

THE BARKING SPIDER

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PREFACE

I think the year was 2013 when I went to my sister's house in Arizona. Now, to avoid any confusion, she just got married to a person who was a CEO of a small company that extracted copper and gold from the earth, and he had a home in Phoenix, Arizona and she had a home in Farmingville, Long Island, New York. I went to Phoenix to pal around with both of them while they looked for another home there. My brother, Geordie, was there as well. He lives in Farmingville, Long Island, too, so it was a vacation as well for him. It was winter and when I went home from Phoenix to Bethlehem, PA, I had to fly to Atlanta first before I could go home to the ABE Airport in Allentown, PA.

The short of it was, I got snowed in and the airline, which I forget which one it was now, put me up in a hotel in Atlanta. Now, there was a lot of down time spent at the airport in Atlanta and the hotel in which I was sent to because of the snow storm in Bethlehem, PA. For some time, at that time, I was thinking about writing a screenplay based on my experience with Leah, who happens to be my great-granddaughter on my wife's side. Judging from my notes and when I sent in the screenplay to my first writing contest, I guess she was about close to three-and-a-half years old. I baby sat for her every day in those days, and she was a joy to have around even though I got extremely tired chasing her around all the time. I add that note because she is eleven now, as edit this, and very hormonal.

It's only appropriate to tell you the story about her before I tell the story about this screenplay. It story makes sense if I to do that. Especially since the title is "The Barking Spider". Now, what is a Barking Spider, you might ask? It had been my understanding growing up that a

Barking Spider was a fictitious name that people gave to a fart that you might just have given to the world at large because you don't want to admit being the culprit of that fart. It's a reverberating sound made by your lips wiggling around as you blow air out of your mouth, and it sounds like a fart, and it's an excuse you use when passing gas.

The reason I bring it up is because, as a baby, Leah farted in her diaper many times, and when I farted she laughed, especially when I blamed it on that phantom arachnid that was passing my way every time my belly was full of gas. I can remember many a day when something happened which eventually made me love her as if she was my own DNA progeny, whether she pawed her way through a glue trap that had been set at a store and yelled out 'stuck ... stuck', or whether she was looking at a A-B-C block that was magically resting on its side between two letters looking as if she purposely set it that way, neglecting the fact that a piece of wood had been shaved off flattening its side so it could rest that way. I remember that time because it looked as if she had magical abilities, and we took a picture of her staring at it as if she was controlling its balance with her mind.

I suppose I could have picked up a pen and wrote about any of my grandsons, because they are all inspired me with great pleasure. But it was Leah who I had babysat for twelve years while her parents had to go to work, and it was Leah whose hormonal disposition forced me to understand Alfred Adler's vocational summation that 'to be human is to feel inferior' more profoundly. It actually forced me to try and understand what a child goes through during those early years of life. For example, if I asked you what your first experience was in life, you probably couldn't answer that question because you don't remember the first few years of life. You certainly don't remember the very first experience when you were born where this giant in white robe smacked you on your ass. You didn't know he was a doctor or someone who was

trying to get you to breath so you'd have life; you just remember this giant in a white coat who hit you so hard you cried like the Dickens and you spent the rest of you life trying to please these giants called parents or bosses or anyone in authority, because you have this subliminal fear that anyone in authority should be respected, or the opposite, maybe, depending on how you have been 'disciplined'. I thank Leah for helping me understand that, and to write and be more understanding of others as well as myself, and be more aware of what's important in life.

Aside from vacations, I was there every day of the week and sometimes on weekends when she wanted to sleep over. I sometimes had to pick her up and take her home, so it is hard to put into words what Leah has meant to me over the years. Certainly my own daughters' sons, my grandsons, never needed that daily supervision that she got from me, whether she wanted it or not. It was an issue I had to put to the side while I was writing this screenplay, and now this novella. Most of the things in this story never happened to Leah per se. Some of it did. But obviously, since Leah is eleven, she never had that track and field experience. For example, there was no 'Goodman' in her life because that happened when she was a senior in high school. Leah's 11 years old as I write this, so that part of the storyline was imagined.

The reason I bring up Phoenix and Atlanta is because the notes I wrote in a two day period laid the groundwork for what you're about to read here. I've edited it, of course, and the story has been years in development in that sense, but the words flowed effortlessly since that 2-day, 1-night storm, and without second guessing what my 'other' progeny might say in response to reading it, I worked feverishly to its conclusion. My only regret is that Leah had to grow up and in so doing she was touched by the world with all its misery and all wonderful prospects. There is some magical about children who have not been touched by this cruel world. I say to all the children of the world, what Joe (Gramps) said to Lana – 'don't grow up; it's a trap'.

Anyway, while I'm editing this, the corona virus is running its course, and I'm encouraged to see so many miracle workers who have helped us move along. As far as Leah is concerned, the end result was ... she lost those child-like magical properties, but she helped me flip from being pro choice to an opponent of Roe vs. Wade. I would've never experienced Leah if her parents opted for abortion. And the experience I've had was as important as hers. I thank her for all that she has given me.

Nevertheless, this is a story that has special meaning for anyone. My grandsons were other examples of why I should have picked up the pen and write a heart wrenching story that will pass the test of time, but it was Leah who I had the daily contact with. It was Leah who I baby sat virtually every day where now she's 11 and, although she doesn't need the daily supervision, she gets it anyway because of the pandemic. I just remember those times like when I blew a puff of air into her lungs because she was in the middle of a cry from falling down and lost her ability to breath, and when she helped me get out of a snow drift that was sure to kill me if I was forced to stay there. I mean, after all, it was Leah who I heard 'stuck ... stuck' at Wal-Mart because she was pawing at a glue pad that was a trap for a mouse, and it was Leah who adds a new meaning to the word 'humphing' because now I'm 74 years old, and if nothing else, I'm feeling the trials and tribulations of growing up all over again through Leah, and she deserves the spotlight in my opinion, and because she has learned the names of all the singing stars of the day, and because she'll be in my heart always. This is my Opus for her.

CHAPTER ONE

Lana Gregory was way early for the High School State track event she was participating in. She was a senior in Liberty High School, and it was her last chance to beat Gloria Goodman in the State Championships, who was the State Champion in the 800 meter race in the previous two years.

Lana could stretch her legs by doing a split, not normally done by other runners. But that was her way of warming up and the coach did little to discourage it. Only one other competitor did it, a male student, who limbered-up about 5 minutes before his race to intimidate other runners. As for herself, she did it because that's how she first learned how to stretch for dancing class a few years prior.

As she was stretching, Sean Peterson approached. He was a graduate from Liberty High School the year before, and he was also in sweats and appeared to be a runner as well, but he was really a spectator. Actually, he was a contributing writer for the Gazette, a local newspaper covering the event. He arrived early as well, to interview Lana, if he could. He was good friends with her and he felt she could win the event. It would be a story to tell if he ever got Lana to agree for an interview.

As Sean approached, he opened the newspaper he was holding under his arm.

"Hi, Sean," Lana said. "You're here awfully early, aren't you? What are you up to?"

"I got my second assignment with the Gazette," he replied. "It's this track meet."

"Why are you wearing sweats then?" she said. "You're not running."

"I figured the coach would kick me off the field if he knew why I'm here. You know how he is."

“I do. He’s a bit anal on staying focused. Still, it’s a couple of hours before I run. Why so early?”

Sean opened up the newspaper to an article whose title read: LOCAL GIRL RUNS AGAINST GOODMAN IN STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS. He folds it back and slides it in the hip section of his trousers. “And now he wants a front page lead story that says you beat Goodman. He’s making the assumption what you will win. Actually, to use a baseball analogy, he’s covering the bases and hopes you will win.”

Lana’s frown was more than a frown. “Did they have to write about my mother in that article?”

“I know,” Sean said. “Sorry about that. I complained and that’s how my editor found out I knew you personally ... I mean, everyone’s talking about Goodman and wondering if she’ll be the first High School State Champion three years in a row. It’s a hot topic right now.”

“So, start writing an article that she won, and you’ll be ahead of the game.”

”I don’t know about that, Lana. Everyone knows you took a misstep last year. A lot of shoving around the turn. Cost you the race, maybe.”

“Yeah, yeah. I was running out of steam because I was tired, else I wouldn’t have done that misstep.”

“Well, maybe so. But I told my boss I think you can stop her. So, he wants me to get your story. Especially in light of all the difficulties in your life.

“What difficulties. Sean ... don’t patronize me. She’s over there. Go write about her.”

Lana pointed to Goodman who just walked on to the field and position herself at the bottom row of the bleacher seats. She put on her stretch pants, which made her even more of an imposing figure at 6’2” with long, lanky legs. She snarled at a student runner who walked by.

Another student passed by and Goodman gave that runner a stare that could flame a candle.

“The laws of the jungle apply here,” Lana said. “You show weakness, you risk being eaten. That’s just the way it is.”

“I saw the race last year, Lana. I mean, I know what happened. She ran a runner off the track is what happened. That just wasn’t right.”

“You mean, I allowed her to run me off the track. We were all bunched together, Sean. Everyone was shoving everyone. The judges ruled it an accident. Believe it. It was. I could’ve shoved her ...”

“And you would’ve been called for it,” Sean interrupted. “Lana, you got a great story. Come on. Talk to me.”

“No, Sean. My personal story is nobody else’s business.”

“Then why did you become a runner in the first place.”

“Because I’m competitive. And it’s a good way to stay in shape.” Lana looked up to her grandfather, Joe, who seemed calm and resolute. She realized it was because of him that she became a competitive runner, but she didn’t want to say that without getting Gramps permission.

“How about if I let you read it first. I will not print anything you don’t want printed. I promise. Besides, if you beat Goodman today, you’ll be a national hero. Believe me. I feel it in my bones.”

“Stop it, Sean. Nobody’s has ever beaten Goodman, and no one is going to beat her today.”

“Exactly my point. I’ll address that. In fact, I’ll say you said that just before the race. The moment before kind of thing. Anyway, I think your story’s good enough without beating Goodman. Come on. What do you say?”

“No. And that’s my final answer. Oh, crap, here comes Goodman now. Don’t say anything.”

Goodman approached expressing her physical dominance swaying her 6’2” frame and flexing her muscles as she walked, as if she was a weight lifter, not a runner. Lana became wide-eyed and somewhat frozen when she approached.

“I read that Gazette article,” she said to Sean. “You write that?”

“No. But my editor wants me to write a story about the winner today.”

“Well, what are you doing over here?” Goodman asked. “You should be interviewing me. You want to interview me now, or after I win.” She waited for an answer but got none. “Hey, I thought you’re a freshman at State.”

“I freelance for the Gazette,” Sean said. “They like my work, what can I tell you?”

Goodman squared off and faced Lana. “So, you’re half black, huh? Doesn't your kind do better in sprints?”

“Her kind?” Sean questioned.

“Yeah. Blacks do better in sprints, don’t they?” Goodman didn’t say anything for a second or two, but she didn’t want them to answer either. “It doesn’t matter,” she added, “because the best you can hope for today is second place.”

Lana went to say something but withdrew. Sean went to say something, but also opted for silence.

Goodman left and Lana quizzed Sean with, “Did Goodman already accept a scholarship to State?”

“I don’t know,” Sean confessed. “State won the Penn Relays last year, so I think she did.”

“Alright. I will tell you my story, but you have to promise me something.”

Sean takes out his tape recorder and pad and pencil and said “Good.”

“But you must promise me you’ll do me a favor first.”

“Sure. Anything. What?”

“Not now. Later. You won’t have to give up anything. I’ll tell you what it is after I tell you my story. I’m going to stretch and walk. You do the same. Keep up. Make it look like you’re warming up with me and I’ll tell you my story along the way.”

Sean agreed and he stretched, then turned on the recorder, and hid it in his sweatshirt sleeve pocket. He was ready.

“Some of what I tell you, the beginning, especially, I’ll piece together from what Gramps and Steven ... and my mother told me. Some of it, I guess is my own mind working overtime. There will be some points where you might ask, ‘how did you know that’, and just assume I know it because I was told it by someone. I’m sure I have a lot of preconceived ideas I don’t want to keep second guessing myself.”

Sean agreed, and Lana started explaining how things were just before she was born.

CHAPTER TWO

She began her story some 18 years earlier at her grandfather's house in suburbia, the same house she and he lives in today today. Back then he was lethargic, lying on the couch all the time, watching TV. The point Lana was making to Sean was Gramps, that's what she called him, didn't get much exercise.

Joe lay on the couch and watched TV a lot in those days. If you looked at him then, his loose-fitting clothes hid his slightly pudgy figure. By his own accounts, this was not the best time in Gramps' life.

A photo of a smiling woman and an urn sat on the fireplace mantle, a place where he visited just about every day. That picture was the only reference of Joe's wife, Lana's grandmother, who who died two years earlier. He was still taking it hard. And there was a picture of the Eiffel Tower on the wall above the mantle, which was a reference to a mistake he made that he regrets to this very day.

His cell phone rang just when he fell asleep. Agitated, he took a quick look at who it was, then hit the speaker key, answered it and promptly placed it on his chest. "Hello, Steven," he said. Steven, his son, was worried about his father's lethargic way he was behaving since Nana died. It appeared Joe was still grieving his loss. Lana liked her Uncle Steven. She thought he was a cool guy. As far as she knew, this was a time when Steven checked up on Joe a lot.

"What are you doing?" Steven asked dispensing a little bit of small talk before he got started with life's issues.

"Watching TV."

"What have you done this past week except watch TV?"

“Not today, Steven. I’m not in the mood.”

“You gotta do something, Dad.”

“I am doing something now. I just told you, I’m watching TV.”

“You need to do something with some passion behind it, Dad.”

“OK. Then I should’ve told you I’m passionately watching television.”

Joe looks over to the mantle and sighs.

“I know that sigh,” Steven sad. “You’re looking at Mom’s urn, aren’t you?”

“No ... yes. No. Well ... yeah. Stop asking me ... those questions.”

“Dad? Are you listening to me?”

Joe placated Steven a lot because he felt that his son was a real nag. But he put up with Steven’s perceived nonsense, only because of what his son was doing or saying was done or said out of care and love and an understanding of the deeper issues, which included the knowledge that Dixie, Joe’s daughter, Steven’s sister and, more to the point, Lana’s mother, was in the throes of addiction. In fact, no one knew at the time, with the exception Steven, that Joe had given Dixie \$1000 to ‘see’ a doctor. At the time, Joe thought that it might be a good idea to get an abortion, especially since doctors couldn’t agree on when the fetus was ‘viable’. It didn’t matter, however, because Dixie used the money to buy drugs, and get her recent boyfriend out of jail.

Anyway, a casual observer could tell that Joe was was still missing his wife just by the way he would referenced everything by saying “What would your mother have done?” or “What would your mother have said?”

“Please stop beating yourself up,” Steven said.

“I’m not,” Joe said. “Your Mom had cancer. I had no control over that.”

“Don’t be coy. You know what I’m talking about. The Paris thing.”

“It’s not really that, Steven. It was a money thing. For the last ten years of her life I told her we couldn’t go to Paris because we didn’t have the money.”

“You told me it was because all the kooks overseas wanted to spit on Americans.”

“Yeah, that too, but it was primarily the money. I used money, or lack of it, as an excuse for not taking her anywhere. I should’ve been more gracious.”

A hefty groan bellows from the telephone receiver.

“So go to Paris, then. What the heck. You only live once.”

“I can’t. I don’t have the money.”

“Yes, you do. You might not have much of it left. Don’t be such a skinflint. You have holes in your shoes and won’t buy a new pair until the cardboard inserts wear out. Go. You know you want to.”

“Your mother fell in love with Paris when she went there as a kid to visit her aunt. That’s why she wanted me to dump her ashes in the Seine. That’s all she talked about before she died.”

“Ok. Fine. Then get off the damn couch and go. Do something. Anything. You’re becoming a curmudgeon.”

“I beg your pardon. I am not.”

“You’re getting old and cranky.”

“I’m doing what I want to do.”

“Which is nothing.”

“TV is not nothing. It’s mankind’s crowning achievement.”

“You want me to come over?”

“No,” Joe said emphatically.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

“Hold that thought,” Joe said. “Someone is at the door.”

Joe rushed to the door and opened it and found Steven standing there.

“Watch Jeopardy then. Seven o’clock.”

They both pocketed their cell phones and Joe slammed the door in Steven’s face. The door immediately opened and Steven walked in with Liz, his wife, close behind him holding a Tupperware container.

“It’s meatloaf,” she said. “I made it today.”

“It’s toxic. You might die,” Steven said jokingly.

Liz handed it to Joe, then smacked Steven hard, although kidding, on the shoulder.

“There’s enough for a couple of sandwiches,” she said to Joe. “And stop by when you get a chance. Brad needs help with his math.” She turned and pointed at Steven’s long nose.

“You’re nose is growing,” she said, “So stop lying. I’ll be in the car.” And with that she walked into the darkness and left.

Joe went into the kitchen to put the meatloaf away while Steven walked into the living room and sat on the couch. Joe came in and plopped down next to him.

“So, how is Brad doing?” Joe asked.

“Fine. We just got him a fishing rod. The reel sticks, so we’re taking it back to get a new one. He’s sulking in the back seat of the car as we speak.”

“Tell him to come in. I haven’t seen him a while.”

“He doesn’t want to come in because of what happened the last time he was here.”

Joe was confused because he didn't remember anything happening out of the ordinary. "What happened the last time?" Joe asked. He had an inquisitive look on his face because he truly didn't remember.

"You called him stupid. That's a word we don't use around the house. It has a real negative meaning."

"No, I didn't call him that. I called him a retard, and he knew I was joking."

"Oh. You called him a retard. Well, that's better, I guess. Just so you know though, he wanted to come here because he knows you're depressed, but if you're going to treat him with disrespect like that, then forget about it."

Just then, Brad, the grandson Joe called a 'retard', walked through the door and hesitantly walked into the living room. He had a flat-top, crew-cut – the All-American look. "Brad," Joe said, "how much is two plus one?"

"Three," Brad responded.

"How much is six times three?"

"That's a little bit tougher. Hmm. Eighteen. Right?"

"Yup. You're a genius." Joe highbrows Steven, then pats the couch for Brad to sit.

"Study your multiplication tables. That's the key to math, you know. Now, I want to you to tell your mother we had a math lesson and it was an astounding success. By the way, I heard you got a new fishing rod."

"Yeah," Brad said. "You want to see it?"

"I know what they look like," Joe said.

"Okay, Son. Say goodbye to Gramps and go wait in the car."

"Bye, Gramps," Brad said as he got up. He gave Joe and hug, then left.

“I heard there’s a new ballroom dance class at the studio in town.” Steven noticed a bag of popcorn stuck between the cushions of the couch and wiggled the bag loose, and tossed it at at Joe. “You could use the exercise,” Steven continued, “and maybe dancing will help change your disposition. And stop eating junk.”

“What brings you around, Steven? You’re not going to tell me I’ve lost more money, are you?”

Steven was an investor for one of the major firms in New York City, and his primary job was to manage other peoples’ retirement funds. The present-day Lana knew that Uncle Steven managed Gramps’ diminishing IRA. Steven heard through his contacts that Disney was interested in Pulsar, a company that does special effects in movies. He suggested Gramps invest a small amount when it went public. He felt guilty over losing most of Gramps portfolio in the housing crash at the time. He wanted to be cautious, but Gramps told him to invest his whole IRA in Pulsar. Reluctantly, Steven did.

“What did Pulsar close at yesterday?” Joe asked

“Closed at five dollars a share.”

“And what did we buy it at, six?”

“Yup. Have you seen Dixie lately?” Even though he knew his father had not seen Dixie in a while, he asked the question anyway. It wasn’t as if there was any love lost between the Dixie and Steven, but Steven and Joe had always hoped that Dixie would get her act together and stop doing drugs, and they both were hoping that time would be relatively soon. Steven was also trying to avoid a conversation about Pulsar and stick his head in the sand and let things happen the way they were supposed to happen as far as the investments were concerned.

“I haven’t seen her since I gave her the money for ... you know.”

Brad charged in with his rod and brought it over to Joe. It was hard for Joe to summon any enthusiasm, but he tried. “Wow,” Joe said. “This is a doozy.”

Joe flicked it a couple of times, and the reel stuck.

“It sticks,” Joe said.

“That’s why we’re taking it back,” Brad said.

Joe handed it back to Brad, who flicked it, but this time it didn’t stick. The sinker accidentally knocked over the urn. Joe ran over to the urn and carefully picked it up. “What are you, an idiot? What the hell’s the matter with you?” Joe bit his lip. He put the urn back on the mantle. He instantly regretted what he had said, or at least the volume of which he said it.

“I’m sorry, Gramps,” Brad said, real sad-like. He ran out of the house and Steven looked as if he was going to punch his father.

“It was an accident, Dad!” Steven said.

“I know.” Joe said.

They sat there in silence for a bit digesting what had just happened.

“Why can’t you be nice to him?” Steven asked. “It’s as if you don’t like kids anymore.”

“He shouldn’t take it personal. I don’t like anyone at the moment.”

Steven got up and as they walk to the door he turned to Joe and said, “I saw Dixie’s dope-head friends at the store. I overheard them talking about Dixie. She’s still using according to them.”

“Good to know. I’m assuming she got the abortion then.”

“One would hope she’s not bringing a crack-kid into this world.”

“Enough,” Joe said. “I don’t want to talk about her, anymore.”

“Be nicer to Brad,” Steven said.

“Tell Brad I’m sorry.”

“You tell him you’re sorry. And do something else other than watching TV. You’re isolating yourself.

At the grocery store Joe inspected the cans of soup and put a couple in his basket. He thought a bit, then put one back. He did this a couple of times, as if he couldn’t make up his mind. He picked up another can from the shelf, looked at it as if he really made up his mind this time, but hesitated, and then put that one back. He walked down the aisle some more, stopped, turned around, and came back to the soup section and did the process all over again. He threw a couple of cans in his basket and went to another aisle. This time he inspected the ketchup shelf. He picked up a brand, then put it back and moved on. He did similar actions for different food items. In the past he obviously was not the ‘go to’ guy for shopping.

When he was on the checkout line, Joe put three cans of soup on the conveyer belt. As he waited, he recognized the Checkout Woman. He forgot her name. “Oh, Hi ...,” Joe stammered. “Um ... um ...”

“Gloria,” the Checkout Woman said.

“Yes. Hi, Gloria. And what is your name?” She obviously wanted more of a conversation.

But he was unable to give it. “Joe,” was all he said.

“Are you attached?” she asked. “I don’t see a ring on your finger.” She was obviously interested, but he was unable to pursue such a windmill.

“I’m still grieving my wife’s death,” Joe said.

CHAPTER THREE

At Joe's house, Joe nodded off while watching TV. An empty bowl of soup sat on the coffee table, and a small empty bag of popcorn adorned one of the chairs next to the couch. The doorbell woke him, and he grudging got up to see who it was.

He opened the house door and saw his daughter, Dixie, blatantly standing there wearing an oversized dirty shirt trying to disguise the fact that she was very pregnant. A small suitcase leaned against her leg.

Present-day Lana explained all this to Sean by saying "She appeared out of nowhere with me in her belly, and by her own admission she used drugs occasionally while I was her tenant for nine months."

"Run out of friends to mooch off of?" was all Joe could think of saying.

"No, Dad," Dixie said. "I had an option to live on Al Pacino's yacht, but I figured you and I needed to spend quality time together. May I come in?"

"For how long?" Joe inquired.

Dixie thought about leaving because she didn't want to put up with Joe's nonsense, but she needed a place to stay so she picked up her suitcase and walked in, ignoring her father's inhospitable tone.

Joe prepared dinner while Dixie sat at the table fidgeting. Joe hadn't seen her in about four months and he didn't want this encounter to end up like all the rest. Yelling. Screaming.

Accusing. He wanted to believe she was getting her act together. If not for her sake, then her baby's.

"I see the money was well spent," Joe said, instantly regretting it.

"I had other pressing issues like eating and ..."

"Steven saw one of your druggie friends at the store. He told Steven that you've been using. If that's the case, the kid's gonna come out deformed. I should've taken you to the clinic myself." He instantly regretted saying that as well. He was beginning to realize his contribution to the way things were. He had to stay away from the 'you' statements, but it was hard for him. Something came over him like a mist or a fog and caution flies out the window.

"I used the money to bail out her father from jail," Dixie responded. "Or at least I think it is her father. Not sure. You know how it is ..."

"No I don't. And you said ... HER father? What's that all about?"

Dixie leans back and rubs her belly. "The muffin's a girl, but don't worry, Dad. If he's the father, he's back in jail, so..."

"Oh. That's supposed to make me feel better?"

"I got no control over how you feel," Dixie responded. She knew how to play the game. How to 'talk the talk'. What Joe was looking for was to understand if she could 'walk the walk'.

He brought over a plate of hamburgers and sat at the kitchen table with Dixie so they could have a meaningful conversation, and then maybe he could understand.

"Spoken like a true addict," Joe said although he didn't want to say it. "So, you're basically telling me she has no father, and you have no job."

"If you're gonna be putting me down, I might as well live in the streets. At least there I'll fit in."

She started eating, and it was obvious that she was no stranger to hunger. After a long pause Joe finally broke the silence, “So, what happened?” he asked. “You get fired from your pole dancing gig?”

“I was a waitress, Dad. And I quit. I got another job. I’m on temporary leave until Lana is born.” She grunted in pain, then took a pack of cigarettes from her purse. Joe grabbed them from her and threw them against the wall. SPLAT!

“You’re pregnant. You shouldn’t be smoking. Besides, you don’t smoke in the house or anywhere on my property. Understood?”

“My God!” Dixie said, finding it hard to believe what she just heard. “This is total bull-shit. Color me gone. I’m outta here.” Dixie got up and waddled out of the kitchen.

Joe leaned back and watched her get up, grab the suitcase that was leaning against the night table in the hallway, and leave the house.

After a few seconds, three hard BANGS resonated off the door. Joe opened it and found Dixie in pain huddled over a puddle.

“My water broke.”

CHAPTER FOUR

At the hospital's maternity ward, Joe peered through the viewing window looking at the babies. A younger man stood next to him gawking as well. He was all smiles. Joe was all frowns.

"Quite a bunch, huh?" the younger man said.

"They all look like aliens to me," was Joe's stock answer.

Joe stared at the baby who had the name GREGORY on her wrist, and on the incubator.

Joe started to leave, then looked back and watched the 'Gregory' baby knock off her knitted cap exposing her curly hair. He looked closer and watched the nurse pick up the Gregory girl.

Joe immediately burrowed his way to Dixie's room and entered just as the nurse handed Lana to Dixie. Joe stared at the baby and waited for the nurse to leave.

"You notice anything unusual?" Joe asked.

"She's beautiful. Isn't she," Dixie said. She looked up at Joe and said, "And that's my final answer."

"Is she black?"

Dixie looked more closely, and after a few seconds she said, "Yeah. I think she is. Well, at least I know who the father is now."

"Really?" Joe asked. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

Now Lana knew Joe was not prejudiced in any way, and she told Sean that in the interview. Still, Joe was pissed judging from his behavior that night because Dixie didn't know

who the father. She had too many dalliances at the time, and her mother's nonchalant attitude about who the father was gave Joe agita. She seemed not to care who the father was, as if she was perfectly happy having the baby, and raising the baby, by herself, with Joe's help, of course.

Anyway, Joe left the hospital room that night very angry. Lana had to admit to Sean, though, that Lana did look black when she was born, and she surmised it was probably because of her hair. She thought her complexion was always light, like Michael Jackson's, so she found it easy to step into both worlds. If she had to admit, though, Caucasians were more accepting of her than blacks. Nevertheless, it was something she never had to think about. Joe never made an issue of it except for that first night and, of course, she didn't remember that. And people in her world never asked her.

A few weeks later Joe sat quietly sipping his coffee and reading the newspaper at the kitchen table. He ignored a baby's distant cry. The microwave dinged and Dixie entered shortly afterwards, retrieving the baby's bottle from the microwave. She tested the temperature of the bottle's contents on her wrist, and then started to leave but Joe stopped her. He pointed to the booze bottles in the garbage and said, "You want to do this now, or later."

"What are you talking about?"

"We need to get some ground rules straight. First, no smoking on my property, which I already told you. It's bad enough you got what's-her-name addicted to cigarettes. I don't want you flaunting your smoking around the house, or drinking booze for that matter."

"Her name is Lana. Not what's-her-name. It's not a hard name to remember."

"No more booze. You hear. The minute I catch you drinking, or doing drugs, you're outta here. Baby and all. Understood?"

"I don't believe you," Dixie replied with no rebuttal to offer. "I have to go to work. The baby-sitter will be here shortly. Her name is Francine, if you can remember that. You have too many 'what's her names' in your life."

"And third, you're going to AA, like it or not."

As Dixie ran upstairs with the baby bottle, the doorbell rang.

"Please get the door. It's probably Francine."

Reluctantly, Joe got up, groaning all the way to the front door.

Joe opened the door to find a middle aged man with stringy hair and dirty jeans. Joe slammed the door just as Dixie trotted down the stairs.

"That's Hank. He happens to work at the diner. He's my ride to work. Did you have to slam the door in his face?" Dixie re-opened the door just as Francine, the baby sitter, came walking up the steps.

Francine ran up the patio steps as Dixie left the house. "Want my life, Francine?" Dixie asked. "That's a rhetorical question, you don't have to answer. The baby bottle's upstairs in her room and... and... There's something else, but I forgot. Oh, yeah. She hasn't been changed yet," and with that Dixie caught up with her ride.

Some time had passed and Francine flounced into the living room from the kitchen. "Mister Gregory," she said politely, "Dixie will be home in a few minutes. She said you would take over when I had to leave and ... I have to leave."

"That's just ducky," he said. "Your money's on the table."

"I got it," Francine said, "thank you. Bye." And with that, Francine left, and as she did the phone rang.

It was Dixie telling Joe that she would be home in about eight hours because she had to take another waitress's shift. "You gotta be kidding me," was all Joe could say. He hung up and went upstairs to a crying Lana.

One would think Joe had no experience when watching him change a baby's diaper, the way he held Lana out by her armpits like she was radioactive. He was an aging man who seemingly had no baby-sense when changing a diaper. He awkwardly did it on the changing table and was, seemingly, repulsed at what he saw and smelled.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lana sat in her high chair at the kitchen table on her first birthday party. That first year a solitary small candle was buried in the middle of the cake indicating this was her first birthday. A larger candle was off to the side in a canister with the intention to be lit every year for 18 years. It took about an hour to melt down an inch to reach the next number, and the markings of 1 to 18 were on the side of the candle to guide the user when to blow it out. Of course, Lana didn't remember the first few years that the candle was used. She had to take Gramps word for it that it was used each year for all those early years.

Steven, Liz, Brad, Dixie sat at the kitchen table and they all, including Lana, gorged themselves on cake. Joe took pictures and watched the event from afar.

As far as she was told by Joe, Lana's birthday was spent the same way every year. Everyone, except for Dixie, sat around the kitchen table and gorged themselves on cake. Actually, Dixie did show up for most of those birthdays but she never stayed for the cake. She'd leave as soon as Steven and his family came. One time Dixie appeared all dressed up in a tight skirt and sweater. Lana actually remembered it because Joe and Dixie argued about Dixie's attire that year. The visit was brief. She remembered Joe at the bottom of the stairs and she was at the top of the stairs by the child-gate, crying.

"What's the matter," he asked from the bottom of the stairs, but she bellowed a lonely cry for a mother who was there for ten minutes and then vanished as if she had more important things to do.

Lana remembered another birthday party where Liz took pictures of all the messy faces, including hers. Some of the pictures of some of her birthdays brought back memories, especially

the one where her face was as messy as it could be with all that cake frosting as if she were dunking for cake rather than apples.

Lana reminisced a little bit with Sean thinking out loud about how Joe would get sleepy in the living room while he watched Lana dance to the Sesame Street music.

“Spin. Spin,” she remembered hollering while dancing to the music.

“Come on, kid,” Gramps said one time. “Slow down or I’ll crush a Valium in your sippy-cup.”

At the time, Lana didn’t know what a Valium was, but unbeknownst to her at the time, Joe saved those sippy-cups believing those were the days when he realized that he was growing up as much as she was. But he tried not to. He did the “Ministry of Silly Walks’ as much as possible. The ‘Ministry of Silly Walks’ was a skit done by Monty Python, only Gramps was running wildly about trying to catch the butterfly, or he was dancing to music only he could hear. Lana loved the craziness of the walk and the dance, and she laughed hard whenever he did it. No one could look as shaggy as he did, which only added to the humor of it, and she laughed real hard when he did the walk. He farted too, and it was the funniest when he went searching for the phantom ‘barking spider’ and was doing the ‘Ministry of Silly Walks’, at the same time.

For Joe it wasn’t that he was afraid to change Lana’s diaper, but rather he was awkward doing it and made a mess whenever he did it, at least in those early years. For example, whenever he got poop on his hands he would touch all parts of his face being somewhat fidgety as he was. He transferred the poop from his hands to his forehead, cheeks, chin and ears. He

wiped his hands on his shirt and got it as dirty as his face, but he managed to change the diaper even though he looked like he went through a war to do it.

Those were the days when Lana jumped on Joe's stomach and chest while Sid-the-Science-Kid played on TV and she sang along with Sid real loud, "What's up with the sky? Do you think I can fly?"

And gramps would wait and until Lana would sing those words and then yell out, "I don't know why, perhaps she'll die", insisting later he remembered those words in a fairytale or something.

She remembered sitting on Joe's chest while he was on the couch watching Sesame Street with her. He pointed the remote control and shot it like a gun to change the channel like he was taking target practice, and stop at Barney reciting "I love you, you love me." Then he shot the remote again to "Twinkle-Think" ... "Twinkle-Think." And then one more time to The Cat-In-The-Hat where the cat character summons "Thing-One" and "Thing Two" for help doing one thing or another. He settled with that Cat show many times. She remembered that he liked that show a lot, for some reason.

Over time Joe got to be a pro in changing kids' diapers. Or it could be he just remembered how to do it from experience with his kids when they were babies. It was like riding a bike, maybe. However, Lana doubted it because of the monster face he created when she kicked, or he wiped the sweat from his forehead, because those were the times when the poop went flying, or he'd transfer a chunk of poop from his hand to his head.

Little did he know that he was contributing to her sense of bathroom humor as he taught the sounds that letters made. Like the letter 'p' as in 'pee' and 'poop'. In fact, she learned the

internet process by going onto a dictionary website to discover what the words sounded like by picking the speaker icon. In progression she'd go from there to accessing tic-tocs and various other places on the internet. In fact, one could get two dictionary dot coms up and hit each speaker icon pretty fast and go from one pronunciation to the other quickly. Joe did it over and over again to get the voice to render the sounds of 'pee' and 'poop' pretty fast and they laughed like crazy while doing it – both of them. To hear them giggle you had had to wonder who was the child, and who was the grown-up.

Gramps thought it was as funny and Lana did as well, and so they did it for other words like boob and Bob, and clover and over, and more benign combo of words like cat and couch and 'fried fritos for Friday', but nothing would bring out the laughs like 'pee' and 'poop'. And, at this point, nothing could dispel Lana's opinion that Gramps was not a normal adult. In fact, Lana remembered asking him why he didn't behave like normal adults. And she remembered the answer like it was yesterday. "Don't grow up. It's a trap."

Maybe that was why he made sure she did her homework every day. This was a time to get a certain balance, so he taught her how to read, and that alliteration was important when writing. He went through alliterative quotes like, 'Becky's beagle barked and bayed, becoming bothersome for Billy' and 'Greedy goats gobbled up gooseberries, getting good at grabbing the goodies', and when Gramps got up there in the alphabet it got harder, but he finally got up to the letter 'z' and made her say a thousand times, 'Zachary zeroed in on zoo keeping as a career.'

Lana learned many things from Joe those early early years. She was well equipped and on her way to know that businesses actually chose names because of the alliterative way they sounded, like Bed Bath & Beyond, and Chuck E. Cheese, and Coca-Cola, and Dunkin' Donuts, and the like. She learned famous names use alliteration, like Donald Duck, and Mickey Mouse.

The point Gramps made was that alliterative words were fun. English was fun ... Math was fun, too, although there was nothing funny about Math in Lana's mind, until one day Gramps said one plus one is three and he could can prove it. Of course, Lana challenged him to prove one plus one is not two. And then Gramps went into this 'Albert and Costello' routine where Costello had two bananas and Lana said in an Italian accent, "I have one banana," and he held up one banana, and then he passed that banana to his other hand and picked up the second banana and said, "plus a two banana." And then, with the deepest of accents he said, "a one banana and a two ah banana is three ah banana."

Lana remembered that Gramps loved all three of his jokes and told them whenever he had a willing ear, and since Sean was NOT willing to hear any of them, she wasn't going to repeat them. Anyway, she certainly developed a keen ear for sounds and learned well-known phrases and sayings that made use of those sounds like, 'busy as a bee', and 'dead as a doornail', and 'good as gold'. Gramps used language in teaching other aspects of life, like letting her know that 'home is where the heart is', and 'don't make a mountain out of mole hill,' and, best of all, the 'p' sounds as in 'pee' and 'poop'.

During this time, Joe finished putting up a banister in the stairwell underneath the regular banister at a height Lana could grab when she was three or four. She remembered him saying, "You're a young lady now, Lana. You should have your own banister." And he took her hand and guided her down the stairs while she used the lower banister and he used the higher one. She used that lower banister for a couple of years until she was big enough to use the upper one. Gramps actually left it there and he loved telling people that it belonged to Lana and she used it to get up and down the stairs when she was little.

Lana remembered playing with coins on the living room table one time. Joe took the coins from her, because she was getting them on the floor. But he missed one. As fate would have it, Lana picked the coin up, put it in her mouth, and choked and stopped breathing. She passed out and went limp. Lifeless.

It happened so quick that Joe didn't have time to get scared. He performed the Heimlich Maneuver, but nothing happened. She still remained limp and didn't breathe. He tipped her upside-down and slammed her back, and that did the trick. The coin flew out of her mouth and to the floor allowing Lana to breathe again. As she hysterically cried, Joe couldn't stop hugging her. He rocked her back and forth until they both stopped crying.

Joe was outside, gardening. He noticed a car parked on his side of the street in front of his house, but in the wrong direction and realized that he had been so engrossed with the gardening that he didn't see whoever it was come in the house. He planted the last of the azaleas and went into the house to wash up, and to see who it was who came to visit. When he went into the house, he was greeted with loud music playing upstairs in Dixie's room, as well as Dixie and someone else talking loud with Lana crying bedside in her play crib.

The man inside the room could not believe what Dixie had just told him. "I don't believe this," the man said. "I get a call out of the blue. And suddenly I'm up there"

“What ... are you saying you want a paternity test?”

“It wouldn’t hurt.”

Just then Joe opened the bedroom door and interrupted.

“Nice knock, Dad” Dixie said. “Come on in, join the fun.”

Bill jumped up as Joe lean over the bed to turn the music off.

Lana climbed out of the crib now and whined for attention.

“Who’s car is that out front?”

“That’s mine. And who are you?”

“Dad, this is Bill. Lana’s father.”

“ Really, now?,” Joe said. “ What kind of father are you? Four freakin’ years and you show up now?”

Lana starts to wail cutting off any argument that may have been started. “I’m leaving,” Bill said, “I’m not getting in another argument. And by the way, I just found out today that I have a daughter.” Bill left in a huff.

Not only did present-day Lana remember that incident, but she told Sean that was the only time she remembers seeing her father. He came over not only because her mother asked him to, but he just re-enlisted in the Army. She supposed he used the Army as an excuse to never show up on her behalf while she was growing up. She also guessed that maybe Gramps had scared him off as well. It was hard to tell which had more influence in his absence.

CHAPTER SIX

While Joe read an AA book in the living room, the doorbell rang. He got up with the book in hand, and was greeted by a man who introduced himself as Bob when he opened the door. Bob was clean cut and wasn't objectionable to Joe. He went to the head of the stairs to yell for Dixie to come down. Then he turned back to Bob and said, "So, you're in AA."

"Yeah," Bob said. "So much for anonymity."

"You working on the twelve steps?"

"Yeah. I'm on step four."

Joe opened the book, read step four, and said, "So, you're taking a moral inventory, huh? How's that working out for you?"

Dixie trotted down the stairs and grabbed Bob by the arm and said, "Do you mind, Dad? Sorry, Bob." And they left. But they left the front door slightly opened and Joe heard Dixie ask Bob if he got the weed.

"All fifty dollars worth ..." was all Joe heard before it turned into a jumble of sounds.

Later that night Bob pulled up in a smoked-filled car giggling like a fifth grader. Dixie opened the door and smoke poured out like it was liquid.

In the living room Joe peeked out the window and saw Dixie waving her hand in the air vigorously trying to disperse the smoke. Music came exploding out of the car like it was a boom box. He heard a rustling sound behind him and turned to see Lana who was responding to the music outside.

“Catch me,” Lana said after she danced down the stairs and ran into the living room and around the coffee table. Joe chased her for a few revolutions and she laughed hysterically. Another song played – and Lana stopped and grabbed Joe’s hand and they danced until he got tired. As he bent down to lift her up, he farted. She laughed uncontrollably.

“What was that?” Joe said. He looked around as if someone else farted. “I think that was the Barking Spider.” And Joe said that with such sincerity that one might one would actually thing he was looking around for such a critter.

He made a ‘raspberry’ sound with his lips. “Barking Spider. Where are you? There he is. Get him.” Lana screamed to her delight while they both chased a phantom spider that neither one of them could see.

Dixie opened the front door, unnoticed, but the music faded as Bob took off down the road.

The Present-day Lana, who was talking to Sean, vividly remembered when Gramps introduced her to the Barking Spider. She actually remembered this day being the first time ‘the Barking Spider’ came alive for her, because she remembered that her mother wasn’t very thrilled about it – not because she was up and it was pretty late, but because she stuck out her tongue and blew a pretty-good, hard-sounding, ‘raspberry’ sound.

“Barking Spider,” Lana said. “Gramps farted.”

“Hey,” Joe said, “you just threw me under bus.”

“What are you teaching my daughter?” Dixie asked with a not-so-nice tone.

Lana let out with another raspberry sound, not helping out with her grandfather’s situation.

“Go to bed, now,” Dixie told Lana. “And stop spitting.”

“She’s not spitting,” Joe said. “She’s making a fart noise. There’s a difference.”

Dixie yanked her by the arm feeling a little twinge of jealousy over the attention Joe was giving, and getting from her. She had never experienced his affection like he had towards Lana, or Lana had towards him, so she was a little confused on how to behave under the circumstance. She supposed she could’ve joined in on the fun of chasing the phantom ‘the Barking Spider’, but it felt more real by objecting as a parent. “How come you never taught me about the ‘Barking Spider’?” Dixie asked. “How come I never saw that loving look of a father on your face, like you have with my daughter?”

Joe wanted to reply, but the lump in his throat was obviously too big to speak. Frustrated, Dixie turned and marched upstairs with Lana in tow. Between Lana’s sobs, Joe heard the words Lana had put together. “Gramps, help me,” Lana yelled.

Joe stoically retreated to his recliner and buried his head in his hands. Part of him wanted to intervene and part of him knew he shouldn’t. He opted for the latter.

“Stop crying, you brat,” Dixie said as she put her to bed. Dixie went into the bathroom, fetched the Air Freshener bottle, and sprayed herself to clear the pot smell from her clothes, and then she stormed down the steps and headed right for Joe.

“You’re teaching my daughter how to fart. What the...”

“Watch your tongue, Missy. If you don’t pay more attention to your daughter ...”

“What? You gonna take her from me?”

“Yes. I’m thinking on doing just that if you keep up your shenanigans.”

“Over my dead body.”

“What’s that smell? Is that air freshener?”

“It’s my deodorant. And since when do you care? You haven’t cared about me in years.”

“You make it very hard to care.”

“Oh, really? And you made it easy for me not to care, you cheapskate. You never loved me or bought me a bike. I had to learn to ride a bicycle from our next door neighbor.”

“I gave you plenty of things. But you never appreciated anything. I worked hard ...”

“You never acknowledged the good things I did.”

“Like what, doing the dishes ...” Joe stopped speaking his thoughts and sniffed. “What’s that smell?” he asked.

Dixie bolted out of the room and stomped up the stairs, and Joe slumped into the living room chair.

In the morning Joe woke up in the recliner and took a minute to realize where he was. Once he did, he went into the bathroom to do, what he called, his constitution, and Dixie went downstairs with Lana to have breakfast.

When Joe finished, he went into his bedroom and he stepped on something. He picked it up saw it was an earring. He immediately looked at the jewelry box on top of the dresser. One of its drawers was opened.

In the kitchen, Dixie poured Cheerios in a bowl in front of Lana who sat in a high chair at the kitchen table. Dixie reached for the milk on the table.

“I don’t want milk,” Lana said.

“Milk is good for you,” Dixie said, and then Lana pounded her feet against the chair and refused to take it.

“I don’t want milk,” she said. “I don’t want it.”

Dixie tried feeding Lana the cereal dry. Defiantly, Lana knocked a few Cheerios on the floor and Dixie accidentally steps on them. CRUNCH ... CRUNCH.

“Now look what you’ve made me do,” she screamed. “Who’s going to clean this up?”

Lana rocks the chair while Dixie tried to feed her again.

“I want to do it,” Lana said. “I want to do it.”

Finally, Dixie slams the spoon down and said, “Fine. Go ahead. Feed yourself, you brat.”

Lana tried to feed herself but dropped more Cheerios on the floor in the process.

“You see? This is why I feed you.” Dixie smacks Lana’s hand and Lana wails.

“STOP CRYING!” She smacked Lana again, but Joe suddenly appeared and picked Dixie up by the collar and threw her out of the kitchen into the living room in one move. Lana continued to wail, and Joe stroked her head trying to calm her down.

“It’s OK, Sweetie,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

In the living room, Dixie backpedaled to the couch as Joe came at her, step by step, foot by foot, inch by inch.

“Some of your mother’s jewelry is gone,” Joe said. “What did you do with her diamond necklace?”

“What do you think?”

Joe hyperventilates. He grabbed her by the collar again, this time he let go realizing he was out of control.

“What are you, insane?” Dixie said with disdain in her voice. “What’s the matter with you?”

“You hocked your mother’s necklace?”

“Mom would’ve given it to me anyway. That makes it mine.”

“Is that how you see it?” Joe said without emotion, although he was busting at the seams with it.

“Yeah, that’s how I see it.” Dixie said with an equal amount of emotion. She noticed Joe’s hands were shaking. “I have to go to work.” Dixie stormed out, and Joe stood in the middle of the living room, breathing heavily, trying to calm himself.

Back in the kitchen, Lana stopped crying and Joe walked back in. He summoned an easy disposition trying to disguise that he was extremely upset. He poured more Cheerios in the bowl.

“I want to do it by myself,” she said not fully realizing the severity of the situation.

Joe handed Lana a spoon, and she fed herself but spilled some cereal on the floor in the process. She cowered a bit, but Joe stepped on the cereal on purpose.

CRUNCH. CRUNCH.

Joe threw more cereal on the floor, and Joe stomped on the cereal again.

“Me, too,” Lana said. “Get me down.”

Joe let her get down from the high-chair, and after they both stomp on the cereal until there are no more crunch sounds, they both sit down on the floor, laughing. That was something Lana could always make Joe do ... laugh.

After they settled down Joe said, “Okay. Now we have to clean up.”

“You do it,” Lana said without hesitation.

Lana bolted to her feet and tried to get around Joe to leave, but he blocked her and made her sit on the floor again.

“No,” he said calmly. “We both made this mess. That means we both have to clean it up.”

He starts putting the Cheerios into the bowl and motions for her to help him. As Joe picks them up he said, “Goodbye, Cheerios.”

After a moment of obstinacy, she started to pick up the cheerios and joined in on the chant, “Goodbye, Cheerios.” She farted and they both looked around for the phantom culprit, but he was nowhere to be found.

Lana, laughing, said “G’bye, Barking Spider.”

While Lana played with the cereal on the floor, Joe got up, his hands still shaking, and looked into the living room at the mantle where the urn, the Eiffel Tower picture, and the photo of his wife, were prominently displayed.

Teary-eyed, Joe went to the Rolex book pinned to the wall, and then picked up the wall telephone and hit a few numbers and waited. “Hello,” Joe finally said into the phone. “Is this American Airlines reservations?” After a brief pause, he continued, “Good. Can you tell me how much a flight to Paris is from JFK or La Guardia?” Joe waited and then finally he heard the amount. “Oh, that much. No, no. I don’t want to make a reservation now. Later. Thanks.”

He hung up, then, Joe sat back down on the floor and helped Lana finish cleaning up.

Once finished, Lana sat in a Yoga position just like Joe. They stared at each other for a beat.

“You never met your Grandmother,” Joe said, breaking the silence. “She would’ve loved you this much.” And Joe stretched his arms out as far as he could. “She would’ve loved you a million, trillion times.”

“Plus four,” Lana added.

“Her name rhymes with your name. ‘Nana’.”

“Nana Banana,” Lana said.

“Well. I was thinking more like ‘Nana Lana’.”

Lana just stared at Joe, as if she was really paying attention.

“She taught me things,” Joe said. “One thing she taught me was that crying does not mean you're weak. And love your spouse even when HE frustrates you.” Joe pointed to himself. Lana laughed. “And probably the most important one was ‘be on time’.” Joe chuckled to himself, and then continued, “Lesson for today. Ready ...” Although he missed some days, he didn't realize it, but he established a routine of giving Lana a ‘pearl of wisdom’, a quotable quote that could stand the test of time. Something that she could live her life by.

Lana was ready for this day's quote.

“You can never have too many Dunkin Donuts.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Joe held a butterfly net while walking Lana around the front yard. He pointed to the trees, birds - everything around them. "Hello, bird. Hello, butterfly. Hello, trees."

And then Lana chimed in, "Hello, bird. Hello, trees."

Joe chased a butterfly and ran wildly, doing the 'Ministry of Silly Walk' walks only he was running wildly about trying to catch the butterfly, and flopping around like a fish out of water. Lana loved the craziness of the walk and laughed hard at it. She had chocolate on her cheek and looked as shaggy as he did.

Steven pulled up in his car saw the whole spectacle. He got out and approached Joe who handed the butterfly net to Lana and yelled, "Run . . . run."

Lana ran around the yard trying to catch a butterfly.

"Looks like you're having fun," Steven said.

At first it was hard to tell whether the butterfly was imaginary or real as they quietly watched Leah run around trying to catch it. Finally, Steven saw it. "Over here," Steven shouted and then pointed. It was if he got drawn in to the Quixote quest, and he didn't know what to do, or how to act. He spotted another net by the Azaleas and ran over to it and picked it up. Before Joe could say anything, Steven was running after the butterfly with Lana. Before anyone could count to ten, Steven was huffing and puffing, like a totally out-of-shape person.

Steven slowly walked back to Joe and watched Lana continue the quest to catch the butterfly.

After a few seconds, Joe shook his head in disgust.

"What's the matter?" Steven asked.

“I lost it with Dixie this morning. She hocked your mother’s necklace, and I blew my stack as a result.”

“Oh. Well, then I guess you don’t know then. Or you haven’t heard.”

“What haven’t I heard?” Joe asked.

“Dixie was downtown with some guy who had drugs. Cops frisked him. They charged them both with possession with the intent to distribute.”

Joe’s shoulders slumped. He looked back at Lana and sighed.

“This is the third time she’s in front of the Judge. They’ll use the Three Strikes Law on her. She might do hard time this time.”

“That does it then,” Joe said.

They both continued to watch Lana trying to catch a butterfly. She was still full of life and ... happy.

“I can’t get her to go on the potty. I hate changing diapers and she’ll be in them as a teenager... watch.” Joe was really tired of changing her diaper.

“She’ll do it when she’s ready,” Steven said.

“She’s four. Shouldn’t she be doing by now?” They continued to watch Lana frolic about for a few seconds. “I’m getting a combination safe for the rest of the jewelry. Unless you want it.”

“Save it for Lana,” Steven said. “How’s the dancing coming along?”

“Don’t start, son. Besides, after watching you run for a half a second, the way you were huffing and puffing...you need the exercise as much as I do.”

“Yeah, I admit it. I do. But dancing is good exercise. You’ll have more energy if you just dive into it. Come on. Do it.”

“Taking care of Lana is enough exercise for me. Believe me.”

Later in the day, Lana played with a train on a toy bench out in the living room while Steven watched. Joe brought in a cup of tea and a sippy-cup. He handed the cup to Steven and put the sippy-cup on the toy bench for Lana.

Joe walked over to the mantle and looked up at the painting of the Eiffel Tower.

“Oh, no, please don’t.” Steven pleaded with Joe.

“Did you know her grandmother was born in Alsace Lorraine?”

“Yes. Go to France and visit her grave.”

“How is Pulsar doing?” Joe inquired.

“Down another ten cents a share. Sell a few shares before the stock goes bust, and go to Paris.”

“I heard the French are still pissed off at us because of Iraq.”

“Ok. I’m leaving.” Steven got up and, as he headed for the front door, he said, “Register for that dancing class.”

Joe sat in the reception area of a law office with Lana in his arms. He was growing impatient and was about to say something just when the Receptionist signaled Joe.

“Mr. Almquist will see you now,” she said.

Joe got up and opened the closed door and entered with Lana in his arms. Mr. Almquist greeted them. “Oh, wow. Isn’t she a cutie-pie,” he said. He went to pat her, but she buried her head in Joe’s neck displaying her shyness.

“She’s either terribly shy,” Joe said, “or she dances like those crazy characters on Sid-The-Science-Kid.”

“Oh, I see,” Mr. Almquist admitted. “But she’s a charmer.”

Joe sits and lets Lana down. Almquist hits the buzzer and Nancy comes in. He asked Nancy to take Lana for a few minutes so they could discuss the particulars in private. Lana didn’t need to hear what they had to say.

Mr. Almquist turned to Lana and asked if she wants a lollipop first. Of course, she did, and so did Joe. Nancy led Lana out by the hand and came back in with a lollipop for Joe. She left and, finally, Mr. Almquist and Joe had their privacy.

“So, you want custody of her?” Almquist said once they were alone.

Mr. Almquist got affirmation and he wasn’t very positive about the possible outcome of suing for custody of Lana. “I have to tell you, Mr. Gregory,” Mr. Almquist said, “without the judge ruling on her drug charge, getting custody of Lana will be extremely difficult, especially if your daughter’s living with you and working. It doesn’t look good.”

“But my daughter is involved with drugs again,” Joe said, while sucking on the lollipop.

“Saying it is different than proving it,” Almquist said.

“But that means I can’t kick her out because she’ll take Lana with her and ruin her life. I know it. I just know it. What can I do? I can’t have that happen.”

“I don’t know, then, Mr. Gregory. How about you let me know how she does on that arrest charge. If she goes to jail, come back and then we’ll be able to do something. Right now, it’s best to just sit and wait.”

As Joe walked into the drugstore, Lana ran from aisle to aisle. She removed an item and Joe put it back. She removed another and Joe put that one back as well. This continued until she found a balloon, and she bellowed, “Balloon. Balloon.”

Joe shook his head and she cried real tears. And she kept on yelling, “Balloon ... Balloon.”

“That’s jibba-jabba,” Joe said. “No jibba-jabba.”

“I want it. I want it.”

“OK,” Joe said. “You can have it. But you have to go on the potty first, and no ...”

“No jibba-jabba.” Lana stopped crying.

“Ok. Now good. Let’s go find a potty first.”

Lana’s frown was as big as a fence, as if she’s going to let out with another yell. Instead, she grabbed Joe’s hand and he said, “Potty. Let’s go.”

Joe led Lana to the restroom and once there he stopped trying to decide which door to enter. He entered the MEN’S ROOM with Lana, and much to his surprise, he was successful in getting her to go to the bathroom.

Moments later Joe was waiting for the lady to fill the balloon with helium. She finished and attached the string to the balloon and gave it to Joe. He bent down to give it to Lana, but there was no Lana.

He frantically looked for Lana, and went down a few aisles whispering loudly, “Lana ... where are you?”

He went up and down the aisles like a frantic parent with a balloon in his hand, but couldn’t find her. Suddenly, a voice in distress sounded in the distance “Stuck. Stuck ...” which

could've meant only one thing. Lana was 'stuck' on something, but her voice, although sounding like she was in distress, was a blessing to hear.

As it turned out her hand was stuck on a mouse glue-pad. While Lana continued to call for him, Joe followed the the voice and found her behind a partition where she held up the pad like a baseball mitt. "Stuck. Stuck," she yelled again.

Joe just stood there, savoring the moment. Chuckling, he took out out his cell phone and snapped a picture or two. This was something he was going to have to show her later on in life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Joe answered an advertisement for a one-time courtesy visit for the first class at the dance studio. Joe exercised with several other students, and the teacher of the studio had a bunch of students exercising, including Joe, who was huffing and puffing like he couldn't catch his breath. Nevertheless, to help show he didn't have an ailment, or something like that, he kept up with the pace of the rest of the group. Joe was unsure whether this was a good idea, to be dancing, that is. Certainly, judging from his own physical feelings, he would've been better off if he tried out for the Olympic wrestling team or challenged the Russian Ice Hockey Team all by himself.

In the children's room of the dance studio, the facilitator was helping Lana exercise as well. She was yelling "Twirl. Spin" as she was twirling and spinning, and the facilitator was having a hard time keeping up with her.

After the class was over, Joe was filling out a form to register himself and Lana.

"That'll be 140 dollars cash," the clerk said, "or ten dollars more if you pay by charge card."

Joe took out his wallet and started paying with cash. It was hard for him to let go of his money. He hesitated a couple of times, watched Lana dance through the window for a few beats, then got a renewed spirit and finished paying the clerk.

While watching the kids dance, Joe mingled with the mothers who were watching their children dance in Lana's class. One of the mothers inquired why Joe was at the studio.

"My granddaughter," Joe said. "That one there," and he pointed at Lana.

"She's incredibly beautiful," one of the mothers said.

"Thank you," Joe replied.

Joe watched Lana with pride as she ran down a pathway and jumped on a trampoline.

“You must be very proud of her,” the woman said.

“I am,” Joe replied without thinking about it.

Dixie finished mopping the floor in Joe’s kitchen while Joe was mowing the lawn. Lana was playing in the next room.

The phone rang and Dixie answered it.

“I told you not to call me here,” Dixie said. She opened the closet doors, and ducked into the closet for privacy. She whispered so Lana couldn’t hear. “Okay. Never mind. How much? For an ounce? That’s too much. OK. OK. Bring it to me tonight, and I’ll give you the money then.”

While Dixie talked in the closet, Lana came bursting into the kitchen and slipped on the wet floor and fell, hitting the top of her forehead on the bottom step of a stool. As Lana screamed, Dixie came out of the closet grabbed a dish towel and covered Lana’s bleeding head. She panicked and ran with Lana out the door to Joe.

Joe, Dixie and Lana walk out of the hospital and no one said a word until they reached the car.

“Seventeen stitches,” Joe said.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Dixie said. “I couldn’t’ve prevented it.” Dixie tried to say something else but Joe held his hand out to stop her.

“Nothing’s ever your fault.”

That night Dixie had to work and Joe took care of Lana. She got in her pajamas and brushed her teeth with Joe. She stood on a stool and followed Joe's lead. Instead of using her hand to rinse her mouth as Joe did, she took a sippy-cup specifically there for the rinsing of her mouth after she brushed her teeth. She tried using it correctly, but she drooled on herself instead.

"Bye, sippy-cup," Lana said when she was finished. "Bye, brush. Bye, toothpaste."

They both put their toothbrushes away and Lana moved on to her bedroom where she used the mattress as a trampoline. She jumped so high she almost hit her head on the ceiling.

"Look at me," she demanded.

She purposely fell, bounced one time, somersaulted and landed on her butt. She sat up and stared in the mirror and touched her stitches. "I have a boo-boo," she said.

"Yes, you do. Don't pick at it, though. You have to let it heal. And you look really cool."

He didn't use the word 'cool' that often, but he remembered his father once used it and gave a long dissertation on how that word managed to survive the test of time. Everyone used it, young and old, and it held the same meaning from generation to generation. The Jim Thorpe era, The Galloping Ghost, the Swing Era, and Frank Sinatra, they have all come and gone leaving one generation sad and others without a care in the world. "Stay focused," his father would tell him. "You look cool," Joe said with a nostalgic tone in his voice.

While Joe tucked her in he said, "Okay Sweetie, my message for tonight..." He thought really hard by searching his mind for that pearl of wisdom that might help her survive the next day, a quote that would help her 'seize the day', like Coco Chanel quote, "a girl should be classy and fabulous", only this night it was simple. He didn't have to think very long. "Have respect for animals," he said.

"Meow," was Lana's response.

“Good night, Sweetie.”

“G’night, Gramps. I Love you.”

Joe always had a hard time saying the words, ‘I love you’ for some reason. He either said ‘right back at you’, or he said nothing. On his night he used sign language to say it and Lana tried to do the same, but at 5 years-old she couldn’t quite manage the fingers right. She gave more of a peace sign than anything else.

That weekend Joe took Lana to the mall. She remembered that day very well because she discovered the ‘sound’ that day. As she remembered it, she stood in at the entrance of the book store and Joe said, “The store is all yours.” For her it was like going into a candy store and being given permission to eat anything she wanted.

She dashed around the children’s section and pushed as many book buttons as she could find: Elmo’s voice, the alphabet song, She found one SOUND which intrigued her so much she hit the button over and over and over again. Actually, it came from a ‘Bugs Bunny’ book, but it was really a portion of the ‘*1812 William Tell Overture*’. Joe discovered it when he was a child not only from ‘Bugs Bunny’, but also from ‘The Lone Ranger’ episodes on TV. It had the classy bounce to it, a classy ‘bump’, and the sound was catchy, a riff that inflamed Lana’s passion to ‘run’. In fact Joe watched Lana with intrigue as she ran from one isle to the other and danced to the Overture beat after she pushed the ‘button’ on the Bugs Bunny book and the ‘Lone Ranger’ book, which had the same music. Joe remembered getting tired just watching her run. She pushed a lot of buttons that day, but she always managed to come back to that book, hit the button and clap at the sound. From that day forward, in order for her to be interested in any book, it had to have buttons, and she pushed those buttons expecting ... well, Joe wasn’t quit sure what

Lana was expecting. Certainly, it was something, but maybe it wasn't the sound. Maybe it was just the buttons because she wouldn't read a book for a couple of years unless it had something to push. She outgrew that of course, but she didn't outgrow the sound of the William Tell Overture. It made her take an extra step, go an inch further or think a little bit harder. For the longest time the sound from the book mesmerized her. To others it might've morphed into noise, but to Lana her passion was stimulated no matter what she was doing.

That day Joe recorded it on his cell phone and he played it for her over and over again, and she loved it.

That night Dixie stumbled in the house and whispered, "Oopsy daisy". She had too much to drink and was trying not to make noise. In the upstairs hallway, Dixie cringed at the crackling floorboards while tip-toeing to her bedroom. She entered, and slowly closed the door. After a beat, the light under Joe's door went off.

CHAPTER NINE

The next day Joe went to court and sat behind the bar with Almquist and a guy by the name of Jones, who was Dixie's lawyer.

"I'm not postponing this hearing. Where is your client, Mr. Jones?"

"I don't know, Your Honor."

Almquist got up while waving papers. "Your Honor, Ms. Gregory pleaded her possession charge to a misdemeanor. We all know she's a druggie..." Jones goes to object, but the Judge beats him to it.

"Almquist," he said, "kindly knock it off. You know better than to speculate in front of me. Miss Gregory was guilty of loitering. Not a good enough reason to take away her daughter. Don't you agree?"

In the back of the courtroom Dixie stumbled through the door, drunk.

"I'm here, Judge," Dixie said. "I'm here, body and soul." Dixie stumbled to the desk and sat. And then she turned to Joe and said, "Got the firing squad ready, Pops?"

"Miss Gregory? Are you high on contraband or something?"

"No more drugs for me, your honor. Nope. Only the legal hoochy-hoochy stuff from now on."

"You come to my courtroom drunk?"

"But, I never drink in front of Lana. Scout's honor, Judge."

The Judge sighed. He was ready to pardon her past grievances in favor of her retaining custody of Lana, but he didn't really know it. Now, it seemed like a moot point.

"Tell me why I shouldn't give your father custody of your daughter, Miss Gregory?"

“Him, Judge? Do you know at school he promised to be at a father-daughter’s square dance, but he never showed up. He stood me up because he was ...” She let’s out with an inebriated burp. “Who knows why? He probably had too much of the hoochy stuff himself.”

The Judge was not amused. He just banged his gavel.

Mr. Jones tried to stop her from talking, but she continued undeterred. “Not only did he leave me standing there as the only kid without a father, he didn’t even pick me up. Had to walk four miles to get home. And he never bought me a bike.” She burps again.

“I see,” the Judge said. “I think I’ve seen enough. I’ll finish this process today and notify Child Protective Services of my decision.”

The next morning while washing the dishes in the kitchen, Joe watched Lana out the window playing in a fenced-in area with Steven. The doorbell rang. He dried his hands and answered the door. The mailman handed Joe a notice and a pen.

“Please sign here,” the mailman said while handing Joe the paper and pen.

Joe scanned the notice and then signed the paper and said goodbye to the mailman. He then tossed the notice on the kitchen table and continued washing the dishes. Dixie entered, having just woke up, and headed right to the coffee pot and poured a cup.

“If you kick me out I’ll take Lana with me.”

Joe pointed to the notice on the table, suggesting she read it first before she did anything dire.

Steven continued playing with Lana in the sandbox. Music blared from the radio he brought outside with him. He turned up the volume to drown out the loud voice from inside the house.

Lana farted.

“Was that what I think it was?” Steven asked.

“It’s the Barking Spider,” she said with authority. Then she giggled, and pointed in no particular direction. But then she decided that the phantom spider ran underneath the shed, so she ran there. Steven followed.

Back in the kitchen Dixie had one foot out of the kitchen and was ready to bolt. She read the notice then threw it on the table. “She drives me nuts anyway with her incessant whining. You can have her. She’s all yours. I’ll pack and leave tomorrow. I’m going to work.” And with that, she left.

Joe sauntered slowly into the living room and looked up at his wife’s picture and whispered to it. “I could use a little help here.”

The next day Joe was gardening while Lana chased a butterfly. Joe loved gardening. It soothed the nerves, at least for him it did.

A sedan pulled up and Dixie burst through the front door with a suitcase “I’ll get the rest of my stuff some other time,” she said. “Good riddance.”

Lana appeared at the door as Dixie left. “Mommy, Mommy. Don’t go,” she pleaded.

Dixie stopped, turned and went on bended knee. Lana ran up to Dixie and they hugged.

“You stay here, Honey,” Dixie said. “I’m sick. Mommy needs to get fixed. “

“Don’t go,” Lana repeated.

Lana grabbed her leg, sat on her foot and wouldn’t let go. Dixie, sobbing at this point, looked to Joe for some help.

Joe intervened by retrieving one of the butterfly nets stuck in the tree branch and slammed it to the ground catching an imaginary butterfly.

“Lana,” Joe yelled out. “Quick. Come here. I caught a butterfly.” Lana let go of Dixie and ran to Joe. This gave Dixie enough time to throw her suitcase in the sedan and drive off.

Lana told Sean that, although she remembered that day, it wasn’t because her mother left. Her mom leaving should have left a bolder imprint on her mind, she thought, but it didn’t. Lana remembered that day because that was the day she she caught her first white-winged butterfly.

That night a dance instructor at the dance studio showed Joe some dance moves and Joe followed him making it more of an exercise than an enjoyable dance routine. While he was ‘working out’ Joe could see Lana playing with other children through a window cut-out that joined the dance room with a play room. Joe danced with great intensity, and she played with great intensity. The music stopped and the dance ended leaving Joe gasping for air.

.The carnival came to town that next night, and Joe, Steven, Brad and Lana went to it. Joe and Steven talked while watching Lana and Brad on one of the rides.

“You got custody now,” Steven said, “so I wouldn’t worry about anything.”

“I’m not worried, I’m just not sure I’m capable of raising Lana on my own, Steven. I’m too old. I make too many mistakes. And I don’t have the patience for this. If Lana doesn’t step up the first time she tries, I lose patience.”

Steven laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Joe asked.

“Has it been that long that you forget how to raise children?”

“I had your mother to help me, don’t forget. Or rather, I helped her.” They remain silent for a few more seconds then Steven chuckled and said, “You haven’t even noticed, have you?”

“Noticed what?” Joe asked.

“I’ve never seen you so engaged in life. Not even when I was a kid. Now, how do you suppose that happened?”

Joe continued to watch the kids in silence while pondering the question.

In some street in town, Dixie fell, or was thrown, out of a car, drunk as a skunk. The car sped away and she staggered down a street not knowing where she was or where she was going. A quick blast of a police car siren led to a mug shot of her at the police station. The caption on the Mug Shot said: B MISDEMEANOR, 1 COUNT, LOITERING; PUBLIC DRUNKENNESS.

This was not only a hard time for Dixie, but it was a hard time for Joe as well. He was lethargic, depressed. He knew he was in trouble because he was obsessing over Dixie’s condition, and watched six-year-old Lana grow up without a mother or father, and he often wondered if he was enough to help her through the pitfalls of life. So, he did what he thought was best. He jogged and watched less TV. He signed her up for gymnastics and took her at the school whenever she had class. He was able watch her progress through a looking glass of a gymnastic school. She did a somersault and a handstand. She was quite agile at such a young age.

He signed her up for a dance competition as well. He watched her and took photos of her as she pirouetted in a dance routine. It was hard to tell who enjoyed the events more, Joe or Lana.

While Joe and Lana ate dinner in the kitchen, Joe read from a lesson book. “Ca-ca-cat. Ba-ba-bat.” Joe said, sounding out each word. “Spell FLAT.”

Lana spelled it out accurately.

“Spell spider, as in ‘Barking Spider’”

And Lana spelled that word out accurately as well.

Joe clapped and Lana stood and took a bow.

It wasn’t long before another year had passed. Joe could see the progression that was taking place in her studies. He noticed the words were getting more difficult in her homework assignments.

At another dinner, a year later, Lana and Joe were again sitting at the kitchen table eating. Joe opened her assignment book from school and began reading and tossing out words for her to spell.

“Special,” he said slow and with precision.

“S-P-E-C-I-A-L”, Lana said, spelling the word accurately, of course.

“Befuddled,” he said. She spelled that one accurately as well.

That Sunday Lana and Gramps sat in a church and watched the preacher saunter to the podium with a Bible in his hand. .

“Honor your mother and father.” The pastor began. “It’s number four of the ten commandments. Now, let me tell you the truth as I see it. If your life seems lacking in any way, it might be because you’re not obeying this commandment, or you haven’t made amends because you violated this command at one time, and you need to address it.”

Maybe our parents made mistakes in life and we dwell on that from time to time, and dismiss our own wrongdoings, not allowing us to fully respect and honor our parents”

Lana carefully listened to the preacher, soaking in the words like “obey’ and ‘God’, and in a previous Sunday sermon, the word, ‘hell’.

“Maybe we feel we are not living a life like God wants us to live it and, if that’s the case, what do you think the problem is? Maybe, just maybe, we are not living a good life because we are not fully obeying the Fourth Commandment ...”

Lana told Sean that later that night she knelt beside the bed saying her prayers and thanking God for giving her mother to her, even though she hadn’t seen Dixie in weeks ... months. And she gave a special thanks to God for giving her Gramps who took her to church every Sunday.

Lana remembered very little between the ages of ten and 14. However, Joe did remember when Lana was 10 and he was in stands watching her play softball on the boy’s team. He remembered sitting in the stands watching 10-year-old Lana smacking the softball into left field and running safely to first base. It was a hard line-drive hit that the left fielder caught on one bounce and had no choice but to throw the ball to the shortstop.

Three years later 13 year-old Lana had all she could do to keep up with her fellow students who were going out for the same track team. Joe saw her struggling back then, and he took out his cell phone and played that sound Leah was so addicted to years before when she played the ‘Bugs Bunny book’ that had the William Tell’s Overture in it. Inspired by the sound, she accelerated her stride and finished ahead of the other students. She bent over, huffing breaths to the ground, like she was going to die. Maybe Joe should think twice before playing that sound.

One night while eating dinner, when Lana was about fourteen, Joe read from a book.

“Okay,” Joe said. “Who’s this: ‘C’ squared equals ‘A’ squared plus ‘B’...”

“Pythagoras,” Lana said interrupting Joe.

“Thirty-two feet per second squared...”

“Galileo.”

“‘E’ equals ‘M’ ‘C’ squared.”

“Please. Come on. Everyone knows that one. Even you. It’s Einstein.”

“Okay, Brainiac. Here’s the most important lesson for today. Are you ready?”

Lana wiggles a bit in her chair, sits up, and waits.

“Education doesn't necessarily mean intelligence.”

“I like the one you quoted the other day.” Lana said. “Who was that? I forget.”

“Nana. Alright. Who said this, ‘Behind any cloud is another cloud.’ Or ‘If you talk, you’re saying something you already know. But if you listen you’re learning something new.’”

“Oh, yeah,” Lana said. “That was a good one.”

“Oh, how about ‘there are no mistakes, just happy accidents.’”

CHAPTER TEN

At track practice, Lana was trying to use the ‘creative visualization’ technique Gramps showed her, but she kept on drawing a blank. Instead, kids from school were smoking behind the stands with a couple of classmates including a cute boy with a fuzzy lip. As Lana remembered it, she became a teenager the day she hung out with a bad crowd who smoked because it was ‘cool’ to smoke. You were in the in-crowd if you did. In her defense she said she was drawn in by a cute kid with a fuzzy lip, and had since forgotten his name. But the coach saw them and took her home knowing full-well that Joe would handle the situation because the coach knew Joe was a stickler on such things. Besides, he told the coach he wanted to be notified if anything usual happened, like her smoking.

Joe came out of the house to meet Lana and the coach as they walked up to the porch. Lana bolted into the house. She didn’t want to face the music because she knew the coach was going to give Gramps an earful about what happened.

A couple of hours later Joe knocked on her bedroom door and entered. “What’s going on, Lana?” Joe asked.

“Nothing. What’s going on with you?”

Joe sighed. His disappointment was apparent. This was not the time for humor, or snide remarks he told her.

“I can smoke if I want to,” she said but wished she didn’t.

“Well, actually, you can’t.”

“What are you going to do? How can you stop me?”

“Just don’t make any plans for tomorrow. Be ready at nine”

“Tomorrow’s Saturday, and I got track practice.”

“I talked to the coach,” Joe said. “He knows you’ll be late.”

“Where are we going?”

“Just be ready at nine.”

In the hospital the next day, a nurse led Joe and Lana into the cancer ward and explained disease of emphysema as the patients were either walking around listlessly in no particular direction, or lying in bed with symptoms the nurse was explaining. One thing they all had in common was they couldn’t breathe properly. Some had canisters of oxygen with them whether they were in bed or walking around, and others struggled breathing on their own. Most of them looked like they are ready to die right there on the spot.

The way Lana remembered it, and was telling Sean, “Gramps didn’t get angry or ground me for smoking. Nothing like that. He just got the nurse’s permission, and took me to the cancer ward at the hospital where people were dying of emphysema, mainly from smoking, and told me that where I would end up if I started smoking.”

And the way she told it, the patients showed no mercy in displaying their disabilities to her. As Lana walked down the aisle of beds, she got increasingly more disturbed at what she saw.

The nurse stopped at every station. One patient was gasping for breath having a tenacious hold on life at that very moment. Another patient walked by with a oxygen tank, like a zombie.

“As eating becomes more difficult, extensive weight loss is common,” the nurse told them. Just as she said that, a 90 pound, six-foot man walked by dragging an oxygen tank with him.

At another bedside a patient coughed and spit blood into a handkerchief, gasping and pursing his lips, a routine they all seemed to have.

“Some patients may cough up blood. They learn different ways of breathing, such as pursing their lips to control the air flow, or leaning over a counter with their weight resting on their arms ...” As she said this, Lana noticed a man leaning on a tall night table trying to get comfortable by leaning on his arms.

Later that afternoon, Joe pulled up to the house and Lana ran upstairs to her bedroom, and Joe headed for the kitchen. Joe poured himself a cup of coffee, sat at the kitchen table, and read the newspaper. Seconds later Lana burst into the kitchen, threw down two packs of cigarettes on the table.

“Come on,” Lana said. “I got practice to go to.”

Joe grabbed the keys and they left.

At the dinner table, while Joe and Lana ate, Lana stared at a couple of pictures of a boy in her notebook. While eating Joe read from an opened notebook.

“Discombobulated,” Joe said.

“Confused,” Lana responded.

“Good. Pungent.”

“Pungent. Something that sharply affects your smell or taste.”

“Not just the senses, right? How about pungent wit. Pungent remarks. That kind of thing.”

They continue eating. She touched the picture with reverence.

“Is that Larry?” Joe asked.

“No. It’s Frank,” She said.

“I thought you liked Larry,” Joe said.

“I think I like Frank more. I don’t know what to do, Gramps.”

Joe thought for a while, and finally shook his head. “I don’t know how to help you on that one, except to say, do what your heart says, and maybe to give you today’s pearl of wisdom.”

“Okay,” she said. “Hit me.”

“You can’t ride two bicycles at the same time,” he said.

“That’s a good one,” she said.

“Someone always gets hurt doing that,” Joe said. “I don’t want that someone to be you.”

She pondered what he said and just nodded.

He smiled and then said, “Have we ever talked about the birds and the bees?”

“No,” she said. “But we have sex education in school, Gramps. I’m fully aware of the repercussions of sex.”

Joe groaned. Lana closed the book with what Joe called a ‘hormonal attitude’.

Joe went to say something else, and pursed his lips. “Ok. Ok,” Joe said. “I’ll stop.”

Lana wanted to say something but she was having a hard time putting the words together. Finally, she asked, “Mom said you gave her money to have an abortion when she was pregnant with me. Is that true?”

Joe looked away. He didn’t want to answer that question.

“Are you angry that I know?”

Joe shook his head.

“Well, if you’re not angry you look sad, then.”

“I’m noticing you’re a young lady, now”, he said. “Please don’t grow up. Nothing good can come of it. It’s just a trap.”

“Is it true, Gramps? About the abortion?”

“Yes. It’s true. I gave your mother \$1000 to get one.”

“But you told me you’re pro-life. You’re against having an abortion.”

“Yes. I am now,” Joe said. “Back then, I wasn’t. I change my mind every five or ten years or so.”

“But you’ve taught me if you believe strongly in something don’t let anything or anyone sway you.”

“Sometimes the world changes and you have to change along with it.”

“How do you know when your beliefs are wrong?”

“You have to listen to your heart. Don’t forget what I told you one night, ‘There are no mistakes, just happy accidents.’

“What made you change from pro-choice to pro-life?”

“When did you get so philosophical?”

Lana shrugs, but remains steadfast in her gaze. “Come on. Tell me. What made you change from pro-choice to pro-life?”

Joe looks deeply into Lana’s eyes, and leans forward and said, “You.”

A moment passes. Lana, filled with emotion, gets up and hugs Joe who takes the hug with a smile.

“I love you, Gramps.”

“Same here, Kiddo.”

On another day, two empty plates sit on the kitchen table while Joe does the dishes.

The SLAM/BAM of the front door opening and closing startles Joe. After a few seconds, Lana enters and throws her books on the floor and plops down at the table. Silence.

“How was practice?” Joe said, hoping to get Lana to ease up a little.

“Ok,” was all Lana was willing to offer, except for the silence that was interpreted as humphing.

“What’s with the attitude?” Joe asked.

“My best friend dissed me in front of Frank and a bunch of other kids.”

“Rebecca dissed you?” Joe asked.

“Yes. She called me stupid in front of Frank.”

“In front of boys? That’s a faux pas if I ever heard one.”

Lana was going to ask what faux pas meant but decided against it because she didn’t want a half-hour language lesson. Not when she felt like this.

“Some girls were there, too,” she said.

Joe sat down and folded his hands. He waited. He knew he was going to get the whole story. It was just a matter of being patient.

After a few seconds she spoke. “We were talking about who the best singers are. Rebecca said she liked Alden Richard. Frank liked Cheryl Cole. I said I liked Justin Bieber, and she laughed and squinched her face at me. My best friend squinched me. She said money ruined Justin. I said Justin Bieber can do anything he wants. He sings, plays the piano. He’s great on the drums, he can dance, and he plays basketball. And you know what Rebecca said?”

Joe shakes his head.

“She said Justin Bieber is gay. And anyone who likes him is gay.” Lana started crying.

“I remember the same argument was presented with Barbra Streisand. If you were a man and liked her, you were gay.

Lana sobbed louder. She got up, threw her arms up and said, “You don’t understand.”

“Hey, I like Lady Ga-Ga,” Joe said, “and I’m not gay.”

“You still don’t understand.” And with that she went to her bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

Lana buried her head in the pillow and cried. A wall poster of Justin Bieber faced her. She lifted her head and talked to the poster. “She just doesn’t understand,” she said to the poster. Then there was a soft knock on the door and the voice behind it softly said, “May I come in?”

“Yeah,” was all Lana could say in one breath. She wanted to say, ‘leave me alone’, but she didn’t have the energy for what might follow.

Joe entered and sat next to her. She sat up and said, “She’s my best friend, Gramps.”

“I know. So, you be a loyal friend and assume the best.”

“Why should I?”

“Cause I have a feeling that she probably doesn’t realize what she did.” Lana wasn’t convinced. After a few seconds of silence he said, “It’s too bad you didn’t know Nana. You would’ve loved her. She was a treasure. She used to tell me our children will make their own mistakes, and when they do, forgive them, and love them anyway. Forgive Rebecca. And love her anyway. That’s what friends do, especially best friends.”

Lana was stunned by his response. She looks up at the Bieber poster, and sighed. “Money did not spoil him.”

“Then tell her that. That it’s much better to cry in a Porsche than on a bicycle. No. No. That’s too funny. Tell her that money does funny things to people, and use Bieber as an example. I have no doubt that once he started getting big pay checks he didn’t know how to spend it because he did not know the value of money. What harm could it do him at that age? Probably nothing. Other things probably got to him. Ego things, maybe. Be open to discuss things with her, and don’t use the word ‘you’ when you talk to her.”

“But Justin ... He’s ... perfect.”

“Wow.” Joe chuckled hard. “Look, Lana. The only thing some people care about these days is how much money they have, or don’t have. And that struggle, if you’re not careful, becomes life-long, and slowly eats away at your dreams, if you have any.”

“But you got to have money to do things,” Lana said, “like eat. I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

“You will in time. I’ll make sure you understand. I don’t want you making the same mistakes I did.”

“Like what, Gramps?” Lana asked. “What mistakes have you made?”

“Well, for example, I used to think money was more important than Nana’s dreams. I told you she always wanted to go to Paris, but I didn’t tell you the lame excuses I gave her all the time, like ‘Which would you rather have, a remodeled kitchen that’ll last forever, or a trip to Paris that would last for a week?’”

Joe took Lana hand and added, “What I didn’t realize is a trip lasts forever, a place someone can go to in their memories as they get older, or after one of them passes on. Right now all I have is memories, and I can care less about the kitchen cabinets. I got some good memories, but I’d sleep a lot better if I had the memory of making Nana’s dream come true.”

Lana sat with that thought for a moment. She didn't know how she got there – the point he was making, that is; but she was glad that they talked. After a beat she leaned in and hugged him. “I love you, Gramps.”

Joe just pursed his lips into a smile and nodded.

Joe turned to a business news channel on the TV, and the Host said, “Disney announced it will sue Pulsar for intellectual property rights on several projects. A spokesperson for Pulsar said he didn't know two of the creative staff worked for Disney on similar projects ...”

Joe shut the TV off, dialed on his phone and waited. Steven finally answered. “I'm watching business news on the TV ... I know ... I know. I just want to know ... How bad is it?”

Steven told Joe he lost about half of his retirement and Joe just slumped in his seat. He didn't know what to say or do. He wanted to cry but couldn't if he tried. He felt like he lost his soul. “I should've listened to you,” he said after a brief silence. “It's my fault, not yours. I knew what I was getting into. How's Lana's college fund?” Steven told Joe he didn't have any Pulsar in hers, so it was doing well. It was actually growing.

As far as Joe was concerned, Steven suggested riding it out – that's what he was going to do. Joe agreed. Steven also suggested that since his whole portfolio was in Pulsar, Joe could sell some of the stock and go for something more conservative. But Joe felt he should've done that years ago, and he didn't like that idea since he was taking such a big hit now. “You're either gonna make a bundle or you're gonna bust,” Steven said. “Or go back to where Pulsar was before.” Joe wanted his portfolio to go back to it's original state so that probably meant he needed to wait it out.

“It’s only money,” Joe said, but Steven knew better. He knew Joe was already retired and needed the money. Living in retirement could be expensive, maybe less expensive than it was before, but expensive, nevertheless. Still, Steven knew from certain people in the business that particular good news would hit the streets soon, so the fact that Joe wanted to ‘ride it out’ was okay to Steven. He just couldn’t, or wouldn’t, say anything to get Joe’s hopes up. He had done that before without any positive results, and he didn’t want to do that again.

At a fast food restaurant the next day, Joe and Lana were waiting for their orders to be filled at the counter when a white and black couple walked in. They were in the middle of a loud argument, and said some nasty things to each other.

The white woman saw Lana and she turned to her black partner and said, “Stifle it, Daniel. Kids are here.” She head-nods Lana’s way.

“Thirty-four”, the attendant yelled, and Joe stepped up and grabbed his tray of food and Lana followed. They sat down at the first unoccupied booth.

“Did you hear that couple,” Lana said “They remind me so much of that day when Bill, my father, came to see Mom.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Joe asked. “What do you think about your mom having a relationship with a black man?”

“A man and a woman should be together for reasons of personal compatibility, not race.”

“Wow! That’s a very mature thing to say at your age.”

“Well, it’s true,” Lana said. “It’s difficult being me because people don’t know how to identify me. Am I white? Am I black? But you, Gramps ... you never had that problem yourself, or with me being half-black. How come?”

Joe felt awkward having this conversation but, nevertheless, he had to be honest. “Maybe it was the way you looked at me when you were an infant. You peered into my soul, I think, and I never saw you as white or black. I saw you as a person who was trying to navigate your way through this crazy world, and you were looking to me to help you. You’re simply my granddaughter who peered into my soul one day and whispered ... your feelings.”

“But my mother and father don’t see me that way. No one sees me that way, except you.”

There was an awkward pause and then Lana continued. “How did my mother behave while she was growing up?”

Joe took his time thinking about how he was going to answer that question. It was the type of question whose answer could come back and bite him.

“I wasn’t a very good father, Lana. Sometimes I feel I was a rotten husband as well. I’ve learned through them that don’t get second chances, so you better be right the first time. You only get one chance to bring up a child. I look at you sometimes and wish I had a second chance with your mother, and Nana for that matter. Maybe it’s time I tell what I know about your mother and how things really were back in the day. Like I was not the best father or husband ...”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

She laid in bed that night thinking about everything Joe said that day. Most of what Lana learned about Nana and her mother, she learned from Joe at the fast food restaurant that day. Later he would tell her more, but he said plenty in those two hours. So much so she had a hard time falling asleep. Her mind was racing, and her stomach felt queasy, but just as she was ready to fall asleep, Joe had opened Lana's bedroom door and peeked in. She pretended she was asleep, and he came over and kissed her good night.

Joe entered the bathroom, and looked hard in the mirror and noticed his face had too many 'splinters' on it, as Lana used to say when he missed a day of shaving. He needed a shave and as he began preparing his face he looked at himself closely, and thought he looked older than his years. "What did you love about this face, my dear," he said to his wife, puzzled at how his face could be so alluring to her.

But as fate would have it, Lana got sick and interrupted his plans. Out of nowhere Joe heard Lana puking. He burst into her room and while Lana puked on the bed and floor, he rushed to her side, and then rushed her into the bathroom.

He turned on the shower and adjusted the temperature. As she started to undress she asked him to go get her bathrobe on her bed.

Joe scouted the room for her bathrobe, and he found it hanging the closet door. He grabbed it and ran back into the bathroom and waited for Lana to finish washing herself. When she did Joe gave her the robe and waited.

"You okay?" he asked.

She opened the curtain and fell out of the tub and into his arms. She leaned into the toilet and vomited again.

Joe found himself on the phone moments later, and he appeared frantic as he listened to the taped recording telling him that all the emergency units' attention was at a 5 alarm fire in town. Joe slammed the phone down then ran up the stairs. The next thing he knew was that he was running out of the house carrying Lana as if he were rescuing her because his house was on fire. She was also carrying a small garbage bucket to vomit in. Joe didn't realize it, but it was raining outside. In fact, the storm was brutal.

He actually threw her in the back seat of his car and in one fluid motion got in the car himself. As he raced down the street he had to slow down for another car. He swerved around it, and in so doing he ran up a curb and knock over several garbage cans. The torrential rain and raging winds hampered his visual abilities. He just missed a falling tree, and the guttural noise coming from Lana distracted him and he almost almost hit a parked car.

When he finally got to the hospital, he pulled into the Emergency Entrance and the sirens and flashing lights of the Emergency vehicles highlighted the frantic activity as medic wheeled in burn and smoke victims from all directions. Joe had to park on the lawn, while Lana vomited for the last time in a bucket that was positioned between her legs.

Joe carried her in and was met by a mob of doctors, nurses, victims on gurneys, and family members in the waiting area. He ran through the double doors into the emergency area where yelling and commotion reigned. He put Lana down, and she stood on her own two feet, weaving back and forth. She was so unbalanced she had to lean on Joe for support.

A doctor appeared and opened Lana's robe. Joe was shocked at the sight of her sunken-in stomach and emaciated body while the doctor took a second to check her heart rate and other vital signs.

"She's severely dehydrated," the doctor said. "Take her and follow me."

Joe grabbed Lana and followed the doctor into a nearby empty office space. The doctor grabbed a nurse and told her to mix a half a teaspoon salt, six level teaspoons of sugar with a quart of water and bring it back here. "Quick. Go, and do it," he said trying to make sure the nurse was not getting caught up in the hype of the fire-emergency. The nurse left.

The doctor took a spoon from a counter, wiped it clean and handed it to Joe.

"We'll replenish her fluids and electrolytes. Give her a spoonful every few minutes until her urine becomes clear in color. If she can't keep it down, wait about 20 minutes and try again." He turned to Lana who was at this point conscious and listening to what the doctor was saying.

"You be a good girl and take this, okay? And everything will be fine." The doctor left just as the nurse returned with the fluids. She handed a mug to Joe, and left. As instructed, Joe began feeding Lana.

A few hours later, back at the house, Joe entered Lana's bedroom holding a sleeping Lana who wore a hospital gown. Her head was cradled in his neck. Joe saw the mess on her bed and gently laid her to the floor and cleaned up the mess. Finally, when all was done, he placed Lana in her bed and she rolled over to go to sleep.

Joe retreated to his bedroom and began to sob. "Dear God," he said. "Thank you. Thank you."

CHAPTER TWELVE

A 16-year-old Lana was dancing with other people and Joe at a dance studio. Nothing much had happened since that night at the emergency room. Lana was into sports at the time, and dancing as well. Joe, on the other hand, always had dancing as a ‘work in progress’ on his resume. He was quite the showboat but not a foot-stomper. In Lana’s eyes, Joe needed help compared to her skill set.

“Today we’re also going to learn a move called the Stanky-Legg,” the student instructor said. “It has great motion for the legs and hips. Like so. Follow me.” And the class followed the teacher. Lana laughed at Joe trying to dance, then showed off her ability, and within seconds she was doing the Stanky-Legg as well as the teacher.

A buzzer went off while most of the students were trying to catch their breaths.

“Ok,” the teacher said. “That’s it for today, folks. Next week same time, same place.”

As Joe and Lana walk to the car in the dance studio parking lot, Lana told Joe she never thought she’d ever see him do hip-hop moves before.

“Is that what it was?” Joe said. “I can hardly walk. It was a good workout, nevertheless. It’s harder than it looks, believe me.”

That’s all they talked about on the way home. As they got out of the car and walked towards the house, Joe asked, “What’s with all the booty shaking I saw? That’s not dancing, that’s ... that’s...”

“That’s just people showing off,” Lana said.

Joe noticed the front door was ajar, and rushed inside. The house had been ransacked and Joe froze, stunned at what he saw. He then ran upstairs and into his bedroom and rushed into the closet. He lifted a trap door, opened the safe, saw his jewelry box, opened it, and sighed in relief. He put everything back the way it was.

Later that evening, a forensic policeman dusted for fingerprints while Joe talked to the plain-clothes policeman. Joe handed him a sheet of paper that listed the things that he thought was stolen, like silverware, a coin collection, and a few other things. "I have jewelry in a safe upstairs," Joe said, "But it was hidden, and they didn't get it."

"Okay, I can't promise anything," the policeman said. "I'll check these items out. Specifically, I'll notify the local pawn shops. If they try to hock any of this stuff around town, we'll nab them. It's not that easy, usually, but maybe we'll get lucky."

The other cops nodded to each other and the lead cop told Joe they would him know if anything developed.

The police exited and Lana came down the stairs and sat with Joe.

"Nothing was taken from my room," Lana said.

"I don't think they were looking for crayons, Honey."

"Very funny," Lana said and then got very serious. They didn't speak about the elephant in the room, but they both suspected there was a strong possibility that Dixie might have been involved.

Lana gave Joe a hug and went to bed.

Weeks later, Lana fanned out a dozen pictures of a boy on the table in her bedroom. She inspected them and began to cry. Joe walked in the house, and followed the sobbing to Lana's bedroom. He pushed the pictures aside and sat down next to her.

"Adam broke up with me." She wiped the tears from her face. "I feel like my heart's been in a blender. I want to die."

"I think you said the same thing when 'you were in loooooove with Frank.'" Joe grabbed her notebook and pen and scribbled a note. He ripped the page out and handed it to Lana. She read it. It read 'Adam is my only love. I'll never love another'.

"If that is true," Joe asked, "then please sign it?"

She signed it with no hesitation.

He took the signed note, folded it, and stuffed it in his pocket. "Now let's take the pictures you've got here and pin them up wherever we feel like it."

Joe gathered the photos and retrieved a scotch tape dispenser on Lana's bureau.

"Which photo do you like the best?"

She pointed to the one she liked the best, and he stood on the bed and taped that picture to the ceiling. He hopped down and taped another picture to the wall.

He entered the bathroom and taped another photo to the door, and one to the upper right hand corner of the mirror.

He handed the rest of the pictures and the tape to Lana.

"Go into the kitchen, living room, everywhere in the house," Joe said, "and pin the rest of photos up so you can see them wherever you go. He'll be the first person you see when you wake up, and the last thing you'll see when you go to sleep. By the end of the week, the hurt will be manageable, I promise. I warn you, though, anger will creep in and replace what you feel

right now. My guess is, in a month you will feel nothing at all for this guy, Adam. You'll have pushed him out of your heart altogether.”

“Fat chance,” Lana said, but as Joe requested, nevertheless. That night she went to bed and looked up at the ceiling and saw a picture of Adam. She blew a kiss. That morning she woke up and was silent as she stared at the picture of Adam.

A couple of days later, she went into the bathroom in the morning and brushed her teeth. She looked at the picture of Adam that was taped to the mirror, and drew a mustache on his image. She went into the kitchen after that and saw a picture of Adam with a mustache already drawn. On another day, she stopped at the front door to look at the picture of Adam before she left the house and took it down. On another day, while she was brushing her teeth and she gave the raspberry sound as she looks at Adam's picture.

That night Lana sat at the kitchen table and read her Social Study book, and while Joe prepared meatloaf for dinner, he said, “I noticed all the pictures of that boy are down.”

“Yes. I don't like Adam anymore,” Lana said. “I like this other kid. Jeremiah. He's cool.”

“Oh. Well, I don't need to be carrying this anymore.” And with that statement, Joe took the note that Lana signed from his hip pocket and tossed it on the table. She laughed and threw the letter away.

Joe continued preparing the meal, and Lana continued reading her book.

At the high school track, Joe sat in the stands watching Lana at one end of the track, and the coach at the pre-designed finish line with a stop watch in one hand at the other end of the track. The coach raised his other hand, and at the starting point two girls lined up and took their marks.

Lana lined up behind them with another teammate and was ready to run as the next duo in line.

The coach dropped his arm and stopped the watch after the two girls buzz past the finish line.

“Six-eight,” the coach yelled, “Next.”

At the starting line Lana stepped up with her teammate and they got set. The coach dropped his arm and started his stop-watch again.

Lana ran as fast as she could, and Joe couldn't tell them apart at the finish line. The coach yelled out, “Six-nine. Next”

Later at the High School Track, when Joe was watching Lana run a longer distance, a shadow appeared over him. It was Dixie looking better than the last time Joe saw her, that is; fit and healthy. She sat next him.

“Look at her run,” Dixie said. She was amazed that Lana not only led a pack of ten other runners, but crossed the finish line way ahead of everyone else.

“She's a better distance runner than a sprinter,” Joe said. “I was just the opposite in high school.”

“I wanted to tell you I had nothing to do with the break-in.” She wanted a response but got none. “Anyway, I came to invite you to a speaker's meeting Tuesday night at St. Anthony's. A speaker's meeting, by the way, is an AA meeting.”

“I know what a 'speaker's meeting' is.”

Joe leaned back and watched Lana loosen up after a workout. She looked up and saw him talking with her mother.

Dixie sat in the front row of an AA meeting. A speaker was finishing up just as Joe walked in and sat in the back row. “Anyway, I would like to thank you all for coming and sharing this moment with me.” The Speaker sat, and the Leader stepped up to the podium.

“The next speaker tonight is Dixie,” the Speaker said, and then sat down. Dixie stood up, came up to the podium, and scanned the audience. She saw Joe sitting in the last row, and nodded. He nodded back.

“Hello, I’m Dixie and I’m a cross-addicted alcoholic,” she said to the group.

And the group said in one voice, “Hi, Dixie.”

“But for the grace of God,” Dixie began, “I’m here today instead of ten feet under.”

While Dixie spoke, Joe showed little emotion. In fact, he sat in the last row without an expression on his face even when she said she had been struggling to stay sober for a long time.

“Today has been three months,” she said, “the longest I’ve ever been sober in almost two decades.”

Some people clap. Joe remains emotionless.

After the meeting was over Dixie fielded ‘congratulation’ pats on her back from her meeting friends along her way to the back of the room.

“I’m glad you made it, Dad,” she said once she got in front of Joe. She waited for a response, but just gets a grunt.

“Would it kill you to say ‘congratulations’?” she said.

“What do you want from me, Dixie?”

“I want to see Lana. I just want to see her. She’s my daughter.”

“Call me when you have three more months under your belt. And be fearlessly honest when I ask you how long you’ve been sober.” Joe starts to leave, then turns back. “Listen, Dixie. Lana has found the wherewithal to be a happy person despite growing up in a motherless environment. If she harbors any wounds, she disguises them well. But I warn you, for her sake, not yours, don’t screw this up. And if you had anything to do with the break-in ...” He stops after seeing Dixie tear up. “She’s got a basketball game on Tuesday. Be there. And when you see her don’t slobber over her like a wounded absentee parent trying to make up for lost time.”

At Joe’s house, the doorbell rang twice before Joe opened it to find a plain clothes policeman telling him they had caught one of the thieves that afternoon trying to hock the silverware and coin collection at a local pawn shop. “A woman who used to live here was the ringleader,” the policeman said just as Lana suddenly appeared. “We found the woman, and she says she’s your daughter, but denies any wrongdoing.”

The policeman handed Joe a picture of Dixie. He looked at it briefly, and then returned.

“Yes, that’s my daughter,” Joe said.

“Do you want to press charges?” the policeman asked.

Joe looks to Lana who doesn’t give him a chance to respond. “Yes. He does,” she said.

Joe told Lana to get ready for the game and Lana thought it necessary to remind him it was not for another five hours.

“Actually, it doesn’t matter,” the policeman said. “If you don’t press charges, then we will. But you’ll need to come down to the precinct to identify the items at least.”

Joe told Lana not to lose focus, and left with the policeman to go to the station house.

The girls' basketball game was being played at the school gymnasium. Joe watched Lana playing first string point guard in her first game. She took the ball down and passed off to the Center of the team who scored effortlessly. A few seconds later Lana's team got the ball on a rebound of a missed shot by the other team. The ball was passed to her and she dribbled down the court and went in for a layup without passing. A tall defensive player blocked it.

A time-out was called by Lana's coach. Joe stood up and when he caught Lana's eye, he mimes a 'Stanky-Legg' move. Lana looks confused, so he mimes a dribble-and-shoot move, and then the 'Stanky-Legg' move. Lana nodded. She got it.

She huddled with the coach and they break. They go back to the game and when Lana got the ball again, she did the 'Stanky-Legg' move as Joe suggested, and she caught that tall defender off balance, and went in for the layup and easy score. The half-time buzzer went off before the other team got a chance to set up a play.

Dixie walked in during half-time and spotted an unsavory character sitting in the stands. She sat next to him, but after a few seconds they both got up and left the gymnasium.

At the start of the fourth quarter, the score was tied. The other team scored first, then Lana received the ball and was expected to pass to their ace shooter once she dribbled down the court to their end of court. But as she raced past Joe, he extended his cell phone and played that sound Lana is so enamored with as a younger child. Lana dribbled down the court and went in for an easy lay-up. SCORE!

On defense she covered an opponent who ran past her and tossed the ball to a teammate who scored.

Frustrated, but determined, she prepared to go on offense again. As she started to inbound the ball, she saw her mother standing by the door. Flustered, she passed the ball haphazardly to her teammate and it was stolen by the defense. The opponent went in for the quick score and all of a sudden the opposing team was ahead by 4 points.

Dixie staggered onto the court and the referee blew his whistle to stop the play.

“Come on girl,” Dixie yelled. To the uninformed observer, she was high as a kite. “You can do better than that. Give me a ‘L’. Give me an ‘A’. Give me an ‘N’ ...”

Joe stood, wanting to do something, but powerless to do anything. So, he watched the uniformed Security Guard pull her off the court. As she was escorted off, she yelled out, “...give me an ‘A’. What you got? Lana. Fana. Banana. That’s my girl, Lana.”

The silence was pervasive except for echoing cackle from Dixie who looked back at Joe as she was escorted off the court. “Oh, and there’s the world’s best father in the whole, wide world,” she yelled. “Take a bow, parent of the century. How come you never came to my softball games or PTAs Daaaada?”

Two security men ran up to the other side of her and escorted her out of the gym.

But she wasn’t finished. She yelled at the top of her lungs before she left, “You think taking care of Lana makes up for never getting me a bike?”

And after being escorted out, her voice still could be heard in the hallway. “You were MIA my entire life, Daddy, boy.”

After the game was over, Joe drove Lana home. While driving, both he and Lana were silent until finally Joe said, “You played a great game, Sweetie.”

“We lost. They were too big.”

“Why do they make such a big deal in basketball about height, anyway?”

“For the same reason strength is important in weight-lifting,” Lana replied.

The elephant in the car was too hard for Joe to ignore any longer, so he said, “Hey, listen, Lana. Someone must have bailed your mother out...”

“I don’t want to hear it, Gramps.”

“So, how long are you going to...” was all he got out before he was interrupted.

“Just let me sit on the pity-pot for five minutes,” Lana said. “You always said take a minute to be on the pity pot. Okay. Well, I want 5 minuets, if you don’t mind.”

“Go ahead,” Joe said. “There’s nothing wrong with self-pity. It’s an underrated emotion. It’s like hope. You can never have too much of it, yet you shouldn’t hold onto it too tightly.”

“She’s dead to me, Gramps, so ... Leave me alone. Don’t give me any of your platitudes, please. Just drive.”

“Okay. Take all the time you need.” And Joe just drove and didn’t say anything else after that.

Once he got to home, Lana got out of the car and went directly to her room and stayed there. She had told Joe she didn’t want supper and just wanted to be left alone. He felt obligated to let her have her way this time being that her mother did what she did, so he allowed her to sulk for as long as she wanted. Joe let her alone for a while, but eventually he went upstairs and knocked on the door, fearing she would not ‘snap out of it’.

“May I come in?” he asked.

“Yes,” Lana responded.

Joe cautiously entered.

“I’m sorry for taking so much time to recuperate from this.”

Joe nodded. He accepted her apology.

“You don’t have to check up on me every two minutes. I’m a big girl.”

“Yes, you are,” Joe said, then sat on the edge of her bed. “Do you know why I only have one picture of Nana in the living room?”

Lana wasn’t in the mood, but she also knew that Joe had to exercise his parental wisdom, or it would manifest itself in some other way, like a long soliloquy about the Big Bang Theory, or Free Will, or guilt, or something like that. So, Lana just shook her head.

“Because whenever I look at her I feel guilty that I wasn’t the husband I should’ve been.”

Lana said through her sniffles, “Yeah. So?”

Joe waited a beat, and then said, “That’s it. There’s nothing else I want to say.”

Lana thought hard for a second then reached up and hugged Joe.

“I’ll get over this. Don’t worry about me. I love you, Gramps.”

“Same here, Kiddo. Get a good night sleep.”

And Lana didn’t get a soliloquy after all, just the usual nighttime quote: “Don’t take life too seriously because you’ll never get out alive.”

Chapter Thirteen

At track practice a 17-year-old Lana ran with a few of other teammates who paced themselves as one unit.

“One more lap,” the coach yelled out. “Dig in. Dig in.”

With one more lap to go, they usually dug in and increased their speed, but it wasn't until they had 220 yards to go before ran as fast as they could and the group started to spread out. So, it wasn't surprising so see them 'dig in', and although Lana finished ahead of everyone else, her body and demeanor showed all the signs of fatigue. She bent over, having a hard time catching her breath. It was as if it were a race.

Nevertheless, Lana struggled through this practice because she overextended herself early on. However, it was obvious to the coach, and to Joe, that every practice she kicked in a little bit earlier, and went a little bit faster, until there was nobody in shape like she was. The only person who knew she was as good as anyone her age in the country was the coach. But he wasn't saying anything at the moment. “Dig in. Dig in,” was all one could hear him say. He also knew her story about her mother, and her grandfather, but he wasn't saying anything on that front either. He even knew that Sean was interviewing her on perhaps the most important day of her life, but he let that go as well because he really felt she had a chance to beat the greatest half miler around. The way she worked out, and the amount of energy she gave, led the coach to believe that she deserved her moment in the sun. He responded much in the same way Joe did. In order to get the best results from her, one just needed to leave her alone. Let her be.

While Lana tried to sleep, muffled voices from downstairs were far from polite. She got up and opened her door and heard Dixie and Joe who were in the middle of a verbal fight. She crept along the banister trying to stay out of sight but close enough so she could hear.

“It’s been over a year,” Dixie said. “And the pawn shop owner couldn’t identify the two guys and the store tape was erased. So, they dropped the charges on them, and if they dropped the charges on them they had to drop them on me as well. Is that so hard to understand?”

“But you told them what was in the house, and they stole from me. That makes you an accessory. You stole from me.”

“I did not. Those two guys heard me talking at the restaurant. They remembered me from high school. I might have mentioned about Mom’s jewelry in the house. I’m sorry. I didn’t know they were potheads.”

“You’re sorry, and that’s supposed to make everything right?”

“I want to see Lana. I’m working. I’m trying to get better. What more do you want. I tried to make it to her practice, but I had an AA meeting to go to. What do you want from me, blood?”

“She’s got a track meet at ten. Be there if you must.” Joe slammed the door on her and turned to see Lana at the top of the stairs. “Sorry you had to hear that.”

“The coach says everyone has excuses, but a champion never uses them.” She said it as if it were a jab, then headed back to her room.

Joe pulled into the high school parking lot and parked. He and Lana looked around for Dixie. They didn’t see her.

They sit for a beat in silence. They see a boy and a girl sneak behind the bleachers which was on the dark side of the track. When the couple kissed, Joe eyes Lana, which was somewhat

of a query than anything else. The couple got physically entangled and Joe growled. More moves from the couple produced more groans and an uneasy shift of posture from Joe. Lana giggled at his uneasiness.

“Gramps. I’m not doing anything.”

“I never said you were. Did I?”

Another round of kissing, which sounded more like munching, had Dixie wanting to leave, so she said, “I got a track meet. Let’s go.”

They get out of the car and, as they walk to the track, Joe mentioned that he read an article about the Goodman girl. “That’s the girl to beat in the eight hundred, right?”

“Yes,” Lana agreed. “She’s quite good.”

“The article reminded me when I was boxer in the Army. I was a pretty good one, too.”

“You were a boxer?” Lana asked with an incredulous tone. “You? I don’t believe it. You couldn’t fight yourself out of a paper bag.”

“Well, I thank you for that sentiment. But I’ll have you know that I beat most everyone who came my way, including this one guy who was a better boxer than me. He should have won, but he didn’t.”

“Why,” Lana wanted to know.

“Because whenever we clutched I told him a little part of a story about my father, which was fictitious, of course. I knew he was allergic to bees so I told him my father got stung by a wasp and he scratched it until his leg got infected.”

A classmate approached and wished Lana luck in the 800 meters. Lana waved to the classmate acknowledging the attention.

“So, what happened?” Lana wanted to know.

“I told him the infection spread and got into his blood system. I didn’t tell him all at once, of course. It was over a few rounds. Whenever we clutched I give him a little more information.”

They reached the track and another runner waved to her.

“I gotta go, Gramps. It’s time to get prepared.”

“I understand,” Joe said. “Good luck, Sweetie.”

She left, but came turned around and came right back. “OK. I’ll bite. What happened next?”

“Well, during the eighth round I whispered my dad died that morning. He dropped his hands and said through his mouth piece, “Aagh”. Then I clocked him as hard as I could. He went down for the count.”

Lana sighed and left for the track. Joe yelled, “But I beat him when he should have won. He lost focus. So, the moral of that story ... stay focused.”

While Lana stretched, she noticed her mother pulling up in her beaten up old Honda. Lana could hear the door squeak open, which was a tell-tail sign her mother has arrived.

Lana continued stretching and looked up and waved to Joe, who tapped his head which was a message for Lana to stay focused.

The coach was very strategic over the plan of how to beat Goodman. “She’ll be laying back for the first half of the race,” he surmised, “so what are you going to do?”

Lana was prepared as could be and said, “Take the lead early. Create enough distance so she won’t have enough in the tank to catch me.”

“Yes. That’s right. She’ll lose her advantage as a sprinter if you create a big enough lead. You got the stamina. And she has the speed. So, if she goes after you early, she’ll burn herself

out. She ran the last 400 in fifty flat when she won the State Championship last year. As a sophomore!”

“I know, coach,” Lana said.

As Joe watched the coach talk to Lana, Dixie approached. “I got stuck in traffic,” she offered as an excuse for being late.

“It’s Saturday,” Joe said. “There is no traffic on Saturday.”

“Dad, don’t start,” Dixie said.

On the track, the Starter prepared the runners by telling them to ‘take your marks.’”

Eight runners lined up and took their marks, Lana being one of them. Goodman looked like she was a foot taller than everyone else.

“I wonder which one of you will be second today?” Goodman asked.

The gun fired and the runners took off. Lana stumbled. As the race progressed, Lana strained to hold third. Everyone could see that something was wrong with her ankle.

Lana’s coach was more involved in the race itself and mumbled, “Now. Make your move. NOW!”

Lana continued down the backstretch for the first time still in third place. She quickened her pace as Goodman held her position in last. As they came down the stretch finishing the first lap, Goodman made her move while Lana took the lead.

Lana’s coach yelled, “It’s too late. It’s too late.”

They come past the stands and around the first turn with Lana and four other runners bunched as a group.

In the stands, Joe’s cell phone rang and he answered it. He yelled into the phone, “I’m sorry Steven, I shouldn’t’ve answered. Not now. Lana is in the middle of running the 800.”

“Oh, so you didn’t hear the news. Pulsar just signed a ten picture deal with Disney. The stock hit the roof. You’re worth a few million.”

Joe reacted as if he was out of breath, but he continued to watch the race. He watched Lana and four others, including Goodman, come out of the turn bunched together. Goodman inconspicuously elbowed Lana which forced her to take a misstep again, and which caused everyone to bump into everyone. One runner got bumped off the track, and even though Lana had a slight limp, she and Goodman lead the way at the top of the stretch virtually tied, but with a burst of speed, Goodman passed Lana and won the race.

Lana turned into the grass gasping for breaths. The coach ran over yelling, “Why did you wait so long?”

Lana looked at her swollen ankle, and didn’t tell the coach she had sprained her ankle. She just shook her head and said, “I guess I panicked in the heat of the moment. Sorry, coach.”

She looked up in the stands and couldn’t see her grandfather. Instead, she saw chaos where her grandfather was sitting.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Steven led Lana as they enter the hospital's intensive care unit and went right to the nurse's desk while Dixie signed papers at the desk. Lana's ankle was wrapped with an elastic tape and she walked with a hopple more than than anything else.

"What are you doing?" Steven asked Dixie.

"These are no-fault papers I'm signing. And by the way, Dad's going to need someone to make health-care decisions for him from now on. He's going to need us to step up for his long term care. You up for that?"

Steven remained silent, then Lana nudged him. "I can't Lana," Steven said. "I'm never home, and I can't burden Liz with Dad."

"Then I'll take custody of him," Lana said.

"You can't do that," Dixie warned. "You're under age."

At the Courthouse, Lana, Dixie and Steven sit at a desk headed by Judge Simpson.

"You're a junior in high school," the Judge said to Lana. "And even if your grandfather is judged as incompetent to handle his own affairs, you can't take custody of anyone. Legally, you're a minor."

"I'll get a full-time job, and then I'll be able to get emancipated."

"I'm afraid that won't work either."

"I will find a way to get emancipated, and then I can file for guardianship."

"Getting emancipated is not that simple, Lana. And it depends which State you live in. Each state has different rules. In your case we'll probably need to get Child Protective Services

involved because you're under nineteen. The issue of your welfare would come first and by the time they get around to your 'emancipation' issues, you'd have turned eighteen already, which in this state automatically makes you an adult. Sorry."

"But my mother doesn't care about my grandfather, Judge," Lana said. "Gramps just made a ton of money, and that's what my mother is after. His money, not his welfare. Uncle Steven, tell him."

"That's true, Judge. My father's portfolio went from a bit over a couple hundred thousand to two million in just a week, and my sister ... She's irresponsible, and she's a druggie..."

"I care about Dad as much as you do," Dixie piped in. "I've been clean for awhile, Judge, and I..."

"How long have you been sober, three days now?" Steven asked. "I bet you say you can stop whenever you want to. Well, the problem is you can start whenever you want to as well."

"Let's slow down here," the Judge intervened. "No one is accusing anyone of anything. Who's been making decisions in the past about his portfolio?"

"I make the recommendations and he usually follows them," Steven said.

"Are there any important decisions that need to be made in the next two weeks?"

Steven shakes his head.

"Good. Then your sister will have temporary custody. She will make decisions on his behalf until that time."

"But all my mother wants is his money," Lana said. "If you give her authority over him now, she'll throw him into the cheapest home she can find, then she'll take every penny he has."

"I'm sure your mother has her father's best interests at heart."

"I do, Judge."

Lana refused buy in to the ‘concerned daughter’ routine Dixie was touting. And she told Sean that she shouldn’t have been angry at Steven because she knew he couldn’t take care of Gramps, but Lana wanted things to be the way they were. She wanted her grandfather back to the way he was. She saw her life crumbling right before my eyes, and she didn’t like that at all.

“Stop,” the Judge said. “I’m going to take this conservatorship and rule on it after I see the doctor’s report. Ms. Gregory, you have temporary custody of your father, until I decide, and that’s that.” The Judge gathers his papers. “And Lana, it will be summer soon. You’re a teenager. Enjoy it. You’ll stay with your mother until I rule on this. Nothing major needs to be decided now. Give me two weeks.”

Lana shakes her head and won’t stop shaking it.

“Lana, if you don’t stop this, I’ll have to get family court involved. You don’t want that, believe me.”

“All she wants is his money, Your Honor.”

“Lana, give me time to review the doctor’s report and...”

“Fine.” Lana got up to leave, but turned to the Judge, and said, “Gramps is a unique kind of person. He’s a man who says hello to sticks and trees and treats an ant with the same reverence as a bird. I learned early on that ‘twinkle thinking’ was a way of solving problems, and that ‘Thing One’ and ‘Thing Two’ were imaginary heroes to call in time of need. I’m not being impertinent, Judge. I’m just being ‘Sid, the Science Kid’, trying to let you know I grew up with no role models except for an old man who saw life as a holy pilgrimage. If my mother gets her way, he will die in an institution. And I will do whatever I can to stop that from happening. So, please know, I’m not being impertinent. I’m just concerned.”

She exited from a silent room.

In Joe's living room, the next day, Dixie sat at Joe's roll-top desk looking over papers while Lana sat on the couch pretending to watch television.

"Don't you have something else to do?" Dixie asked. "Track practice or something?"

Lana saw the Paris pamphlets she had left on the desk as she got up from the couch, but Dixie snapped them up before Lana get to them. "They're just travel pamphlets," Lana said.

"He can't go to Paris. He can't go anywhere in his condition."

Lana notices Nursing Home brochures and points to them.

"I'm going to take Gramps to one of them today to see if he likes it," Dixie said.

"You mean, you're putting him away." Lana growls her discontent and leaves in a huff.

She trotted upstairs and as Lana walked by Joe's bedroom, she heard a noise. She entered and saw Joe lying on the floor with his wheelchair on its side. Lana struggled to get him up.

"Shh," Lana ushered as a sign to keep quiet. "The Wicked Witch of the West will hear us. How did you do this, Gramps?"

In the living room a distant THUD sound distracted Dixie. She ran upstairs to investigate.

Dixie opened Joe's bedroom door and saw Joe pretending to sleep in bed while Lana sat in a chair pretending to read.

"I suppose ghosts are making all that noise," Dixie said sarcastically. "Dad! I know you're awake. We're visiting a home today, and that's that."

Joe opens his eyes and grunts his discontent.

Dixie and Lana struggled to put a shirt on Joe.

Lana pursed her lips and made a raspberry sound. Laughing, Joe said, “Agheeing aghhida. Agheeing aghhida.” Joe laughed again, but it sounded more like a guttural fog horn.

“Shut up!” Dixie said. “You both sound like retards.”

Undaunted by the remarks, they continued the task of getting Joe dressed, but he couldn't

Then he showed them the recreation room where four residents played cards at a table in the center of the room. A TV played in front of a woman who was asleep in a wheelchair. In another room, which the attendant introduced as the second living room, there was a TV that was turned off, and a window whose view was less than spectacular. Lana actually thought it was dreary.

The attendant the led them to a pint-sized bedroom where a Bible sat on a night table, and a cardboard TV hung on the wall. The narrow bed overwhelmed a small room.

They then walked into a boring room, a sort of meeting room decorated with just a couple of chairs and a couch.

“Here you can visit Joe and talk with him privately,” the Attendant said.

“Really? What happens if you have two families meeting in here?”

“You just move the chairs to the corner here. The other family can move over there and you have your privacy that way. Or, of course, you could stay in the bedroom, but if you have more than one visitor, they’ll be a bit cramped.”

“We could bring our lawn chairs,” Lana said sarcastically.

Joe farted and Lana pumped her arm and said, “The Barking Spider strikes again.”

Dixie immediately turned to the attendant and thanked him for them around. “This is a perfect arrangement,” she said before leaving.

As Lana wheeled down the walkway, Dixie said, “That was very embarrassing. And inappropriate. And very disturbing. You guys should be ashamed of yourselves.”

“Don’t listen to her, Gramps,” Lana said. “Not too many people can fart on demand. You have a great talent there. I think I’ll take you on the road.”

“Like it or not, this is the place where you’ll be staying, Father. And then you can fart all you want once you’re here.” Lana and Joe looked at each other despondently.

In Lana’s bedroom, Lana sat at her computer and had a French doctor’s site up on the computer screen. The homepage read NEW BREAKTHROUGH FOR STROKE VICTIMS. She scribbled some notes on a paper, then hit the print key and the article began printing. Lana spent night after night at the computer for two weeks looking up information on this doctor in France.

One morning, Joe sat at the kitchen table reading the newspaper as he waited for Lana to finish making scrambled eggs at the stove.

“Ug!” Joe said.

Lana put two pieces of bread in the toaster, and then poured a cup of coffee. She tossed a straw in the cup and placed it in front of Joe. He sucked on the straw then nodded. Lana turned the newspaper page and Joe continued reading while she continued making the eggs.

Dixie entered just as the toast popped up. Lana buttered the toast and gave it to Joe. He nodded, and she turned another page.

“How did you know he wanted toast?” Dixie asked.

“He has toast every morning. ‘UG’ means mug. That’s coffee. When he pronounces ‘CH’, that means cherries. Scrambled eggs is ...”

“OK. Ok,” Dixie said. “Never mind. Forget I asked.”

Lana placed the scrambled eggs on a plate and put it in front of Joe with a fork.

“And how is he going to eat that?” Dixie asked.

Joe tried eating it with his right hand, which he's successful at first, but he eventually needed help from Lana. As Dixie left, she said "Just to remind you, we have a meeting with the Judge next week."

At the airport ticket counter, the attendant handed Lana two tickets and told her to have a nice trip. Lana thanked her and left.

Not being a seasoned traveler, Lana pushed Joe and followed the signs. She felt she wasn't even a traveler in her own land, let alone Paris.

"Gate Seven has a wheelchair accessible ramp," Lana said. "So don't worry. You'll be the first to be called."

As Lana wheeled Joe to Gate 7, Joe tapped on the arm of his wheelchair and mumbled something. "My college fund, Gramps. Is that what you're asking?"

Joe tapped on the wheelchair and mumbled again. Lana stopped wheeling and knelt down in front of Joe who was holding a carry-on tightly.

"I told you," Lana said. "We have a few grand for the hotel and food and enough for a boat ride to dump Nana's ashes. We're set. Don't worry about money. Your dream of going to Paris is more important than money, remember?"

Joe struggled to say it and Lana was overjoyed to receive it. "Ov oo. Ov oo," Joe said.

"Wow! I don't believe it. I guess there's a first time for everything. I love you too, Gramps."

She continued to wheel him when he mumbled something else. "Don't worry. The hotel management promised to send a nurse."

"Oood. Oood. Oood."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lana told Sean that she took Joe to Paris to dump Nana's ashes in the Seine. Little did he know that Lana was taking him there to also get fixed, 'hopefully'.

Joe looked out the window as the plane took off but he fell asleep and, as a consequence, the plane ride seemed short to Joe. The next thing he knew he was looking out the window of the plane and saw the Eiffel Tower as they approached the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris.

When Lana and Joe deplaned, they looked around like typical tourists. Nevertheless, an attendant helped them negotiate the airport and, finally, to a cab with an English-speaking driver.

The driver noticed that Joe and Lana were inexperienced travelers gawking at everything in sight, and gave them a grand tour as he took them past the Eiffel Tower to their final destination which was the Grand Hotel du Palais Royal.

Lana enjoyed the view of Paris through the hotel window. While admiring the view, she heard a flush then a crash and she rushed to the bathroom.

The Health Care Worker by the name of Frank tried to pick Joe up from the bathroom floor. Lana stepped in and helped him put Joe back in the wheelchair.

"I lost control of him," Frank said. "Sorry. I'll be more careful."

"His left side has no strength. It's almost like lifting a two hundred pound bag of cement."

Lana wheeled Joe out of the hotel, turned the corner and continued down the street. She eventually stopped at a Paris book store, and looked through the window. Joe tapped on the arm of his wheelchair because he wanted to go in.

Once inside Lana inspected the store, then stepped in front of Joe, spread her arms and slowly rotated.

“The store is all yours,” she said, remembering that was exactly what Gramps said to her those many years ago.

Lana got some quick flashes as a child dashing through the children’s section, pushing buttons on as many books as she could, summoning music, like Elmo’s voice doing the alphabet song, and the SOUND that she so passionately embraced.

Back in the United States, Dixie, Steven and Judge Simpson sat in his chambers. The Judge was just informed that Lana and Joe were in Paris and couldn’t join them. “So, you helped her take Joe to Paris?” the Judge asked Steven.

“I helped her get the money from her college fund,” Steven said. “She thought once Dixie became guardian, he’d never get a chance to go, so she took him there.”

“Oh, please. Judge,” Dixie said, “the doctor’s report says my father can’t care for himself. So, what is she doing in Paris? Good question. End of story.”

“Yes, I guess that’s true. End of story. Please ... Dixie. Don’t make this any more difficult than it is. Let me proceed. Mr. Gregory, that was not a good thing to do. You’re actually in contempt, and I have a mind to charge you, but considering everything ... I don’t like making a ruling without seeing your father face-to-face, but I have no choice, really. Temporary custody is extended to your sister.

The judge signed the papers. He kept a copy, and handed a copy over to Dixie.

“And Steven, tell your father and Lana I want to see them when they come back from Paris. First thing.”

At the entrance to a Seine Cruise Liner, an Attendant escorted Lana and Joe where they could reach over the rail and almost touch the water. The carry-on bag was strapped to Joe’s chair, and in it, of course, was the urn. Joe mumbled something, and Lana took out some money from her purse and handed it to the Attendant as a tip.

“Merci beaucoup,” the Attendant said.

Later, on the boat, Lana fed Joe his last bite then sat back to enjoy the sights. Joe nodded to the bag and Lana carefully removed the urn. Joe nodded again and Lana slowly dumped the ashes out, and into the water.

Joe was tearful, but happy.

Lana wheeled Joe into the Doctors Office the next day and parked the wheelchair out of the way. She headed right to the Receptionist’s desk and asked, “Do you speak English?”

“Yes,” she said, “What can I do for you?”

“I brought my grandfather from America. He had a stroke and I was hoping Doctor Duryea would...”

“Do you have an appointment?” the Receptionist asked.

“No,” Lana was quick to respond, “And I don’t have any money either. But I was hoping...”

The receptionist laughed, held out her hand like a traffic cop and got up, and after a brief moment in the Doctor's office, she came back with Doctor Duryea who also spoke English but with a heavy French accent.

"You phoned me," he said. "I remember. You're the American?"

"Yes. And we talked briefly about a payment ... I mean, it said on your website that you give people who can't afford treatment special..."

"Yes. Yes. I know, but agh ... But you had money to travel, no?"

"Yes," Lana admitted. "But that was from my college fund. And the hotel is more expensive than the airplane ride. So, as it stands I'm not going to college unless..." Lana didn't have to say anything else. The Doctor understood her predicament.

"I see," Doctor Duryea said. "The MRI is very expensive."

"I know," Lana said. "And I brought his old MRI and his Doctor's report with me here. And if you can make him better, he will have access to his estate and..."

"Yes, yes. Promises ... promises. I know how that works." The doctor held up his hand for silence, then took a long look at Joe, then back to Lana. After a beat he whispered something to a nurse as she passed nearby.

"Please follow the nurse," the Doctor said.

The nurse led them into a room with a large MRI machine.

Later, in the Doctor's office, the doctor examines the MRI scan on his computer while Lana and Joe patiently sit by his desk waiting for him to finish his review.

"Was he disoriented when he had his first stroke? Trouble speaking? Was that true?"

"Yes," Lana said.

The Doctor examined Joe's eyes, then pointed to a chart on the wall and said, "Can you read the third line, please."

The third line read A-O-E and Joe mumbled something which was an actual effort to recite the line, but was a far cry from what the third line really was.

"Show me your teeth," the Doctor asked of Joe.

Joe cracked the corner of his mouth, a botched attempt to smile. The doctor sat back and had grim news to give.

"You can talk in front of Joe. He wants to hear what you have to say."

"It was in your chart that your grandfather had a hemorrhagic stroke. Statistics show 10% of stroke victims recover completely. Another 25% have minor impairments. And 10% of stroke victims require a nursing home or a long-term care facility. Hard to tell from the scan alone, but with his immobility and speech patterns, it seems he falls in the last group.

"But your methods?" Lana pleaded. "People completely recovered doing your exercises."

"Yes, robust treatment usually does the trick, but we work on patients whose brain damage is less severe than Mr. Gregory's."

"But you said it's hard to tell and I've heard him speak. And he can move his hand. Gramps show him. Move your hand."

Joe tried to move his right hand. After much effort he tapped the wheelchair.

"That's normal, Ms. Gregory. And you heard him try to read the chart. I am sorry. There's nothing I can do. You've come a long way for nothing."

Lana started to sob, but the Doctor reminded her that he was alive and she should be thankful for that because fifteen percent die shortly after the stroke.

Lana nodded her sense of gratitude, and walked behind Joe and started to wheel him out. She opened the door and just as they left Joe said real fast, “Yeayo. Yeayo. Yeayo”. He was making no sense at all.

After they exited, the doctor sighed and turned to his desk and wrote his report.

As Lana was wheeling Joe down the hall, she put her hand on his shoulder and said, “Slow down you thought process. I can’t even understand when you go fast.”

Joe then responded with “aa ... oh ... ee.” And then he said much louder for the Doctor to hear, “AA ... OH ... EE”.

Hearing this, the doctor looked at the visual chart he had Joe try to read a few minutes before and saw the third line at the chart ‘A’, ‘O’, and ‘E’.

AA ... OH ... EE, the Doctor heard again. His face conveyed the hope that Lana and Joe had.

Lana was still sobbing while she wheeled Joe down the hall. The door behind her flew opened. She turned and faced the doctor.

“WAIT!” the Doctor commanded. “Mr. Gregory, say that again.”

Joe incoherently jabbered off a string of syllables that made no sense. Then Lana put her hand on his shoulder and told him to slow down and take his time. Joe wet his lips, then proceeded much slower. “Aa ... oh ... ee,” he said.

The with that, Doctor Duryea beamed a smile to a wide-eyed Lana who clapped and was giddy with joy.

“OK. OK,” the Doctor said. “I can’t promise anything, but here’s the deal. I’ll waive my fee, but you have to come here twice a day for six weeks, and you can’t miss one session, and have to pay my therapist \$1000. Can you afford to do that, and the hotel fees?”

“My uncle can wire me the rest of my college fund. We can do it. Yes.”

Weeks later, back in USA in the Judge's office, the Judge, Dixie and Steven sat at the table in his chambers. Silence prevailed. The Judge looked at his watch.

“It's one of the most ridiculous things I've ever heard,” Steven said to Dixie. “You pressed charges for kidnapping? That's low, even for you.”

“It's been over six weeks. Give me a break, Steven. She took my father to France while she had a deposition ...”

“Wait ... wait,” the Judge said. “There were no criminal charges brought against her. There are no charges at all.”

“That's right, Judge,” Steven said, and then he turned to Dixie. “And you know they went to Paris to scatter Mom's ashes.”

“That takes two days.”

“And they went to see a doctor for his condition.” Steven said, then turned to the Judge. “Your Honor, Lana says Dad's much better. He's...”

“Don't worry, Mr. Gregory. I told the DA to bring them here before charging her. I should be charging you, actually. For obstruction, or something.”

“Why me, Judge. I didn't do anything.”

“Yes, you did,” the Judge responded. “You emailed her money so she could perpetuate this ... charade, and to stop me from doing what I was going to do. They call that ‘obstruction of justice’. You do realize that, don't you Steven. I was going to make a decision of what to do then, but...” He looked at his watch again.

“What difference does it make?” Dixie said. “You already signed the papers, Judge.”

“If your father’s not incapacitated any longer,” the judge said, “your temporary custody will be voided. That’s what this is all about, Dixie.” The Judge stood and gathered his papers. “But I guess it’s all over now. I can’t hold this session any longer...”

The Judge was interrupted by Lana entrance. Then, right behind her a shadow lingered, then Joe appeared with the help of a walking cane.

“Your Honor, wait a moment, if you would, please.” Joe’s speech was labored but precise. “Hello, Steven, How are you, Your Honor? I know Dixie will owe a lot of money for court costs after all this is over, so let me help.” He walked over to Dixie and handed her a check for \$300,000. That should be enough for her to get back on her feet. He bent down and whispered to her, “Now you can buy that bike I never got you.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Even though Lana had a little more to tell, she basically finished her story that she was giving to Sean. They both saw the coach motion for Sean to leave, so Sean turned off his tape recorder.

“Done,” Lana said. “The only thing I have is after that dramatic appearance with the Judge, things improved right away with my mother and I. We went out to a restaurant that same night and she confessed to me she always had blamed Gramps for her addiction when it was her bad choices that led her astray. She has come to terms with that. And that’s about it.”

“Thanks,” Sean said. “That was quite a tale. Listen, I haven’t got much time. I gotta go. Got to put this together. We have a cameraman to take a video of the race. You and Goodman. Don’t let her off the hook. I’ll get back to you with the story before I send it in to the editor.”

“But wait a second. What about the favor you promised?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right. A promise is a promise. What do you want me to do?”

“The Gazette did a piece on the track coach at State recently, right?”

“Yes,” Sean said. “On coach Oswald. He violated a recruiting rule. Got his hand slapped is all. A minor infraction. Why?”

“Well, here’s what I want you to do,” Lana said. “take your Gazette Press badge and pin it closer to your shoulder so it can be seen then I want you to ...”

While Lana explained to Sean what she wanted him to do, Goodman was in the final stages of her warm ups. She looked up and saw Lana still talking to Sean and wondered what they were talking about. Their conversation had her interest, for sure, but the Announcer bellowed over the track that it was five minutes until the 800 meters was about to begin so she

began her ritual of bends, twists and other stretching that she needed to do in the last minute or two.

“Okay, got it,” he said and then look off when he saw the coach approaching.

While Lana was warming up, she looked up and saw Joe and Steven in the stands. Joe gave her the ‘over-the-shoulder’ arm-pump. She waved, then continued stretching.

“You were talking to him ever since I got here,” the coach said, referring to Sean.

“Yeah. I know, coach.”

“You need to stay focused.”

“Hey, coach. Goodman accepted a scholarship to State already, right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Ah, nothing. Just wondering.”

“Stay focused. This is your senior year, Lana. Your last shot. What are you going to do differently this year, hmm?”

“I’ll lay in third to see who the rabbits are, then make my move at the hundred and run like hell.”

“And why are we doing that?”

“Because she always lies back for the first quarter and if I create enough of a distance between her and me, her late kick can’t make up the difference. The only alternative is for her to keep up with me and if she does, she’ll burn herself out.”

The coach went to say something but as Lana headed for the track, she looked back and said, “I got it, coach. I got it.”

Lana approached the starting line just as the Starter called for the runners for the eight hundred meters. Goodman walked over and she and Lana nodded to each other.

The other runners lined up for the 800 meters. Goodman was the tallest of them all. She certainly looked like she a foot taller than Lana as they stood next to each other.

In the parking lot there was no mistaking who belonged to the car that had the squeaky door, as Dixie got out of her car and walked up to the edge of the stands to watch the action.

”Runners, step up,” the Starter yelled out. As they stepped up, Goodman positioned herself next to Lana and hovered over her before taking the running position.

“Hey, Goodman. No elbows today, huh?”

Goodman looked at Lana as if she has two heads. Then she looked at the others.

“I wonder which one of you will be second today.”

As Lana set herself up on the line, she said, “You.”

“Not on your best day,” Goodman said.

“We’ll see. Oh, by the way, congratulations on your scholarship to State.”

Goodman grunted just as Sean came over sporting his Gazette badge.

“Lana. I can’t have that news leaked before we print it, so mums the word on coach Oswald from State. Okay? Promise?”

Lana zippered her lips. Goodman looked hard at Lana.

“Too bad about coach Oswald, huh?” Lana said.

“Runners, take your marks,” the Starter said.

Lana shook her head and forced a frown. “There was much more to his gift giving than was reported, I guess.”

“Set!” the Starter said.

Goodman went to say something, but the gun fired, and the eight runners took off. Lana retreated to last position next to Goodman.

“Rumor has it that State can’t compete in NCAA Track and Field because the recruiting violations,” Lana said. Her coach started to get worried. “What the hell are you doing?” he said to no one in particular.

Lana quickened her pace before the hundred pole. Goodman hesitated, but followed. They both settled close to the lead.

“Shame he got caught,” Lana said. “All the colleges are doing it.”

“What are you talking about? Where did you read that?”

Lana quickened the pace, lunged to the lead. Goodman followed. She had to know what Lana was talking about.

“The Gazette’s going to publish the story in tomorrow’s paper. No track program for four years. That’s gotta be tough.”

Lana quickened the pace leaving Goodman a few lengths behind. Goodman must hustle to keep up with her. The pace was quick.

“I didn’t hear anything about that,” Goodman said.

Joe saw Lana talking to Goodman and smiled. He got up and walked down to the fence at ground level. On his way he said, “That’s my girl.”

Lana and Goodman came around the stretch for the first time, and Lana quickened the pace again and Goodman had to make a decision whether to keep up with Lana or not. This was the point of no return for her. Goodman decided to nestle next to Lana and ask her again where she read that story. “You saying I have no scholarship?” Goodman asked.

Lana waited for about ten seconds and let Goodman repeat her question before Lana said, “Let’s end this chit-chat now. Hope you got enough gas in the tank.” And with that Lana quickened the pace again. Goodman’s face told all - the sudden realization she was just duped.

Joe watched Lana and Goodman battle for the lead at the top of the stretch. Goodman inched ahead of Lana but didn't have the kick she normally had. Joe already crept down the stands and was by the fence watching the race.

"Well I'll be," Lana's coach said, wide-eyed and smiling as he watched Lana and Goodman match each other's stride at the top of the stretch.

Joe extended his cell phone and pumped out the sound Lana so passionately loved. The William Tell Overture blared and it was just what Lana needed the last few yards as she proved she was the best this day.

Dixie watched and couldn't be prouder. "That's my girl," she whispered to herself. A shadow appeared over her. Dixie turned and saw it was Lana's father in an Army uniform.

"How long you been clean?" he asked.

"Not long. Six months."

"It's a start."

While Lana heaved her breaths to the ground, Lana didn't seem to know people were back-slapping her, congratulating her for a win well-deserved. She looked over to Joe who was arm-pumping like crazy.

"I don't believe it. It works," Lana whispered to herself. "It actually works, you crazy coot."

Lana saw the excitement around the track, in the stands, and in the parking lot where she saw Sean leave and her mother talking to her father. But there by the fence, she saw the one man who was probably more responsible for this win than anyone else, even her.

She thought to herself. 'You sure have a strange way of teaching, Gramps. It was crazy fun crunching Cheerios on the floor.'

‘How else would I have learned the value of cleaning up after myself? And lying may be wrong, right? Unless it has tactical benefits, like during war or at track meets. And farting? Ooo. That’s a good one, Gramps. There’s certainly humor in it, even now.’

Lana made a raspberry sound and laughs to herself. Her eyes meet her grandfather’s. They share a smile and she said, softly so only she could hear, “Don’t worry, Gramps. You’re my teacher, and if there’s one lesson you’ve taught me to hand down to my children it’s this: don’t grow up - it's a trap.”

THE END