, what's going on..."*

I sang with all the soulful feeling I could muster, hitting the keys with a little countermelody I improvised on the spot, picking up on the string and horn arrangement from Marvin Gaye's original. I sang loud and true, remembering how it'd been one of my father's favorites, and I filled my voice with emotion — not just because I was surrounded by a black family, but also knowing all too well how much real war and hate would still be going on many years from now in my own time.

Finally, I got to the last verse and finished with another riff and a final chord, which reverberated throughout the hall. I looked up at them and they were smiling. "That's as close as I can get to a gospel song," I said.

"Only love can conquer hate," the reverend mused. "I know that's from the scriptures somewhere."

"Ecclesiastes 3:8," said Mrs. Meacham. "There's a time to love and a time to hate."

"Ah," I said, recognizing the lyric. "That's a different song, but the message is pretty much the same." With that, I launched into an impromptu abbreviated version of The Byrds' "Turn, Turn, Turn."

The woman seemed impressed. "That's wonderful," she enthused. "We also pray it's not too late for peace."

I sighed, remembering we were in the last week of October. "I'm afraid you've still got almost another six months of war left," I said, doing some quick math. I idly glanced at my wristwatch and froze. "Oh, man... I've gotta get out of here, or Mrs. Colt will declare war on *me*." I tossed the tools back into my bag and hopped off the bench and started for the door.

"Jason!" the minister called. "Thanks very much for helping our church, son. Those songs of yours were fine — very fine, indeed."

I stopped and turned. "If you want, I can stop by and teach your choir a few more. Maybe bring them up to speed with a little soul and R&B."

Mrs. Meacham was trying to pick out some of my blues chords at the keyboard.

"Watch that diminished fifth on that one," I called. "It's tricky. I'll try to come by again on Friday after work. 5 o'clock okay for you?"

She got the chords right and smiled. "Yes — that would be very nice. Thank you most kindly, Mr. Thomas."

I grinned. "Please, call me Jason. G'night, folks."

As I trotted away on the wagon, with Dandy leading the way, I heard some tentative bluesy chords from an open window. *Alright*, I thought. *Hopefully she'll bump into W.C. Handy someday in a few years and invent jazz.* I marked that down on the mental list of how I was changing the past. Or, more likely, maybe I was just knocking over the dominoes to make things happen the way they were always meant to.

"Either way," I said out loud as the mule and I continued bumping down the darkness of Old Country Road, "it's all destiny. It was bound to happen anyway, whether I was here or not." And hopefully all the changes would be for the better.

§ § § § §

After a quick dinner in the Colt's kitchen, I made my way out to the barn. Travis and I had stashed McBillin's wagon just outside the chicken coop next to the barn and left the mule tied to a feeding post, where it was happily chowing down on a wooden bucket of oats, with some water nearby. Mr. Colt had admonished me to clean up after the mule, on the threat of "thrashing" me (and I didn't want to find out what that was). After almost three weeks on the farm, I was already an expert at getting rid of cow shit — or "taking out the barn trash," as Mrs. Colt delicately put it — if only to keep the odors under control in my sleeping quarters.

"Hey, Jason!" Lem called from the side of the farmhouse. "Your friends from school are here. Said you boys would be singin' out in the main barn, so that's where I sent 'em."

Damn! I'd almost forgotten our rehearsal. "Thanks, Lem." I started to turn away but he ran up to me and held out a glass jar.

"Lookie what I got here!" he said excitedly.

The jar glowed with a faint yellow flicker, and something was dancing inside of it. *Tinker Bell*, I thought. *The kid has caught Tinker Bell!*

"It's a firefly," he said breathlessly. "Ain't it somethin'?"

I had to admit, it was. From my world of Playstations, Blu-ray players, and widescreen TVs, maybe catching a firefly in a jar wasn't exactly high-tech. But it was charming in an old-fashioned, low-tech kind of way, and you couldn't beat it for the price. *And no batteries required.*

I tapped the side of the jar and the luminous insect momentarily darted and danced, making minute tink-tink noises against the glass while shimmering a pale yellow light into our faces.

"That is cool," I said, handing it back to him. "What're you gonna do with it? Keep it?"

"Naw," he said. "Wouldn't seem right. I'll show it to the other boys at school tomorrow, then maybe let it go 'round sunset." He looked up at me, his face bathed in the soft glow of the firefly. "Things as beautiful as this deserve to be free, don'tcha think?"

I nodded. *And people, too*, I thought. I turned to head back to the barn, but Lem stopped me.

"You gonna tell me any more o' those *Star Wars* stories?" he asked. "I ain't never heard anything like that before. Why, maybe you could write 'em down and put 'em in books, like that man Dickens."

I laughed. "Yeah, and this is 1864. I can sue Lucas."

Lem gave me a quizzical look, but I continued. "Seriously, it isn't my story, so it wouldn't be right. Maybe someday I'll write my own stories. Even better, write some songs. That's what I really want to do: sing my own stuff for people."

"You like doin' that?"

I let out a sigh. "Yeah. I think it's the greatest job in the whole world. Maybe after I finish school, I can even make a living at it."

"You'll be good at it someday — I know ya will. G'night, Jason."

"Night, Lem. Sleep tight. Don't let the, uh, fireflies bite."

He seemed to get a kick out of that, and hooted as he headed to the back door.

The other boys were waiting for me inside the barn. "Bout damn time ya got here," Perry snapped as he hopped off a bale of hay. "Cain't see why we can't just rehearse after school."

I shook my head. "I've gotta work at the general store three days a week — I promised the McBillins. But we can do it at school tomorrow and on Thursday. Alright?"

They seemed to agree. I leaned against the cow stall's railing and pulled my spiral notebook out of my back pocket. "OK, here's some more songs we can try for the show Saturday night. We don't have a piano, so I'll just have to improvise."

"Impro-what?" Bobby asked, giving his drum a little roll.

"I mean I'll have to fake it. Make it up on the spot. We'll work out the keyboard arrangements after lunch tomorrow." I winced when he slammed his sticks particularly loudly, then I remembered my bag. I pulled out some hand-made paintbrushes I'd grabbed at the general store ("two for just five cents, the best in town," Mrs. Billin had promised).

"Now, I'm no drummer..." I started.

"That's for damned sure," he interrupted.

"...but I still know a few things about rhythm," I continued. "Let me show you. You ever hear of a rim-shot?"

Bobby shook his head. I took the sticks and gave him a demonstration. "See, you can vary the sound, half on the head, half on the rim. Or maybe more on the rim, like this." I lightly slammed the stick down for emphasis.

"I ain't never seen that before," he said, momentarily impressed. "I know all kinds o' military beats. I know a dozen different marches, and I know what to do when we charge."

"How 'bout when ya retreat?" muttered Perry.

"Dude, come on," I admonished him, as the drummer waved a stick close to the trumpet player's face. "The kid's a war hero — he lost a leg. Give him a break."

I took the sticks and tried another move, gently rapping on the drum head. "Here's a flam. You hit the second stick just a fraction of a second after the first. It works real well on the first beat. Check this out."

I played a simple rhythm, then varied it with an added off-beat, almost kind of a reggae/shuffle thing. “Now, you try.”

Bobby began rattling the snare head, but after about fifteen seconds, I stopped him.

“Okay, that’s pretty good. Now, try it with the brushes.”

He reluctantly shoved the sticks into his back pocket, then gave the brushes a try. The difference was instantly obvious, and I relieved to see the brushes were the perfect size for his hands.

“Warum, das ist sehr gut!” said Gunther, who’d been idly plucking his violin. “Good, ja?”

We spent the next few minutes going over some other moves. “That’s it,” I said, as encouragingly as I could. “Swirl the left brush around and then give the right an accent on the off beat. Now, you got jazz.”

Over the next hour, we went over the set list I’d prepared earlier in Twitly’s afternoon class. It was a struggle, since most of the songs I knew were crammed with references to the modern world I came from; you’d be amazed how little is left once you eliminate every lyric about telephones, airplanes, modern slang... and let’s not forget sex. I was certain that Mrs. Weeks would want our musical program to be rated G, all very politically correct.

Perry still had a tendency to play a little flat, but Gunther — despite the language barrier — was clearly a very talented violinist. A little too classical for my taste, but he started loosening up as the evening progressed. Finally, by 9PM, we’d managed to struggle through three entire songs without a single wrong note. The band members relaxed and snacked on some leftovers that Mrs. Colt had brought out to us in the barn.

“That was great,” I said, clapping my hands together. “I think we might just make it all the way to Hollywood.”

“What about that passage in the middle of that last song?” Bobby asked, his mouth partly full of a sandwich. “Ain’t nothin’ much happenin’ there.”

I waved him off. “Not to worry. I’ve got a piano solo that’ll drop right in there. You’ll hear it tomorrow at school. Trust me, it’ll knock ‘em out Saturday night.”

“Sounds pretty good already, if’n ya ask me,” said a voice.

We turned to see Travis leaving up against the barn door, grinning from ear to ear. "Why, I reckon I ain't never heard anythin' as good, and that's a fact."

I smiled back as Travis walked over. "I just hope the audience at the Halloween Recital feels the same way," I said, yawning from the exhausting events of the day.

"Best hope Mrs. Weeks likes it," Perry muttered as he and the others shuffled out the door to their horses. "She can get mighty ornery."

"We can handle her. See you guys tomorrow!" I called, as Travis closed the door after them. "So," I said. "You liked our little rehearsal?"

Travis grinned his crooked smile and hopped up on a hay bale. "Is that the sorta music you sing back home? In Can-a-da or Seattle or wherever tell you're from?"

"Seattle," I said, scooting close beside him. "It's not quite what I'd call the latest hits, but it's passable. So, uh... you ever been to one of these Halloween gatherings before?" I asked, wondering how audiences of 1864 would react to our upcoming performance.

Travis shrugged. "I ain't much for dancin'."

I pulled him closer. "You know... dancing is just making love, only standing up. Or so they say."

He guffawed. "You mean like wrasslin'? Hardly."

I snuggled closer and gave him a quick nibble on his earlobe. "It's kinda similar," I said in a low voice, "only without the fireworks at the end. If you know what I mean."

Travis gave a little nervous shiver, then hopped off the hay bale and stood up. "I probably oughta be gettin' back to my room. Colt don't want me spendin' any more time out here than I need to."

"So, you really liked our music?" I asked casually, twisting some strands of hay between my fingers.

"Yeah," he said with a shrug. "But I think maybe you're gettin' a little too fancy with your singin'. Just a touch."

"Too fancy?"

"Well... whatever ya call it. That up-and-down thing you do with your voice — you sorta do it a lot."

I harrumphed. "Hey, I worked about a year with a singing coach to get that right. It's called melisma. I'm just adding some vocal runs to the

basic melody. Makes the song a little more interesting. Everybody does it." *On the radio*, I almost added.

Travis winced and shook his head. "You don't really need it. You don't have ta make your voice any fancier. It's good as is."

"Just sing it straight, you're saying," I said, my temper starting to flare.

"Yeah, sort of," he said. "Otherwise, it sounds like you're kinda goin' all over tarnation. 'Specially at the end of that last one. Sounded a little crazy, if ya ask me."

"What the hell do you know?" I exploded. "It's called *style*, asshole! Every pop singer in the world does it! It sounds cool!"

Travis took a step back. "I'm just sayin', it sounds like... I dunno, like some kinda trick or somethin'."

"A TRICK?" I cried. "That's part of my technique! At least I'm not using Auto-Tune, like half the singers out there. This is all real, coming from *me!*" I said, pounding my chest for emphasis. "My vibrato, my pitch control, the melisma, all that stuff — that's what I *do!*"

"Melisma... sounds like some kinda disease," he retorted. "Anyway, you asked me what I thought, and I told ya."

I rolled my eyes. "Everybody's a goddamned critic!" I snapped. "Who do you think are — the St. Louis version of an *American Voice* judge?"

"I ain't never heard of no *American Voice*," he said, anger creeping into his voice. "I'm just tellin' ya how I felt. If you can't take it, that's your problem. But that's how I heard it."

My face began to redden and I clenched my fists. "You know what? Fuck you, Travis! And get outta my barn! I don't need some jerk pecking me to death with criticisms." I shook with anger, incredulous that my best friend — my only real friend in this world — could be so hurtful and insensitive about the most important thing in my life: my singing.

He glowered at me. "Fine — if that's what you want." With that, he left, slamming the door behind him.

Matilda the cow let out a mournful sound. "And no cracks from you," I muttered, "or I'll grind you up into hamburger."

I dimmed the kerosene lanterns, pulled myself up to the hayloft, then plunked down in my makeshift bed and stared at the ceiling. *Fuck-*

ing asshole, I thought. Some Missouri country hick criticizing my vocal technique!

I was already nervous as it is about having to perform for Mrs. Weeks the next day. The last thing I needed was for somebody to start slamming me, chipping away at my self-confidence.

“What does he know about music anyway?” I muttered, pulling the bed covers up to my chin. “Jerk.”

Despite my anger, tears began to form in my eyes. *I’m not gonna let this bother me, I thought. Just relax and get to sleep. And try to forget what Travis said.*

“Damn you anyway, Travis Colt,” I muttered, as the exhaustion of the day wrapped around me like a thick fog.

Chapter 14

I chewed my scrambled eggs thoughtfully, watching the light rain trickle against the kitchen window, smearing the dawn's light through the speckled glass. Mrs. Colt noticed the frost between Travis and me, but only gave us a curious glance. Our breakfast went by in near-silence, except for Lem's occasional chatter. Travis was sullen, but I ignored him. *If he wants to play it that way, fine*, I thought. *I'm the guy who deserves an apology this time.*

After we cleared the table, Lem followed me out to the store wagon, where I slung my book bag in the back. The drizzle spattered down my neck, and I pulled up my winter coat as I slid up the wagon's canvas sides onto the wooden frame to provide a little bit of a shelter. Lem held the rear section in place for me as I fastened it down. Travis walked up, doing his best to ignore me.

"You guys wanna ride along?" I asked, securing the last strap in place.

Lem seemed taken aback. "Ya mean we don't have to walk to school no more?"

I shrugged. "Not as long as McBillin lets me borrow the store's wagon. I'm actually thinking of buying it. With my part-time job, I could pay it off over the next few weeks, but I also gotta give your dad another fifty cents each week for Dandy's feed." I did some quick math. "It'll be a little tight, but I think I can afford it, specially with my bonus on the store's extra profits."

"Think you're some kinda rich boy," muttered Travis, as he turned away.

I rolled my eyes. "C'mon, flip the bitch-switch off, already," I called after him as he trudged through the mud. "You wanna get soaked or ride with us? Your choice."

As if to answer him, there was a rumble of thunder and the gentle rain began to turn into a steady downpour. I hopped up into the driver's seat, then pulled a tarp over my legs and steadied the mule. Lem happily scampered in and set his books behind the seat. We both stared expectantly at the older boy standing in the mud.

Travis turned away and started a few tentative steps, then stopped and shivered in the rain.

"C'mon, Travis!" called his brother. "Walkin' to school in the rain ain't gonna get ya nothin' but soggy clothes for your troubles. Catch your death."

He frowned. "Reckon so." Travis turned, gave me a brief scowl, hesitated, then reluctantly stepped up in the back with Lem and we clattered down the long muddy trail that led to the Old Country Road.

Halfway there, I glanced around to see Travis staring off to the east, his face illuminated in the pale blue light of the early rising sun. His blond hair was partially plastered to his forehead, and he effortlessly shook the bangs out of his eyes.

Damn, I thought, feeling a slight stir as I became hypnotized by the subtle details of his neck and ears. *Travis even manages to look good soaking wet. But he's still an opinionated asshole.*

"Look out!" he suddenly cried.

I pulled back on the reins and felt the wagon take a hard lurch to the right, then we dropped about a foot with a loud crunch. We came to an abrupt stop, and the mule brayed in annoyance.

"Shit," I muttered, as the three of us jumped out on the road to examine the damage. The back right wheel had slid into a gully. Dandy turned and gave me a disdainful look, rivulets of water trickling down his dark brown mane.

"Saw that one comin'," Travis said with a sniff. "You got a lot to learn 'bout drivin' wagons."

"Might've been nice if you had warned me about this pothole, you jerk," I spat. "I need cruise control on this thing. Or at least a GPS." I turned to the smaller boy. "C'mon, Lem. Let's get our shoulders behind

this. On the count of three!" Together, we gave the rear backboard a major heave. The wheel slipped out of the hole, Dandy began clopping down the muddy path, and we ran up alongside the wagon and hopped back in.

"Maybe you'll keep your eye on the road better next time," said Travis, shaking the water out of his hair, and still refusing to look at me. "There's an awful lot you don't know 'bout farmin' and takin' care o' mules."

I snorted. "Yeah? Well, I think you got Dandy beat for sheer stubborn orneriness."

Lem chortled, but Travis shot him an angry glance and he quickly clammed up.

"I know all kinds of stuff," I continued, slowing the mule down as we took the wider road to the west, just as the rain turned into a fine mist. "Granted, a lot of it's not exactly valuable at the moment, but trust me, I know how things work. Practical stuff, theoretical... I've got a brain, ya know."

"Stuff? Like what?" he sneered.

I thought for a moment, then pointed in the distance, where the moon lay low in the early morning sky. "Okay... like that. Why is the moon sometimes visible during the morning, but sometimes it isn't? Riddle me that."

He shrugged. "Ain't never thought about it."

I slowed the wagon to a stop, and grabbed my notebook and a pencil. In seconds, I drew a quick diagram, brushing a few water drops out of the way. "This is why," I said, showing the relative position of the sun and the moon. "We happen to be in just the right position for the moon to be in the west, and we can see it because the morning sun is rising in the east. The moon is still up there in the sky, orbiting the earth, but we can't always see it because it doesn't get any light from the sun. Either it's too low in the horizon, or the earth blocks the sun's rays."

Lem traced his fingers on the paper, grasping what I was saying. "But howcum the moon seems to get bigger or smaller?"

"Depends on its orbit," I said with a shrug, giving the reins a little snap to get Dandy's attention. "Sometimes it's a little closer or a little further away, 'cause the lunar orbit is elliptical, like this. Plus, the angle of

the sun is what makes it look like a new moon, half moon, or a full moon. It's almost 240,000 miles away, but it still causes tides and all kinds of reactions on earth. It's all about gravity."

"And seasons?" asked Lem.

"No," I replied, as I coaxed Dandy and allowed the wagon to come back up to speed. "Those are caused more by the angle of the earth's axis — how much it tilts in relation to the sun. You wouldn't think a degree or two would change, since we're about 93 million miles away, give or take. But it's the earth's angle that makes the seasons. Because of that, when it's winter up here, in Missouri, it's summer down in Australia and New Zealand, in the Southern hemisphere."

Travis rolled his eyes. "I never heard more malarkey in my life. Why, that ain't nothin' but pure useless information. That ain't gonna help crops grow, keep clothes on your back, or put food on your table."

I laughed. "My dad loved *Jeopardy* — it's kind of a game back where I come from. We'd watch it together, and I learned a lot of useless trivia. For example... why does soap work?"

This time, both boys raised an eyebrow. "Work how?"

"I mean, *why* does it make dirt fall off your body? I bet neither of you know."

"Ain't important neverhow," muttered Travis, wiping some of the rain off his face as the wagon took a small jolt. "It just does."

"I'll play, I'll play," said Lem excitedly. "Cause... cause it makes the dirt slip off?"

"Close. Soap works by getting rid of the oil in your skin that holds the dirt. It's a chemical reaction. Get rid of the oil, the dirt can't hold on."

"Good-for-nothin' nonsense, if'n ya ask me," Travis snorted. "Ya cain't make any money knowin' fool things like that."

I glared at him. "My father used to say: we're all ignorant — just about different things. And there's basic stuff you have to know just to live every day, at least where I come from."

"Yeah? Well, ya sure don't know howta get this mule to move. Here," he said, snatching the reins out of my hand, then clucking and gently snapping the leather against the mule's backside. Sure enough, in a few seconds, we were moving at twice the pace we were before.

I laughed out loud. "Alright," I admitted. "So you're a step ahead of me in mule-driving."

"But Jason knows lots about science," piped Lem. "Knows 'bout lightnin' bugs, an' stories, and everythin'! And the moon and the stars."

"Book-learnin'," the older boy scoffed, as we approached the large grassy field that adjoined the high school. Travis handed me back the reins and nodded toward the animal. "Treat him kindly, now. Never a good idea to get on the wrong side of a mule."

I grinned. "That much I've already learned."

As we rolled up to the front of Jefferson High School, Travis hopped out and jogged up the steps, not pausing to look back. *He's one stubborn mule himself*, I thought. *But I bet I can still teach him a few things, if he's willing to learn.*

§ § § § §

The rehearsals over the next couple of days were rough. Bobby, Perry, and Gunther were getting a little annoyed with me, and they were trying my patience as well.

"No, no!" I snapped. "You gotta come in on the next measure! C'mon, get with it, guys."

"Actin' like some kinda slave driver, he is," Perry snapped.

"I'm doing the best I can!" wailed Bobby.

"You wanna get this right, or not?" I retorted.

We tried again, and this time, we all hit the downbeat at the same time. *That was more like it.* I sang along, leaning into the piano as we slowed down the tempo, and it was perfect.

"No, no, no!" cried out a voice.

We looked up as Mrs. Weeks darted in, wringing her hands. "I told you before, Mr. Thomas. We need more songs that celebrate the church and God's word!"

I thought quickly. "We will, ma'am. Note the part of the song where we're 'soaring.' The songwriter intended for this to be like the flight of, uh... angels. Angels flying in heaven."

She gave me a doubtful look.

"Trust me," I said. "When you hear me sing it with Faith, I promise, it'll be... well, heavenly."

"We'll see about that. All right, Mr. Thomas. I'll give the benefit of the doubt. You have three songs to present to me tomorrow. I trust that each of them will be enriching, uplifting, and ennobling to the human spirit."

"Yes, ma'am," I said with a nod, and she darted back out of the room. *Like that works for Halloween*, I thought.

"Ain't nothin' holy about this music," muttered Bobby.

"Everybody's a critic," I retorted. "C'mon, let's move on to the next song. And try to stay in tempo, willya?"

§ § § § §

As our Saturday performance approached, I began to get a little nervous. Mrs. Weeks had fought me on a couple of my song selections, but was ecstatic at the way Faith and I harmonized on our duet. I suspect Faith was still intent on harmonizing with me in a more physical way, but she seemed reluctant to make a move with the other musicians around me. I resolved to make sure she wouldn't get the chance to corner me alone at the recital.

"You all set for the Halloween school show tonight, young Mr. Thomas?" Mrs. McBillin asked, as we wheeled a supply cart through one of the general store aisles, while carpenters worked on a new front counter. "We're so looking forward to it."

I grinned. The McBillins had been kind enough to let me put up some show posters on the store's front window, and were letting me leave an hour early so I could get home and change. "Yeah. I hope the Harper's barn is big enough for the crowd. Mrs. Weeks tells me we'll have at least 250 people there — maybe more, if our ad works."

"You'll do fine," she said, carefully emptying a burlap bag of apples into a wooden display barrel. "How many other young people will be performing?"

"About a dozen," I replied. "Me, Faith, and our little band are closing the show. I figure the whole thing will last a couple of hours." *Sort of the 1864 version of America's Got Talent*, I thought, *only with Mrs. Weeks taking Howard Stern's seat at the judging table*. "I think we'll be done by

9:30PM. 10 at the latest. About the only thing I'm really worried about is getting the piano over there."

Just then, the store's front door crashed open, and a familiar voice called. "Jason? You in here?"

"Back here, Lem," I answered. "Everything okay?"

He ran up to me breathlessly. "No — the school piano done slid off the wagon they was haulin', and it's pretty busted up. I declare, I don't think they can get another one for tonight."

"Jesus," I muttered. "What about Faith's family?"

He shook his head. "Mrs. Shaw is mighty partic'lar 'bout her things. She ain't about to loan the school that harpsichord for tonight."

This screws up everything, I thought. Without a keyboard, I'd kinda look like a dork, singing in front of the crowd — especially an 1864 audience, and me without a microphone, performing with sheer lung power alone. *Unless...*

"Rufus?" I called to the back.

"Yassuh, Mas' Jason?" he said, his dark face peering from the store-room doorway.

"You think there's any chance we could borrow your church's piano? Just for tonight?"

He thought for a moment. "The one you done tuned? I s'pose that'd be alright. Services ain't gonna start at Gospel Hall until 8AM Sunday mornin' at the earliest."

"Mrs. McBillin, would it be alright if..."

"Of course, Jason," she said with a smile. "Rufus, please take the new wagon and see if you can find someone to help move your church's piano out to the Harper farm."

"Yas'm. I kin do that 'fore nightfall."

"Best leave now. Our Jason has a show to perform."

I turned to the black man. "And I'll need at least 15 minutes to tune it up. Let me ride along with you and help... if that's okay."

She glanced around and lowered her voice. "I'll tell Mr. McBillin later. He won't be back for at least fifteen minutes. I suppose I can handle the store myself until closing time."

I gave her a quick hug. "Thanks, Mrs. McBillin. Tell him I'll make up for the lost time on Monday."

“Oh, he’ll certainly expect that,” she said with a chuckle. “And possibly an extra hour for your trouble. Get along with you!”

§ § § § §

The big barn at the Harpers’ farm was bigger than I expected: an enormous red and white building, roughly three stories high, easily big enough to hold the Colt’s entire house and main barn together with room to spare. I glanced at my wristwatch. Even though it was only 7:40, a good-sized crowd had already gathered outside the entrance. A large sign was plastered above the main door: “*Jefferson High School’s Halloween Singing Celebration — Come One, Come All!*”

I shivered. The weather had cleared up and was brisk, and the air smelled of cinnamon and spices. A few tables to the side were festooned with carved-out pumpkins as decorations, along with apple pies and pecan pies that some of the local farmers’ wives had donated as part of the festivities. A few of the smaller kids had discovered a rope fastened to an overhanging corner of the barn roof outside and were careening into a large pile of hay, giggling with excitement.

Inside the barn, Rufus and I positioned the upright piano on the side of the stage area, with the help of two of his church members, and I managed to get it retuned in record time. We were the only act using the piano; the others included some kid reciting some Robert Browning poetry, a couple of boys with banjos (the resemblance to the cast of *Deliverance* made me cringe a little bit), some guy with a clarinet, and a quartet of chubby girls that had voices that sounded like cats being tortured. Plus there were two or three other groups and soloists from one of the rival schools across town.

Piece of cake, I thought, playing a few tentative chords and looking out towards where the audience would be sitting. *If this were an American Voice audition, I’d ace it.*

“Ya’ll be mindful of this here instrument,” Rufus warned, patting the top of the upright cabinet. “Ain’t much to most people, but we need our pi-ana for the mornin’ services. Ya don’t wanna rile up Pastor Meacham.”

"I'll help you load it on the wagon and retune it again myself once we get back to the church. I promise." I held out my hand and we shook. "You got my word on it."

He grinned. "I'll always b'lieve a Thomas when dey give their word. And we 'preciate you comin' by last night and teachin' us those new songs. I ain't never seen Miz Cleotha so happy! Reverend Meacham, too."

"Can we please rehearse now?" called an irritated voice. It was one of the chubby girls, who resembled an 19th-century version of Kim Kardashian, only with a lot less makeup. "If you're finished with the nigger, that is."

Rufus and I froze. I turned to her and gave her an icy grin. "Excuse me, but *Mr. Jones* here helped us out quite a bit with the piano. And he's a free man — and a personal friend of mine. So I hope you can —"

She ignored me and abruptly pushed past us, the other girls trailing alongside her, giggling at my reaction.

"— give the man some respect," I finished, scowling.

"Don't pay them no never-mind," Rufus said in a low voice as we walked towards the side exit, where the crowd noise grew louder. "Some folks still ain't quite used to slaves walkin' free in Missouri."

"Stupid bitches," I muttered. "Sorry about that, Rufus. You gonna stay for the show?"

He hesitated. "I don't think the Harpers want my kind here, not 'till everybody gone, at least. Maybe I'll poke my head in the back, me and some of the others. Don't want no trouble."

I nodded. We were both interlopers: me, a gay kid from the 21st century, and him, a former black slave from 1864. Neither of us belonged in this racist, sexist world.

"Don't you worry none," he said, then stopped abruptly and peered in the Eastern sky, his forehead furrowing. "Now, that's mighty strange: a demon moon. Ain't seen one o' dose in a coon's age. Mighty strange, indeed."

I turned, and the full moon looked red and angry. It seemed much larger than normal, and cast an odd orange glow through the trees.

"Don't tell me that's some kinda omen."

He cocked his head. "Prob'ly not. I best be on my way. I'll meet ya back here a'fore ten." He gripped my shoulder warmly. "You take care now, Jason."

We made our way out to the side of the barn, and Rufus disappeared into the crowd. I caught up with Perry, Gunther, and Bobby, who held onto their instruments. They looked very nervous.

"You guys ready?" I asked. They nodded glumly.

"I vill need to..." Gunther made a vague gesture... "*justieren sie die violine. Ah, tune ze strings.*"

"You guys calm down," I said. "I'll help you right before we get on stage. The barn temperature will heat up once the doors are closed and everybody's inside — no use to tune it now, since it'll drift when the air's ten degrees warmer."

He seemed satisfied with that. I glanced at my wristwatch: almost 8PM now. The audience was almost completely seated and murmuring with anticipation. Usually, I didn't have any stage fright, but this was my first time in months performing before a large audience. Back in my old life, I had managed to slip into the line at a regional *American Voice* audition a few months earlier, and I almost made it through the preliminaries until they discovered I was only 15 and sent me home. That was the single most terrifying moment I had ever had in Seattle.

But now... this was a different kind of fear, maybe a sense of foreboding. I wasn't sure why. The most this audience could do to me was boo and throw tomatoes... and that was unlikely. *Maybe it's the demon moon.* I peered at the expectant crowd, watching as Mrs. Weeks made her way up to the stage area, which was really just a dozen elevated wooden boards about two feet above the dirt floor. *Definitely a full house, with some spillover out the two back doors.* I tugged on my bow tie, which made my starched shirt collar feel tighter and rougher than usual. Mrs. Weeks had insisted on it — matching red ties for all of us (and not clip-ons, but the real thing) — and I prayed that the pressure on my neck wouldn't affect my voice.

The audience applauded as Mrs. Weeks stepped up to the stage area. She thanked the crowd for being there, and the first act began.

"Ya scared?" whispered a familiar voice behind me. It was Travis, with his usual lopsided grin, his long blond bangs hanging in his eyes.

I flinched for a moment, then frowned. "Takes more than a crowd this size to scare me, bucko."

"Listen, Jason," he said in a low voice. "I thought about it — what you said the other day and all — and I didn't mean ta insult you or nothin'."

"So is this an apology for Tuesday night?" It'd been more than three days since our fight, and we'd barely spoken since.

"Didn't say that, neither. I just... I didn't want ya to go out there with me on your mind, is all."

I raised an eyebrow. "Who says you were on my mind?"

"Well..." He glanced around, then lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Listen, Jason. You're always on my mind."

Against my better judgement, I began to smile. "You were always on my mind..." I sang. "Good song. Not exactly my kinda music, but it's OK for country."

He laughed. "Is everything musical to you?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. What can I say? It's in my blood."

Travis nodded, then looked out towards the crowd. I stared at the nape of his neck, which was muscular and incredibly sexy, his shaggy blond hair hanging down to his collar. I stared at the soft curls, as they wrapped *just so* around his skin. It'd been at least four days since we'd had any kind of sex. My mouth felt dry. I longed to reach out and pull him to me... but I had a concert to do. *Music first.*

He turned back. "I gotta go back to Ma and Mr. Colt. Lem says good luck."

"What do *you* say?"

Travis looked down for a moment, then smiled shyly. "Me? I don't believe much in luck. You got somethin' better than that, Jason. You love what you do, you're great at singin', and ain't nobody can take that away from ya." He gave me a quick hug. "Sing your heart out."

"I will," I said, my pulse beginning to race. "And... maybe with a little less fancy vocal stuff. Maybe I'll stick more to the melody — like you said."

"Don't change on my account, now," he said, slipping back into the barn's side entrance. "You're the singin' expert. I'm just the audience."

You're a lot more than that, I thought, watching him weave through the rows to get back to his seat. Lem waved when he caught my eye.

§ § § § §

By 9:15PM, Mrs. Weeks had a visible look of relief on her face. "Thanks again to the Jacoby Sisters," she said as the applause died out. "That was wonderfully... unusual. And now, we present our final entertainment for the evening. Our newest student at Jefferson, Mr. Jason Thomas, will be singing and playing the piano, along with Mr. Perry Davis on trumpet, Gunther — what is that name? — Mr. Gunther Heinstein on violin..."

"Heinlein," the boy standing next to me muttered angrily. "Sie ist verrückt."

"...and Mr. Robert Ellison on drums. Please welcome them with your generous applause!"

With that, we stepped up and took our places, and I gave a quick nod to the audience. Ignoring the butterflies in my stomach, I played the introductory chords and began to speak, standing at the upright piano.

"Thanks, everybody," I said in a loud voice. "I know I'm a stranger here. I've only been in St. Louis for three weeks now, but I thank you all for making me feel at home. My Aunt Olivia loved this song." I hummed the opening melody, then took a deep breath.

*Day after day...
I must face a world of strangers
Where I don't belong
I'm not that strong.*

*It's nice to know
that there's someone I can turn to
Who will always care
you're always there.*

*When there's no getting over that rainbow
When my smallest of dreams won't come true...*

*I can take all the madness the world has to give...
But I won't last a day without you."*

My confidence grew as I sang my heart out, making tentative eye-contact with the people in the first few rows, smiling and a little relieved to see most of them smiling back at me. By the second verse, we had hit our stride. Gunther played the counter-melody adroitly, Perry held back with his muted trumpet, just as we'd rehearsed, and I thought Bobby might just make a decent jazz drummer yet. The acoustics of the barn were much better than I had feared, and my voice rang out and filled the room as we hit the final verse, letting my vibrato swell to blend perfectly with the final chords.

At last, the song came to an end, and the crowd cheered, with several people actually standing and pounding their hands together.

I waited for the applause to die down. "Thanks very much," I said. "Our principal, Mrs. Weeks, reminded me that all of us are created by a powerful force that's full of love and hope."

"Our lord and saviour!" she added from her seat the crowd. "Praise Jesus!"

I winced, but caught myself from adding *and pass the ammunition*. "Thank you," I said, as I stepped away from the piano and picked up the acoustic guitar and began strumming the opening chords. "But sometimes, it seems like certain people get a little extra from a higher power. And if you're lucky in this world, you might get to know somebody like this, maybe even fall in love with them." And I took another deep breath and began.

*"Can this be true?
Tell me, can this be real?
How can I put into words what I feel?"*

*My life was complete
I thought I was whole...
Why do I feel like I'm losing control?"*

*I never thought that love could feel like this
and you've changed my world with just one kiss.*

*How can it be that right here with me there's an angel?
It's a miracle...*

*Your love is like a river
Peaceful and deep.
Your soul is like a secret
That I never could keep.
When I look into your eyes
I know that it's true
God must have spent...
a little more time
...on you."*

Perry squawked a slightly flat note on the trumpet but I kept going. Bobby didn't do badly on the backup harmony vocal; for a drummer, he actually sang okay.

Another quick glance out at the audience: several of the girls in the front row seemed to be totally enraptured by our performance. One in particular, a pretty brunette with a scarlet ribbon in her hair, practically swooned with an expression of pure love. I looked over her shoulder towards the middle row and again spotted Travis: the same expression was on his face, and his eyes glowed with the warm reflection of the kerosene lamps. I grinned and gave him a little nod of recognition.

Again, we hit the final verse and brought the song to a close. As the last chords rang out, half the audience stood up and applauded. Even Mrs. Weeks clapped her hands. *Praise Jesus!* she mouthed, smiling broadly.

"Thanks!," I said. "We appreciate it. For our last song, I'd like to invite a special guest to sing with us tonight: Miss Faith Shaw." I began to clap as Judge Shaw escorted her by the elbow up from the third row, and the crowd applauded politely. I was amused to see she had again tied a little lace bow to her cane, this time an orange one for Halloween, as she hobbled up the step.

"You look great," I whispered.

"I could just eat you up," she whispered back.

She leaned her cane against the piano and held onto my shoulder as I played an extended version of the lead-in chords with a flourish.

I cleared my throat. "This is a song about what people really are, and how some people are even more beautiful on the inside than what you see on the outside. I hope you'll like it."

*"We're soarin', flyin'...
There's not a star in heaven that we can't reach..."*

Faith hit her cue perfectly, and her intonation and pitch were as perfect as ever.

*"...if we're trying.
So we're breaking free."*

Our voices blended together in two-part harmony; she'd cut back on her operatic approach and now embraced more of a "pop" feel.

*"You know the world can see us
In a way that's different than who we are.
Creating space between us
'Til we're separate hearts.*

*But your faith it gives me strength
Strength to believe...*

*We're breakin' free
We're soarin'...
Flyin'...
There's not a star in heaven that we can't reach...
If we're trying.
Yeah, we're breaking free."*

Perry and Gunther picked up the melody as I jumped up from the piano, and Bobby's snare provided a perfect staccato beat. As I sang the

next line, I spun and slid away in a quick move, then pulled Faith towards me as we started the second verse.

The audience was momentarily stunned. This old *High School Musical* song was hardly rock and roll, but to an 1864 audience, I think they weren't quite sure what they were hearing. "Camptown Ladies" it wasn't. But they seemed to like it.

"C'mon, everybody," I called. "Clap your hands!"

A few half-heartedly clapped along, and within seconds, at least half the audience got the idea and began clapping. Bobby hit the snare a little harder on the beat, and I turned to him and grinned as we came down the home stretch to the finale.

*"More than hope, more than faith...
This is true, This is fate...
And together we see it comin'..."*

*More than you, More than me,
Not a want, but a need...
Both of us breakin' free."*

I spun Faith around, and even though we'd rehearsed this move a dozen times back at school, her left leg stumbled for a moment. I gracefully caught her, and our faces almost got close enough to kiss. I turned away and belted out the next line.

*"To get to the place to be all that we can be...
Now's the time
So we're breaking free."*

We finally stood together, my left arm supporting her by the shoulder, and we finished with a perfect a capella duet, slowing down the tempo for maximum effect:

*"You know the world can see us...
In a way that's different than who we are."*

This time, the entire audience rose to their feet and applauded wildly. Faith looked away, her face reddening slightly.

"Take a bow, guys!" I stage-whispered. "On the count of three: one, two, three!"

All of us bowed, Faith swaying slightly to stay balanced on her injured foot. Several whistles broke out, and as I stood up, I saw Travis on his feet, his face beaming with pride as he roared and whistled his approval. Judge Shaw walked over and held his arm out, and Faith took it and hobbled back down with her cane to her seat in the audience, blowing me a kiss as she departed.

Within moments, Mrs. Weeks stepped up on the stage, clapping her hands briskly. "My, that was... so very wonderful and energetic! I know it's getting a little late, but I wonder... Mr. Thomas, would you and your little group perhaps mind doing an encore?" She turned to the crowd. "That is... if the rest of you wouldn't mind?"

"More!" shouted one of the men from the back. "You have the voice of an angel!" called the cute brunette from the front row, accompanied by more applause.

I held up my hands and the audience settled down. "Thank you," I said, quickly scanning my brain like an iTunes library. *Something mainstream*, I thought. *Middle of the road classic rock, like what my mom and dad used to listen to back in Seattle. Nothing heavy or too contemporary.* "Bobby, Gunther, and Perry and I all really appreciate it," I said. "We need to wrap things up, and I know the Harpers would like to get their barn back."

I thought for a moment, and I instantly knew just the song. I sat down, found the right key, and began playing the intro. "This last one is for someone special out there. I didn't write it, but the person who did wrote it for somebody they cared about very much. This one's for you."

The boys on-stage looked at me curiously. "Fake it!" I whispered. "B-flat!" I took a deep breath and began to sing:

*"It's a little bit funny, this feeling inside...
I'm not one of those who can easily hide.
I don't have much money, but... but if I did
I'd buy a big house where we both could live.*

*If I was a sculptor, but then again — no...
Or a man... who makes potions in a traveling show
I know it's not much, but it's the best I can do
My gift is my song, and this one's for you."*

My fingers flew over the keys, and Bobby, Gunther, and Perry each fell in, one at a time. This wasn't one we had rehearsed, but they knew my style well enough to be able to improvise something almost reasonable. Gunther effortlessly drew his bow across the strings, creating a perfectly improvised countermelody for the piano. *Ja*, I mouthed to him with a grin. He smiled back, with the kind of easygoing familiarity only experienced musicians know.

I was really firing on all cylinders now, not just channeling Elton John, but singing in full voice — and I'm sure, much to Travis' relief — just hitting the notes straight and pure without any embellishment. And I sang with all of my heart, closing my eyes and feeling every word, every line, as if it was a part of my life... which, looking back, I guess it was. And as I came to the end, all I could see in my mind's eye was Travis' handsome face.

*"So excuse me forgettin', but these things I do
You see I've forgotten if they're green or they're blue.
Anyway, the thing is... what I really mean...
Yours are the sweetest eyes I've ever seen.*

*And you can tell everybody this is your song
It may be quite simple, but now that it's done
I hope you don't mind,
I hope you don't mind
that I put down in words...
How wonderful life is while you're in the world."*

By the end, it was just the piano and the violin gracefully intertwining their chords like a playful dance, with Bobby providing just the right

brushwork on the snare and cymbal. Perry glared at me; improvising on the trumpet wasn't exactly his strong suit.

As we struck the final chords, the crowd jumped to their feet and roared their approval. After a few moments, the audience rushed the stage, and Judge Shaw pounded my back. "That was glorious, son!" he cried. "Masterful!"

"Heavenly!" said Mrs. Weeks, who dabbed her eyes, clearly affected by our performance.

"Where in tarnation did you ever learn how to dance like that?" asked the pretty brunette with the scarlet ribbon from the front row, who was suddenly right in my face. Apparently, my earlier Michael Jackson moonwalking move had caught a few people by surprise. She gave me a quick hug. Even though I'm gay, I can still accept a compliment from a hot girl as well as anyone, and I bowed and gave her my best imitation of an Elvis "thank ya, ma'm, thank ya ver' much."

The stage was swamped by our new grateful fans, almost drowning me with their compliments. I looked out in the crowd and saw Travis, who had a small tear trickling down the right side of his face. He quickly brushed it away and continued clapping and grinning ear to ear.

I smiled back, and gave him a private look that I hoped only he would understand. *Just you wait 'till I get you alone in the barn*, I thought, feeling a little surge in my groin. *That's when life will really be wonderful.*

§ § § § §

"You got it? OK, guys... PUSH!"

With that, we shoved the church piano the rest of the way up the ramp onto the wagon. Even with all four of us, it had taken me and Rufus' friends a good fifteen minutes to roll the piano out of the barn and slide it up on the makeshift platform.

There was a smell of ozone in the air — the kind you get right before a severe storm — and that uneasy feeling you sense from a humid late summer night. Rufus had explained earlier that Halloween in this part of Missouri often had "mighty peculiar weather," as he put it. No doubt this warm evening was the harbinger of a bad storm on its way in

the days to come. I expected the temperature would drop at least 20 degrees in the next day or two, leading the way for the snows of November.

A few stragglers stayed behind to wish us well. The parents of Bobby and my other band mates came by and thanked me for the show. I sincerely praised the boys' work onstage, pointing out that "without a good band behind him, a singer is just a voice in a barn. But with these three and my voice... then it's music." The guys seemed very pleased with that and accepted my compliments.

Reverend Lucius Abrams suddenly loomed up, dressed in a grim black suit, then placed his left hand on my shoulder and warmly grasped my right hand with the other. "You know, Jason," he said, "we truly must have you as a soloist at the First Baptist Church. Your voice is just magnificent."

"I'm sorry, Reverend," I said, shaking my head and looking away. "I honestly appreciate your offer — I'm honored that you'd even ask me — but with all my schoolwork, and my part-time job at the general store, I just don't have the time. I barely get enough sleep as it is."

He began to squeeze my hand uncomfortably. "I really can't take no for an answer," he said in a low voice. "You really and truly must."

I wrenched my hand away. "Uh... I don't think I can." I spotted Rufus and one of his helpers on the wagon, giving me a concerned look. "To tell you the truth," I continued a little icily, "I'm actually thinking of changing churches. I believe the Gospel Hall might be more my style."

Rufus' mouth fell open. Abrams took a step back and scowled. "So you're telling me you'd rather be at a nigra church than be with your own kind?"

I looked him right in the eye. "Where I come from, that's not important. Maybe I'm color-blind."

"Or very foolish. '*The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.*' Ecclesiastes 4:5."

"Whatever, but I'm more partial to cheeseburgers. I'll let you know if I change my mind."

He glared and stormed off. I ignored him and helped Rufus secure the rope on the back of the wagon.

"You don' wanna make an enemy of the Reverend," he warned in a low voice. "Besides... man's right. The Colts ain't gon' want you comin' to our church, neither."

"We'll see how I feel in the morning. I'll meet you at the church in ten minutes to retune the piano. Shouldn't take long."

He nodded and secured the rest of the piano in place. As I looked around for Travis and my ride home, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"I'm Martha," said a voice behind me.

I turned to see the pretty young brunette who'd been in the front row during our performance.

"Martha Young," she continued breathlessly. "I thought you were ever so wonderful, Jason! You sing... you dance... and your piano performing was..."

"...good enough to get three votes to Hollywood," I said with a grin. "Thanks. I saw you out in the audience, but we haven't really met."

"You've met my older sister Jill. She knows Faith at your school."

I started to interrupt when a voice hollered from close behind me.

"Martha! You stop talkin' to that idjit. Git outta here!"

I turned just as a hand spun me around and a fist smashed into my nose, momentarily stunning me. A flash of white sent me sprawling down to my knees. Dizzily, I looked up to see a slightly younger pimply-face kid bellowing at the top of his lungs, waving his fists wildly.

"Put up yer dukes! You ain't got no right to talk to Martha! She's my gal!"

I wiped a warm trickle of blood from my left nostril and raised a hand in protest. "Hold it, hold it!" I said, sounding slightly nasally. "I swear I don't even know Martha. Honestly, she's not my type." I started to add, "*I'm actually more into cock,*" but I figured that might be a little much for this crowd.

"Get up!" he hollered again. "As sure as my name is John Anderson Truman, you git up and fight like a man!"

One of the boys helped me up to my feet, and I slipped off my jacket and let it drop to the floor. *Fine*, I thought, a little dizzy. *If I have to fight this asshole, I'll at least make an honest stab at it. I took care of three thugs the last time; this kid doesn't look all that tough.*

I shook my head to clear it, then gave my worthy opponent a once-over. The young teen was a few inches taller than me, and probably outweighed me by a good thirty pounds. His face was red and puffy, with a swarm of angry-looking pimples on one side that looked like they were on the verge of eruption.

I took a few steps forward and made a tentative jab, but he effortlessly batted my hand away. Remembering some of the boxing lessons Travis taught me back at the Colt's farm, I began dancing to the right, then feinted with my left. Young Truman started to react but left his right side wide open, and I rocketed forward, my fist connecting on his jaw with a satisfying crunch. He reeled, then spat out some blood and narrowed his eyes. He shook with fury.

"Now you're gonna pay."

I began to panic. *Where the hell was Travis?* He had been in the crowd with Mr. and Mrs. Colt only minutes before. The plan was for them to drop me off at the Gospel Hall Baptist Church, and Rufus would give me a lift home. A quick scan of the gathering crowd didn't reveal any familiar faces.

"Mas' Jason! You be careful, now!" called Rufus from the wagon. "You wan', I can go get some help!"

"Figures somebody like you needs a nigger to handle his fights for 'em," snarled Truman.

I looked over to Rufus. "Don't worry, I can handle this jerk," I called. "Go find Travis and tell him we need to get out of here." I turned back to the hulking boy as I continued circling around him warily. "Listen, John Truman or whatever-the-hell your name is... I swear, I have no interest in your 'gal,' and I'm not here to fight with you. Can't you get that through your thick skull?"

He swung a large fat fist, which missed my head by inches. "All I know is that Martha's sweet on ya. You were makin' eyes with her, singin' her those songs for twenty minutes! You're just makin' trouble!"

I started to protest, but he quickly stepped forward and slammed me in the stomach — once, then twice — then gave me a good whack on the side of the head as an added bonus.

Christ, I thought, fighting to stay on my feet. For all I knew, this guy might be a pro boxer. Or just a lucky and highly-skilled amateur.

I staggered back and caught my breath. “Dude! Whoa! Look, I apologize if Martha liked my singing. But I want nothing to do with her — honestly! Can you accept that?”

He took another swing and I jumped backwards.

“You sayin’ she ain’t good enough for ya?” he snarled.

“No!” I said. “She’s just not for me. Date her, marry her, do whatever you want. Just leave me out of it!”

Truman swung again, only this time, I blocked his punch and smacked him good with an uppercut to the jaw. *Home run!* He flew up in the air a couple of inches and sprawled backwards into the dirt.

The small crowd of teenagers watching us gave me a smattering of applause. *Not as good as my last performance*, I thought with more than a little pride as I dusted off my pants, *but hey, I’ll take adulation where I can get it.*

The boy lay still for a moment, then shook his head. The onlookers gave a little murmur.

“Truce!” I said, holding out my hand. “Honestly, I apologize if I gave... what’s her name? Martha? If I gave Martha the wrong idea, I’m sorry. I’m not here to fight, okay?”

The angry boy stared at me, then slowly held out his hand. I took it and helped him up to his feet.

“Thanks. Listen, I really have to go, and I’m sorry for the trouble—”

And without warning, he suddenly lunged forward and smashed his fist into my throat with incredible force.

I was stunned and staggered backwards, then crumpled to the ground. My vision swam and the crowd took a hard tilt to the left. My heart thudded in my ears. My lungs were useless: I gasped but could only make incoherent gagging and wheezing sounds. I heard someone scream to get help. Hands were on my chest, opening up my collar, pulling down my tie. I began to black out.

My vision blurred as I faded in and out of consciousness. As if in a dream, I heard a young girl sobbing hysterically. Mrs. Weeks cried out... something about getting Doc Wells. Strong hands sat me up, but my head lolled to the side. More voices. I thought I heard Travis and Lem call out, but I wasn’t sure. Then blackness.

I was prepared to just lie back and sleep for awhile. I felt very calm. It'd been a long, stressful day, and I honestly could use some rest, since I'd been on the go since 5:30 in the morning. I probably should've taken a nap in the afternoon, but there just wasn't time. At least now, I had nothing but time... all the time in the world, really. I'd just sleep and sleep and sleep. Maybe I could fall back into the mysterious blue light inside Marsen's Cavern and time-travel back home. If I had to die, maybe I could at least die in my own time, and not in the insanity of 1864. Or perhaps fate would take me to another time and place entirely. So many different possible destinies...

Or maybe all of this was all just a dream. My thoughts became more disjointed, more unreal. I began to shiver. Maybe I wasn't really in the past at all. Maybe I just hallucinated the entire experience. Did it matter if I existed or not? I mean, what was the point? What is reality, anyway? Was Travis real, or was he just an erotic fantasy, like a memory of a half-glimpsed Abercrombie & Fitch model from a magazine ad? Maybe I'd open my eyes and I'd find myself back in the bottom of the cave in St. Louis, crushed and pinned by falling rocks, gasping my last breath. But it didn't matter; it was easier just to let go. My muscles went limp and I sank into oblivion, and felt an immediate sense of peace and calm wrap around me like a warm blanket.

Suddenly, I felt a sharp piercing pain, as if I was being stabbed. The sting was distant, almost like it was happening to someone else, but I felt a twinge of a rhythmic sawing motion as if someone was trying to carve out a hole. Strong hands pushed my chest, and muffled voices shouted. Seconds later, I gulped a blast of deliciously cold air, and my eyelids fluttered. I saw a vague image of a man with a black hat and mustache, leaning over my face and yelling at me.

"I said BREATHE! Come on, son! Now! I beg of you!"

I began to cough and choke as I hungrily sucked in air. My head was swimming. Several hands reached out and sat me up, and I stared down at the front of my shirt, which was drenched with blood. *Had I been shot? Was this my blood?* I looked like the star of *Dexter* on a bad day. It suddenly seemed hilarious that my entire shirt front was now as bright red as my dangling bow tie, and I started to laugh, only it came out as a choking, gurgling sound.

“That’s it!” a familiar voice cried. “Keep breathing, Jason! You’ll be all right, son. Listen to me: it’s Doctor Wells. I’ve had to give you an emergency tracheotomy, but the worst is over. You weren’t unconscious for more than a couple of minutes. I’m going to stop the bleeding now.”

“Whaaaaa...” I wheezed. My voice was hoarse, an unrecognizable whisper. “I can’t... my voice...”

“I’m sorry, Jason,” he said, wrapping my throat with bandages. “I had to cut into your windpipe, just above the sternum. It was the only way you could breathe.”

My heart froze and my eyes opened wide. “But...” I croaked. “I need to sing...”

“Let’s get you home,” Dr. Wells said, his face coming into sharp focus. “You need rest. And let me get this dressing taken care of. We have to be careful of infection as long as this wound stays open. You’ll have a scar, but at least you’re alive, thank God.”

I was in shock. My neck was throbbing, partly from being punched, partly from this 19th-century hack slashing my throat. *And he’s probably damaged my vocal chords.* As my chest rose and fell, I heard a low whistling sound, and realized all my air was coming in from my throat, not my mouth or nose. It made a peculiar sound, as the flap of flesh vibrated in time with my breathing.

I slowly began to realize the truth: *I’ll never sing again. My voice is shot. No matter what, it’ll never be the way it used to be. My life, my whole career in music, everything I’ve ever worked for, has been taken away in five seconds.*

They should’ve just let me die.

Tears began streaming down my face, but not a sound came from my lips, which quivered with sorrow and fear.

“Don’t worry, Jason,” soothed Mrs. Colt, who was cradling my head in her lap, clasping my forehead, choking back tears. “You just sleep now, child. Please — everything will be all right.”

I hated her. I hated this world and everybody in it. I just wanted to die.

I closed my eyes and let them lift me up and into the back of the Colt’s wagon. We rumbled down the Old Country Road. I swayed with the wheels as they clattered through the mud and just prayed for this horrible nightmare to be over.

Chapter 15

I was only dimly aware of the events of the next few hours, as I swirled around in a murky gray fog. The doctor had given me some kind of injection — I had no idea the extent of medical science in 1864, but I figured it was probably a little short of what Blue Cross would've covered — and I awoke some hours later as I opened my eyes to the dim yellow light of Travis' bedroom at the Colt's farmhouse. A sharp pain in my throat reminded me I was still alive.

Shit, I thought. *Still stuck in 1864*. My hand lightly touched the bandage on my sternum, which now had a deep vertical gash. My breath fluttered and rasped as my chest rose and fell; most of the air hissed out of the opening in my throat, which was an uncomfortable sensation compared to the normal act of breathing through my nose and mouth. The unvarnished wood logs of the right side of Travis' room were dark and gloomy, the roof was rough-hewn, and I could make out weird flickering shadows that danced in time to the pale yellow flame of the kerosene lamp on the bedside table. A distant rumble told me the storm had hit while I was unconscious, leaving the windows on the left wall streaked with the downpour.

The pain in my throat was just barely tolerable, bubbling just below the surface. Suddenly, the door opened and Mrs. Colt stepped in, her face ashen. I started to speak, but she immediately hushed me and called out to the others in the living room. Dr. Wells quickly entered and strode over to my bed, trailed by Travis and Lem, who hovered right behind him.

"Good," the doctor said, as he listened to my chest with his stethoscope, then peered deep into the inside of my mouth using a tongue-depressor. "A little more light over here, please!"

Travis held the lantern closer.

Dr. Wells leaned towards my face. "You've been unconscious for about three hours, Jason," he said quietly. "I gave you a mild morphine injection on the way here, and the swelling in your throat is already starting to go down. Once your air passage is fully normal, I'll be back in the morning to stitch up your throat, and let you breathe normally. I think the scarring will be minimal."

"But what..." I hissed, then recoiled. My voice sounded like some kind of monstrous gurgle. "When will I be able to..."

"Hush, now," soothed Mrs. Colt. "You need your rest. I've changed your shirt. You can stay in here for the next few days."

"Our first concern is infection," said Dr. Wells, slipping his stethoscope into his black leather bag.

All we have to do is wait about 60 years for them to invent penicillin, I thought giddily. With my luck, I'll die of some goddamned disease that could be fixed by a fifty-cent pill from Costco back home. That gave me some hope; death would at least take me away from this hell. Permanently.

"I've left this small bottle of absinthe with Mrs. Colt in case you need it for the pain," he continued, rubbing his eyes with exhaustion. "I'll be back at dawn to check on you again. I believe the worst is over."

I started to correct him by saying, "sure, that's easy for you to say," but it came out as a couple of "gaks" and a series of heaving coughs.

"Don't try to talk yet," he said, putting a hand on my chest. "Your vocal chords were damaged by the blow, not by the surgery. They're terribly swollen, but I can't detect any hemorrhaging. We'll see how you are in the morning, and I'll decide when you're well enough to leave this bed. Until then..."

"Prisoner..." I murmured. "Stuck... here."

He smiled wryly. "I wouldn't call it that. Listen to me, son: where there's life, there's always hope. I want you to cling to that thought." He stood up and put on his hat. "Goodnight, Jason. I'm so glad I was close by the Harper's farm. If I was another couple of minutes later..." He shook his head. "But I wasn't, and you're alive. We can be grateful to God for that. Goodnight, Mrs. Colt."

He left, and Travis stepped by the bed, illuminated by the bedside lantern. By the look of his eyes, he'd been crying, which shocked me.

Travis was always so strong, so stubborn; as far as I knew, he hadn't ever even shed a tear when his father beat him, despite the marks on his back.

"That was a low-down thing that Truman boy did," he said in a low voice. "Why, that t'weren't no honorable fight. You even done apologized and held out your hand! I reckon there ain't nobody there who ain't on your side now, Jason."

Lem nodded excitedly. "I think done whupped the Truman boy good, too!"

I managed a small smile, then shook my head. "I shoulda run," I hissed in a wheeze. "Shoulda just hit the road, and... just avoided the whole thing."

Travis squeezed my shoulder. "You're too brave for that," he said. "You stood up in front of all those people and put on a show! I ain't never seen something like that. Whole town's talkin' about it — singin' and dancin' like that."

"Hush, now," said Mrs. Colt, as she shooed the boys away. "Jason needs his sleep. You boys stay outside. I'm going to change his dressing now." She peeled the bloody bandages off and began wrapping some clean white cloth around my throat, leaning me forward slightly.

"How bad... how bad does it look?" I said, wheezing slightly. I could feel only a tiny bit of cold air trickling in from my mouth, but my chest still rose and fell normally.

She looked at my throat, then looked away and hesitated. "That's... that's for Doctor Wells to say."

I closed my eyes. *My voice is shot, and now I'm disfigured. Great.*

I leaned forward, and the whole room spun and I immediately fell back. *Whoa*, I thought. *Whatever drugs they'd given me had totally whacked me out.* "Let me sleep awhile," I rasped. "Please."

She nodded. "I'll be back every hour to check on you. Stay in this bed. In the meantime, Mr. Colt and the boys and I are going to pray for you."

I rolled my eyes. *Lotta good that'll do*, I thought. I started to say something sarcastic, but thought better of it. She meant well. Finally, I nodded and rolled to my side. The living room clock chimed again, and I closed my eyes as a clap of thunder rolled in the distance.



I was awakened early next morning by a knock. A small crowd of visitors swarmed into the room: Perry, Gunther, and Bobby, as well as Mrs. Weeks from the school; Faith Shaw; her father, the county judge; and her mother (whom I had only met briefly before). All of them said the right things and were sympathetic, but Faith almost recoiled when she saw the bloody white rags around my throat.

She clasped my hand. "I'm so sorry this happened, Jason. I care for you so very much. Look... I made a drawing of you after our recital last night. I meant to give it to you before you left." She handed me a piece of paper, and I glanced at it and smiled. The likeness wasn't bad: she got the eyes just right, and even had left my hair in back a little scruffy-looking, with my arm raised as if I were in mid-song. *Almost as good as a photograph*, I thought.

"It's nice," I wheezed. "In fact, I..." my voice let out a strange honk. "Sorry," I said in a whisper, the pain a sharp reminder of my injury. "I won't be able to talk for awhile."

"Don't you worry about that, now," said Judge Shaw, patting my shoulder affectionately. "All you need to do right now is rest." They backed away through the doorway.

I smiled faintly and nodded my thanks. From the living room, I heard a slight commotion, then the bedroom door opened wide. A man dressed almost entirely in black entered: it was the Reverend Lucius Abrams, who suddenly loomed over me, casting a dark shadow across my face.

"I heard what happened," he said soothingly, but there was an underlying tone of sarcasm in his voice. "So very tragic." He leaned down and dropped his voice to an intimate whisper. "Ironic, isn't it? To have someone so consumed with their own talent, only to suddenly have it taken away after scorning God. The very definition of hubris."

My face burned. I gestured for him to come closer. I put my lips to his ear. "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, asshole," I said in a low voice.

Abrams took a sudden jolt, then he stood up. “*Be not deceived!*” he cried in a loud voice, on the verge of shouting. “*God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.*” Galatians 6, verse 7.”

“Get out,” I said, in a voice that sounded like something out of *The Exorcist*. I wanted to add, “and don’t let the door hit you on the ass on the way out,” but I was in too much pain, and this pompous jerk wasn’t worth the effort.

Rev. Abrams stormed out the room and pushed past a teenage boy standing in the doorway. I didn’t recognize him at first, but it slowly dawned on me as he crept closer that it was the instigator of the events of Saturday night: John Truman. He held his hat in his hand and was trembling slightly. His face had a fresh outbreak of severe acne, even worse than when I had seen him on Saturday night; some of the sores were purple and festering, making him look like the recent victim of a swarm of bees.

“Go on, now!” yelled a man behind him. “Do what I told ya, or I’ll whip the tar outta ya again!”

The boy took a few tentative steps forward and stopped at my bedside. I had to restrain myself from leaning forward and strangling him. He was younger than I remembered — probably 13, 14 at the most — but was at least my height.

“I’m... I’m right sorry for what I did,” he mumbled.

“LOUDER!” called the man, who was clearly the boy’s father.

“I said I was SORRY!” the boy cried. “Really I am! I ain’t proud for what I did at the recital yesterday. I was aimin’ for your jaw, fair and square. Never meant to hit ya in the throat.” He looked down at the floor.

I shook with anger. This boy, Truman, had changed my life forever. Whether I stayed in 1864 St. Louis or wound up back in my own time in the future, he took away the one thing I had, the *only* thing that made me different from everybody in the world: my voice. I’d never be able to sing again. Oh, sure, maybe I’d be able to croak out a drunken karaoke tune at a bar, or sing ‘happy birthday’ at my Aunt’s birthday party or some crap like that. But any hope I ever had of being a real performer with a career was gone *forever* — snuffed out, like stomping on a candle.

The boy held out his hand. I glared at him, refusing to shake it. He looked away, unable to meet my gaze.

"Maybe it's time you should leave, now," said Mrs. Colt, walking in with a tray. "Nice of you to stop by, Mr. Truman. You, too, Johnny. Please say hello to Mavis for me. I hope we'll see her at church later on."

I've got to kill him, I thought, my mind racing. *If John Truman took away my voice, the least I can do to him is to take away his life.* The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like the right thing to do. But I'd have to come up with a plan first, and that would take time.

"What in the Sam Hill is goin' on in here?" yelled Mr. Colt. "The Reverend seemed mighty upset as he was leavin'! Is that boy havin' seizures? Coughin' up blood again? Speakin' in tongues?"

I started to sit up, but Mrs. Colt eased me back down. "Hush, now," she said in a low voice. "Drink some more of this." She tipped a small tablespoon up to my lips. It was filled with a bitter liquid, and I winced at its sour taste. "You need your rest," she added.

I'm going to kill John Truman if it's the last thing I do, I thought. *Kill him dead.* The room began to swim around again, with the faces of Mr. & Mrs. Colt going out of focus and then getting dimmer. Their voices echoed and swirled, and I descended back into a very pleasant haze.

§ § § § §

"It's been damn near a day and a half, ya know," said Mr. Colt, snapping his pocket watch shut. "I know you think you ain't up to it, Jason, but a growin' boy like you... you gotta go to school."

I shook my head. "No," I said, as loudly as I could with my rough, frog-like voice. "Just let me go back to the barn and live up in the hayloft. The doctor says there's no infection, and I don't mind the cold. I'll bundle up." Wells had stitched up my throat the day before, and I was recovered to the point that I could breathe almost normally through my nose and mouth and communicate without whispering, though my voice was still very scratchy and raw. I inspected my face in a handheld mirror. There was an ugly fist-sized purple welt right where my throat met my upper chest, and I also still had a black eye, along with a jagged star-shaped scar just above my sternum — a permanent reminder of the worst night of my life.

Colt leaned over. "I been through this before," he said in a low voice. His breath was foul. "Sheriff Baxter don't take kindly to boys playin' hooky. There's laws in this county agin' it." He wagged his finger at me. "And you know I ain't a man that cottons to misbehavior."

"Don't forget I'm your future *partner* in this farm," I hissed. "Two thousand acres of my Aunt Olivia's property, still in my name. I haven't made the deal with you yet. And that's worth thousands of dollars." *Plus \$800 cash in the bank*, I thought, as an escape plan started to form in my head.

The man lowered his hand and raised an eyebrow. "That's so, that's so," he replied coolly. "But I'm still the adult here, and you ain't of age. Until you're 18, you gotta get yerself educated. Long as you can still walk and your arms move, that is."

"I'll help you get ready, Jason," said Mrs. Colt, bustling through the doorway. "I brought your clothes in from the barn. And look! Why, here you are in the newspaper!"

She handed me yesterday's edition of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, which was folded over to page 6. There was a small headline: "Tragedy Strikes! Local Boy Injured in Melee at Festival — Nearly Dies After Being Struck in Throat." Below it was a reproduction of the inked portrait Faith had drawn of me singing on stage.

"Great," I croaked. "Now I'm immortalized in history as a cripple."

"Ya can still walk, boy," barked Mr. Colt, as he yanked off the bed covers. "Your legs are right as rain. Get your fanny up and get dressed."

"I'll help him," called Travis, who brought in my boots. "I'll take the wagon in and drop Lem off at the element'ry school. Don't worry — I'll see to it that he gets to Mr. Twitly's class, sir."

"You'd damn well better," Colt called over his shoulder, as he left the room. "Else I'll be cuttin' two sets o' switches tonight!"

"Thanks loads," I muttered, as I pulled off my bed clothes and wriggled into my jeans.

"You don't never wanna get on Colt's bad side," the boy warned in a low voice, helping me with my shirt.

"Does he have a good side?"

Travis shook his head. "Not that I ever seen. Don't cause no trouble — it'll only make things worse."

“They can’t possibly be any worse than they are right now,” I said, my voice rough and raw, then let out a strangled sob as I half-fell, half-sat back down on the bed and put my face in my hands. For the first time since the fight, tears flooded from my eyes as the enormity of my situation sunk in. I was stuck 150 years in the past, my throat hurt like hell, and now I could barely speak, let alone sing. And I was surrounded by backwoods idiots. I was wracked with sobs. I think this was the first time I had cried — *really* cried — since my father had died more than six months ago, back home in Seattle.

“Listen to me, now,” Travis said in a low voice, as he glanced around to make sure his parents were nowhere near, then sat next to me. He put his arm around me and gripped my shoulder. “Ya know how I feel about ya. Why, there ain’t nothin’ you can do if’n ya put your mind to it! That’s what my daddy used to say — my real father, that is.”

I snapped, “Yeah, but look what happened to *him*,” but instantly regretted it. Travis let my insensitive remark pass and held me tight.

“Don’t. You’re the only good thing I got in my life right now, Jason. Just stick with goin’ to school for now. Things are bound ta get better — I just know they will. And there’s a whole lot more to you than just your voice. Especially to me.”

Travis’ expression was so kind, his eyes shining with affection, a part of me melted.

“Alright,” I rasped, wiping my nose with the back of my hand. “Alright — for today. But... no guarantees.”

“Good enough,” he said. And we made our way out to the wagon.

§ § § § §

I managed to survive in Twitly’s class until almost noon. And that’s when things took a turn for the worse.

“We are on chapter six of Mister Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*,” the teacher said in a loud voice. “Please take out your books and turn to page 124.”

There was a flurry of activity in the class and the thumping of books. Twitly glared at us, then looked into his notes, scanning his finger down

the list. "Alright. Now, Mister... Mister Thomas. Will you please do us the honor of reading the first five pages?"

My face reddened. "I... I..." My voice suddenly honked, then I coughed a few times. Some of the other students tittered. "I can't speak very well," I rasped. "I had an... an accident last Saturday night."

Twitly seemed indifferent. "We're all aware of that, Mr. Thomas. Come up here and stand in front of the class. Read as best you can, boy."

I shot him the angriest glance I could muster, and briefly considered hurling the book into his face — and this was the 1850 hardback edition, which weighed a good solid three or four pounds — but I thought better of it. I trudged down the aisle and stood in front of the class and cleared my throat.

"Chapter Six..." I began, my voice giving a slight honk. "I enlarge my circle of acquaintance. I had led this life about a month, when the man with the wooden leg..."

"Louder!" Twitly shouted, as he walked to the back of the classroom.

I took a deep breath. "...when the man with the wooden leg began to stump around with a mop and a bucket of water, from which I inferred..."

"Can everyone hear him clearly?" Twitly asked.

One girl in the third row shook her head. A smaller boy piped up. "I can hear alright."

"I cannot," said Twitly. "Have you read the material before, Mr. Thomas?"

I briefly considered telling him I saw the old British B&W film on DVD back in 7th grade, but rejected it. "Yes," I lied. "But my voice..." I was suddenly overcome with a fit of coughing and turned away, holding on to the teacher's desk for support. As I finished, I noticed with a shudder that there were several droplets of blood on my hand, remnants from my throat wound.

"Can't you see he's hurt?" shouted Travis, as he sprang to his feet. "His throat's all cut up! He dang near died Saturday night!"

"Calm down, Mister Colt," the teacher snapped, waving him away. "Alright, Jason, take your seat. In fact, you and Miss Collier change places. I'll have you sit in the front of the row so that I can hear you more clearly at my desk."

I did as he asked, trudged forward a few steps, flung the book a little harder than I intended onto the desk, then sat down and glared at the teacher.

As the loud crash of my book dissipated, the classroom got uncomfortably quiet. Twitly narrowed his eyes.

“And detention for you after school, Mr. Thomas.”

I winced. *I hope he doesn't ask me to sing the Star Spangled Banner.*

§ § § § §

After I'd spent almost an hour banging erasers, scrubbing down blackboards, cleaning school desks, and sweeping floors, Twitly seemed satisfied with my work. Promptly at 4:30, he nodded. “Off with you,” he said with a vague flick of the wrist, not even looking up from his work. “Don't forget *Copperfield* chapter seven for tomorrow.”

“Can't wait,” I muttered, as I made my way down the hallway. Travis and Lem had already gone home, since both had chores waiting for them back at the farm. I could borrow the wagon again from McBillin's store if I walked the half-mile further into town, or I could just walk home.

As I mulled over my options, I passed by the vacant classroom where we'd rehearsed our recital the week before. I peered inside to discover a different piano now occupied the back of the room, a replacement for the one that was dropped on Saturday afternoon: this one was a newer Steinway Baby Grand, which I knew must have cost a small fortune, even in 1864. I couldn't help myself. I looked around, then made my way inside, sat down and opened up the keyboard. It was in great shape, a sleek, shining ebony-black instrument, hardly different from a modern piano from my own time. I tentatively hit a few keys, then broke out into a wide grin as the notes reverberated against the empty classroom walls. It had a beautiful tone, light-years better than the old church upright, and the keys and pedals had a great feel. *Perfectly in tune, too.*

I thought for a moment, then sat down and began playing the middle section of Gershwin's “Rhapsody in Blue,” which had been one of my mother's favorites. My father was more like me, a classic rock and pop guy, but she was mostly classical. They fought on quite a few issues over the years, everything from politics to finance, but Gershwin was the one

thing they could always agree on when it came to music, and I knew the piece backwards and forwards. I leaned into it, speeding up the tempo a bit, and adding little flourishes on the runs and fills, then came to the climax, which I attacked with frenzy.

"Bravo!" said a voice, with a few half-hearted hand-claps. I looked up and was surprised to see it was Twitly, who now had on his coat and hat and carried a small briefcase. He walked over and leaned on the piano. "That was actually quite beautiful, Mr. Thomas. What do you call it?"

"Gersh—" I began, then was overcome by a fit of coughing. "Sorry. It's by George Gershwin," I croaked. "He's... he's big where I come from."

"Haven't heard of him. But *Mozart*," he said, sitting on the edge of the stool and wagging his index finger for emphasis, "*Mozart* was a genius."

I grinned, then played the first few measures of Beethoven's "Pathetique" from *Sonata Number 8*. "Beethoven was more my style," I rasped. "More emotional."

Twitly surprised me: he closed his eyes, leaned back slightly, and conducted his right hand along with the melody. "Yes," he said. "Also a genius. Very much so."

I played a little more, then switched to Grieg's "Concerto in A Minor." "I had to learn this one for a contest a year ago," I said hoarsely.

Twitly smiled again and nodded. After a minute, I got to the end of the movement and paused.

The man raised his eyebrows, clearly impressed. "I'm astounded that you could do all of that from memory."

I shrugged. "I had to perform the last one for a classical showcase at my school last year," I said with a slight wheeze. "Took me a couple of weeks to get it down, but I've got a knack for it."

Twitly hesitated, then spoke. "I'm sorry if I was hard on you back in the classroom earlier this morning," he said.

"Torturing me, you mean," I said bitterly. "It's like kicking a cripple."

He shook his head sadly, then sighed. "You think you're the only one who's ever had to overcome personal tragedy?" He held out his left hand, and I was stunned to see that the lower two fingers were missing, and the middle finger was slightly deformed, as if badly burned. "This happened to me when I was in a train accident many years ago, slightly younger

than you. Terrible experience, back in Suffolk, Virginia in 1837. Claimed the life of my brother and sister." He paused and leaned forward. "But I survived."

I was stunned. I had never even noticed the teacher's missing fingers, then recalled that Twitly always strolled around the classroom carrying a book or papers in that hand. This perfectly concealed his disfigurement.

"But at least you can speak," I rasped, my fingers lightly touching the stitches on my throat.

"The loss of a few fingers may not seem important," he said, "but it was very difficult for me over the years. People can be very cruel, especially children. But eventually I got my life back to normal. Well, except for this," he said indicating the keyboard. He played a few chords with his right hand, but then held out his disfigured left and smashed the keys with frustration. "Useless. My days at the piano were taken from me." He leaned back and shook his head.

"But I can barely speak!" I cried with a slight honk, then slammed the keyboard lid shut with a loud bang and stood up. "It's not the same thing! Even if my voice comes back, it'll never be like it was! I'll never be able to sing again!" I coughed again, panting for breath and glaring at him.

Twitly sighed, then his face softened. "Listen to me, Jason. You still have very real musical talent. I saw you sing with Faith at the recital on Saturday night, but your artistry at the piano was equally good. Don't let this setback affect your ability to survive and learn in the world. I believe you're far wiser than that."

I turned away, my eyes filling with tears.

"Think about it," he called over his shoulder, as he grabbed his hat and briefcase on the way out the door. "You're a bright young man who still has your whole life ahead of you. Use your talents wisely."

I will, I thought, watching him leave the doorway. And the first thing I'm going to do is to kill John Truman.

§ § § § §

"I don't get it," Travis said the next day, as we walked deeper into the woods on the south side of the Colt farmland. "Why in tarnation are ya interested in shootin' now?"

I shrugged and kept my raspy voice nonchalant. "You said it before: all I know is city-boy stuff. If I'm living on a farm with you and Lem, I may as well learn how to be a real farm boy. You're out here every few days, shooting rabbits and deer. Maybe I can help."

Travis gave me an odd look, then thought better of it and nodded. "Alright. We'll start with the basics."

Over the next hour, he explained all the subtleties of loading, aiming, shooting, and cleaning the lever-action Henry .44 rifle. Apparently, this weapon was what a lot of Union soldiers were using in the war against the south. Travis explained the differences between a musket, which had to be loaded manually, vs. a modern rifle like this, which used a self-contained bullet. Apparently, this 1864 model was the latest and greatest, Mr. Colt's pride and joy.

"The Henry ain't exactly got a lot o' range," Travis said, as we lay up against a fallen log at the edge of a clearing, "but if'n you're real quiet, ya can still bring home supper. Like that rabbit over yonder."

"Where?" I rasped, with a slight cough.

Travis shushed me. "Right there under that tree, that bush on the left." He handed me the gun and pointed to a spot about two hundred feet away, his voice low. "That's it. Balance it on your arm. Aim careful. This is a .44 rifle. Ya gotta hit just the head, else'n the whole thing'll explode, and there won't be nothin' for Momma to use for supper. Hold your breath, then when ya got it in your sights, count to three and slowly squeeze the trigger. Don't rush."

I did as he said, and was nearly knocked on my ass by the recoil. My ears rang from the explosion, which echoed around the forest. Travis peered over the log and grinned. "Well, ya shoulda aimed more for the head, but ya got it. Mom'll be pleased we got somethin' for supper. Let's go get some more."

By sunset, I'd managed to snag two, but missed several others. Travis got three, so we had a total of five in his burlap sack. "More'n enough for rabbit stew for today and tomorrow."

I made a face, distracted by a mental image of Bugs Bunny in an oven. "I'll see if I can bring home some fresh beef from the butcher. I'm in the mood for a hamburger."

"Those're good, too," Travis said with a laugh, giving my back a light slap. "And you might just make a durn good hunter, yet. For a city boy, that is."

I'll do just that, I thought. I began to formulate a plan on how I'd kill Truman. By Thursday, I'd managed to figure out where the boy lived, which class he went to — he went to the same school as Lem, just two grades higher, age 13 — and who his friends were. John Truman was a farmboy, like Travis and Lem, but the Truman family owned much more property out on Oakridge Trail, a mile or so from the Missouri River port at Hayden Field. I'd been in that area once before with Travis when we watched the steamboats go by from a nearby hill.

I spent the next couple of days plotting when and where to strike. Late Friday afternoon, I was working behind the counter at McBillin's General Store, adding up the last few items for a plump woman carrying an infant.

"Six dollars and..." I coughed a few times, "six dollars and forty-five cents."

"My, you really should get that looked after, young man," she said. "Catch your death."

"I'm not sick," I said hoarsely. "Got punched in the throat." I tipped my head back slightly and the woman's eyes widened at the fading bruise marks and my stitches. I gave her the change and she quickly scurried away with her groceries.

"Yer scarin' the customers away again, lad," warned McBillin, as he dropped a small crate of supplies. "I think the lady was only tryin' to show ya some sympathy."

"What, because I'm a crippled freak?" I snapped.

McBillin eyed me and started to respond, then thought better of it and busied himself with checking the inventory under the counter.

I heard a small disturbance in the far right aisle and looked up. It was a middle-aged woman with a drab purple dress and white lace frill, and two children in tow. One boy was about five or six and whining at the top of his lungs about how he wanted some sweets; the other kid was

taller, probably about my height, but a little thinner. He turned and I was stunned to see it was John Truman, in the flesh!

I felt a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach. *I could kill the pimply-faced bastard right now*, I thought quickly. *But I can't get my hands on a gun fast enough to take him out right here in the store.* I had no choice but to wait.

I ducked behind the curtain in the storeroom and peered around the edge, watching them from a distance. "No, you can't go with your brother to Hayden Field tomorrow," the mother admonished the smaller boy. "I want you home to help your father with the horses. With Jenny right ready to foal, your Pa'll be needin' all the assistance he can get."

"Aw, mamma..." the boy whined.

"I'll be back by 11 in the mornin'," the older Truman boy said. From their brief conversation, he was apparently delivering some supplies at the dock to help out his uncle's shipping business, then walking home.

I nodded, my fists tightening. *This was perfect.* There were only two routes that went out to Hayden Field, and I knew both of them. The one that led to the Truman farm was easy, less than three miles from the edge of the Colt property on the south side. *With luck*, I thought, *I could shoot him out in the woods and then bury the body — just like Tony Soprano. No muss, no fuss.*

"What you doin'?" said a familiar voice behind me.

I turned to find Rufus, giving me an odd look. "You done spyin' on Mas' McBillin?"

"No, no," I said in a rough voice. "Just taking a quick break."

"Throat still sore?"

I nodded and looked away.

The large man gripped my shoulder. "You need somethin' positive in your life, son. If'n you want, you come by the Gospel Hall Church on Sunday. Pastor Meacham'll set you right." His eyes looked sorrowful. "I know you done lost your voice. But you'll see: miracles do happen, they surely do."

I didn't reply. Instead, I turned back to watch the customers line up at the back-counter register. *The only miracle I hoped for was one clean shot right in the back of John Truman's head.*



Saturday morning I rose early. Mrs. Colt generally slept a little later on Saturdays, since the boys had no school and didn't have chores until about 8AM. I dressed quickly and exited the barn towards the farmhouse, with just enough light to illuminate the path that led to the back porch and the kitchen door. I brought along a brass canteen I had bought for 25 cents from McBillin's store, filled it with well water at the cast iron pump by the side of the house, then cautiously entered the kitchen door, cursing the hinge for its loud creak. I grabbed a stale sourdough roll from the breadbox along with a chunk of cheese and slipped them into a pocket of my blue North Face backpack, which I slung over my head, wincing slightly as one strap brushed against my wounded neck.

As I started to leave the kitchen, I spotted a small round bottle half-hidden on a kitchen shelf. *The absinthe*, I thought, my heart beating a little faster. My throat wound was stinging a little bit, so I figured what the hell — there were only a few drops left anyway. I swallowed the last of the bitter greenish fluid, knowing the effects would dull the pain in just a few minutes, then carefully slid the now-empty bottle back, hoping that Mrs. Colt would forget how much she had given me last night.

I crept into the living room and slid open the side cabinet, which held Mr. Colt's gun collection. The three on the left were old Enfield muskets — I bet they'd be worth a fortune back home on eBay — the next was a Springfield rifle, which Travis had warned me had a bad gun sight, and the one on the far right was the Henry, distinguished by its gleaming brass-plated sides. The drawer on the right held the .44 shells; I grabbed six, though in truth I planned only for a double-tap: one in the head, one in the chest. With luck, I could have the rifle back by 6PM. I knew that Saturday was the day Colt, Travis, and Lem generally spent weeding and planting, so chances were nil that any of them would need the rifle.

This will work, I assured myself, my hands trembling slightly as I slipped the shells into my pocket and hefted the rifle onto my shoulder. I left a note on the kitchen table explaining I had gone off to McBillin's store for an early-morning inventory and wouldn't be back until late afternoon, but would bring back some beef for dinner. I crept out the back

door and walked past the side of the farmhouse, careful to make as little noise as possible.

The day was already lighter; my watch indicated it was almost 6:05, which was right about the time Mrs. Colt usually rose. I left McBillin's wagon where it was, making sure that Dandy had his morning feed. As I reached the picket fence, I turned around and glanced back at the farmhouse. For some reason, the Colt's place looked sadder and more dilapidated than usual; maybe I was seeing it for the way it really was, a crumbling rustic Missouri farmhouse made of clapboard and tin.

I felt a little dizzy, as the effects of the pain medicine sank over me like a pleasant veil. Yes, I thought, suddenly calm. *Killing Truman made perfect sense.* A slight mist hovered over the withered dead grass, and the pale morning light gave the house an eerie bluish tinge, like something out of a serial killer movie: sinister, forlorn, and abandoned. I shook my head to clear it, then made my way out to the muddy path that led to the Old Country Road and deeper into the forest on the southeast side.

§ § § § §

"This is taking far too long," I muttered out loud. I had crouched behind a tree at the very back of the clearing for the better part of two hours, giving me a wide view of the main trail path that led from the Truman farm. The early morning fog had been surprisingly thick when I'd first arrived, but now it was fading as the sun began burning it off. A canopy of thick trees formed a rooftop over my head, shading me from the harsh glare. I glanced at my watch for the eighteenth time: already 9:15. "Where are you already, you little shit?" I said through clenched teeth, a little too loudly.

Right on cue, I saw a shape enter the clearing from a hundred yards away, rolling a cart filled with supplies and boxes, and my heart leapt. *Could it be?* I kept the gun barrel down low and inched my head over the edge of a fallen tree trunk. I sank back down and sucked in my breath. Yes, it was John Truman, right where I had expected him to be. *Should I shoot him now?* My heart was hammering. No — better let him at least make the delivery to his uncle at the riverboat, then kill him on the way back.

I leaned back, knowing the greenery around me would provide perfect cover. My stomach growled. I scattered a few stray ants off my backpack and grabbed the bread roll and made a quick cheese sandwich. An Egg McMuffin it wasn't, and it needed some mayo, but it'd get me by. I stuffed the last pieces of the sandwich in my mouth, then waited twenty more minutes — still no sign of him returning. Just as I was beginning to wonder if Truman had taken a different route home, I heard someone whistling in the distance. *Alright*, I thought, reaching for the rifle. *This is going down.*

I took my position, leaning on my chest, my legs straight behind me. I cocked the hammer and took aim towards the far right of the clearing. The boy was taking his time, stopping for a moment to tie his shoe, then continuing along the trail. I knew the range of the rifle wasn't that great, but I was confident from my practice the day before that I could at least hit his body and bring him down. That would give me more than enough time to reload for a second shot to the head.

"Damn," I said out loud, mentally smacking my forehead. *I'd forgotten to bring a shovel.* I'd need that to dispose of the body. It'd be tacky to just leave him lying there in the dirt. I wasn't planning to stay in St. Louis much longer, but I didn't want to be grabbed by the sheriff before I even made it out of town. Better to have John Truman just disappear than be found too soon.

I aimed again at the moving figure. "That's it," I whispered, as his head appeared precisely in the notch of the sight. "Five more seconds, and I've gotcha." I remembered the lyric from an old Eminem song: "You better never let it go... you only get one shot... this opportunity comes once in a lifetime." *Ain't that the truth.*

I held my breath. The boy whistled happily, completely unaware that his head was going to explode in a matter of moments. I began to squeeze the trigger, just as Travis had taught me, but my hand was shaking. *NOW!* I was screaming inside my head. *DO IT NOW!*

Still I hesitated. My vision was suddenly clouded with tears, or maybe it was just sweat... it was hard to say, since this November morning was unusually humid, a remnant of the storm from the previous few days. But I had to do it. I swept the moisture from my face with my left hand and aimed again. My trigger finger trembled.

Suddenly, a twig snapped behind me, then a foot nudged my leg. "Put it down," said a low voice. "Don't do it."

It was Travis.

"I've got to," I said, my eye glued to the gunsight, quickly repositioning the rifle. "I've got to kill him."

"Ya can't," he said calmly. "Ain't fair sneakin' up on the enemy."

I rolled over. "It is in *war!*" I hissed. "And that asshole out there deserves what he gets!"

Before I knew it, Travis had ripped the rifle out of my hands and shoved me back down in the dirt with his foot. In one quick motion, he ejected the round, letting it thump to the ground.

He sat down beside me, and I began to sob. "I have to kill him," I said hoarsely, pounding the ground with my fist with anger. "Don't you see? It's not fair."

In the distance, I heard the Truman boy disappear into the brush at the far side of the trail, still whistling happily, utterly oblivious of his narrow escape. *Maybe there was still time left to reach him from the other side of the forest*, I thought frantically.

"You ain't no killer," Travis said. "I know you."

"Under the right circumstances, *anybody* can be a killer!" I cried. "If you lost your fucking leg, I bet you'd wanna kill the guy who did it to you!"

"Reckon so. But only if we were fightin' on the battlefield, man to man."

"You're not a man."

Travis grinned. "Close enough. Come on." He pulled me up to my feet. "Colt'll kill us both if he finds us out here," he said, handing me my backpack as he pushed me towards the path. "And he'd do it with his bare hands."

"How'd you get here?" I asked, as a large brush scratched past my right shoulder. "How'd you even know where I was?"

He shrugged. "I thought somethin' was fishy on Wednesday when ya wanted the shootin' lessons. When you left the wagon behind, I figured you had other plans for the mornin'. I guessed right, is all."

I half-slid, half-fell down a mud slope to the hard clay trail, pulling my backpack up onto my shoulder. "How'd you find me?"

"Saw your tracks. Have to be a dang fool not to see all the bushes and branches ya bent back and the grass and mud ya walked through on the way over. It's easy to track most anythin' when it's been rainin' the night before."

I stopped and glared at him. "You should've just let me kill him."

Travis shook his head adamantly. "You ain't no kind o' murderer, Jason. I *know* you."

"You know what I *used to be*," I said hoarsely, my throat already aching. "Truman deserves to die for what he did to me."

Travis began walking and I ran to catch up to him. "Ain't his time," he said, matter-of-factly. "Fate decides when you're supposed to die — not you or me. Ain't no gettin' around destiny."

I glared at him. "So it was fate that took my voice away?"

"Who's to say it won't come back?" he said, idly grabbing a weed and sticking it in the side of his mouth. "Fate took my brother away in the war. He's dead, no matter what my ma thinks. You, Lem, an' my ma are all I got left now. Colt don't count."

The crickets and cicadas were chirping loudly and a riverboat blew its whistle in the distance to the east. I mulled over what he said, and my shoulders slumped in defeat. "I'm sorry," I said, coughing for a moment and clearing my throat, which was rasping again. "I guess that's true for me, too... even though I never really had a brother. I'm just an only child."

Travis thought for a moment, then came to a sudden stop. "Gimme your knife," he ordered.

"What?" I protested. "I'm not gonna try to stab him now."

He held out his hand and snapped his fingers impatiently. I reached in my pocket and reluctantly handed over my pocket knife. I watched as he clicked it open, then deftly made a small slit on his right thumb.

"What the hell are you doing?" I said, taken aback.

"Now gimme your hand," he ordered.

"What — you gonna cut my fingers off? So I can be like Twitly?"

Travis held my thumb in his left while he made a tiny incision with his right, and I sucked in my breath. He then snapped the knife shut and carefully placed our two thumbs together, a little trickle of blood oozing out.

"Ow," I muttered. "There's no possible way this is medically sterile."

He held our thumbs together tightly. "I declare Jason Thomas an' Travis Finnigan Colt to be blood brothers. Official-like."

I looked into his eyes, which seemed bluer than ever. "Blood brothers?"

Travis grinned. "Yeah." He pulled me closer and gave me a deep kiss. "From here on."

I leaned over and he wrapped his muscular arms around me.

Chapter 16

The rest of the day went by in a blur. I busied myself in the general store's stockroom, helping Rufus unload and replenish our merchandise on the back shelves. I mulled over the tumultuous events of the day. *What in God's name could I have been thinking?* I thought wearily. I realized now that killing Truman wouldn't give me my voice back. Sure, the revenge would probably feel great for a solid ten seconds... but then what? *No.* It made no sense for me to murder anybody — not for this. I never could have lived with the guilt. *Must've been side effects from the pain meds Mrs. Colt's been giving me every day,* I mused.

Still, no matter how Travis felt about me, I couldn't stay in St. Louis anymore. I didn't know where I wanted to go, but for the moment my thought was that anywhere but here would be better. What I needed was to go off in search of adventure and find out why I was in 1864 to begin with. Maybe Travis was right: fighting destiny just wasn't possible. And maybe Truman was meant to live. For all I knew, he was related to Harry Truman, the President who dropped the bombs on Japan to end World War II. *Fat chance of that pimply-ass kid fathering a future American President,* I thought, shaking my head.

As a distant church clock tower struck 6PM, Mrs. McBillin began to dim the kerosene lanterns along the aisles in preparation for closing time. A couple of last-minute customers came by to pick up a few things, and I rang them up at the back register. One of them looked familiar.

"Hello, Jason," the man said, smiling broadly. It was Judge Shaw, who had visited me in my sickbed just a few days earlier. He shook my hand. "Glad to see you're up and around, son. How's that wound of yours healing up?"

I nodded. "Stitches come out Monday," I rasped. "At least it's stopped hurting."

"Your voice any better?"

I shook my head, then added up his order and took his \$10 bill and placed it in the register till. "Same. I sound awful. Not even Auto-Tune could save me."

The judge raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry," I said, clearing my throat as I counted out his change. "It's kind of a music box they use back home to... sorta change people's voices and make them sing better than they really can. But it's hopeless."

"There's always hope," he said, pocketing his change and taking his bag. "And don't forget: I'm still very much obliged to you for helping get Faith out of that damned well in my backyard. You ever need a favor, you just have to ask."

I thought for a moment. "As a matter of fact, Judge, there is something. How well do you know the bank manager across the street?"

Five minutes later, we were seated in the office of Boatmen's Savings Bank. The manager, Mr. Bartholomew Dollarhyde, was a very thin bald man in his late 40s, with large grey mutton-chop sideburns and a raggedy beard. He peered at Olivia Thomas' deposit records through his pince-nez glasses and frowned.

"This is most irregular, Hamilton," he said nervously. "I accept your word that this young man is Jason Thomas, Olivia Thomas' only living relative. But I'm reluctant to hand out such a large amount — on a Saturday evening, yet!"

"Tut-tut," said Judge Shaw. "\$800 is a trifling amount these days, Bartholomew. You do... have the cash in the vault, do you not?"

"Of course, of course. But it'll take me a moment." Dollarhyde got up to leave, then hesitated a moment. "You're absolutely certain about this, Hamilton? We do have a reputable institution here."

"Exactly why Aunt Olivia kept all her life's savings here for 20 years," I said.

Judge Shaw nodded his approval.

"Alright. One moment."

We watched him dart out of his office, then lit a few lanterns in the outer office, and we heard the vault door in the distance open with a loud clank.

“There’s one more thing I need you to do, Judge,” I said. “It’s... kind of a legal matter.”

“Certainly,” he said. “While I’m a county Judge, I’m of course certified as an attorney by the state bar, and I still maintain a private law office two blocks from the courthouse. What do you need?”

“My Aunt Olivia’s property — the two thousand acres. I, uh... want to give it all to Mrs. Colt.”

Shaw’s eyebrows shot up. “Assign the property rights to Sarah? Not to Mr. Colt?”

I shook my head. “Definitely not. He’s an ass—... uh, he doesn’t deserve it. I figure if I leave it to Mrs. Colt in her name, she and her two sons are protected. And if anything happens to her, it goes to her sons — and then to charity. Not a dime to Seth Colt. As long as they’re alive, they could sell half of it and still have enough to live on for a year or two.”

He snorted. “That farm land’s worth a lot more’n that, son,” he said. “Current market rates? I’d say that land’s worth at least \$10,000, even after taxes. Sarah will do very well — very well, indeed.”

“Good.”

Mr. Shaw cocked his head. “Now, technically, we haven’t yet had the court hearing giving you the title to that property.”

My heart sank. “Is that a problem?”

The judge made a casual gesture, then leaned forward. “Not for somebody who saved my daughter’s life,” he said in a low voice, then sat back up with a wry smile. “It’s just a formality, anyway. I give you my word, the land title deed will be done promptly by 9AM Monday morning.” He picked up a pen and a blank piece of paper from the banker’s desk. “Let me make out a quick form giving me temporary power of attorney. That will give me the right to transfer your property on this one occasion.”

When he finished, I dipped the pen in ink and signed the paper, then coughed a few times. “Thanks, Judge.”

We looked up as Dollarhyde quickly stepped back in, his face a little flush. “Alright,” he said, counting out two small stacks. “Seven hundred

dollars in bills, and five twenty-dollar gold pieces. I hope that'll do. That closes out your Aunt's account. Sign here, and here."

I did. As he sat at his desk, I thought for a moment about what Travis had said earlier. *Destiny*. Maybe I should prepare for a couple of different possible futures — one in 1864, and another one in case I ever get back to my own time. "There's one more thing," I said. "Could I open my own account?"

The banker rolled his eyes. "Right this very minute? What kind of account?"

"Savings. Something I can get to at anytime. Even many years from now."

"Ah, you mean a trust," said the Judge, turning to the banker. "Bartholomew, set up a trust fund account for this young man. Call it... The Jason Thomas Trust." He turned to me. "That sound alright to you?"

I nodded. "Yes, sir." I slid back three of the bills on the banker's desk. "Keep this \$300 in my account for now. And I have a couple of conditions: I want to be able to wire money to and from that account if I need to. And I'll need to be able to take all or part of the money out in person — or give it to anyone who has my signature and knows the code word. At any date — now or in the distant future."

Both men's mouths fell open in surprise.

"This is most irregular!" sputtered Mr. Dollarhyde. "Code word? I mean, it's not impossible, but it's simply not done this way. Highly irregular."

Judge Shaw leaned back in his chair, looking thoughtful. "I'm well-versed with the current financial laws of the great state of Missouri," he said, stroking his chin, "and all this sounds perfectly legal to me. If the beneficiary of the estate can show Mr. Thomas' signature, and knows the account number and the code word, he can do what he will with the account. Do I have that right?"

I nodded. "Yes. Exactly."

Dollarhyde frowned. "Oh, very well. Sign this account card, and take this copy for yourself. I'll make a note that the holder of the trust must know the words. And what are they?"

"It's a phrase: 'Lady Gaga's Little Monsters.'"

The bank manager blanched. "What in tarnation does that mean?"

“Nothing,” I said, suppressing a laugh. “Just some random words nobody but me would ever know. But if someone knows the account number, the code words, and has my signature—”

“—yes, yes, they’re entitled to the proceeds. I understand. Still, it’s... most irregular, as I’m sure you’ll agree.”

“But it’s legal. Even five years from now or ten years from now.”

“Hell, I reckon it’d still be good a hundred years from now,” chortled Judge Shaw. “Not that any of us would need it by then.”

Both men laughed.

I shrugged and managed a small smile. “Maybe my descendents will some day. You never know.”

§ § § § §

By 6PM I felt utterly exhausted, rattling along Old Country Road in the store’s mule wagon back towards the Colt farm just beyond the outskirts of town. I’d managed to get a couple of pounds of ground sirloin from Jacob Morgan, the butcher two doors down from McBillin’s, just before closing. Call me a picky eater, but I preferred the idea of making my own faux Big Macs to the thought of eating roast rabbit. I wasn’t exactly thrilled with the idea of eating a cute, fuzzy creature — even with biscuits and gravy, the way Mrs. Colt served it.

About forty minutes later, I pulled the wagon up to the barn and glanced over at the dimly-lit house.

“That you, boy?” called an angry voice at the front door. “You’re damn near a good half hour late!”

“Coming, Mr. Colt!” I called.

On the ride back to the farm, I had reached the decision that this would be my last night in St. Louis. Despite my affection for Travis, I had no real life here. I had the strange feeling that destiny wanted to take me far away from St. Louis to points unknown. I knew from last week’s rains that getting back inside Marsen’s Cavern again and finding the time-travel doorway that would take me home was probably impossible, at least anytime soon.

“But Frank and Jesse James said the mud always washes away by Spring,” I mused out loud as I stepped off the wagon and fastened the

mule's reins to the fence post by the edge of the barn. "I could come back in five or six months and try again."

Somehow, that felt right. At least I had a plan now, one that didn't involve killing anybody. Maybe I could make enough money to sock some more away in the trust fund. *And someday, I thought, Jason Thomas could get all the money... either in 1865, or 150 years later. What would 150 years of interest add up to?* Sounded like winning the Lotto.

"Bout dang time you got here," said a voice to my left, as I trudged up onto the porch steps.

"Travis, you scared the living shit outta me," I said, momentarily jumping. "Did you, uh... put back the you-know-what?"

The boy snapped his pocket watch shut. "Didn't get a chance. I hid the rifle out in the barn for now."

I knocked the mud off my boots against the side of the steps. "Okay. We can take care of it later."

He stopped me by the door. "You alright?" he said warily. "You sound kinda funny."

I turned away. *Could he somehow know that I was planning something?* "Sure I sound funny," I said, controlling my voice as best I could. "Half my vocal chords are shot. I sound like a yodeling frog."

He gave me an odd look. "C'mon. Dinner's waitin'."

§ § § § §

By 9:30PM, I yawned and made my excuses to the Colts. I made my way back to the barn, mentally running over my escape plan again. I was going to leave \$100 for Travis with a note in his older brother's secret cubbyhole up in the hayloft, which only he and I knew about. I desperately hoped Travis would understand that there was no place for me in the St. Louis of 1864, and all I was doing was just treading water by staying here. I'd also write another note for Mr. & Mrs. Colt, thanking them and explaining that I had left them all of Aunt Olivia's property — I chuckled, thinking of the rage on Mr. Colt's face once he found out I really signed the property over to his wife — and that if they sold half of it, they'd have more than enough money to expand their farm and hire a couple of dozen more men to work the fields.

“Maybe that’s part of their destiny,” I said softly, as I opened the barn door. *I’ve been here almost a solid month, I thought, but the Colt family’s lives can only change for the better from here on.* A distant railroad engine roared its steam whistle in the distance; that’d be the last passenger train that ran until dawn. I shivered slightly and made a note to add an extra blanket before I went to sleep.

As I closed the door, I felt a pang. Travis would be very hurt, probably even feel betrayed. We were, after all, blood brothers. I stopped and examined the little scratch on my thumb and felt the scab. *He’d get over it, I thought.* Travis would be a lot more popular at school if he dressed better and was a little more upscale, even go to college someday. For all I knew, he was meant to grow up and have a family of his own. Or maybe even wind up with a guy. Who could tell in 1864? The words ‘homosexual’ or ‘gay’ didn’t even exist. *I bet he was really bi-curious, I thought with a grin. With a face that handsome and a body like that, he’d have no problem dating anybody he wanted back home in Seattle — straight, gay, or undecided.*

Just as I crossed the barn and reached the ladder at the back that led up to the hayloft, Missie stirred and let out a mournful murmur. “C’mon, hold it down, willya?” I called over my shoulder. “You’ll get milked in eight more hours. So just keep a lid on it.” *The last thing I needed was a noisy cow interrupting my sleep.* But I wasn’t planning on sleeping long. The first train out of St. Louis was at 5:30AM — I knew from an early conversation with Rufus that the passenger trains ran every half hour — and I figured I’d just get on board and keep going until the tracks stopped. From there on, my itinerary was wide open.

I didn’t have much to pack; I still wore my Swatch Revitalize wristwatch and had my pocket knife in my pocket. I lit the lantern with my Bic butane lighter. From the hayloft shelf, I grabbed my worldly possessions and threw them into my backpack: my broken iPod, my cell phone, my Maglite, a small folding shovel and a pickaxe from the cave, my pocket notebook, two ballpoint pens (only one of which worked), and a pair of Rayban sunglasses. I still had enough room for two shirts and an extra pair of pants, and I’d wear my fleece-lined jacket and my boots. Anything else I needed I could buy en route with the \$400 cash I had. At the last minute, I added the small picture frame that held the photograph of my

dearly departed Aunt Olivia, along with a pocket edition of *David Copperfield*. Even if I never finished Twitly's classes, I figured having something to read on the train would help pass the time.

"Hey!" called a familiar voice from below.

Shit. I shoved my fully-loaded backpack out of the way, behind a bale of hay. "Up here," I called over the railing.

Travis' head popped up at the top of the ladder. "So, ya wanna..." he said shyly, nodding towards the mass of quilts in the back corner of the hayloft. "You know."

I grinned. "Wrassle?"

He nodded shyly, then leaned forward.

I took a quick whiff in his general direction and my nose wrinkled. "Christ, Travis! You could knock a buzzard off a shit wagon!"

He shrugged. "Whatcha expect? Daffodils? I was traipsin' through the woods this mornin', stoppin' you from a dangfool murder, then fertilizin' out in the fields with Lem and Colt for eight solid hours."

"Wash up first," I said, indicating the wooden bucket down below. "If my tongue is going anywhere below the beltline, that area had better be clean."

"T'ain't no guarantees," Travis warned.

"We'll see about your taint later," I retorted.

"Ya drive a hard bargain," he said, quickly stepping down the ladder. "I'll be right back."

Travis quickly shed his boots, overalls, and shirt, then stood below, completely naked, his muscular chest and ripped arms illuminated by the kerosene lanterns. He braced himself, then grabbed the water bucket and doused his head. He looked incredible.

"Don't forget to use soap!" I called, tossing him the shampoo bottle.

He caught it and made a face. "That's for *girls*," he snarled.

"As opposed to pigs!" I retorted with a laugh. "C'mon — lather up and I'll come down and get you a refill to rinse off."

I half-stepped/half-slid down the ladder. Travis turned away bashfully so all I could see was his powerful back and broad shoulders, separated by a line that deeply etched down his spine and into his muscular buttocks, which glistened with water and suds. *That's a million-dollar ass if I ever saw one*, I said, feeling an instant throb in my groin. I had been

so traumatized by my throat injury last weekend, and then so consumed with wanting to kill John Truman, sex had been the last thing on my mind over the last few days. But I was ready to go now.

"I'll get some water," I said hoarsely, my voice shaking a little with unbridled lust. I ran with the bucket out to the dusty path next to the house and quickly maneuvered the well pump, filling the bucket to the brim, then sloshed it back to the barn and slammed the door behind me, my heart racing.

"Hold still," I said as I walked over, my hands shaking slightly at the sight of Travis' magnificent body. For a kid who was physically just three months older than me, he looked like he could qualify for the Olympic gymnast team. And his face still took my breath away: piercing blue eyes, almost-feminine long blond eyelashes, but a strong jaw, high cheekbones, and not a single blemish anywhere, like a world-class model. *Drop-dead gorgeous by any standard.*

"Ya gonna pour or not?" he said, his teeth chattering slightly. "C'mon! I got suds in my eyes, and I'm damn near freezin'!"

"Sorry." I rinsed him off, letting the water slowly cascade down to the sawdust-covered barn floor. "Turn around." He did and I massaged his back and ass, brushing away the suds, my hand slipping slightly on the soap-moistened skin. I noticed a small mole on his right cheek.

"Hey," I said with a grin, giving his buttock a small squeeze. "I finally found a flaw!"

"What?" he said, turning.

I put my hand behind his neck as he turned around. "I always thought you were the most perfect guy I ever saw, Travis," I said in a low voice. "You're beautiful. But you have a little mole on your ass. Glad to know you're only 99.9% perfect."

The boy grinned. "I ain't perfect. Look: my dick still bends to the right."

I looked down and saw that he was right. He was hard as a rock and breathing a little heavily.

"C'mon up to my place," I said, nodding towards the ladder. "And be careful you don't bang your dick on the way up."

We quickly made our way up to the hayloft and tumbled together onto my makeshift bed, laughing. Mrs. Colt had supplied me with three

layers of hand-made quilts and a sheet, plus a thick blanket on top. I wouldn't say it was the most comfortable bed I'd ever had, but it was warm enough at night.

I nuzzled his neck, brushed his long, wet blond bangs out of his eyes, then slid my left hand down below his waist, and he let out a soft moan. His skin was slightly moist but now smelled terrific. "Hey," I whispered, as I pulled off my clothes. "As bad as things have been for me this past week... you're the one good thing I have left. Thanks for that."

Travis looked up and smiled shyly, then he kissed me. Our breathing grew rapidly as our hands explored each other's bodies. He held our cocks together and began to rub.

"No," I said hoarsely, feeling an unexpected surge. "I'm right on the edge already. Let me..."

"Uh-uh," he interrupted. "I wanna do you first."

He kissed me again, briefly slipping his tongue into my mouth, and I moaned. He gently shoved me down on my back, then moved down towards my groin.

"It's even bigger up close," he said, playing with my groin, wagging my erection back and forth.

"Just shut up and suck," I muttered.

He did as I asked and I fell back in a near delirium. It didn't take long. In less than thirty seconds, my hips began bucking and I spasmed over and over again. Travis choked, then spat, then continued to pump my dick manually with his right hand. I felt warm liquid spatter across my abdomen and chest as he milked out the last few drops.

"GOD!" I cried, my chest heaving. "St-stop... stop! That was..." I was at a loss for words.

He fell beside me and put his arm across my chest and gave me a quick kiss. I tasted a little salty residue on his lips. He nestled his still-damp head onto my shoulder.

"This stuff we do together," Travis said in a low voice. "It's... it's good. But I like this part best of all. Jes' layin' here and havin' somebody to hold on to."

"Yeah."

He reached over and began to idly play with the two or three hairs growing out of my left nipple. "My brother Billy James... he had a little more hair 'n this on his chest," he said. "He was barely 18."

My nipples began to harden with the attention, and despite my recent orgasm, I felt my groin begin to swell again. I turned towards him and kissed him passionately, and he moaned.

"You know about 69?" I asked, a little breathlessly.

"The number?"

"It's more than a number. Trust me."

Ten minutes later, he fell back, completely spent, his powerful chest heaving. "My lord," he said, wiping off his mouth and gasping for breath. "I ain't never done that before."

"Add that to your list," I said, using the blanket to wipe off a few stray splatters. It was rare for me to go twice in a twenty-minute period. *One of the benefits of being 15 and horny*, I thought with a grin. *Quick recharge*. "I just hope the neighbors didn't hear us. You were pretty loud."

We snuggled under the blankets for a few minutes and I dimmed the lantern. "Hey," I said softly. "I owe you a lot for stopping me from... well, from making an incredibly stupid mistake this morning." I stroked the inside of his muscular arm, letting my fingers trace the vein on his thick bicep, leading up to his broad shoulder.

Travis smiled. "Least I could do, for all you done for me."

I let out a long sigh of relief. "That was the absolute worst thing I ever did in my life... or *almost* did."

"But you *didn't* do it."

"No. Thanks to you." I paused and thought for a moment. "What's the worst thing you ever did?"

Travis looked up at the barn roof. "I ain't never killed nobody — though I've sure thought about it. But I think the worst thing I done was with a tortoise, back when I was little."

"A turtle?"

"Yeah, sorta. Me 'n Billy James were out in the woods, spring of '58. We split up, and 'bout an hour later I found me a tortoise."

"What's the difference between a turtle and a tortoise?"

He laughed. "You city boys! Turtle lives in water; tortoise lives on land. Don't they teach you nothin' back in Seattle?"

"C'mon, what happened?" I asked, a little irritated.

"Alright, so there was this legend 'round here 'bout the biggest tortoise in the woods. They called him 'King George.'"

"Ah," I said. "Probably goes back to the War of 1812."

"Mebbe, I dunno. Afore my time. Nobody knew how long he'd been around — maybe 50 years, maybe 60. Schoolteachers told us they kin live more 'n a hundred years! My daddy told me King George had even been there when he was growin' up, and his father, too. Anyway, I was walkin' in the pines out near Miller's farm, takin' a path to where I thought Billy was waitin'... and then I saw it. Why, my eyes plumb popped outta my head! Dang thing was at least three, maybe four feet across... must've weighed a hunnert pounds! My hand to God!"

I let out a low whistle. "That's a *big* turtle."

"*Tortoise*," he corrected. "Anyway, I always heard tell that if you turn a tortoise over, they can't turn back. I always thought that was just an old wives' tale — I was barely nine, ya understand — so I snuck behind it, grabbed the shell, and managed to tip it over on its back!"

"What'd it do?"

"It lay there, snappin' and a-hissin', flailin' its feet, rockin' back and forth, tryin' its very best to flip back over and bite me. But all it could manage was kinda spinnin' round a little bit. Totally pow'rless."

I leaned up on my elbow. "So what happened?"

"Well, I watched it for a few minutes, an' I realized they was right: tortoises *can't* turn over by themselves! So I did my best to turn it back, but it kept hiss'n' and tryin' to bite me. The more I tried to help, the angrier it got. And it started goin' into conniptions, like it was goin' totally mad."

"Jesus, Travis. What'd you do?"

The handsome boy's face sank. "I ran and found Billy James. Took me a good twenty minutes, but I found him. Billy wasn't happy with me — said it was bad luck to hurt a tortoise this old. We rushed back to the clearin', and..."

"And what?"

"King George was dead," Travis said in a low voice. "Poor thing had been vomitin' up yellow stuff... it was just awful. We turned it right side

up straightaway, but it didn't help. Head was stickin' out his shell, tongue lollin', legs were still. Stone-cold dead." He turned away.

I sighed. "Well... it was just a dumb animal."

"Tortoise ain't no animal — it's a *reptile*. Twitly taught us that. And I had no right ta kill it."

"Well, still..."

"I felt right badly for what I did," he continued. "Billy James kicked me in the ass, told me I was worthless and ign'rant for killin' a dumb, defenseless thing like that. Wouldn't speak a word to me for a week." Travis was on the verge of tears.

An uncomfortable silence passed.

"Hey, look," I said, touching his arm. "We all make mistakes. I would've made the biggest mistake of my life if it hadn't been for you." I gave him a soft kiss. "Thanks for that."

He nodded, then sat up and turned in the direction of the farmhouse.

"You gotta go back?" I asked.

"Yeah. We got church in the mornin', then we gotta bring in some feed from town for the herd on the lower 40 'round noon. Colt'll tan both our hides if you and me don't come along."

I let out a long sigh, knowing that by the time they woke up and realized I was gone, I'd already be halfway to Arizona or Nevada. It wouldn't be for another six or seven months before a newspaper editorial told Americans "go West, young man!" after the war. But I was always a little ahead of my time.

Travis stood up and stretched and yawned, his incredible body bathed in pale amber light. *I was going to miss touching him, feeling the warmth of his skin, the tight ripples of his muscles, his shaggy blond hair...* I looked away as he scrambled over the edge of the hayloft railing, still naked, and stepped down the ladder onto the barn floor, then tip-toed through the hay and dirt over to his overalls.

"Wait!" I called. I yanked up my underwear, then slid down the rungs to join him, just as he was buttoning up his shirt.

"Huh?" he asked.

I pulled him towards me and hugged him tightly. "I just... I just wanted to say goodbye." It was an effort to keep my voice steady.

He flashed a toothy grin, then gave me a quick kiss. "Ain't no need. I'll be seein' ya in less'n eight hours at breakfast."

"Right," I said, a little guiltily. "Yeah. Alright."

Travis slipped on his boots, then pulled on his coat and grabbed the Henry rifle, which we had stashed just inside the front door.

The night air felt a lot colder outside my bed, especially without another young body to keep me warm. I shivered as I watched him start to walk away.

"One more thing!" I called.

Travis stopped at the barn door, about to close it, and turned as I jogged up to him.

"Thanks again," I said, my voice hoarser than usual. I fought to keep the tears from my eyes, trying to remember an acting exercises we'd done in drama class back home in January. "I mean... for everything you've done for me here in St. Louis."

He smiled. "Like I said before — I *know* you, Jason. You never woulda pulled that trigger. Even if I hadn't come along. Ain't got it in ya."

I shivered in the evening chill. "We'll never know. But it's destiny, right?"

"Yeah."

A voice yelled out from the distance. "Where you at, boy?"

"I gotta git," he said hurriedly. "G'night."

"G'night, Travis," I said, as he closed the door. "And goodbye," I added in a much lower voice, as I latched the door with a click.

§ § § § §

I couldn't take off immediately. Hanging out at the downtown St. Louis train station for five hours wouldn't exactly be my idea of a fun evening, though they did at least have an indoor waiting area that was probably heated. I decided to first take a nap here in the barn, setting my wristwatch to beep promptly at 4:15AM. That'd give me a solid hour to leave, drop off the wagon back at McBillin's general store, then walk the ten blocks down 4th Street to the central station downtown. With luck, I'd be on the train half an hour before any of the Colts even woke

up. And they wouldn't really notice I'd gone until at least 6:30AM at breakfast.

I tossed and turned. What little sleep I had over the next few hours was filled with unsettling dreams: part me of still wished I had killed John Truman, and I saw in graphic slow-motion what it would've been like to shoot him in the head, his lifeless body lying cold and still on the ground, unmoving. *But you ain't no killer*, Travis' voice reminded me. *I know you.*

My eyes momentarily filled with tears. *Was it worth leaving?* I mulled over all my options, and no matter how I sliced it, there was nothing here in St. Louis worth staying for except for Travis. But I was overwhelmed by a feeling that tonight was the night: I had to leave. And I couldn't be certain that if I saw Truman again, I wouldn't start thinking about killing him. Plus, no matter how sympathetic Twitly seemed, I couldn't stand being treated like a pathetic victim by the other kids at school. No, it made more sense to take my chances elsewhere.

Freedom was what I needed. But in six months, I'd come back to Missouri in the spring, try to keep out of sight, and find my way back inside Marsden's Cavern. Maybe once I was able to find the mysterious blue light again, I'd be instantly transported back to 2013, right where I left off... or maybe in 1971... or maybe in the distant future. But anything would be better than the Shitville, Missouri of 1864.

My wrist alarm began beeping, and one of the cows stirred. *Damn.* It was time.

I arose and turned up the kerosene lantern by my bedside, then retrieved my backpack and checked it again. Everything was there. I pulled on my clothes, wearing two shirts and my woolen coat to stave off the cold; my guess was it was below forty degrees tonight. Travis had mentioned at dinner that the first snows were due in another two or three weeks.

I slipped on my socks and boots, then gave a last look around what had been my primitive 1864 bedroom for the last month. On impulse, I took an edge of the quilt in my hand and inhaled. *Travis' smell.* I was going to miss that.

I brushed my hair, then tossed the brush and the mirror in my backpack, zipped it up, and stepped over the hayloft guardrail to the ladder.

One of the cows on the right — I was never sure of all of their names, Melissa or Matilda — stared at me, chewing her cud. I walked over and petted her. “I’m not gonna miss your delightful fragrance,” I said, glancing at the green lumps in the hay on the corral floor. “But it’s been fun.” She seemed grateful for the attention. “Stay away from the barbecue if you can.”

I turned down the kerosene lamps, made my way over to the barn door and clanked the wooden catch up, then slowly pushed it open. The coast looked clear. The half-moon was misty and partly obscured by clouds, like a scene right out of *True Blood*. A glance to my left told me that Dandy was asleep at the wagon. *How mules and horses slept standing up, I’ll never know*, I mused.

“Hey,” I whispered, brushing the mule’s forehead with my hand. “We gotta go. Head ’em up and move ’em out.”

The mule let out one small bray, unhappy at being disturbed at this late hour.

“Shut up, dumbass!” I muttered, sliding my backpack behind the wagon seat. “No offense. Here.” I found some sugar cubes Rufus had stashed in a leather pouch at the driver’s position, put a few in my palm and let Dandy slurp them down. That quieted him down in seconds.

I checked my backpack one last time. I still had the nagging feeling I’d managed to leave something important behind, then suddenly remembered. “Of course,” I muttered, trudging back to the barn for the last time. *The guitar!* It was the only musical instrument I had, and I figured the money I left Travis would more than pay the few dollars it was worth. I’d desperately need some kind of music to keep me company on the long road west. I grabbed it by the neck from its resting place, then jogged back out the door and back to the wagon. Just as I stashed it in the back and started to hop up, I noticed a dark shape standing on the path to my left.

“Now just where d’ya think you’re headed?” said a low voice, followed by a loud metallic click.

I turned and saw Mr. Colt walking towards me, dressed in his long underwear, pointing a rifle at me.

Shit. “I... I have some early-morning errands to run,” I said, coughing a little in the cold night air. “Sir.”

He crept closer and glanced at my backpack on the wagon floor. "Looks like ya got a mind ta leave us. You get on back to the barn, boy."

"No," I said, glaring at him. "I'm outta here."

"We still got a 'greement, you 'n me," the man said, spitting off to the side. "Little matter of that 2000 acres. We ain't quite settled on that."

"You mean Mrs. Colt's land," I blurted out. "I signed over the documents last night. She owns Aunt Olivia's property now. All of it."

Colt dropped his mouth open in surprise, then quickly recovered and pointed the rifle at my head. "Then maybe I got no reason lettin' ya live. Get inside the barn."

My hands shook. *This was definitely not part of the plan.* I instantly regretted telling Colt the truth.

I stepped away from the wagon and patted Dandy, who brayed again and nuzzled my arm, apparently in the mood for more sugar, then stashed the guitar in the back.

"What exactly do you plan on doing with me?" I said, as the man marched me back to the barn.

"I'll haveta think about that," he said, as he opened the door. "Keep your hands up."

"Jesus," I said. "What is this, *High Noon*? Do I look like I'm carrying a weapon?"

Colt nudged the rifle barrel into my back. "Keep those feet movin' or I'll blow your goddam head clean off — right here, right now!"

As we entered the barn, I watched as he turned up two of the kerosene lanterns. Our shadows danced and flickered on the rough wood walls. He pushed me towards the far right side of the corral, and I carefully avoided a pitchfork that leaned on the wall about five feet from a supporting post.

"Don't ya get no ideas," he said. "Keep them arms up."

"You asshole," I snapped. "I've got nothing I can give you! I told you: your wife's name is on the deed now. You can do what you want with it. Judge Shaw says it's worth almost ten grand! Sell half of it, and you've got enough money to live on for years! Hire some farmhands, buy more livestock, put in a backyard pool... do whatever you want. Send Travis and Lem to school!"

"They already got school."

“No, I mean *college*. Make something with their lives. They could be a lot more than just farmers.”

He slammed the side of the rifle barrel into my head, and I saw a flash of a dozen tiny lights go off in my eyes. I fell to my knees, woozily holding my head and sucking in my breath with the pain.

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with farmers,” he snarled. “My oldest boy thought he was better, too. Didn’t get him far.”

I shook my head, still partially stunned. “You mean Billy James? But he went off to war, right?”

He spat and laughed, a low cruel laugh without any humor. “Rottin’ in the ground is more like it.”

I felt the right side of my head, where a small lump was growing. “Yeah,” I said, my mind racing as I tried to figure out a strategy to get around this psycho. “Travis told me that Billy probably died in the war. Battle of Cold Harbor.”

Colt took a step forward and leaned down. “That’s what Travis thinks.” He crept closer and half-whispered: “But you’re right on top of him.”

I looked down. I’d jostled some of the hay on the floor by the barn wall, and saw that the dirt on this side was a lighter brown color than the area surrounding it. *But that would mean...*

“Wait, hold up. You’re saying he’s... he’s buried right here?” I gestured towards the ground in front of me.

The man smiled, showing his yellowed teeth, an incisor missing on the upper left side. “That’s right. And you’re gonna be joinin’ him real soon.”

My insides turned to ice. “They’ll hear you inside the house if you shoot me,” I said, my eyes darting around to see if I could grab a weapon. *Shit — the pitchfork was too far away.* “I know how loud that gun is.”

“Why, I reckon I could just say I heard a noise and thought some varmint was out in the barn tryin’ to rob us. Had us some ‘coons ‘n coyotes out here on occasion, tryin’ ta chew up our milk cows.”

I kept my voice steady. “Sounds like you’ve thought this all out pretty clearly.”

Colt shrugged. “Been plannin’ this since the day after you ‘rived. Ya just sped up my timetable, is all.”

A moment of silence passed. "So now what?"

Still holding the rifle on me, he walked over to a batch of tools in a barrel and pulled out a shovel and threw it on the ground.

"Start diggin'. Right there."

"You're gonna bury me *alive*? Boy, you are a sick bastard."

"Shut up!" he barked. "More diggin', and less talkin'."

Using the shovel as leverage, I staggered up to my feet, swaying dizzily. *This was not a good day*, I thought. I began shoveling, flinging the dirt to the side.

"You won't get away with this," I said in a low voice. "Travis'll stop you."

"Travis ain't here. That little shit knows where his bread's buttered. He ain't yer concern. Keep diggin'."

Fifteen exhausting minutes later, I'd managed to dig a shallow hole about three feet deep and six feet long. Despite the cold evening air, my back was sticky with sweat, partly from fear, partly from exertion, and also because I was still wearing two shirts and a thick coat. From outside the barn, I heard Dandy bray several times, probably anxious to leave. *Not as anxious as I was*, I thought glumly.

My shovel hit something. I looked down and scraped off the dirt. It was part of a human skull.

"Say hello to Billy James," Colt said with a sickly grin. "Keep ya company over the next couple hundred years!"

"Jesus," I said, absolutely stunned. "You weren't just trying to scare me!"

"Now, why in tarnation would I try ta do that?" His eyes had a mad sparkle to them, and his scraggly salt-and-pepper beard gave him an uncanny resemblance to Charlie Manson.

"Gee, I dunno..." I said. "Maybe because you're an serial killer asshole?"

"You shut your damn fool mouth!" he snarled. "Turn around."

"What're you gonna do, you pervert?" I said.

He slammed me again with the rifle barrel, only this time I didn't go down. I turned to the left, shook my head to clear it, then looked him right in the eye. "You fucking coward! You killed your own son? And now me? For what reason?"

"You ask a lotta questions, Jason," he said calmly. "Ya always did have a hand full of 'gimme' and a mouth full o' much obliged."

"Spare me the hick talk and just get to the point," I said, sticking the shovel into the dirt.

Colt smiled grimly. "Billy James got some foolish idea he was gonna leave the farm. Him and me... we had ourselves an understandin'."

I was confused. "What? He didn't have any property?"

"Naw," the man said. "But he gave me what I wanted. Man's got needs."

An uncomfortable silence passed, and my eyes widened. "You mean... you had sex with him?"

He spat. "Ain't no sex. I just had my way with his backside, is all. My wife... Sarah's a good woman, but after she done miscarried back in '61, she ain't been much for wifely duties."

"So you fucked your adopted son up the ass?" I said in a low voice, completely stunned.

Colt shrugged. "Like I said... a man's got needs, and a boy's gotta do what his father tells him. When I found out Billy was gonna leave and done enlist in tha Army... well, you see how far he got," he said, pointing towards the skull in the grave.

"But all those letters..."

"Just two letters," he corrected. "I sent 'em myself. I knew his hand-writin', and that was the only way Travis and Lem would stop askin' their damn fool questions."

"Wait," I said, as a terrible realization began to dawn on me. "That means... you and Travis..."

"You give that no never-mind. What's between me and him ain't none o' yer concern. Besides," he said in a menacing voice, "he's been spendin' some time out here in the barn with you lately, last few weeks. I do b'lieve yer just as guilty of enjoyin' the pleasures of the flesh as any young man. I s'pect he's learned a thing or two."

My mouth dropped open. *Fuck*, I thought. *Colt had heard us out here in the barn, after all.*

"That isn't the same thing at all," I protested. "We..."

"Enough of this dilly-dallyin'," he interrupted. "For the last time — turn around."

I looked down at the skull, then looked back up at the gun and his face, my mind racing. *Now I understand how Travis' panicked turtle in the woods might have felt, I thought. But I'll be damned if I let this man flip me over in my shell and watch me die.*

"Look, Mr. Colt," I said, speaking very quickly. "I've got \$500 in cash — four hundred in bills, plus five \$20 gold pieces. Cash. I'll give it all to you, if you just let me go. Nobody has to know."

I knew I still had another \$300 left in the bank, which would be my emergency fund while I was on the road. *But if this situation didn't qualify as an emergency, I dunno what did.*

His eyes narrowed. "That so? Show me. Slowly!"

I lowered my left arm and reached into my pants pocket, then pulled out the five gold pieces and laid them in my hand. "Here's the gold," I said, letting the reflections dance cross his face.

"That's good, that's good," he said. "Just toss 'em right in front of me. And now the bills. Slowly."

"I've... I've hidden the rest," I said, my mind racing. *If I could just get outside, I thought, I might be able to make a run for it.*

"Quit stallin', boy!"

"Wait a minute," I said, still speaking quickly. "Hold on. How do I know you won't still kill me?"

He smiled again. "Why, I could give ya my word."

"And if I refuse?"

Colt pressed the rifle barrel right up against my forehead. "Then I got a bigger mess to clean up in the barn."

Not a lot of options, I thought, my heart suddenly sounding louder in my chest. I began to get a little giddy at the thought of my gravestone: Jason Zachary Thomas... 1998-1864. I began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" he snarled.

"They'll never be able to explain that at the funeral parlor," I said, starting to shake with hysterics at the insanity of it all. "Even if it's true!"

"THE MONEY!" he bellowed. "ALL OF IT! NOW!"

"Don't do it, Jason!" called Travis at the front of the barn.

Colt turned his head. In a flash, I grabbed the shovel and flipped up a full load of dirt right into the man's face. The rifle went off over my head with a loud bang, the bullet ricocheting off the top of a nearby lan-

tern. It hit the floor and the wall instantly exploded in flames. The cows began mooing very loudly.

“WHAT'RE YA THINK YER DOIN'?” the man roared, clawing his eyes as he fell to his knees. “I’LL KILL YA BOTH!”

The entire right side of the barn caught fire. The cows began to scream, scurrying over to the opposite side of the pen. The flames leapt over to the underside of the hayloft, which blazed into light as the dry grass ignited.

“NOT TONIGHT, YOU WON’T!” Travis screamed, as he seized the pitchfork and harpooned it as hard as he could ten feet away into Colt’s back. The man screamed and fell forward, his hands clawing at his back.

“Goddamn, Travis!” I yelled.

The entire hayloft erupted into an firestorm, almost knocking us back with the heat. Colt tried to get up, then fell back on his face, flailing in the dirt. His hand was right next to the open grave.

“Your brother,” I yelled, grabbing Travis as I coughed and choked from the smoke, trying to raise my injured voice over the screams and mooing from the cows. I gestured towards the open grave. “It’s him — Billy James... that’s his body down there! Colt murdered him!”

Travis’s face turned white. With a roar, he picked up the handle, kicked the man’s body over, then rammed the pitchfork deep into his chest with all his might. Colt screamed and kicked his legs, but Travis shoved the prongs in all the way up to the hilt, impaling him tightly to the floor. Colt writhed like an animal caught in a savage trap.

“GET OUTTA HERE!” Travis yelled, slapping open the livestock pen and stepping back as the three cows and the calves raced outside. I grabbed my backpack and scooped up the gold coins on the ground. Colt caught my wrist for a second, but I kicked his hand out of the way and stumbled away, coughing uncontrollably.

At that moment, the hayloft began to collapse and we sprinted out the front door. Acrid grey smoke was everywhere. Within seconds, the flames had spread out to the barn’s sides and roof, quickly turning into a raging inferno.

We ran over to the wagon, Dandy braying frantically with all the noise, smoke, and commotion. I quickly unlocked the hand brake and

walked him and the wagon towards the side of the farmhouse, a good hundred feet away from the barn. The fire had turned from yellow-gold to white now, and I heard a loud crash as the back side of the wooden frame collapsed inward. I stared into the barn's entrance: it was like looking right into the center of hell.

"You was gonna leave," Travis said, catching his breath. "Leave me! After everythin' we done!"

"God, Travis, I'm sorry," I said, still coughing. "I don't know what I wanted! All I know is, I just couldn't stay here anymore. Colt is a total asshole..."

A large section of the front wall collapsed, and the flames shot up to the skies, becoming a conflagration.

"...okay," I continued, "make that *was* an asshole. And a murderer." I looked into Travis' eyes. "Is it true? What he said?"

Travis' lower lip began to tremble. "He was... he was *usin'* me... usin' me like a *woman*. Like those two boys out by the rocks we saw comin' home from school a coupla weeks ago." He turned away and began to sob.

"Hey," I said. "That's not what you and I had. What Colt did was rape. But at least your mom..."

He turned back to me, his face red and scowling. "She *knew!* 'Better you than me,' was all she said. And if'n I didn't... didn't do what he wanted, he'd do it ta Lem."

"Jesus Fucking Christ," I said, overwhelmed by shock and horror. I had to lean against the wagon for support. "You've got an entire Jerry Springer show right here on the farm!" I said, incredulously. "A total horror show! Un-fucking-believable."

A sudden scream to our right caused us to turn our heads. Mrs. Colt ran towards us, her dressing gown fluttering behind as she darted through the smoke. "Oh, my Lord, my God, my Lord!" she cried, over and over again, her hands fluttering. "My gracious! Where's Lem? Where's Seth? Are you boys all right?"

I glared at her. "Colt is dead. He tried to kill me."

She let out a shriek. "NO!"

"Listen, Ma," Travis began. "I told you from the beginnin' that Colt was no good. He killed Billy James."

"That can't be!" she wailed. She took a tentative step towards the barn, but the entrance way collapsed and a muffled explosion inside told me the center part of the barn had collapsed. The roof was on the verge. Travis and I held her back.

"It's true," I said. "I saw Billy's body, what was left of it in the barn. Colt found out he was going to join the Army."

Her face turned grim. "Billy James never should've tried to leave," she said, her voice shaking only slightly. "I warned him. He had no right."

"But Colt was... Colt was... *doing it...*"

"Momma didn't care," Travis said coldly. "Don'tcha see? She didn't want nothin' to do with Colt."

"Colossians 3, verse 20," she said in a low voice. "*Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.*" That's what it says."

My mouth fell open. "I don't think they had ass-raping in mind when they wrote that passage!"

She reached out and slapped me in the face, hard. "How *dare* you use such foul language to me!"

"Jesus, lady," I said, rubbing my face. "Call it anything you want, but raping your kid can't be legal, even in this God-forsaken time zone!"

Just behind us, the last wall of the barn keeled over, heaving into the ground with a low rumble and sending a shower of red sparks up into the night sky. Luckily, the barn was far enough away from the house that there was no chance the fire could spread, and there were no winds tonight. The pigs in the nearby pen squealed frantically, pressing up against the opposite fence railings in a desperate effort to avoid being turned into bacon.

"Get out!" she hissed. "You've both ruined my life, and you killed my husband!"

"He tried to kill me first!" I protested.

"Just get out!"

"But Momma..." Travis began.

"GET OUT!" she screamed. "You ain't no son of mind! Go and burn in hellfire and damnation!" She began to sob as she turned and walked back to the house.

"Let's go," Travis said, as she disappeared from sight.

"Just like that?"

“Just like that. C’mon.”

We got in the wagon, and Dandy seemed to be extremely eager to get away from the farm, practically galloping away down the path at top speed. We reached the town in record time, pulled up the wagon in the alley behind the general store, and I used my key to get inside. At the back counter, I turned up a nearby lantern and wrote out a note to McBillin explaining that I’d decided to leave town, thanking him for the kindness he and his wife had shown me. They were holding my share of the store profits for safekeeping, almost \$120; I told them in the note to donate it all to Rufus’ gospel church.

“Grab some clothes and a suitcase,” I said, pointing Travis towards the men’s jeans and shirts on the front left side of the store. “Your long johns won’t exactly blend in on the train. I’ll leave McBillin \$20 with the note.”

“That’s a lotta money for clothes,” he muttered.

“Grab a heavy coat, too,” I called. “Coats and jackets are hanging on aisle 2 just behind you.”

“Still feels like stealin’,” he muttered, slipping on a dark blue cloth coat, one of the more stylish ones, then jogged up to the counter.

“Naaaa,” I said, checking out the label. “This one’s on sale. Trust me, McBillin always makes a profit. We’ll let ‘em keep the change.”

I glanced at the fitting mirror to the side and turned up a nearby lantern, then unbuttoned the top of my shirt.

“What’re you doin’?” Travis asked warily.

I pointed to my neck. “The stitches,” I said, flipping open my pocket knife. “I gotta remove them or else they’ll be embedded.”

Travis winced. “Ya sure you know what yer doin’? You ain’t exactly no doctor.”

“I watched *M*A*S*H* in reruns,” I muttered. I deftly snipped the ten stitches, then gingerly eased them out, one at a time. It stung a little, but there was almost no blood. *Hmmm*, I thought, a little relieved after checking the mirror when the last stitch was out. *The scar isn’t half as bad as I thought.* I grabbed a bottle of iodine from another shelf and dabbed it on, wincing at the slight sting.

“Just call me Hawkeye Pierce,” I muttered, buttoning up my shirt and slipping my coat back on, then grabbing a black felt hat from a display. “You ready?”

Travis nodded. Minutes later, we were walking down the sidewalk towards the central train station, our boots clunking noisily across the wooden planks. In the distance, we heard the steam engine hoot twice and I glanced at my watch, which read 5:17. *Right on schedule*, I thought.

“You sure you wanna go through with this?” I asked Travis as we picked up our pace.

He let out a sigh. “I got nothin’ here and there ain’t no other livin’ relatives. I thought o’ takin’ off for a long time. Only reason I never done enlisted is ‘cause o’ Lem.”

“You gonna miss him? It’s not too late for us to turn back.”

Travis shook his head. “Not with Ma still there. Maybe I’ll write to him later... tell him what really happened. Lem’ll be alright, now that Colt’s not around ta hurt him. Lem already shoots better ‘n you.”

“That’s not hard to imagine.” I stopped on the sidewalk, the train station less than two blocks away. “But you’re okay with this — running away? Why didn’t you just leave the farm sooner?”

He sighed and looked at his feet. “Thought about it plenty o’ times. But I knew if I left, then Colt woulda started to... you know. *To him.*”

“Jesus,” I said, incredulous. “Fucking child molester. That explains the bruises.”

“And my busted-up nose,” he said. “First time Colt did it to me, he punched me hard in the face. Said if I didn’t just turn over and take it, he’d kill me. And I believed him.”

“But you knew about him and Billy James?”

Travis nodded. “We all pretended like it weren’t happenin’. Colt would just close the front bedroom door and they’d get real quiet-like. Lem would ask questions, but Momma just shushed him and made us stay in the back, in the kitchen. Boy like him is too young to know...” He started to choke.

“Hey,” I said, putting my arm around him. “Hey. It’s all over with now. Colt got what he deserved. And I left all Aunt Olivia’s farmland to your Mom.”

“To hell with her,” he said, spitting to the sidewalk. “Ma was just as bad, tellin’ me to shut up and mind my father. And he *ain’t* my father.”

“The sheriff’s going to want to know what happened,” I warned, as we continued down the muddy street, thinking about the carnage we left behind on the Colt farm. “Especially when they find two dead bodies out in the barn wreckage.”

Travis shook his head. “She thinks she’s a respect’ble Christian woman. Better to just say that’s Colt’s body and my body.”

“Not if the CSI shows up — I mean, the sheriff. They might figure out that other body has been dead for six months.”

“Momma’s got money now,” Travis said, as we crossed the street and walked up the steps towards the train station’s main entrance, looming just ahead of us. “That’ll keep the sheriff and the town gossips quiet. Best for Ma if nobody asks any questions. The money’ll change her and Lem’s lives for the better.”

It was hard to argue with that logic.

“Shit,” I said, clapping my forehead at the sudden reminder. “I left you a letter and a hundred bucks back in Billy James’ secret compartment back at the barn!”

Travis shrugged. “It’s all up in smoke now. Billy James is gone, that money’s gone, and Colt’s gone. All things considered, I’d gladly pay ten times that to see that man burn in hell. I surely would.”

“Well, we still have almost \$400,” I said, patting my wallet, as we got in the short line of customers waiting at the train station ticket window. “Less whatever it costs to go to...” I scanned the signs above our heads showing the list of Missouri-Pacific passenger trains leaving town in the next hour. “...Albuquerque. You ever been to New Mexico?”

He shook his head. “I ain’t never been anywhere but here.”

I took a step forward in line, but he squeezed my arm.

“You really woulda left me?” he said in a small voice. “Is that what ya meant by no guarantees?”

I looked down, then slowly shook my head. “I couldn’t pull the trigger to kill Truman yesterday,” I began. “And as far as leaving — well, knowing how I feel right now... I bet I would’ve gotten halfway into town, then given up and turned back. No — I never could’ve left you behind, Travis.”

“Honest?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I swear. By the moon and the stars.”

“Blood brothers?”

“Blood brothers. Brought together by fate.”

Ten minutes later, we stared out the window of the train as it built up to speed, the engine chugging along. *All aboard Harry Potter’s Hogwarts Express*, I thought, my heart pounding with the thought of the unknown territory that lay ahead. The real-life steam train was a lot louder, dirtier, and much more bumpy than the ones in the movies. *But not a bad deal for \$37*, I thought. The ticket vendor had warned us that some of the tracks were out for repairs because of the war, and that we’d have to take a Butterfield Overland stagecoach wagon for parts of the journey, but gave us instructions on how to make the transfers.

There was only one other passenger in our passenger car, and he was either drunk or half asleep, his hat over his eyes. We watched through the windows as the lights of the city of St. Louis began to dim behind us. The train was headed south, with brief stopovers in Arkansas and Texas, then points west.

“Hey, listen,” I said in a low voice, “I never did thank you for... you know, saving my life back in the barn.”

Travis’ eyes softened and he turned away. “Naw. I’m the one who should be thankin’ you. You saved *my* life. If ya hadn’t done what ya did — if ya hadn’t found out the truth — I never woulda had the courage to finally do it. I owe ya for that.”

I nodded. *Maybe we both saved each other*, I thought. *Like it was always meant to happen.*

We sat, momentarily lost in silence. “Maybe we changed fate,” I muttered, mulling over the potential disasters for changing the future.

“No we didn’t,” Travis said, still staring out the window. “I’m positive Colt was gonna die. And I couldn’t’ve stayed on that farm one more day.”

“I hope you’re right,” I said. *The risks of changing the past were terrible*, I thought. I’d seen this go horribly wrong many times in movies... but those were just movies, and this was real life — my life. *And now I’ve dragged Travis into this mess*, I mused, with a gnawing feeling of regret. *Even now, we might be causing little ripples that could have a tidal-wave effect on my future... our future.* I resolved to be much more careful, espe-

cially in life and death issues that could have unpredictable consequences 150 years later.

We sat in silence, then the train momentarily clunked and rattled noisily as we crossed a bridge, metallic clacks chattering on either side of the train car. The first rays of the early morning sun were beginning to etch brilliant golden yellow streaks in the crops and fields in the distance.

"You sure you're ready for what's out there?" I said, changing the subject, swaying slightly in my seat as the train tracks took a steep turn to the south.

"Yeah," Travis replied, turning to face me. For the first time since the fire, he began to smile. "I reckon we're goin' to meet our destiny, whatever that is." The sunrise hit the side of his face, edging his shaggy white-blond hair and giving him a luminous glow.

"Is it fate or is it destiny?" I asked, sitting a little closer and putting my arm across his shoulders. "I never could get those straight."

"I figger *Fate's* what makes life happen. *Destiny* is where you're meant to be."

"Okay," I said, grinning. "Then destiny it is."

And our train rumbled southwest, into the darkness, towards an uncertain destiny a thousand miles away. Travis snuggled a little closer, and I let out a long, exhausted sigh. Whatever was going to happen would happen, and even if I wasn't in a world I belonged in or understood, at least I had a friend by my side.

THE END

But Travis Finnigan and Jason Thomas
Will Return
in
Defying Gravity

pieces of destiny

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