

**WHEN I PLAY
IN THE BAND
They Never
Give Me the
Microphone**

Tender tales from a rural, traveling
mental health care worker

Based on
real events



A Bobby Blackie Banks Book

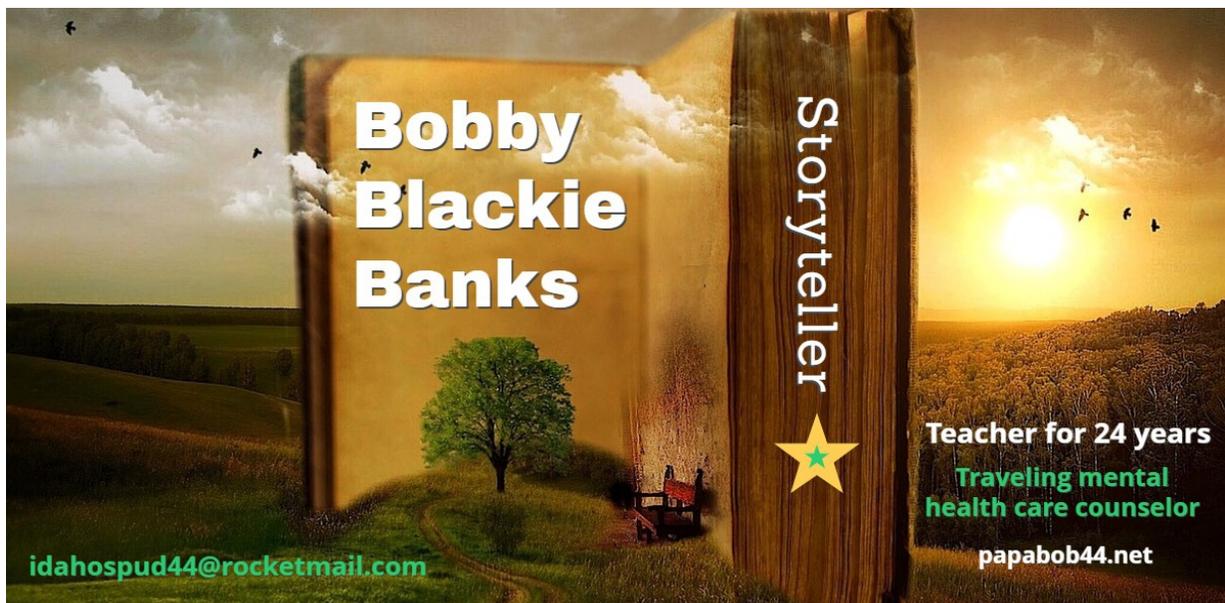


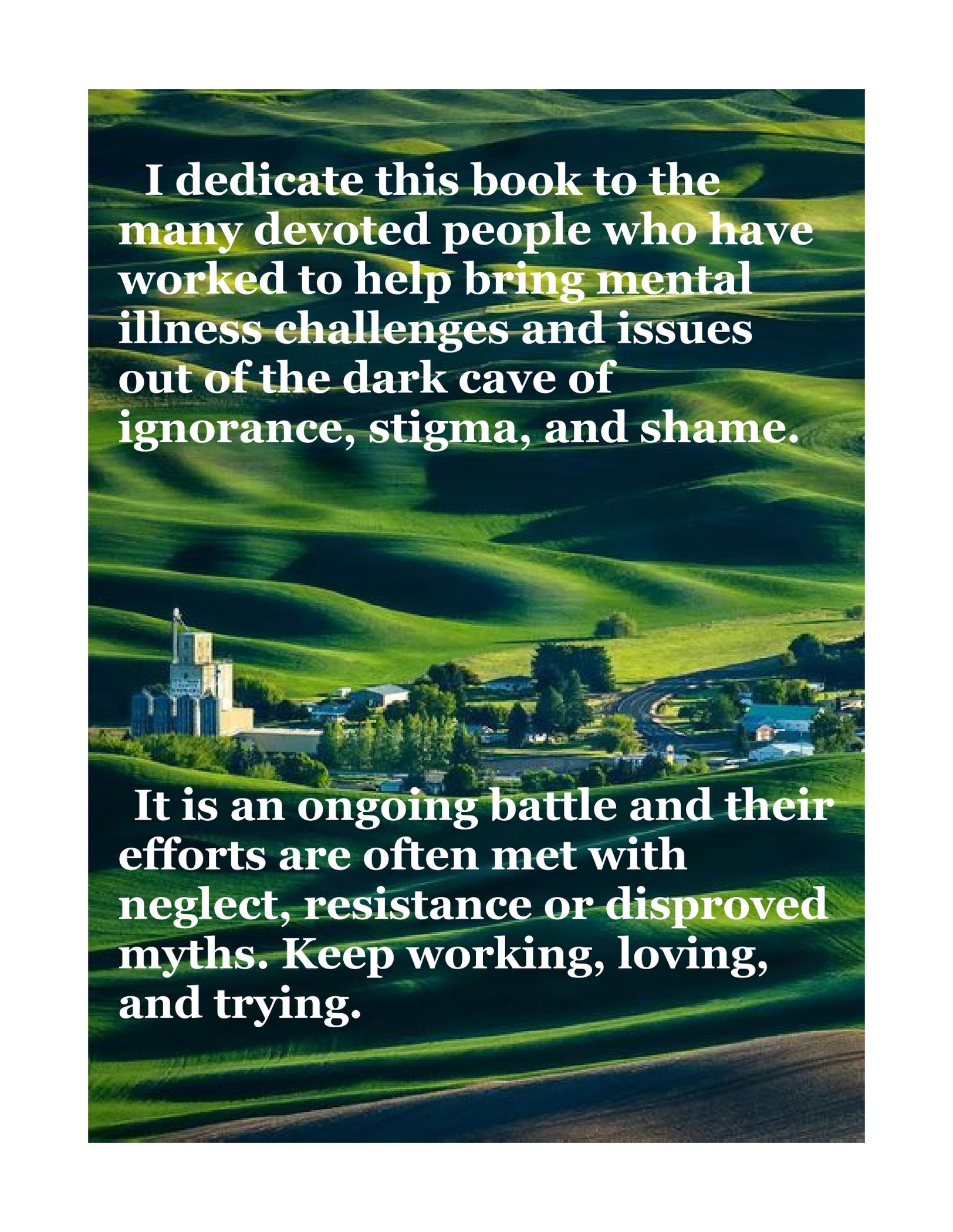
Tender tales of a traveling, rural mental health counselor

I worked as a traveling mental health counselor for a full decade in Northern Idaho. I loved the job because I met and spent thousands of hours with a collection of wonderful people, each presented with the challenges of dealing with a mental illness most commonly—paranoid schizophrenia. This is a work of fiction loosely based on some authentic experiences I witnessed during that time. I have copyrighted © this book 2015 and all

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I based the three principal characters on some dedicated, loving workers I knew who lived and roamed the remote sections of Northern Idaho. These workers provided support services and taught skills to folks who needed a little guidance and encouragement in order to live independently. Any resemblance to any specific individual is pure coincidence and not intended.





I dedicate this book to the many devoted people who have worked to help bring mental illness challenges and issues out of the dark cave of ignorance, stigma, and shame.

It is an ongoing battle and their efforts are often met with neglect, resistance or disproved myths. Keep working, loving, and trying.

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**THANK YOU FOR THE HONOR OF YOUR VISIT. I
HOPE YOU ENJOY THIS BOOK AS MUCH AS I
RELISHED CREATING IT.**

BOBBY BLACKIE BANKS



Greetings, reader. My name is Sherrie. I woke up as nervous as if it were the first day of school, for I am starting a new career as a counselor today. I will be your guide throughout this story.

This tale takes place over three fascinating days. Here is day one.

Chapter 1 -Get Out of the Way, Hook Arm



“Get the hell out of the way, hook arm,” was an unfortunate choice of words and considering the circumstances, possibly the single dumbest thing I have ever heard. Stunningly stupid because the words were directed toward a mammoth hombre, James Jerome McMurphy.

This ex-Green Bay Packer defensive lineman and Vietnam veteran had been a legitimate tough son-of-a-bitch his entire life and an uncompromising warrior for the neglected and picked on for over three decades. If pushed, he had a volatile, scary temper. JJ — that’s what everyone called him—did not hesitate.

He swung his artificial limb, which connected with a wicked thump to the skull of the unsuspecting gasbag, Vincent Morris. The

loudmouth simpleton instantly went night, night—out on his feet. If it had been a cartoon, there would have been stars and cuckoo birds circling around poor, dense Vincent’s head.

JJ’s close pal Duke, a surprisingly quick, athletic guy in his fifties, dove off the porch toward the falling Vincent. He managed to divert the guy’s tumble heading directly toward the cement sidewalk to a more forgiving landing spot—a patch of overgrown grass and sticker weeds. Vincent landed with a booming thud, throwing up a cloud of red dirt. Duke rolled twice, quickly popped up on his knees, and began checking the motionless Vincent for a pulse and injuries while yelling at JJ.

“You stupid moron. You may have killed him!”

JJ nuzzled the two teenage boys toward the van and said, “Get in, boys. Everything’s cool.”

Appearing from the horrid-smelling living room of the shack, a once pretty woman came out screaming and started smacking JJ on his powerful back with a broken broom.

“Get out of here, you asshole. I’m calling the cops. Get you fired.”

JJ calmly snatched away the broom, flipped it into the dead brambles of what had once been a neatly trimmed juniper bush, and slowly eased down on the porch.

“Go ahead. Call the cops, Alice. I’m certain they’d like an excuse

to look through your garage there. I'll wait and help 'em," he said in a steely voice as he sprawled out his 6' 8" frame on the steps and clasped his arms around his head.

She froze. I noticed her fearful, inadvertent glance toward the shed. She ignored JJ and ran over to the still motionless Vincent, whose nose and mouth were dripping blood. Duke ordered her to get some water, washcloths, a pillow, and blankets. Alice hesitated.

"Now, goddammit!"

She ran into the house and returned a few seconds later with some requested supplies. Duke went to work, splashing Vincent with water, propping up his feet, and putting his head on the pillow. He wrapped the blankets under and over him and wiped off the blood. He had obviously done this before. I remembered from the files that he had been a Vietnam medic years ago. Vincent stirred and tried to get up before collapsing on the pillow, holding his head in both hands and moaning. Duke looked over at me, shook his head, and nodded in the van's direction. It was an unvoiced signal to head to the vehicle.

"He'll be okay, in a few minutes, Alice. But he'll have one roaring headache. Better get some Tylenol or something. He'll need it."

Alice glared and yelled at silent JJ.

"Why'd you have to hit him so hard? He didn't do nothing to

you.” Even from a distance, you could tell her teeth were all fucked up.

“He deserved it with his big mouth and you shouldn’t let him beat on those boys ... And clean up this place. It reeks in there,” said Duke.

He popped up, dusted himself off, and caught up with me as I ambled back to the van, somewhat in shock yet too interested to want to miss anything.

“Don’t get paranoid Sherri, this doesn’t happen often,” whispered Duke as soon as he got within earshot. We got close to the van and turned around. JJ was dishing out threats to Alice in a thundering voice that would have made Lucifer wet himself.

“You tell Vinnie boy here when he wakes up from his little nap, he’d better find a new place to live before I come back Monday. As for you, Alice, remember this. I got your ass out of prison so you could take care of Chris and Johnny. Can have you thrown right back in for neglect. Get this place cleaned up by Monday. Trust me, I am not kidding.”

He walked over to Vincent.

“Hey, scumbag. You touch either of those two boys again and I’ll be back and we’ll talk.”

He gave him a none too gentle boot to the ribs with the steel

toe of his cowboy boot and moved back to the driver's seat with several long strides. His speed and quickness surprised me. I had been told at the counseling center he could be a total asshole. This had been only our third stop of the day, yet already one thing could not be debated. If you were a kid or anyone suffering from abuse or neglect, James Jerome McMurphy would be a good man to have on your side. I thought of my ex-husband for a second. Perhaps JJ would like to enlighten him with a visit.

Duke opened the van's sliding door. The boys and I got in the back as he jumped in the shotgun side.

“Let's get the hell out of here.”



The van roared to life, and we raced down the river road with JJ at the wheel. I joined the two boys in the back seat and buckled myself in. We were going way too fast for my comfort on this curvy,

two-lane road that followed the Clearwater River.

“Nice shot, JJ. You whacked that prick out on his feet,” fifteen-year-old Chris yelled out.

“Hey, Chris, knock it off. Sherri, the big mouth there is Chris. Silent boy calls himself Johnny whenever he chooses to speak,” said Duke.

Johnny didn’t look up. He smiled shyly, exposing a chipped front tooth. Chris and I nodded at each other.

“Where we eating today, boys?” Duke asked as he fooled around with the black patch protecting his left eye.

We ended up stopping at the Panhandle Cafe where JJ bolted inside before I could get my seat belt unfastened. Duke politely opened the sliding door and waited for me. Man, he has a wonderful smell, I thought for at least the tenth time this morning.

The two boys, Duke, and I took over a booth. JJ sat off by himself reading the paper and drinking coffee.

“Order what you want, boys,” said Duke.

Johnny had yet to say a word. Chris made up for him by talking non stop and ordering the Logger Platter for both of them. He focused on me.

“Hey, Sherri, how come you’re hanging out with these two losers?”

“Good question, Chris. I should know better. Getting some training from them this weekend.”

“Johnny, did ya hear that? This chick’s getting training from these two harelips. That’s a hoot, huh, Johnny?”

Johnny merely smiled and nodded as he stuffed his mouth with a forkful of pancakes. The huckleberry syrup left purple dots all over the white tabletop.

We had already eaten on the first stop of the day but that didn’t seem to matter to JJ who was attacking a platter filled with eggs, pancakes, bacon, and sausage while engrossed in the paper. I had ordered only coffee and used the cup to cover up my amateur spying. Duke sat silently sipping on a small glass of orange juice while writing into a small yellow pad with a shiny gold-plated pen. He glanced over at me and flashed a smile. I felt like he had caught me, which was not a false feeling as I had wondered if any of the words were about me. I hoped so.

Chris’s incessant chattering had paused, replaced by fast-moving silverware scraping against the platters, slurps, lip-smacking and finally a loud burp which captured Duke’s attention as well as an elderly couple across the room who shook their heads in disapproval.

“Chris! Pretend you have some manners. Jesus, you two beasts need to slow down. This isn’t a speed test. They have more food in

back and nobody's gonna steal it before you shove it in your mouths."

Silent Johnny asked, "Mr. Duke, can I get some more pancakes? Man, these are scrumptious."

"Johnny boy has chosen to speak. It's a miracle! Go politely ask Wanda over there if you want another stack of pancakes. By the way, bravo on using the word scrumptious."

The skinny kid slid out of the booth and started off at a rate of speed that was over the limit for Duke, who snatched him by the elbow.

"Slow down, Ace."

With his mouth full, Chris asked, "Pretty fancy pen, there Duke. Where'd you steal it? What you writing about?"

An ooze of egg sat on his lip.

"Damn, here wipe your face."

He tossed him a couple of napkins before returning his notebook to his pocket. He held up the pen and pointed it at him.

"I'm taking notes on this book I'm going to write on nasty-talking, smelly, gross country bumpkins from the remote hills of Idaho. You two might become famous."

"Hey, Johnny, Duke's gonna make us famous with the words he's scribbling down. Check out the gold pen he stole from some old

lady's purse when she weren't looking."

Johnny had no response but to slide back into his spot.

"It was my grandfather's pen, smart one."

Duke stood up abruptly, leaned toward him menacingly, pointed the pen at Chris and pushed a button on the side. A three-inch blade popped out of the bottom of it.

"I use it when I am in a tough spot or when smart-mouth teenagers get on my nerves."

He smiled and sat back down.

"Whoa, that is too cool. Can I borrow it? Need to use it to cut the nuts off that Vincent asshole."

"Dammit, Chris! We're out in public, so watch the language. Show some class."

"Sorry, Duke."

Chris's comment had started a replay of the scene at the boys' house that I knew I would never forget.

After leaving another client at the nearby hospital, we drove for a few miles on the main highway that followed the scenic Clearwater River and turned off onto an unmarked road. After going down a steep gravel driveway that gave this place shelter from the highway, we parked near a little creek. There sat Alice's isolated green shack that should have had a neon sign blinking: '*Meth Lab.*' JJ jumped

out first with Duke and me hustling to keep up. We got to the gate and Vincent yelled out in our direction.

“I had to slap the shit out of the smart ass.”

Duke immediately jumped in between Vincent and JJ to prevent a confrontation and gently guided JJ into the house. The two men had been right. Duke had given me a jar of Vick’s VapoRub and showed me how to put a dab on each nostril.

“This place stinks and this always helps,” had been his explanation.



We hurried in with this goop as part of our armor and thank goodness. I rubbed the Vick’s around trying to make a complete seal as we moved through a living room filled with stacks of newspapers, piles of puppy shit, three beyond gross over-flowing kitty litter boxes, filthy dishes, oily motorcycle parts, and dirty clothes. Big healthy flies zoomed around everywhere. And why not? This had to

be fly heaven.

We rushed through the unbelievable mess back to Chris's room and found the kid crawling on the floor.

"What are you doing, Chris?"

"Looking for bullets. Gonna shoot that son-of-a-bitch myself."

Duke said, "Chris, come on; let's get out of here. I'll get you something to eat."

Johnny peeked his head out from behind the door.

"You, too, Johnny, out to the van."

The brothers hustled to the porch before we could catch up, where Chris shouted to Vincent.

"I'm going to shoot your ass, dickhead, if you ever touch me or Johnny again."

That's when Vincent ran over, yelled, and took a quick nap after what JJ later called his "love tap." I suggested he call it his "hook shot." The two men laughed and glanced at me with what I hoped was appreciation.

I had to do a hundred hours of supervised counseling before I could start seeing clients. Mark, the owner of Clearwater Home Counseling who had hired me, promised if I worked this three-day long weekend with these two characters it would count for most of the rest of the hours I needed.

I had already been out with Duke a few times to see clients. He had introduced me to the work and taken me to a variety of environments during our travels. His humor, professionalism, and the gentle kindness he had shown to each client had impressed me. He took the trouble to explain what he was doing and why. At the office, he enjoyed being the main cut up at the meetings I had attended. Some of his comments had cracked me up.

We had been told every client needed to be seen and key papers signed for the upcoming audit. Mark had me come in Thursday afternoon. He told me he needed a current vitae letter for my file and showed me four client files. I did my vitae in minutes with no problem and spent the remaining couple of hours reading and signing off on the policy manual and looking through the files to get an idea of the paperwork required.

I also snooped.

I read JJ's and Duke's files. They had impressive credentials, experience, and strong educational backgrounds. Duke had two master degrees, one in Special Education, and the other in Psychology on file. JJ had earned a PhD. in clinical psychology which would surprise nearly anyone who witnessed him roaming around.

Duke dressed informally yet neatly in tennis shoes, black jeans, a black sweater, and a black and orange San Francisco Giants baseball

cap.

JJ, after spending a year in New Zealand, had developed the habit of wearing shorts year around even in the freezing places he traveled to each week in the winter. He wore wool socks that he stretched out to his knees and a faded sweatshirt of some type. They were quite a pair.

Walking side by side after the morning meeting, they looked like a dysfunctional cartoon. JJ with his hook arm, shorts, and wool socks, and Duke, almost a foot shorter, with his black eye-patch and ball cap resembled two goofy, aged pirates away from their ships and looking for trouble had been my thought.

This had only been our third stop, and Duke told me we had sixteen more for the day. I checked my watch, which read 11:50. My mind had been filled with experiences, personalities, and events I knew others would find hard to believe and all before noon. I had a feeling this could be one long, long Memorial Day weekend.

Since you're here following along, let's go back to the beginning.



Chapter 2-Breakfast with the Crew



AFTER THE SEVEN O'CLOCK MEETING, WE HIT THE ROAD. JJ drove like a maniac in and out of the little traffic around. At one point, in the morning fog where I could see nothing, he threw up his one good arm and drove with only his hook arm on the wheel.

“Look, Mom, no hands,” and gave out a hearty laugh.

“Put both your hooks back on the wheel, you idiot, and slow the fuck down. You can't tell me you can see anything out there. Watch it, buddy, I've got an eye on you, ”said Duke, who was riding shotgun.

He readjusted the eye patch on his left eye and laughed.

“Hey Sherri, can you believe this dick? Enjoying his driving?”

They were showing off by screwing around like teenagers, and I

was enjoying the show.

“Duke, Mark told me we have to meet up with your favorite Valerie in Moscow. She's going to supervise Sherri. And get this, she's going to be with us all morning.”

“Are you shittin' me? God, I can't stand her. She knows absolutely nothing, Sherri. She's one of those social workers whose biggest personal trauma happened when she got her pink princess phone taken away for a weekend her junior year. I'll bet you both she mentions '*personal boundaries*' within the first five minutes.”

“Oh, come on now, Duke. Tell the truth; you want to bone her,” joked JJ.

“Some things aren't funny and that's one of them. Sick bastard,” Duke answered.

On the way, Duke told us about Tom, a favorite guy he had worked with for six years, who had some trouble yesterday. He repeated the entire conversation from memory to show us. I turned on my recorder without them seeing.

“I walked in yesterday and he had flopped out on the couch, staring blankly up at the ceiling. He normally jumps up when I come in ready to go. He's always friendly and excited. I asked him what he was doing, and he told me some cartoonish story about the Queen of England and her flying midgets. It's one of his deals.

Whenever he gets stressed out, he starts talking about midgets in some way. I interrupted him and said, 'Come on, get up. Let's go to Denny's.'

'No, can't go anywheres today, Duke, 'cause King Tut ate all the minestrone.'

'Bullshit,' I answered. 'King Tut wasn't an Italian.'

Tom answered, 'That's what you say.'

I moseyed to the bathroom, shaking my head at the things his mind makes up and then returned.

'Come on, get up, Tom. We'll go to Starbucks. Get a butterscotch latte for you.'

'I ain't going nowheres today, Duke. The Japanese Jerry Springer is driving me crazy today.'

I told him to stay put and when I visited him before I came home last night, he was snoring on the couch. I worried about him all night. If he isn't better today, he may need to go to the hospital."

We pulled into the driveway as he finished the story. JJ gunned the motor a couple of times for some reason and abruptly flipped off the key. He flew up on the porch and was knocking before Duke and I could get out of the van. The door opened and we strolled inside the group home. JJ had already taken a seat at the kitchen table where Tom sat with his shirt off eating cold macaroni and cheese

from a large green plastic bowl.

“Hey, Duke, I’m doing a whole lot better today,” he announced as he threw up his arms in a football touchdown sign.

Duke walked over, patted him on the back, and moved into the kitchen. He returned with two full coffee cups and handed me one before speaking.

“Jesus, I certainly hope so. I worried about you most of the night. You were really into the cartoon talk and wouldn’t even go out to get something to eat or drink. Yesterday, you were mumbling about the Queen of England’s midgets, King Tut, and the Japanese Jerry Springer.”



“Well, Duke, that’s why when I play in the band, they never give me the microphone.”

This cracked up both men. It took me a minute to realize how damn funny that statement had been.

We moved into the living room where we spotted a middle-aged woman sitting on the old sofa. She held a notepad, shifted around uncomfortably, and kept smoothing out her expensive-looking print peasant dress. She had tied her long hair up in a bun where her eyeglasses were perched. That had to be the infamous Valerie, I thought.

We waited for Tom as he headed upstairs to get dressed before we could take him to eat even more breakfast and do some shopping. We sat down on one of the three couches; neither man made any attempt to acknowledge the sitting Valerie. She seemed irritated, got up, and curtly introduced herself to me without offering a hand or even attempting to return my polite smile.

We heard a yelp and loud laughter coming from the basement. The door flew open and up the steps ran Sylvester, a short Hispanic looking guy wearing a tee shirt that said, *Reality is Weird*. He laughed wildly.

Right behind him came Kristy, who yelled out, “Sylvester is farting in Chinese again.”

Sly lifted his leg and let out a solid toot on cue.

“That one was in Spanish,” and he let out another wild laugh. “Hey, Duke, I’m wearing the tee-shirt you had made for me. I want you to make another one if you can.”

“Yeah, what’s it going to say: ‘I fart for food?’ You sick puppy.”

“No, that’s happening cause of those whole-grain cookies mom sent me.” He filled up his coffee mug and put an unlit cigarette in his mouth before continuing.

“I want one that says, ‘We’re all sick bastards on the front.’ On the back, I want a VW van picture.”

He pulled out a lighter and headed to the smoking porch.

Kristy fell into the couch cushions.

“I’m bringing this up at the meeting.”

“Kristy, he’s just playing around. How are you today? This is Sherri, our newest worker,” Duke said.

Kristy didn’t acknowledge my presence.

She answered, “I’ve been having some dreams the last couple of nights about how they’re trying to steal my identity and my secrets on being invisible. Sly was in my dreams. He carried around my breasts from room to room in the castle.”

JJ snorted, got up, and headed to the smoking porch. Duke ignored her odd comment.

“Kristy, we’re all going to the Breakfast Club. Want to come?”

“Well, I would, but they serve Eggs Benedict down there. I don’t eat traitor eggs.”

She headed upstairs without another word.

“Now Sherri, there goes a true patriot if I ever heard one,” Duke said to me.

“You should have refocused her instead of encouraging her,” said Valerie.

Duke rolled his eye, “Oh, here we go. Thank you, Mrs. Peabody.”

“That one guy said you bought him a tee-shirt. That seems to be a violation of the counselor/client personal boundaries to me, which is not ethical at all,” said Valerie, fulfilling Duke’s prediction.

“That guy has a name. It’s Sylvester. The tee-shirt thing was a successful social interaction activity, which is one of his psycho-social and state-approved objectives,” Duke responded.

He looked over at me and gave me a wink with his one good blue eye. It was a bit unsettling, which I suspected he fully knew.

“We have different ways of handling these clients. I think you should stick to proven methods for the agency’s protection.”

“You’re right. We have different ways. I know exactly what I’m doing at all times and you don’t have a clue, ever. Just kidding, Val.”

“My name is Valerie, not Val.”

Luckily, this verbal ping pong match ended when Tom appeared dressed and ready to go. I had never seen such an outfit in my life. He had on these huge sunglasses, a red stocking cap, a red-and-black-checked hunting jacket, and a pair of cutoff jeans with white

long underwear underneath them. He was wearing new white running shoes and wool socks that he had stretched out to the top of his knees. He was almost as large as JJ and looked for all the world like Elmer Fudd without his shotgun. Duke looked at Tom and back at me.

“Ready, Tom? Let’s go get some of those wascally wabbits.”

He winked his one eye at me again and stood up.

“I thought we were going to get something to eat,” Tom said, looking confused.

“Hey, I want to go,” said Sylvester.

Ricky, a handsome young college guy in his early twenties, the newest of the agency’s 58 clients, came out of the bedroom.

“Hey, Ricky. Do you have classes today or are you on break?” Duke asked.

“Nothing today. Where are you guys going?”

“Heading down to the Breakfast Club,” Duke answered, “want to come?”

He did. The scene of the crew stuffed in the van was priceless. I swear it looked like a collection of circus performers or a carnival work crew. I started to squeeze in, but Valerie stopped me.

“Sherri, ride with me. I want a word or two with you.” I shrugged and strolled over to her as JJ and the crew zoomed off down the

street. I waited for her to unlock the door and took a seat in her brand new Honda.

“Nobody rides in my car without a seat belt, so make certain you buckle up,” she said while adjusting the mirrors without looking at me. We hadn’t traveled a full block when she started.

“I told Mark I was opposed to you getting introduced to this work by those two. The way they do things isn’t based on sound science. They constantly forget the most important thing in counseling, which is adhering to personal boundaries,” she said.

She stopped at the busy intersection and then looked at me intensely before continuing.

“It’s important for the counselor to keep a healthy distance from their clients for both the client’s protection as well as your own. I really have a problem with how they do things and wish this program was more office based.

I took a chance and asked, “Their clients sure seem to like them. Isn’t that important?”

“We aren’t supposed to be their friends. We’re supposed to teach them specific skills. I’ll show you some of the things I do while we’re at breakfast.”

“Oh, brother,” I thought.

I already didn’t like her, and we had only driven six blocks.

JJ, Duke, Sylvester, Tom, Ricky were seated along with two other guys they had somehow picked up on the brief trip over there. Another big guy named Mel and a short, long-haired, early thirties guy called Keith were now part of the crew. I got stuck with Valerie at a table nearby.

She showed me a bunch of paperwork that I needed to learn and shared a lesson that she used with her clients. The guys were all laughing and having fun, and here I sat stuck with this humorless, stolid woman. Luckily, before she could order, her pager went off. She took out her cell phone, listened for a bit, and told me she had to leave.

“Here’s the paperwork. I need you to sign that I gave it to you. I’ll catch up to you tomorrow and we’ll go through the material,” she said.

I signed.

I noticed she had never once smiled or said one word to a client. She left through the back door. Praise God and Allah, I thought and moved over next to Duke.

“Ricky, this is Sherri. She’s going to be working with Kristy.” That was news to me.

“Good,” said Ricky, “she needs somebody to care about her and listen to her. I try, but she says too many wild things for me. Then I

start getting messed up. She's on this invisible kick here lately."

"Hi, Ricky," I said and offered my hand, "aren't you the one who records and sells music?"

"Yeah, I just finished my second CD," he said and made eye contact with me for the first time. His handshake was firm.

"We're going to listen to the latest one on the long drive down to Orofino, Ricky. That song you wrote for my website is a classic," said Duke.

"Thanks, I like that one myself."

He seemed relieved that his food order had finally come. He dove into it, speared a piece of sausage which he stuffed into his mouth along with a large forkful of pancakes.

Duke took a bite and said, "Hey Ricky, how you sleeping these days?"

"Oh, not too good. I have been stressed with school. Noticed that whenever I get really stressed out that my hair looks better."

"What? Your hair looks better? Explain."

"Well, when I get stressed, I always rub my hair over and over. After a couple of days, it starts looking all glossy for some reason. Maybe it brings the oil out or something."

"Could be," was all that Duke said.

JJ's voice caught my attention.

“Sly you can’t just point at the menu. Come on, man, talk. Tell the young lady what else you want.” Sylvester mumbled something, and the server looked at JJ for help.

“Slow down, Sly. She didn’t hear you.” Sly repeated his words, and she finally caught that he wanted a large iced coffee along with his food.

“Hey, Sly, let’s play a word game. Let’s think up some good insults. Here, I’ll start. Sly, what color undies are you wearing today, you little girl? Pink ones, perhaps?” joked JJ.

Sly merely stirred his eggs.

“What no response?” asked JJ. He shrugged and turned his attention to his skillet dish that looked like it could fill four people. We sat and ate for another twenty minutes. I was learning about the distinct personalities and had questions about each one. I had already learned that these were merely people with mental health challenges who needed some simple help and someone they could trust and count on. Duke had explained it very well at the clinical meetings I had attended over the last month at the counseling center.

Duke got the check, paid, and handed the tip directly to the server, a young college girl, who flashed him a friendly, genuine smile. These guys know people, I noted.

We were walking out in a long single-file line when Sylvester suddenly blurted out a comment from the very back.

“Hey, Mister JJ, what happened to the jolly part of being fat?”

We all busted up laughing as we walked out as one entity, piled into the van, and headed for the mall to do some shopping with the crew. It had already begun to get hot on the Palouse.

Chapter 3-Shopping, Rat Poison and a Hospital Visit



Duke gave me the shotgun seat up front as he scrambled into the back of the van with his five group home clients. JJ gunned the engine and took off for the mall. We stopped at the Safeway grocery store and it took a while for everyone to get their weekly food shopping done, especially Sly, who kept going up and down the aisles with no apparent purpose until JJ helped him focus.

We descended on the Dollar Store next, where Duke announced that each member of the crew could spend fifteen dollars on hygiene products and snacks. This group knew their way around the Dollar Store and filled their carts in record speed. Tom and Sly threw their selections in their shared cart like they were on a game show and

stood impatiently in the checkout line three minutes later with the equally effective Ricky and Keith in separate carts right behind them. The friendly checker unloaded the carts containing toothpaste, mouthwash, shampoo, razors, bags of chips, Frito's, Cheetos, candy bars and liters of soda. She checked the items and smiled at Duke as he joked with her and paid.

Big Mel, who had hooked up with us at the restaurant, had some trouble. Everyone had finished, but Big Mel rolled up and down the aisles with an empty cart. He finally showed up with an unusual choice of goods. He had picked three bags of Cheetos and twelve bottles of aspirin, enough for several hundred-thousand future headaches.

"Mel, what in the world are you doing with all those aspirin bottles?" Duke asked him gently.

"Ah ... I didn't know what else to get with the fifteen bucks."

"Sherri, go help him, would you?" Duke asked me as he took out all but one of the aspirin bottles.

I took the cart and motioned for Big Mel to follow me. I offered suggestions, which he ignored. He finally picked out some sunflower seeds, a bottle of juice, and eight boxes of Junior Mints. I figured an abundant supply of Junior Mints could be viewed as an improvement over a cart of aspirin, but wondered what Duke would say. We pulled up to the check stand.

Duke looked at the new load and smiled.

“Yeah, Junior Mints. That’s much better.”

He smiled at me, and I felt relief.

We headed back to the van where I witnessed something I had never seen before. Sly opened his jar of instant coffee and poured a big load in his mouth. He followed it with a drink from his water bottle. I could hear the swish, swish as he mixed it up in his mouth and then swallowed.

“Goddammit, Sly, I’ve told you that instant coffee trick of yours is abuse. Do you realize what it does to your stomach? Don’t do that anymore,” Duke shouted at him.

“I just wanted some coffee. Geez, what’s the big deal?” Sly answered, this time in perfectly coherent words.

“You just drank, what, six or seven cups at the restaurant? Jesus, take it easy.”

Tom stopped the minor dispute by saying, “Thanks, Duke! Man, this is great! Look at all this stuff. I am set. We did it all this morning, didn’t we?”

He happily took a swig of apple juice.

There were mumbled “Thank you’s” and we took off after Ricky spit out a glob of mouthwash on the pavement. They filled the van with a combination smell of corn chips, junior mints, coffee,

mouthwash and a few whiffs of Big Mel's body odor. I should have suggested some deodorant and mentally slapped myself. Sly lit up a cigarette and everyone started yelling at him to put it out.

"Jesus Christ! I just want to have a little smoke," Sly said in a pissed off voice.

He crushed the cigarette out on the back of the seat.

A few seconds later, he started singing one of the Larry, the Cableman's silly songs.

♪*"Get a job, you bum, bum, bum bum. Money don't grow on trees, you bum, bum, bum, bum."* ♪

Several laughing voices joined in. The crew jumped out as soon as Duke opened the van's sliding door at the home and disappeared. But Sly lingered around not saying anything. He finally stuck out his hand toward me and mumbled, "Nice to meet you," as he stared directly at my tits.

I let him do so without comment; after all, they are pretty nice tits if I do say so myself. I shook his limp hand.

"See you, Sly. No more farting today, okay?" I said.

He ran toward the smoking porch. Duke took back the shotgun seat, and I got in back.

"So Sherri, what do you think of my crew?" Duke asked as he pulled out a CD from his beat-up old briefcase.

“Oh, wow! What a crew. They all seem so sweet and innocent, in a way. I love Tom. He’s like a big, old teddy bear, and the microphone thing could be the best line I’ve ever heard. What’s with Sylvester? He’s hilarious, but off in his own world. They seem pretty happy,” I said.

“Yeah, I love coming here. This home is a good place for these guys. It’s safe and Wanda, the housemother, monitors them. She keeps the place running and Kristy keeps everything tidy, although she can get carried away. You’ll do her a lot of good,” Duke said.

After a sip of coffee, he continued.

“Sly is doing well. He never used to talk at all. Since he’s gotten away from his mother and her attempts at curing his schizophrenia with vitamins and herbs, he’s doing tons better. You might not guess it, but he has a very high IQ. Just can’t always make himself understood. He’s like a little kid and says something funny every time I see him,” Duke said.

“How did you like Val?” JJ interrupted, making eye contact using the rear-view mirror.

“Oh, I don’t know. Seems she likes to keep her distance. I noticed she didn’t say one word to anyone and never smiled.”

“Yeah, she has her place. Deals with the state workers and great with the paperwork, but nearly hopeless in dealing with clients,” he

said.

The wheat fields and pine trees lining the road whipped by with the heat bouncing up from the pavement. It was going to be a hot one today.

Duke spoke, “There are many in this social work who think that being a professional means you treat these guys like sick things to be fixed. They constantly blab about boundaries and keeping a line between client and counselor. I think this is fundamentally flawed. Most of these guys have a long history of abuse, teasing from peers, law enforcement involvement, and don’t really trust anyone who comes off as an authority figure.”

He paused and took a sip of coffee.

“We downplay that by the clothes we wear and the words we use. These guys need to know you care about them. Not one of them would ever go into an office to get counseling; that would scare the hell out of them. Frankly, JJ taught me that a good, positive relationship is the only way to help these guys out. We treat them as fellow humans rather than sick cases. And we’re pretty successful. We may goof around, cuss, and stuff, but we’re deadly serious about what we do.

This quote is my belief.:

“It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Duke spoke this from memory without one hesitation during the Robert Kennedy quote.

“We are all ripples of some sort. Those of us who try to help others need to be certain ours are golden ones,” Duke added.

“God, isn’t he cute when he gets all philosophical?” asked JJ. I didn’t answer, but I thought, “*As a matter of fact, yes, he is.*”

“Fuck off! Here’s Ricky’s music. Pretty impressive the way he puts it all together,” said Duke as he put in a CD.

Some pleasant new age techno music came out that captured me in minutes. Its relaxing tone mesmerized me.

“Wow, that kid did all of this?”

“Oh yeah, he’s a genius. He gets a 4.0 in his college classes, has his own website, and his music is highly rated on the music site he posts his creations on. This next tune is my favorite. He made it for me to put up on my website.”

We traveled on, starting down a steep grade when the song ended.

“Incredible, just incredible!”

“Yeah, it really is, isn’t it? Some think that if you have a mental illness, then you lose all abilities and talents, which is totally false. So many think that way. You will see it by observing how those in the community interact with our clients. It’s a constant challenge we deal with,” he said.

“Sherri, now you get to meet some of my folks. Get ready for a trip into the Idaho boondocks. I’ll leave it up to your imagination to visualize what these back roads coming up are like in the middle of winter. Next stop, Gary’s spooky house,” JJ said.

We turned off the main highway and headed up a steep, narrow gravel road through the multicolored rolling hills. There were no houses or buildings of any kind in view. JJ’s fast driving on the narrow gravel roads generated a jumbo dust cloud behind us.

“It’s so gorgeous out here this time of year,” I said as we traveled through a patchwork of rolling Palouse farmland.

“It’s so gorgeous out here this time of year,” I said as we traveled through a patchwork of rolling Palouse farmland.



The Palouse area showing off its colors



We traveled for a couple of miles with the trail of dust disappearing into a cloudless sky. We pulled up to an old farmhouse out in the middle of nowhere. Not a neighbor or dwelling in sight, merely acres of now browning pasture land with two lonely horses munching, and a few scattered Holstein cows who already looked miserable in the heat.

“Let’s go see how Gary’s doing,” said JJ, who vaulted out of the van.

We followed as I tried to ignore the grasshoppers jumping around. A crow gave out a caw from up in the one lonely pine tree that provided some minor shade for this old place. Our appearance sent a skinny cat scurrying from his perch on the stacked woodpile. A skilled carpenter had recently put up a wide, covered, zigzagged wooden ramp which we climbed. JJ banged on the door.

An overweight Indian man with shoulder-length black hair wearing a stained beaded ball cap peeked out the corner of the window while seated in his wheelchair. He rolled over, opened the door, turned, and without a word wheeled himself back into his kitchen. I noticed his black tee-shirt, covered with dried stains and bits of food.

“Gary! How you doing, man? Remember Duke, don’t you? This lovely woman is Sherri, who’s with us today. Is it okay if we come in?” JJ said in a loud, friendly greeting.

Gary shrugged and waved us in. He wheeled himself into the living room. The place smelled like recent and dried piss, which was hard to ignore. We walked by the sink filled with dirty dishes and into the living room littered with movie boxes, CD’s, and old cassette tapes all over the floor. A horror flick ran with the volume way up on the small television.

“Are you up here scaring yourself again, Gary?” said JJ as he flopped down on the old stained orange couch. A puff of dust came up.

Gary actually smiled and said, “Yeah, this one’s good.”

We sat and watched a couple of brutal murder scenes.

JJ said, “Hey, Gary, want to head down to the cafe?”

“No, I don’t go in there no more.”

“What? That used to be your favorite place,” JJ said.

“They keep spitting in my food and laugh at me all the time,” Gary said as he wheeled himself to the fridge and grabbed a diet soda, which I looked at with envy.

“Are you sure? They seemed to like you down there. You’ve been a good customer for years. What were they laughing about?” asked JJ.

“The waitress girl said they were all laughing at me because I never fuck no more.”

“Gary, that didn’t happen. Come on, man. You know that don’t you?” Gary shrugged, apparently not convinced.

“We brought you a pizza. I’ll go get it.”

JJ went out to the van.

We sat watching more movie violence in the hot house. The three fans weren’t doing much to cool things down. I felt wet marks under my arms and the smell of the place and the screams from the television were getting to me. Duke seemed to read my mind and said, “Gary, may I show Sherrie around your property?”

Gary shrugged without looking up. Duke handed me a coke as we went outside, just as JJ came in with the pizza. He grabbed his nose and made a fake puking sound.

“Freaky place, huh?” Duke said to me as he lit a cigarette.

“May I have one of those?” I asked him, hoping like hell he would give me one.

“Sure.”

We were out there puffing away when JJ came out.

“Hey! We have a real problem here. Gary just told me he ate a full box of rat poison this morning. Tried to kill himself. We have to get him to the hospital.”

JJ wheeled Gary, who was struggling with getting his fleece jacket on even in this heat, zipped him down the ramp, got him into the front seat, and loaded his chair in the back. Nobody spoke. We raced down the steep grade until we reached the river road where JJ accelerated and we flew the fifteen miles following the curvy river road. We pulled up to the hospital where two strong-looking emergency staff took over.

We sat in the emergency waiting room, nearly filled even this time of day. A doctor came out and talked with JJ in the corner. They agreed Gary would only be released to the mental ward in the regional hospital thirty miles away after his stomach got pumped.

His mother and father, an elderly couple, showed up a short time later. We left after filling them in and getting Gary settled. The van had heated to boiling inside and smelled like fresh piss.

“Damn, that’s his third try in the last two years. He has a double

whammy. MS, which is why he has such bladder problems, and schizophrenia. What a hand to be dealt. One of these times I hope I don't find him ... ”

Duke interrupted, “Roll down the damn windows for a few miles before I puke.”

I examined these two eccentrics who traveled the backwoods and small towns that made up their weekly routes—their efforts not recognized or fully appreciated—and grasped something profound. These guys save lives.

Chapter 4-Entertaining Confessions and Visits



IT WAS ONLY 10:45 IN THE MORNING when we left the hospital and visited Chris and Johnny's place. After we finished breakfast with the boys, our third stop of the day, JJ pulled in front of the tiny office that the agency kept in this small riverside town, Orofino. He stopped the van.

“You and Sherri get to take that beautiful blue piece of shit over there. Hope it starts. Sherri, you should drive. I'll get Chris and Johnny a place to stay until Sunday and make the Weippe run. Be able to check six more off our list and you can get some more. Meet you back here at 3:30 or so.”

Duke and I got out as silently Johnny jumped into the vacant front seat. The van took off way too fast and disappeared before

Duke unlocked the beat up Nissan Stanza, a blue beast from the late 80's that looked like it had been an auto warrior.

“Hop in Sherri. Let's see if this piece of shit will even run.”

It started on the first try. He gave it gas and a puff of blue smoke came out. It ran but was awfully noisy. I got in and buckled up as Duke talked on the cell phone. We took off with some sputtering hesitations and headed out of town on a scenic side road that followed the Clearwater River.

“Sorry about the noise,” Duke yelled, “sounds like the muffler is completely gone. Better keep the windows down.”

“Where we going now? Do you guys work at this pace all the time?” I asked as I tied my hair into a ponytail.

“We're heading to see Vern, who got suspended from school. It's just a few miles from here. Oh, by the way, I'm a really shitty driver.” He smiled over at me. I liked being around this guy for I could sense his kindness. He looked and felt around for something.

“Damn, I left the Vick's jar in JJ's van. Shit, let's pray that Vern and his mother cleaned up some ... And oh, no ... I couldn't keep this pace up. I usually visit the group home and maybe one other client in a day. We need to get all the authorization papers and insurance forms signed this weekend. Mark apparently fucked up and is in a near panic. The agency is being audited next week.”

A large creek to our left rolled on and we putted along. The difference in driving styles of the two men couldn't have been more different. Duke drove slowly, pointed out scenic places, and seemed to be enjoying himself, and the travel. I could imagine JJ racing somewhere in his black van in his daredevil way. Duke drove like an old lady heading to Sunday's afternoon Bingo session. He handed me a cigarette and we smoked in comfortable silence for a few miles.

Slowly, he took the turn into a little trailer park that hung on the edge of the creek we had passed over. It didn't occur to me that his Magoo-like driving might be because he couldn't see that well with just the one eye. I started to mention that when he stopped the blue beast in front of an old trailer. Dogs started barking everywhere and the sounds echoed off the creek. Duke came over and opened up my door, which surprised me.

This guy had some damn good manners I noted. I followed as he gave pats and rubs to the two black labs that were chained up on the porch. Their tails made little whacking noises on the deck and you could tell they appreciated the attention. The place was a mess outside. Bicycles with flat tires, old fishing gear, a rusted exercise bike, bags of garbage, and a rusted garbage can filled to overflowing with beer and soda cans made up the scene. Cigarette butts were everywhere like confetti after a parade.

Duke pounded on the trailer door marked with a sideways six

on it. Some moving around sounds from inside were heard before a hefty teenager boy answered and invited us in. It was comfortably cool and the place neat and tidy, but filled with way too much furniture and a huge television that was playing a soap opera of some kind.

Vern turned down the television and brought us each a can of Coke without us asking.

“It's fucking hot out there already ain't it? Oh, sorry, for the language,” and he looked at me with embarrassment.

Vern was a big, wide boy and not all fat with a neck the size of a tree trunk. He had shaved his head and his now flushed red face was the home of several pimples that looked like they hurt.

“Don't worry about it, Vern. It is damn hot. Hi, I'm Sherri.” I extended my hand hoping that I had done the right thing. Duke looked over and smiled.

Vern took my hand and asked, “Are you married?” He gave me the once-over.

“Down tiger, down boy,” Duke said, “so Vern how come you aren't at school?”

“Well, I've been getting in some trouble lately. These kids kept picking on me whenever I cleaned up in the cafeteria. Got damn sick of it. JJ told me I might need to take some action,” he said. He took

a big gulp of soda.

“So on Monday, I was wiping off the tables when a group of them started talking shit to me. I threw down the cleaning towel and thought, '*You're toast*' and punched out all three of 'em. Got 'em good too. All of them out on the floor. I walked out of school. All the way home. Got suspended for two weeks ... Where's JJ? Need to talk with him about something.”

“It's only us today. What else is going on? ”

“It's kind of ... I don't know if I should say it with her here,” Vern whispered.

“Sherri's cool. She can handle it and knows how to keep her mouth shut. Come on, out with it.”



“Well, there may have been some people over here having a party, kind of,” he said with his eyes looking down at the worn carpet.

“Were you having a party, Vern?” Duke said.

“Yeah ... There could have been some people drinking beer over here.”

“Were people drinking over here, Vern?” Duke asked.

“Yeah ... There could have been some people smoking pot over here.”

“Were people smoking pot? Were you drinking and smoking pot, Vern?”

“Yeah ... There could have been a bunch of people laughing over here.” This slow, comical confession might take some time.

“Okay, so there was a party, you were smoking pot and drinking, and people were laughing. What made them laugh?” Duke asked. He looked at me and tried to conceal a grin.

“There might have been someone doing something funny.”

“What was funny?” Duke asked. His patience impressed me.

The soap opera in the background and the noisy swamp cooler were the only sounds for several long seconds. We waited and waited.

“Ah ... well ... you know, someone could have gotten something out of Mom's bedroom,” were the words that finally broke the silence.

“What did you get out of your Mom's room?”

“Someone may have gotten out her ... her ... well, her dildo and started flicking it on people's faces.”

“You were rubbing your Mom's dildo on people's faces and people were laughing?” Duke said, resisting with all his being from snorting aloud, I imagined. I bit my lip.

“Yeah, I wiped it on Tammy's face as she held the little baby and everyone laughed.” The big boy sprang up, headed to the kitchen, and splashed water on his face. This confession was wearing him out.

“Tammy was over here with a baby? Shit, Vern, that can't be good. You can't let little babies come over here. You could get in all kinds of trouble.” Duke's voice showed concern.

“I know, I know!” He threw his hands up to his face and started bawling. Big sobs. “I don't want to go to Juvie again.”

“Vern, Sherri, JJ and I won't let that happen. Hey, big guy, it's going to be okay.” He rubbed the man-child's wide shoulders. I beamed inside because Duke had included me.

“What would I tell them when they asked, 'What you in for?' What would I say? Dildo flicking?” he said. He grabbed his head in his hands.

From out of the darkness of the back bedroom a monstrously overweight woman in a colorful sundress with obviously no bra on

came out and flopped on the old recliner that protested with distinct squeaks and creaks. I hoped it would hold. She had to be carrying over four-hundred pounds on her short frame.

“I usually keep it locked up,” the poor woman simpered.

We got the papers signed, patted the dogs, and hopped back in the blue beast. Duke zoomed out of the park kicking up gravel. He floored the thing. We traveled about a mile to the nearest turnout. He pulled off, switched off the key, and jumped out. He held his tight gut and smacked the hood of the Nissan. His laughter echoed off the river's water. I got out screaming and howling, in a total laughing spasm. We were soon both in tears.



“Sherri, can you fucking believe that? Jesus Christ, you're getting it all today,” he said and gave me a gentle pat. “You know it's a full moon and our guys are really influenced by that. I almost died when she said, 'I keep it locked up.' That scene is making my hall of

fame.”

He lit a cigarette and handed me one.

“Here's some more information. That was Pam. She's already in our agency's hall of fame for her attempted suicide after she tried to beat herself to death with a cast iron skillet after getting caught at the prison giving her boyfriend a blow job in the visitor's center a year or so ago. She seriously messed herself up. Tragic, but still so wild that we laughed about it after it was determined she'd be okay.”

We finished our smokes while gazing out over the river, snickering. We headed out, this time at Duke's usual pace. We made a half-dozen or so other quick stops and had the parents of five of the agency's kid clients sign the needed papers. My head started to swirl in confusion at meeting all the different personalities in all the various living situations. We pulled into a better-maintained trailer court than the earlier ones and walked up with the needed papers. The growling from a pit bull who wasn't thrilled with our presence stopped our progress. Duke motioned for me to stop and I did. The dog walked around us making low, menacing sounds.

“Oh, he won't bite you,” said a skinny woman who came out and grabbed him by the collar. *That's total bullshit*, I thought. I know dogs and that sucker would have attacked us if we had flinched even a little. My heart continued racing as we moved inside

and got the papers signed. Duke stacked the papers, put them in his briefcase, and asked, "How's Jason doing these days?" as we started to exit.

"He's nothing but trouble. Never listens to me. I'd give him to his drunk old man but I just bought a car and need the child-support payments to pay for it. He only shapes up when I give him a good whipping."

"There are other ways to handle things. Would you like me to drop some things off for you to try?" Duke asked.

"I don't need no know-it-all telling me how to raise my own son. Who the hell are you anyways? I do my best and you come out here and start shoveling your bullshit on me. Well, go to hell!"

She stomped her feet looking like a kindergarten child who had missed her nap.

"Hey, I just offered. You need to calm down and control your anger," Duke told her.

"I don't have an anger problem!" she screeched which reverberated off the other trailer homes.

She stomped her feet again and slammed the door. I hoped like hell that the dog had remained in the house. Duke looked over at me as we raced back to the blue beast.

"Jesus, Sherri. I repeat. You're getting it all today. Another

classic scene. My God, I don't remember a more entertaining day. I think you will do well, really well, in this work. Nothing seems to phase you.”

“Well, I had six brothers, a mentally ill mom, and an alcoholic father. I'm right at home with these people. I know this stuff,” I answered while thinking about what it would be like to put my arms around that tight waist of this older, kind, good-looking man.

I slapped myself and repressed those thoughts quickly. I replaced them with a stern warning and a vow to get some loving soon. It had been over seventeen months since Mr. Abusive Asshole had shown his true colors and left me with a black eye and broken heart. Now, here I was thinking about doing a guy old enough to be my father. Did I have a daddy complex?

“This next one will really be fun. We're going to Chester and Mabel's house. You'll love it,” Duke said.

“I already do. The name itself is intriguing,” I said.

But I was really thinking about asking him if we had time for a quickie by the river.

“*Jesus Christ, Sherri, knock it off. You need this job,*” I yelled in my mind. I slapped myself on the thigh, hard.

“Why did you do that?” Duke had noticed.

“These flies are getting to me,” I lied.



We pulled up to an aged country home nestled next to another clear creek with a big red barn that could be seen for miles. The acres around it were several shades of vivid greens and the place shaded by a combination of large, thriving pine, locust, and maple trees.

We parked and walked up as three cute, young kids came running up to us. Duke started chasing them as they screeched in delight.

“Hello, Duke. We've missed you,” called out a deep voice. A healthy-looking, suntanned man wearing clean bib overhauls came up and shook both our hands. The kids ran up and hugged Duke.

“We miss you coming over. You should come to dinner sometime,” said Chester.

“I don't make it up the river much anymore. I stay pretty close to Moscow but you name the day and I'll be up here for one of Mabel's feasts, that I promise you,” Duke answered.

He bent down and hugged the kids one at a time.

“Hey, kids do you still have that crazy swing? I want to show my friend Sherri and see if we can scare her with a ride.”

“Yeah, we were up there last night. I'll push her if she wants a good ride,” announced Danny, the oldest of the three.

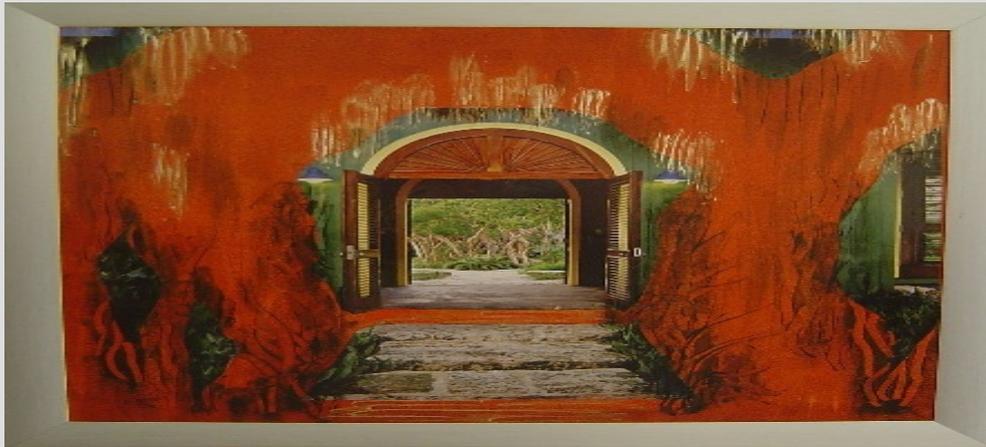
Before Duke could respond his cell phone rang. He answered. His shoulders slumped and his head shook back and forth. He finally stood silently simply listening, then barked out a terse, “Thanks,” while putting the phone away. He immediately announced:

“Sorry, Chester but something urgent just came up. We have to go right this second. We'll make it back in a couple of hours or tomorrow at the latest. Sorry, Danny, we'll have to come back for a good day of swinging some other time. We have to go.”

He motioned for me to come and sprinted with all he had toward the blue beast. I could feel the urgency and started running as fast as I could. I made it to the vehicle and was barely able to leap in before Duke slammed it in gear and we raced off.

“That was the hospital calling, Sherri. JJ's been shot! They say he's unconscious.”

Chapter 5-Get Me Out of Here!



APPARENTLY LITTLE FIVE-YEAR-OLD JIMMY WAS THE ONLY one to see the dagger with the ivory handle twisting and turning through the air and heading directly toward his Grandfather Jack's unsuspecting face. Laughter, chatter, and the clinking of the platters of mashed potatoes, green beans, sweet potatoes, and steaming long slices of turkey that were being passed around the long table from relative to relative filled the room with pleasant, active sounds.

Assembled at this table sat a big portion of the McMurphy clan including his mother, Grandma Junie, his two aunts, a tipsy Uncle Tim, seven more of his cousins, and his two older sisters dolled up in their special dresses normally reserved for Easter.

Jimmy bounded up from the table to try to intercept the knife but his grandfather's giant forearm stopped him cold. Grandpa smiled,

looked up, and accepted the knife that stuck directly in the right part of his neck. Nobody else had even noticed.

Jimmy's mother held him and stroked his red hair. She murmured to him and held him as he yelled, "It's Grandpa Jack, mom, it's Grandpa Jack!"

"Shh, Jimmy. You had a nightmare, honey. Must have been a bad one too. Take some deep breaths, honey. I'll get you something to drink."

Jimmy sat straight up and tried to remain calm but he knew something was seriously wrong. He accepted the drink and eventually fell back to sleep.

The little boy saw his family in tears the next morning around the kitchen table talking about how Grandpa Jack had died of a massive heart attack the previous night. His mother ran to him and gave him a suffocating hug. She looked him straight in his eyes for a long time and then gave him a long kiss on the forehead. Jimmy knew better than to say anything like he had the times before.

The scene switched to a steamy jungle and the little boy had become a full-grown, dangerous man who had outgrown the child name of Jimmy. Everyone now called him simply, JJ. He had been trained as a warrior and became a great one. He had been assigned as the leader of the platoon and always took the point while on patrol.

His men trusted him, respected him, and listened without ever questioning his orders. He had learned to ignore it when he would see the death scenes that always, without exception, came true out here.

His left arm kept itching, twitching, and cramping up. It had been like that nearly every minute since rolling out of his damp bedroll that morning. He marched along when suddenly the man directly behind him crumpled in a heap.

JJ yelled, "Sniper! Take cover!"

He dove for the ditch, rolled, and got his gun up ready to fire when he first felt it. He looked down and noticed the left sleeve of his uniform had turned a dark red. He recognized in the first critical seconds of seeing the blood that he was in deep trouble, helpless, and his last thought was remarkably calm:

Here comes death.

He remembered waking up to the sound of the helicopter taking off and the feeling of pure panic he had felt in seeing his troops as they disappeared in the distance. He awoke in a too skinny of a bed days later in a Saigon hospital not certain of where he was or how he got there. A nurse noticed his return to this world and came over to him immediately. She greeted him, sat him up, and offered him a glass of water that she held to his dry lips.

"Welcome back, big guy," she smiled.

He started to recall the shooting, the confusion and noticed his arm aching. It shocked him when he saw no arm, only a stump.

He ambled off the plane in Spokane six months later, carrying his release papers, a purple heart medal in his back jean pocket, and sporting a new artificial arm. He felt surprised but not overly excited that he was still alive.

He comprehended that nobody would understand the slideshow that often played with such remarkable clarity in his head. He also knew few would care.



The scene flicked over to a Christmas gathering late at night. He had come looking for Bobby, a friend he had known since kindergarten. Bobby had also recently returned home from Vietnam and served as a reliable source for a score.

JJ didn't shoot the shit like Bobby had descended into doing. JJ merely snorted the white powder and felt drunk enough to be on the hunt for a more substantial high. He carried his tall Budweiser bottle from room to room looking for his old friend. He finally noticed him sitting quietly on the corner of the couch while others in

the room laughed and yelled at the ship-captain-crew dice game they were playing. JJ shook him, blinked a couple of times, and tried to get everything in focus.

That's when he noticed the drool of vomit creeping out of Bobby's mouth and the blue tint of his skin. He yelled for help and checked for a pulse. He was thoroughly sober when the ambulance took Bobby away. He isolated himself and vowed that he was done with any more fucking around with hard drugs. He hid up in his apartment for nearly a month straight, only leaving to walk to the flyspeck neighborhood store late at night to get food and cigarettes.

His reaction to his old friend's death had surprised him. He had seen many die and suffer and acknowledged he would never get rid of the horrid scenes that played often in his mind. His career in football was no longer possible which left a void in his life for he had relished the violence, fellowship, and competition. He especially missed the violence for he had no place to release it now.

He tried each day, with little success, to focus on what he wanted to do with his life. He had some money left over from his football signing bonus and wondered what he could do with it. One day, sometime in the mid-morning, a loud knock came at his door.

JJ looked through the peephole and noticed a short, fit guy sporting a black eye patch standing on his porch. He recognized this guy as Duke, a former star baseball player three years behind him in

school. He reluctantly answered when the knocking became incessant.

Duke showed up every day and they talked it all out. Ever bit of it and the cleansing became life-changing. That had been over thirty years ago.

He worked and returned to school. Eventually, the two men, now closer than most blood brothers, took jobs at this one small counseling agency. JJ was assigned clients and when he had the first premonition of one of his client's death, he did the unthinkable. He tried to intervene.

When the guy didn't die it shocked him. It seemed his ability or curse had changed a bit. He now tuned into potential danger and death didn't always follow. He became an effective and dedicated social worker who fiercely protected and defended his clients.

He suddenly felt some irritating motions that kept going on and on. He looked up and heard a very distant, odd voice.

“JJ, JJ, wake up goddammit.”

He tried to ignore the voice. But it was unceasing and no matter how hard he listened, he could not understand it, like trying to dial in a radio station in between stations. He gave up, relaxed, and tried to forget about it but then grew curious and his eyes popped open.

“There you are. Sit your ass up, you big, dumb fucker.”

Duke and some gorgeous looking red-haired girl with her long

hair pulled into a ponytail looked down at him like he had become some attraction at the zoo.

“Where the fuck am I?” He tried to move and his attempt caused him to fall back in pain. He tried to tap his hook arm and got only air.

“Where's my goddamn arm?” JJ yelled out in panic.

“Take a look. I got it right here,” said Duke. JJ looked up and saw what was left of his plastic appendage. He started recalling.

“That filthy little meth-head, Vincent ... Coming down the Greer Grade with my arm out the window and this pickup roared up right on my ass. Wouldn't pass and I heard a goddamn shot. That's when I stomped it and squealed around the curves way too fast,” he paused and tried to get more comfortable and readjusted the pillows.

“The back window exploded and I had no choice but to punch it even more ... couldn't make one of the curves. Looked up when my van stopped rolling and saw Vincent on the road with a big grin pointing a rifle down at me at me. I ducked and rolled is all I remember. Damn, get me some water would you?” he said.

“Yeah, that arm took most of the damage. Luckily, Sheriff Gilbertson happened to be motoring up the grade and saw you wreck. Vince and one of his asshole buddies are in jail,” Duke said. He held up the arm ready to fall to pieces.

“Get me out of here,” JJ demanded as he tried to sit all the way up. “And if you call me Stumpy or some shit, I’ll kick your fucking ass.”

“They say most of the injuries are from the van going into the ditch. You need driving lessons from me, you crazy bastard. They want to keep you for the night. And I’d never even think of calling you names, asshole,” Duke answered.

“Well, fuck that!” JJ tore out his IV tube and threw off the covers. “You’re taking me home, this instant.”

“Mr. McMurphy! You need to get back down,” said a confused voice from the doorway that came from Marge, the most experienced nurse on the hospital staff.

“I ain’t staying here another minute. I only live a few miles up the road. I can heal up fine at home,” said JJ

He got out of the bed, had his shirt on, and tried to put his pants on over the blue gown. It wasn’t going well.

“You’ll tear out all the stitches if you keep moving around. I’m getting the doctor,” said Marge as she bustled off.

“JJ, what are you doing, for Christ sakes? Get your fat ass back in that bed,” said Duke.

“Fuck off. I’m going home,” was JJ’s answer.

And he did.

Chapter 6-A Remarkable Night Over the River



I found myself behind the wheel of the blue beast. JJ had signed all the forms and won his argument with the doctor after explaining his shitty, rip-off insurance coverage, and sprawled out taking up the entire back seat. He cussed, complained, groaned, and twisted around.

Duke gave me directions and we drove the five miles on the river highway before turning off on a gravel road. The Nissan bounced around as I tried my best to miss the many potholes.

“Jesus Christ, Sherri, are you trying to hit every one of those holes?” asked a cranky JJ.

“Sorry, I could pull over and let Duke drive,” I said.

“Fuck that. Ol' One Eye would drive us off the cliff. I'll quit bitching.”

We pulled in his driveway. I eased the vehicle into his garage. We helped JJ in and he immediately reached below the sink and pulled out an old bottle of whiskey.

He took three solid slugs.

“I'm heading for bed. Sherri, my daughter has some clothes there in the back bedroom that might fit you. I'm feelin' pretty good. See you both in the morning. There's plenty of food. Better watch yourself though Sherri, if you take a shower. That one-eyed creep will be peeking in on you ... you can bet your sweet ass.”

He limped off letting out little moans all the way to his bedroom.

“Nightie, night, Stumpy,” Duke called out.

“Go fuck yourself, One-Eye.”

“God, what a beautiful view up here!” I said to Duke.

“Yeah, he designed and built this place years ago. Come out on the deck. You can see three bends of the river from out there.”

He threw me a cigarette and asked if I wanted a glass of wine. I did. We strolled out on the deck smoking and sipping on some burgundy as the brown hills turned shades of pink, red, and purple. The sky soon changed colors and the few clouds that had shown up turned bright pink. We sat enjoying our second glass of wine when the first stars showed themselves.

We were up high enough, way away from any city lights, and by the third glass, I could see the entire Milky Way as if in a closeup.

The only sounds were crickets and the distant roar of the river miles below. A gentle breeze came up. Duke started speaking.

“Isn't it something that in all this beauty there is so much sadness, abuse, foolishness, and evil? Not always like this up here. These river communities used to be thriving little places. Every little town had a sawmill and jobs were always available even if you weren't so great at school. You could support a family, get a little house, a decent car all on one income. Those days are long gone. Shit, unemployment up here hovers around twenty percent. Jobs in the woods are gone and the mills are closed and abandoned.”

He leaned over the edge of the deck and fiddled with his eye patch.

“The towns on this river road are now filled with meth labs and the bars crowded even in the daytime. This is the abuse capital of maybe the entire Northwest. It's getting as dangerous as an inner city. You know, poverty gets to everyone. I can't work up here and I would suggest you stay up in my area.”

“What's the difference? Aren't the problems the same up there?” I asked.

“No, the colleges in my area are still thriving and there's plenty of work up there. It can be challenging but it's not dangerous. You can have success up there. It's much harder here. JJ's a miracle worker down here and nobody really recognizes it or gives a shit ... Sherri,

today was one wild day. You handled everything perfectly.”

“Thanks. I feel like I'm a different person after today. What a day! The clients are fascinating. I wonder if I'll be able to really help them. Did I really do okay?” I asked sounding like a seventh-grade girl.

“Better than okay. You have it. I became convinced when I saw how you handled Sly at our first stop when he gave you the obvious once over and it didn't phase you. You seem to have a great sense of timing and that is what much of this work is good timing. Knowing when to press, when to be supportive, when to listen, when to offer advice, and sometimes when to confront and be assertive. It's a complicated set of skills that can't be fully taught. We need a good, caring woman.”

“Well, what's the secret to being good at this? I want to be good,” I asked. I wanted to keep this guy talking. His voice, his passion, his kindness had me hooked. He didn't hesitate, except for a quick drink from the crystal glass of burgundy.

“Don't invade the clients with your fixes. Let them know in action and words that you aren't afraid to be with them on their various journeys and challenges. Don't create separation; work on earning their trust and respect them as fellow humans. Almost everyone we met today lives a lonely existence. They need to know that you care about them and you must be predictable. You can't cancel

appointments or break promises. They need to be able to predict your responses. This comforts them. I guess that's the ten-cent version, for what it's worth," he said and then took another swallow of the burgundy.

I sat speechless.

"That was worth a lot more than ten cents, sir. Splendid. I think that's what I've always believed but I've never heard it put into words before." I took a sip and looked over at Duke.

"You are a remarkable man, Duke. I think I knew that from the first time we met ... what two months ago? I listened to you tell your stories and offer insight at the meetings. You chatted with me and welcomed me when I first came to the agency. I really appreciated that. You have such patience and obvious love for your clients. You treat them with respect and are their friends."

I took another sip of wine.

"Excuse me, but do you have kids?" I said. He had talked about timing and I thought it time to find out some things here and now.

"Geez, Sherri. Thanks for the kind words. I sensed you would do well at this work when I first met you. I have two wonderful boys, fully grown. Willy is 23, Perry, 19. Great kids. Years ago when married, we took in foster kids for several years. My first wife couldn't have kids. My second had an affair with cocaine and I ended up raising the boys mostly by myself. How about you,

Sherri?”

“I have a little boy, just turned five, named Eddy. He's with my parents this weekend. They headed up to the St. Joe River to fish and camp,” I answered. My thoughts immediately flashed to my boy.

“Edward, huh? What's he into?”

“Not Edward. He's Eddy, like a part of the river. I'm addicted to fly fishing. I feel most alive when on the river trying to outwit rainbows or bass. He likes baseball and plays basketball all the time. He's a great fisherman for a little guy.” There was a pause but it wasn't uncomfortable. I had noticed earlier, that moments of silence were not awkward or at all uneasy with this man.

“Why did you pick him? Have you figured it out yet?” Duke shocked me by asking.

“What do you mean, Eddy? I didn't pick him. He came about, frankly, because I thought it would help things.” But I suspected he had meant something different.

“Not talking about your little man. I was wondering about the man who hurt you.” He stared directly at me and then lit a cigarette.

I thought okay, you started it, so don't bitch now. I vowed to never, ever play poker with this guy. He knew how to read people. So that's what I focused on.

“You can really read people, can't you?”

“Yeah, I can. You would never want to play poker with me.” He flashed me a wide grin.

“Okay, my turn, wise ass. I will tell you about it all some other day or night but right now I'm going to take a shower. I could use some help. Want to join me?” I felt shocked that I actually said that aloud. But I wanted an answer.

The grin faded. This verbal genius could find no words for once. He shifted around uncomfortably. Now, I became the one with the solid eye contact.

“I appreciate the offer more than you'll ever know, Sherri ... but well ... I had better pass.” He got up and gave me a kiss on the cheek and said, “Have a good shower. See you in the morning.”

I navigated to the back bedroom slightly high from the glasses of wine and not the least bit embarrassed. In fact, I felt proud of myself for at least trying. For a few seconds there I had felt alive again.

I found some pajamas, put them on, and started to head to bed. I stopped, disrobed, and walked into the shower, knowing damn well that I would have to turn it on cold at some point. I got in and soaked up the hot water, and began reviewing the astonishing day I had experienced when I felt soft but strong hands start caressing my shoulders.



I felt his touch and turned to see two blue eyes, one much brighter than the other. Without the patch, he looked like a different man. A rose appeared. He began rubbing my neck and sides of my face with the soft, sweet-smelling petals. He reached for the shampoo smiling as he poured some in his hands and slowly began washing my hair. He added an occasional wandering touch to my sensitive places. Soon, I was wet all over. Abruptly, he spun me around. His lips pressed hard on mine until I almost melted. A quick flurry of kisses covered my neck and cheeks. I felt his rapid breathing in one ear and then the other. I threw my arms around him, opened my hips toward him trying to take some measure of

control. He merely smiled and shook his head.

I finally understood the 80's song my mother had often played, *Slow Hand*. His talented hands moved everywhere as he pressed me against the slick wall of the stall. His wonderful exploring stopped. I found myself in his arms as we moved toward the bed. He gently dried me off with a bright red towel, pulled back the covers, and dove for my breasts. I grabbed his neck and pulled him toward me but he broke away, jumped up, and turned on a CD player. "May I have these next dances, madame?" he said. He held his hand out.

Boy, could he dance. He moved smoothly keeping with the beat perfectly. I hung on. I highly recommend dancing naked late at night at a place with a river view. This older man's trim, strong-looking, tanned body shamed those on men half his age. He read my every move and seemed to know what to do instinctively. The slow, controlled loving felt tremendous. Then the pace would change. I worried that JJ might hear the headboard banging. In between sessions, yes, I used the plural, he told me:

"Sherri, I don't think this is going to work out long term."

When I asked why he answered, "I'll be in my late seventies and they'll be pulling polyps and stuff out of my ass at the same time you'll be going through menopause."

He got up and stretched. Against my better judgment, I asked why that seemed to be a possible problem.

“I don't think I'll have the patience to put up with your hot flashes and nasty attitude then. A redhead going through menopause? Sorry.”

I slapped him which I guess he took as a signal because away we went again. During a rest, he told me, “Sherri don't think you can screw your way to the top in this agency.”

He laughed way too loud.

I responded by switching spots and said, “I guess I won't wait then,” I assumed control until passion took over. We fell asleep as the sun's first rays lit up the room. I woke up alone, refreshed, and hoping we didn't have any long walks planned for the day.

Then I got pissed which turned into a full rage. I grabbed a robe, headed to the deck, and yelled with all my being at the river canyon below.

“Hey, Mr. Abusive Asshole, wherever you are. Bite me, you low life. You don't even care about your own son, you scum. I'm done even thinking of you.”

No matter what happened, I knew that counselor Duke had taught me one unforgettable thing. I would never spend another moment of my life lamenting loss or feeling lonely because of some abusive jerk who got his pleasure from controlling and dominating me. I deserved better and I would never put up with some lousy

creep merely because I feared being alone. Never!

Duke came out and handed me a cup of hot coffee with a shot of Bailey's mixed in it.

“I hope that yell wasn't directed toward me.”

I think the kiss I put on him answered that particular question.

“Gorgeous view up here isn't it? Sherri, always remember one thing. Don't bring Your work home.

GREETINGS, READER! DID YOU ENJOY THAT FIRST DAY? LOTS OF ACTION, WASN'T THERE? I HOPE YOU WILL JOIN THE BOYS AND ME FOR DAY TWO AS THE TALE CONTINUES.

Chapter 7- Hatching the Plan at JJ's (Day 2)



DUKE WHIPPED UP AN OMELET. We were eating at the kitchen table when JJ walked out bare-chested, wearing only his boxer shorts. He rubbed his messed up hair with his good arm as his stub wiggled around. An even though he had a bit of a gut, this enormous man oozed power and strength. He poured a cup of coffee and looked over at us.

“Oh, Jesus fucking Christ, you stupid asses. Did you at least change the goddamn sheets?”

“What are you babbling about?” Duke asked with his mouth full.

“You aren’t the only one who can read a situation. You’re sitting over there with the look of a Holstein cow that just got milked, and it don’t take a genius to see Sherri has nothing on under my daughter’s robe.”

“JJ, I won’t go all junior high on you guys. Haven’t you ever just wanted a little loving?” I said to him.

“Ha! Yeah, you thought it was all your idea and by the way, I’m the one who made that music CD, not that one-eyed prick. Shit, Sherri, this could all have been yours!”

He waved his one arm around his cozy, comfortable house.

“Well ... that’s all nice, but frankly, neither one of you is really my type. I merely wanted a good evaluation,” I said with a straight face.

“Oh, really princess? What exactly is your type?” JJ seemed to be enjoying this.

“To begin with, I have higher standards. I would at least want my next man to have both arms and two eyes that work.”

I glanced at Duke, who jerked and knocked his glass of orange juice all over the table. JJ threw him a towel and gave me a sly grin.

“Well, well ... since we’re being so honest here. I’ll tell you something. If you keep flashing those goddamn gorgeous tits at me, I may just sprout a new arm on the spot.”

“Perhaps this will help. Here’s your daughter’s robe.”

I threw it to him and stood naked as a stripper in the kitchen in front of two men I had just met a few weeks ago. I wondered how many glasses of wine I had ended up having last night.

“And you two geniuses aren’t the only ones who can read minds or understand situations, so inspect JJ. Yeah, some of us are red all over.”

I retreated to the bedroom and congratulated myself on my masterful performance. I heard loud screams of laughter and snorts. I came out dressed. The two of them seemed focused but smiled when I appeared. Their phones and an open notebook were on the table.

Duke motioned for me to sit and said, “Okay, here’s the plan. We missed out on our goal of seeing people yesterday with JJ’s goofing around and have decided to bring them to us today. We’re meeting two dozen or so people at the ballpark for the Memorial Weekend NAIA World Series. The games go from nine am to eleven pm today.” He got up and poured some more coffee.

“We’re taking the rest of them fishing Sunday. That will be your deal, Sherri. JJ will make all the calls. I’m heading down to Chester and Mabel’s to hire them to drive the clients down in his old school bus.” He lit and puffed on a cigarette before continuing with the pep talk.

“Now, this is something that could get us both in trouble, so we need to prevent Valerie from knowing anything about it when we hook up with her sorry ass this afternoon.”

“Yeah, so Sherri, you better cooperate or I may have to share

with Val your lack of adhering to proper boundaries which could hurt your evaluation,” added JJ trying to use his professional voice.

“Her name is Valerie, not Val. I’m thinking she would be quite interested in my version of how you attacked that poor Vincent guy. So, you may want to use more honey than vinegar with me, sport,” I retorted.

“Hmm ... be right back,” JJ said. He vanished through the back door.

Duke looked at me and laughed. “Your brothers taught you well. Thanks for last night, Sherri. Are you going with me or staying up here? I’ll be back in a few minutes.

“Go ahead. I’m used to being used, abused, dumped, and lied to by men. Why should you be any different? I’ll just stay up here out of the way,” I said with false seriousness.

He stopped at the door and stared at me.

“Sherri, don’t take this wrong but ... ”

“What is it?” I read concern on his face.

“Well, just thinking or rather more hoping that...” he said and paused as he fiddled with his eye patch.

“Duke, what is it? Is something wrong? Did we make a big mistake? God, I hope not,” I said quickly in one breath. My smart-ass times were over for the rest of the day, I vowed.

“I’m trying to say ... Well, I mean ... don’t take this wrong, but I’m wondering, in case we ever hook up again ... well, ah, do you think you could move around a little more? Seems I did most of the work last night.” The door slammed.

“Son of a bitch!” I mumbled to myself as my racing heart rate came down a bit.

“He really got me there.”

It caused me to pause for a minute. However, I remembered moving around quite nicely when I reviewed the fine memory.

I heard some rustling around and soft moans coming from the back porch. The screen door opened with a squeak as JJ appeared, moving gingerly, in obvious pain. He dropped a fishing rod and reel in my lap.



“Here’s some honey, Honey. They were my grandfather’s best setup. Perfect for fly-fishing.” I looked at the setup and recognized instantly that these were carefully crafted, valuable pieces, and well maintained.

“I can’t take this JJ. It should stay in your family.”

“No, Sherri. Nobody in my clan fishes much anymore, and I can’t use it properly. I want you and your son to have it. Really, I would be honored if you would take it.”

I wondered how he knew about my son. I hadn’t mentioned it yesterday.

“A thousand thanks, big guy.” I gave him a kiss on the cheek. “How’s the pain today?”

“No biggie. I can handle pain.”

I had him go stretch out while I cleaned up the kitchen. I had almost finished when he handed me a photo album.

“This has all my favorite fishing spots. You catch ‘em; I’ll fry ‘em. I’m both surprised and happy for you and Duke. He’s one hell of a man, Sherri. Seriously, he’s the best guy I have ever met. He saved me when I needed someone. More importantly, he thought I was worth saving. You’ve sparked something in him I have never seen before. Reel him in; age means zero.”

Chapter 8-A Scorching Day at the Ball Park



THE THREE OF US WERE IN THE BLUE beast with me driving an hour later, heading toward the ballpark for our rendezvous with what I expected would be quite a crowd. We talked about each client and divided up the paperwork. I pulled the beast into the parking lot at around ten o'clock. The growing first-day crowd had settled into watching the opening game of the tournament, which had already entered the fourth inning.

Duke grabbed a bag of sunflower seeds and guided us to some vacant seats directly behind home plate. His phone rang. He listened for a moment, turned to me, and smiled.

“Sherri, we got a break. Your friend Val has canceled for the day and may meet us tomorrow.” He held up his hand, and I slapped it.

I love baseball. I played fast-pitch softball every summer and lettered three years in high school. This charming park, Harris Field, was about three-quarters full by the middle of the second game on this cloudless, glorious day. I met the rest of the clients as they got off Chester and Mabel's old yellow bus. They seemed so excited to be on an adventure. Several had brought their kids along for a free day at the ballpark. We got the papers signed during the lunch gathering, which filled six picnic tables. Duke purchased the entire group lunch. The only problem came up when JJ found young Jason, one of the many kids, smearing his poop around on the inside of one bathroom stall.

I sensed Duke wished he could go off by himself. He studied each move as the game rolled through the innings. From habit, he called out each pitch and rarely got it wrong.

Chester and Mabel loaded up everyone at 3:15. We waved goodbye to the still excited group as they headed up the river road. Mission accomplished. I let Duke have some peace, roamed around, and found JJ sitting under an umbrella on the first base side where there were still plenty of available seats. I joined him as I wanted to get out of the sun and the heat. The thermometer on the digital scoreboard read 93 degrees.

“Old Duke goes off in his own world down there watching, doesn't he?” JJ said.

He pointed at a seat.

“Oh, yeah. God, he’s so into it. He told me this is his favorite weekend of the entire year.”

“Yeah, he never leaves the park; watches every game from start to finish, regardless of the score. Last night was the first opening night of the tournament he has missed in over a decade. I guess he had something else going on,” JJ said.

He gave me a pat on the shoulder, which was meant to be gentle, I guessed. It still smarted. The ground crew prepared the field for the next contest as we chatted. The park had grown quiet except for the motor of the three-wheeler dragging the infield.

“JJ, what happened to Duke’s eye?”

“Oh, shit, what a story. Listen up. Hey, before I start, want an iced mocha?”

He took off after my nod. I grabbed a nap while in the lawn chair in the shade. He appeared smiling, carrying two precious iced coffee drinks. He handed me my iced white chocolate mocha quad shot. I immediately took a sip. He took a gulp of his and started.

“Duke was a helluva player. Not good. I mean a genuine star. His dad had been a talented semi-pro player before he got killed in the Korean War. Guy dove on a grenade to save his buddies when Duke was like eight or something. Think, that’s why Duke tries to be

everybody's father. Anyway, this is a baseball town and everyone always talked about him as having major-league talent. Hell, he made All-State three years in a row. One at shortstop and two at second base. Never been done in this state before or since. You see, he had a golden arm, the kind only one in thousands has."

He stopped, burped, and took another gulp.

"Wait a second, JJ. His dad got killed when he was a little boy? Oh, how sad."

"Never has much to say about it, but I know it broke his heart. His mom got married again. But that guy got killed by a drunk driver up near Spokane. She was a schoolteacher for decades. Sweet woman. She's still alive up there, in some small town close to Spokane. He idolizes her. Kinda took over for his dad, even as a young guy. Became really protective after she lost her second husband. Born caretaker."

"I'd like to meet her someday. I'd like to hear more about his dads too."

"Well, good luck. Known him for years and years. He doesn't talk about stuff like that ... always makes a joke or something to steer you away. But back to his baseball experience."

He got up and took another loud slurp.

"The little shit was unbelievably quick, fast on the bases, as

competitive as a starving bulldog, and had more than a little mean streak. Yeah, a nasty mean. Something I really liked about him. Might have guessed that, huh?”

“Yeah, I see you enjoying that,” I said.

“Well, let me tell you, any baserunner heading for second on a double-play ball with Duke trying to turn two, had better watch the fuck out. He’d throw submarine style right down the line, at eye level, so you’d better get down. He hit three guys who got down too late and knocked one of them out cold. Word got around, players started sliding twenty feet from the bag. Cracked me up to watch it. His hands were unreal. He’d charge in for a slow grounder, and it looked like he never actually caught it. Boom! It was gone. The pro scouts watching and grading him agreed he had major league quickness and the best hands they had ever seen.”

“Quick hands, huh? I could testify to that ... ”

“HA! God, you’re a great smart ass, Sherri,” JJ said with admiration in his voice as he took another gulp.

“Well, anyway, Duke heads to college, gets a little bigger and stronger. That was always his problem, being too short and skinny. Well, he starts hitting, really hitting. That little bastard could take it out to deep center in any park. He’d knock a million out of this park, especially with an aluminum bat. Anyway, every scout had always agreed he was a major league fielder, but many wondered about his

bat. He finally signed after his second year for some paltry amount. Five grand, I think. They sent him to the Florida League, and he led the league in hitting. He moved up to AA and still tore it apart. His second year, they gave him the start at second in AAA, a step away from the majors. Leading off and hitting over .400 by mid-season. Rumors circulated that the Pittsburgh Pirates were going to bring him up in the September call-ups.”

He took another sip. His voice was filled with pride, as if he were bragging about his own son.

“He was up at the plate one night and some wild fireballer let one of his 100-mile-an-hour fastballs get away. Hit Duke square in the left eye and bounced all the way back to the mound. Put him in the hospital for nearly a month. They couldn’t save his vision, too much nerve damage, they said. Of course, that was his lead eye, and he was done.” JJ shook his head and stirred the ice.

“Been walking around with that same damn patch for thirty years now. Tragic. He would have played for years up there. I know it haunts him. Football still haunts me. Shittin’ Vietnam took my career away. I was just bigger and stronger than most. I wasn’t that athletic like Duke. He had skills, actual skills. We both could have made more in one or two years that we will ever make in this chicken-shit career.”

I heard a bit of resentment creeping into his voice.

“You played for Green Bay, right?”

“Yep, well, I suited up. Didn’t play that much. That’s how I bought my little farm though.”

Duke showed up balancing three plates of barbecued steelhead and rice that the Nez Perce tribe had been selling semi-legally in the parking lot. He handed us each one and sat down by me.

“JJ was telling me about your baseball career.”

“Bullshit. He was explaining to you about my eye, wasn’t he?”

“Well ... yeah but he said you were really good,” I said.

“What Stumpy didn't tell you, I bet, is that it was my fucking coach's fault that I got hurt. Duke said as he stabbed a piece of fish.

“How so?” JJ asked.

“He was always telling me to keep my eye on the fucking ball.”



Chapter 9-An Exciting Night With Oscar



OSCAR HAD BEEN MINDING HIS OWN business in the Silver Dollar Bar when it happened. The trouble started as he strolled back from a bathroom break toward the booth where JJ, Duke, and I were waiting. Some hefty logger dude bumped into him and gave him a violent shove into the counter.

“Watch where you’re going, you old fuckin’ hippie, or I’ll kick your ass right here and now!”

The big, bulky guy had been pounding beers for several hours. Oscar stood up to his full 6’6” height and glared back. I thought a fight might happen, but Oscar smiled and mumbled, “Sorry.”

He came back and sat down, shaking his head. I thought he had avoided the confrontation, however, the logger dude followed Oscar over and slapped his bottle of Budweiser on our table.

“I think you and I need to step outside!”

JJ started to move, but it was Duke who beat him to it.

“Hey, sonny, you best leave us alone before you get the biggest surprise of your life.”

JJ stood up and glared.

Suddenly, Oscar vaulted up and smashed his mug of beer on the table and announced, “Okay, fucker! Gotta get ready first.”

He ambled over to the door and dramatically kicked it open. Every one of the dozen or so people followed him out to the long porch. The three of us got there in time to see Oscar holler and dive headfirst off the porch into the gravel four feet below. He rolled around in the small stones three or four times, thrashing and bellowing.

“Okay!” he screamed, “now I’m ready!”

He assumed a fighting pose with his fists clenched. Blood rolled down his forehead, nose, and mouth. He looked like Rocky in the twelfth round against Apollo Creed. The logger looked at this, paused a moment, and spun back into the bar, shaking his head. We ran to Oscar, squeezed in JJ’s Mustang, and got out of there.

“Why in the hell did you do that, you fool?” JJ asked.

“Did you see the size of the sucker? Jesus, I didn’t want to fight him.”

We all started hooting as we buzzed on down the country road. Let me back up a minute and tell you how this night got started.

It was still blazing hot in the ballpark, especially for the end of May. I had buzzed home after JJ told me about Duke's eye and grabbed a few minutes of sleep and some clean clothes. I felt somewhat refreshed.

The astonishing adventures of the weekend and the intense surprise sex last night had combined to have me almost purring with contentment and excitement. I grabbed an iced tea and went looking for my new partners. They weren't hard to spot, even in the crowd of thousands cheering, shouting at the ump, and milling around at the baseball game.

They were in Duke's spot, the prime seat in the house, two rows up directly behind home plate. JJ waved his one good arm at me. Duke stood up and gave me a quick, tender hug. "God, you're so gorgeous," he whispered to me as I took a seat between them.

They had on new NAIA World Series shirts and hats. JJ looked much less intimidating without his hook arm. His stump made him look slightly vulnerable. Duke adjusted his eye patch, which I had learned was a nervous habit he probably didn't even notice. The crowd buzzed with exciting cheers of encouragement as the bases were loaded with one out in the bottom of the ninth.

The hitter smashed a hot shot up the middle that looked like it would score two and win the game. However, the second baseman dove to his right, snagged it on one hop, flipped it to the shortstop who tagged second, and fired to first to catch the runner by a step to end the game. The place went manic with yells of approval. People cheered for over a minute as the three of us sat munching on peanuts and making plans.

“We’ve got all but eight people signed off. I got hold of Oscar, who’s supposed to meet us down here any — bribed him with a promise of a prime rib, beers, and a ride home. I think he’ll make it,” said JJ with his mouth full of peanuts.

“Yeah, and we’ll get the rest tomorrow when we go fishing. That will be your deal, Sherri. You will be in charge of that adventure. I’ll have to get Eric tomorrow afternoon and that will be it. That fucking Mark is going to owe us big time,” said Duke.

“He always waits around until the last minute on this paperwork shit and then gets everyone all stressed about it. For such a good guy, he sure is a stupid prick about this paperwork junk,” said JJ.

“What about Val?” I asked.

“We called and told her we were already done. Won’t have to deal with her until Tuesday’s meeting. Have to listen to her bullshit then,” JJ said.

We were wandering out through the throng of happy fans when Oscar grabbed JJ in a bear hug from behind. He had appeared from nowhere.

“Where’s your hook, you ugly whore?” barked this fit, gray-haired mountain of a man in maybe his early 40s. He had pulled his hair into a neat ponytail that hung halfway down his back. His tattooed biceps looked like they were going to tear off the sleeves of his, Get Off My Cloud tee-shirt at any moment. He wore a Seattle Mariner’s baseball cap.



“Oscar, you made it! Goddamn, it’s a miracle,” hollered JJ, who faked a punch to Oscar’s firm belly.

“Hey, you get off of my cloud,” sang this guy showing a smile that featured a couple of missing teeth.

The voice had deep, rich, distinct tones that you only hear rarely

and always remember. We headed downtown and ordered prime rib and bowls of spaghetti that Bojack's Steak House featured with every meal. A band began warming up. One musician ran over and grabbed Oscar's ponytail.

"Hey, you old buzzard. What you gonna play for us tonight?"

"I ain't playing shit with you fuckin' amateurs," Oscar answered while grabbing the guy's hand off his hair. He could have broken it into pieces, it seemed to me.

"Oh, come on. Why not? One song. Just sing one. It'll be fun."

"Nah, I'm with my guests here. That's my new girlfriend and I don't want to embarrass myself with you out-of-tune stoners," Oscar retorted, pointing at me. He took a bite of prime rib.

I played along. "Come on, honey. I want to see you sing on stage. Get up there."

"Yeah, Oscar, get your ass up there. You'll love it and I need a laugh tonight," said JJ.

"Hey, Hey, leave the poor guy alone. He can't play shit anymore. He's washed up and you guys are going to hog him into making an ass out of himself," said Duke as he took a sip of beer.

It was obvious reverse psychology yet delivered in a perfect tone that made it almost believable.

"Hmm ... a challenge then. Washed up? You one-eyed asshole.

Let's see about that."

He chugged the rest of his beer, took off his hat, and walked on stage whispering to the band seconds later.

"This one's for my new gal, Sherri, over there."

He pointed at our table. The two dozen people looked at us. I sat there with my mouth open in surprise as he sang an old Eagles tune. This man, haunted by the challenges of schizophrenia, sang perfectly, beautifully, without missing a beat. He could have played in the Eagles himself, seriously. A sprinkling of applause followed, and the band members patted him on the back. He came over but didn't sit.

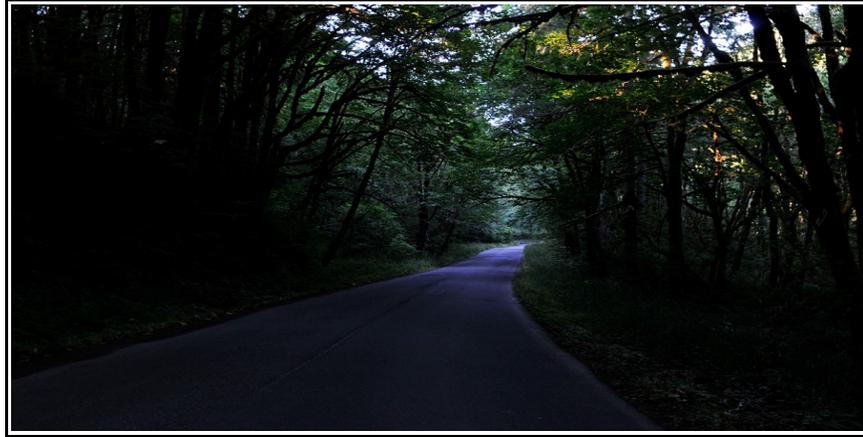
"Let's get the fuck out of here."

He plopped on his cap and headed outside before any of us could even move. The musician sat in the shotgun seat of JJ's Mustang and didn't acknowledge Duke and me as we climbed in the back. He sat silently until JJ appeared, got in the car, and started it. Then he spoke.

"You assholes owe me a beer for that."

He ordered JJ to get on the highway and head up to the Silver Dollar Bar, a shitty little hole miles from town on a remote country road. We were only in there for a couple of minutes before the logger dude came over and Oscar did his incredible leap off the

porch.



We decided to take Oscar the eight miles to his remote farmhouse after cleaning up his bleeding face. He started singing “Born to Be Wild”. We joined in with his pure voice and convinced him to sing three more. He signed the papers and vanished into his house without a goodbye.

“How did you like Oscar?” Duke asked.

“Boy, can that man sing! What a talent. What’s his story?”

“Shit, it’s an awful one,” spoke JJ. “One night he and his wife had a wreck on this Harley he had built. He was playing in a Seattle band and getting known for his singing and songwriting ... Man, you should hear him play the guitar. He’s incredible. Anyway, late one night after a show in downtown Seattle, he hit a patch of oil in a turn and lost control. He dumped the bike, which caused them to roll several times. She had died by the time the ambulance came.”

He concentrated on getting up his speed as we entered the main

highway.

“Poor guy. Already dealing with schizophrenia. He had been for years. Tried to kill himself a few days after the accident, which got him involuntarily committed. Spent nearly five years in a hospital on the coast. He told me he memorized songs as a way of coping. The guy knows thousands of songs, all the verses by heart. He does okay but has tried to hurt himself two other times. I found him one time. Thought he was gone for certain. He told me that sometimes the loneliness gets too much to bear,” finished JJ.

“That’s what you will learn, Sherri, how profoundly lonely many mentally ill people are,” Duke said as he took off his hat and wiped his forehead.

The two men, now my friends after two crazy, wonderful days on the road, dropped me off at my apartment and headed off into the night. I already missed them by the time I unlocked my door. I knew I would need some time out on a river by myself to think it all out, but now was not the time. I went out to my shed and gathered all my fishing gear for tomorrow’s fishing outing.

I had planned as soon as Duke assigned me the chore. I desperately wanted to impress my new partners. After some tossing and turning, I fell asleep confident that we would catch some of the bass and trout in one of my favorite holes at Cherry Lane Bridge. But I would be fibbing if I claimed I wasn’t nervous.

**End of Day Two-
Cherry Lane Bridge-Tomorrow's Test**



Chapter 10-“She Killed His Two Dogs!”



TODAY WAS MY DAY. DUKE HAD put me in charge of a fishing trip, and it was my first thought when I awoke. We met up the river at around eight o'clock. I expected six people but twice that number of clients showed, and began wandering around near the water, most of them smoking. JJ had brought some extra poles, and I had two ready to go in my trunk, always did. I fly-fish at least twice a week year round. I showed them how to cast and to yell, “Fish on!” whenever they felt they had one.

This became an exhausting morning. They kept getting tangled. Sylvester, who Duke had brought down from the group home, kept yelling, “Fish On!” but he never caught one. In his mind, he was getting bites every couple of minutes. Tom, another group home guy, caught a boot and cried, “Hope I catch the rest of the guy.”

We caught over thirty fish. My two “pals” were certainly no help.

They sat up in the distance on lawn chairs, smoking cigars and drinking coffee. Duke sat reading and JJ concentrated on some crossword puzzles. They left me on my own, dealing with twelve clients trying to fish. I could have killed them.

“Great job, Sherri!” Duke said to me.

“Yeah, thanks to both of you for all the help,” I said.

They laughed at me. I had to admit it had been a funny, enjoyable morning. We dropped everyone off. We had one last visit to wrap up the weekend. It was a lousy stop.

JJ said, “You two deal with that crazy bitch. I’m out of here. Not dealing with that woman. She’s pure evil and hates my guts. Feeling’s mutual.”

He gave me a long hug and another of his rough pats. He tore off down the road seconds later, leaving Duke and me alone.

“Let’s go see Eric. Great kid but his mother ... Oh, boy, his mother, Sandy, is the toughest person I’ve ever dealt with in my life. Shit, it’s already one-fifteen. The appointment was at one o’clock.”

We rushed over to the place and hustled up to the front porch. The door flew open and there she stood, hands on hips, dressed all in black except for a sweat-stained cowgirl hat with a colorful hat band, and what looked like a damn golden eagle feather—illegal—out to the side.

“It’s about time. You’re late and Eric is pretty upset. If you tell the boy one, then it should be one, goddammit,” she said before looking at me directly, “and why did you bring your girlfriend up here without asking me? ”

She pointed at me. Her eyes looked like little slits of evil, black coral.

“You’re not welcome here now or ever!” She stormed into the house, slamming the door right in our faces. I stood there with a paragraph of every cuss word I have every used flying around in my mind when Eric appeared.

“Sorry, man,” Duke said as we walked toward the blue beast.

“About what?” Eric said with a strange look on his face.

We got in and Duke said, “Well, your mom said I really upset you at me being late.”

“Hey, dude, haven’t you learned yet that she’s totally nuts? Here, I made a Larry, the Cable Man, tape for you. Can I put it in?”

“Bless you, little brother, bless you,” Duke said.

We took Eric out for some Chinese food which he inhaled, let him shoot some paint balls, played pool, and chatted about how things were going for him at school and home. The kid told us that school had been going pretty great ever since he got into the public high school and shared that he had tried out for the football team. He

thought it would help him in the future when he joined the Marines, which had been his dream and something he always talked about at the sessions without fail. His unhinged mother had moved him all over town. He had attended the fundamentalist church school, the charter school, and his crazed mother had even tried to home school him at one point.

We also had to visit his deceased older brother's memorial tree at Creekside Park and put on some Christmas tree ornaments for Memorial Day.

“If we don't put these up, there'll be hell to pay. I know it's pretty damn dumb. But you know my mom.”

We took the poor kid back to the psycho bitch and the house that looked like a fairy-tale hovel. She would not sign the papers and refused to talk to us. All she did was bellow, “Eric, you'd better clean up after those damn dogs.”

The visit with Eric ended the memorable weekend.

“I'll send Mark up to get her signature. Good payback.”

He leaned over and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks for a great weekend, Sherri. How did it go for you?”

I ordered him to stop at the University Inn. I shared how much I had learned as we drank two Bloody Mary's. We watched a sunset while looking over the valley on the old back highway he picked for a

scenic, quiet drive home. The lights of our valley town shone as we drove down the final grade when Duke's phone rang. He listened and then slammed on the brakes, sending the beast to a screeching stop.

“What? Get out of there, now. Ride your bike to my cousin's house. Tell him to let you wait in his basement. Calm down. I'll be there in twenty minutes.”

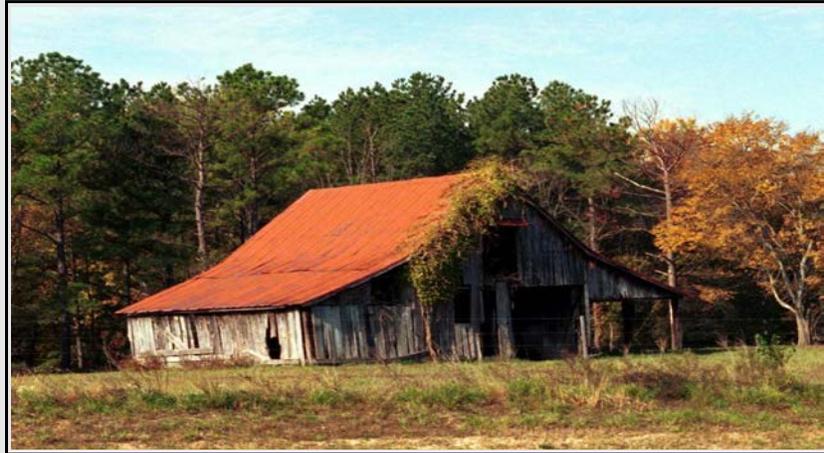
“Duke, what is it?”

“Jesus Christ! That was Eric. That crazy bitch just killed both his dogs. He kept crying and saying, ‘Poor Buster and Ernie’ over and over. He needed and loved those dogs. Now, he's holding their dead bodies in his lap.”

He sped down the grade, gave me a kiss in front of my place, and tore off back up the road to rescue Eric. As I watched him leave, I knew I was in love with this man.



Chapter 11-Johnny Shows Us His Shit Collection-



DUKE AND I SAW EACH OTHER at the weekly meetings, and he took me out to dinner at least once every two weeks. He made no moves toward lovemaking, and I didn't press the matter. We worked together occasionally and had compelling, pleasant adventures together seeing clients. I soon had eight women and two young girls on my client list. One day, he asked me to join him on a trip to Orofino. He had purchased a new car.

JJ had taken off on another trip to New Zealand and Duke had agreed to fill in. It happened to be my day off and Eddy was on summer break fishing with his grandpa. We cruised into the river city in the early afternoon and stopped at Chris and Johnny's place, but nobody answered the door. We were leaving when Johnny came

walking up from behind the house.

“Hey, Johnny. Where’s Chris?” Duke asked the thin, black-haired teenage boy while giving him a gentle pat on the shoulder.

“Him and Mom went to see Jeremy at the prison in Cottonwood,” he answered.

“Oh, really?” Duke said. Jeremy was the oldest of the brothers in this troubled family.

“Okay, see you tomorrow then. Tell Chris we’ll take you guys out for breakfast,” said Duke.

He grinned at us.

“Wanna see my collection?” he whispered.

“Collection? What collection, Johnny?” I asked.

He popped off the porch and headed toward the old barn on the back of the property that looked as if it could fall over during the next high wind storm. He turned back, waved at us vigorously, and smiled, showing his chipped tooth to us.

Unfortunately, we followed. A large black raven flew out of the shadowy barn and startled us. We should have listened to his warning.

“What ya think of my collection?” said Johnny as he pointed to shelves of mason jars.

There were dozens of them. We moved closer. It was dark in

there, so Duke grabbed one, examined it, and handed it to me. It was filled with a long, twisted human turd.

I looked at the shelf. My mind did calculations faster than any computer ever conceived. I knew I had to remain calm. Obviously, Johnny had some deep problems. Duke could find no words for once and stood shaking his head while scanning the shelves.

So I said, “Hmm, ah, Johnny, which one’s your favorite?”

Johnny didn’t even hesitate. He ran over and grabbed one.

“This one. I like the color.”

“Thanks, Johnny, but I have to tell you that looking at these was kind of a shitty experience,” said Duke handing back the jar he was holding. He slapped the kid gently on the back and laughed. Johnny laughed too.

“I’m coming over tomorrow morning and taking you and Chris to breakfast,” Duke said, “see you later, Johnny,” Duke continued.

He grabbed my hand. We started almost running back to the car. We made it to the vehicle and stopped while looking at each other, a little out of breath.

“Holy shit!” we both said at the exact same moment. We stopped at the store for some juice and started back down the highway. Duke pulled over suddenly, shut off the engine, and looked at me.

“Which one’s your favorite? Fucking genius comment!”

He started to howl.

“Thanks. But what about you? It was a shitty experience?” I said.

We sat laughing for a few minutes.

“Sherri, can you imagine being at a cocktail party and somebody asks: ‘How’s work?’ Can you see yourself answering, ‘Well, pretty good, actually. One of my clients showed me his shit collection this week.’ Think they’d understand?”

“Are you shitty me?” would probably be their answer.

That caused him to throw back his head and shriek. He started the car and drove off, but stopped.

“Want to take a quick hike?”

I excitedly agreed, and we were walking up a steep trail overlooking the river a few minutes later. We could see the town in the distance below. He pointed out three different places. Finally, he made me focus on one of the taller buildings adjacent to the river a few blocks from the small downtown.

“Know that place?” he asked me.

“Nope. It looks pretty cool, though.”

“How would you like me to buy you a steak there, get a room, and make love all night?” he asked without looking at me.

“Let’s get the steak and room later,” I said while pulling him to the ground. A magical sunset appeared at a key moment and we

stayed there until way after it got dark.

Never did get the steak.

Johnny stayed in the state hospital for a few months. He ended up living independently and successfully after adhering to some proper medication, some psycho-social rehabilitation and weekly support both at home and at school. Duke thought it was great that we had one of our best times ever after viewing a shit collection.

Chapter 12-A Death Leads to a New Life



When I started my car, it began making weird noises. I shut it off, then pulled up the hood for some unknown reason as I don't know squat about cars or how to fix them. JJ came cruising by, which was both surprising and fortunate. I shut the hood and stepped over to the open window of his van.

Duke and I spent every night together for two weeks after our romantic encounter up the river. I had received a note two days ago which said he had to go out of town for an emergency and would be in touch. JJ would know the scoop.

“Howdy, Sherri, been catching any trout lately?” JJ asked.

“No, I'm more interested in catching that friend of yours, JJ. He disappeared two days ago. What's going on?”

“The very reason I came over to see you. Duke's mother died up in Rosalia, a small town near Spokane. He's up there taking care of

things. The funeral is tomorrow. Want to go with me? No, let me put it another way. You should go with me. He told me to come ask you,” JJ said solemnly.

When I climbed in his van the next day, one look at JJ convinced me he was crazed. He wore an expensive black suit jacket, had combed his hair straight back, and somehow got it to stay. Underneath the jacket, he wore a gray sweater, white shirt, and with the top of a tie showing. Quite stylish, until my eyes zoomed in on the ever-present shorts, wool socks, and cowboy boots, which were a shiny black color today with silver tips.

“Geez, JJ. I’ve got to find you a woman. Are you seriously going out in public, let alone a funeral, in that get-up?” I asked. We sped off up the highway.

“Could you? Since you ditched me for that one-eyed creep, I had almost given up hope ... Yeah, find me a woman. Hell, I have a paid-off place with a river view, I’m educated, well read, collect music, and I only can only whack off with one hand.”

“You know, I heard Valerie got a divorce ...”

“Stop right there or get your ass out. Some things aren’t funny. That’s one of them. God, my pecker just descended into my colon without even thinking of that one. Come back here, boy. She’s only kidding,” he said while looking down at his crotch. We laughed. He put on some music as the miles ticked by.

“By the way, the pants and belt to this suit are in the back, you red-haired ass-wipe,” he said. He answered my questions about Duke’s mother and we talked about Eddy and then his children. We stopped at a rest stop about twenty minutes from Spokane. He put on the pants and belt and combed his hair again. The change was dramatic.

“Okay, chief much, much better. That is one nice suit. You’re a good-looking older dude, that’s for sure. If you cruised out looking like that, you’d get a bunch of action,” I said really meaning it.

“Well, I call bullshit on that. It would only get their hopes up. I ain’t running around like this again until the next funeral. Or maybe a good wedding. Are you going to marry him, Sherri?” JJ said as we got back in the van.

“Someone’s got to ask before I can give an answer. You taking notes or what? By the way, I’ll bet a thousand bucks that tie you’re wearing is a clip-on,” I said while straightening up my hair and makeup in the visor mirror.

“Shit, I hate knotting up. Don’t bother trying to hook me up with any redheads. Seems like they get on my nerves something fierce. Don’t worry, you look gorgeous. But Sherri, I have one suggestion.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“You should pull that zipper down and show a little cleavage at

this gathering and create some excitement. I hate funerals. Don't bother coming to mine; I won't be there."

Duke got up and addressed the crowd of around two hundred people.

"Thank you all for coming to pay tribute to my mother. It's heartwarming to see so many of her dear friends here to honor her. No bands will play. No flags will fly at half-mast. No ringing speeches will be given today. Mom became one of the hidden heroes that make up the pulse of a community. The heartbeat of this small town skipped a few beats as Mom took her first steps into eternity three days ago. But because of the love she received from all of you, she was prepared, and content with passing on."

He paused and scanned the audience, then continued.

"She lived through the Great Depression, World War II, outlived two loving husbands who died too soon, raised six children, and stayed happy and vibrant through the years of fighting off cancer and chronic pain. I was with her when she passed. We had moved beyond being mother and son and became the best of friends. She told me she hoped that shining her weak beam into the darkness of this world had made a small difference; has eased a little suffering, and had healed some unsettled spirits, if only for a moment. When I turned sixteen, she paid me 25 dollars to memorize a poem. I didn't

understand the words, really. To a kid, it seemed like such a silly thing to do, but I was glad to pocket the 25 bucks. I love her for planting those words in my mind. I have recited them many times. Mom had me do it one last time, two evenings ago. Let me share.” He read the poem and ended with these words.

“I hope my mother got to walk up some crystal stairs. She earned that walk and she deserved that walk. She wanted me to remind you to keep shining your beams. Thanks for coming.”

JJ and I skipped the burial service. Instead, we helped set up the church for the reception. Duke came up to me, gave me a crushing hug, and had me stand by him as the solemn people who had made up his mother’s support circle paraded by.

After everyone had left, behind the small, white church in this unfamiliar, picturesque rural town, Duke asked me to be his wife. Without hesitation, I agreed.

I rode back home with JJ, who stopped immediately on a side road when I shared the news. He pulled out a bottle of whiskey from underneath some clothes in the back and we took a shot.

It touched me deeply that he seemed so happy for his dear friend and me. One month later, Duke and I eloped and honeymooned in Hawaii.

Marrying Duke fulfilled a long dream. I never regretted it, even

for a moment. The man was a treasure and a great friend as well as my soulmate and lover. Here's the poem.

Mother to Son



**Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,**

**And places with no carpet on the floor-
Bare.**

**But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,**

**And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.**

**Don't you fall now-
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair**

Chapter 13-Duke Raised My Son Eddy



Duke raised my son Eddy. We bought a house near Harris Field almost exactly two years after our first love-making session and lived there for sixteen marvelous years. He became Eddy's actual father. That's how we all viewed it. The three of us had an active, happy life. Duke coached all of Eddy's teams in basketball and baseball. He read to him and tucked him in nearly every night. Duke and I never spoke a cross word or had any actual fight. I admired him, loved him, and knew one thing always. My wonderful husband saved lives.

I still work in the mental health field to this day. I have my route and my own stories. Duke never told me a thing about the night

when Eric's precious dogs, Buster and Ernie, died. I tried to press him on it a couple of times, but he would offer nothing. That is until one summer night up at the lake he told the story.

"I want to tell you about Eric now," he announced. My heart started racing. I could only nod.

"Remember honey, how I got the call and rushed off? Well, this happened."

He took a gulp of iced tea and a deep breath.

"After I dropped you off, I sped up the highway as quickly as possible to my cousin Johnnie's place. Eric had made it to the basement. He told me how his mother had started beating him with a belt and chasing him all around the house in a total rage. He had not cleaned up after the dogs, as ordered. Buster had come to his defense and started snapping at her.

She turned her attention to the dog and started on him with the belt. Eric got out of the house. He raced off on his bike. As it got dark, he silently returned, hoping it would calm her down. He slipped in the backdoor, which is when he first saw them. His two beloved dogs, his best friends in his lonely world, not moving, gone. He held them, rocked them, and called me.

His mother heard him on the phone and yelled for him to hang up. She swung the belt at his head. Eric grabbed it. They started wrestling. He finally pushed her. She lost her balance and smacked

her head against the corner of a sideboard. He saw something red on the floor and ran out, got on his bike, and took off to cousin Johnnie's." Duke paced as he tried to get this secret story out. He continued.

"I listened to Eric's story. I told him he was going to my friend's house over on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington for a month until he turned 18. He could then join the service as being a part of the military had been his dream for years. He agreed with no hesitation. I made the calls to my friends and told them part of the story. I got him to promise to keep this night to himself and call me every night. I knew I would need to keep him focused. I put him on the 10:30 bus with a couple of hundred bucks.

I drove over to the house. I parked a couple of blocks away. I prowled down the hill behind the house and eased through the back door. I found her there, dead. Dead bodies are no big deal to me. I've seen many. I got some towels, cleaned up the pool of blood, and put them in a garbage bag. I wrapped the body up in a sheet and three blankets and taped them all together with a roll of duct tape I found on the kitchen counter.

I moved outside and cleaned out a hole in the garbage in the plastic dumpster on their back porch that they used. I had to throw four or five bags of their stinky trash way in the back of the lot. I loaded her bundle into the hole and pulled the dumpster out to the

street. I waited in the dark for a few minutes, walked as calmly as I could to the corner, and sprinted for the van. I pulled it up after one trial run. The neighborhood was dark and there was only one neighbor nearby, anyway. The house had no lights on or any activity. I figured I was safe. I simply parked the van next to the dumpster and loaded her up.

I traveled all the back roads and picked a place up on the Drowshack Reservoir. I found an unlocked small boat with oars. I got the body in, rowed out, and dumped her in the middle of the lake with a bunch of rocks to get her to sink. I did not get home until sunrise.

I took the next couple of weeks going through everything I could find about Jeb, Eric's older brother, who had died under suspicious circumstances. JJ had always said he thought she had been responsible and the full story would never be known. I think she suffered from a severe mental illness, Munchhausen Syndrome by Proxy. Both Eric and Jeb were in the hospital constantly. There was a lot of suspicion and several investigations.

She could scare people into taking no action and would sue them or threaten them with ethics violations. People just gave in. I talked to one doctor who was totally convinced that she made Jeb sick on purpose. He could never prove it. The woman had been damaged beyond redemption. I can only imagine what kind of upbringing

created someone as ill and downright wicked as she became. Eric told me a story.”

Duke got up and paced. Took a drink and paced some more. He flopped down and started.

“She caught Jeb with a Playboy magazine and almost beat him to death with her cowgirl belt. He shared his memory of her coming out of Jeb’s bedroom, all covered in sweat and carrying the belt.

Yes, I have to admit I searched for a justification for saving Eric, who I viewed as another victim of her illness. I didn’t think he needed to be punished for fighting off her abuse. I thought the kid deserved a chance. So, I broke the law and I would do it again.

I knew no one would bother to check up on her as she had no friends, no relatives, no actual contact with anyone in the community that would worry or care about her wellbeing. The house stayed abandoned until some kids apparently burned it down one night. I got word this week that Eric got killed in Iraq. I hope the poor kid got some peace in his brief life.”

Duke mentioned nothing about that night again. Every once in a while, I get some flashes of what that night must have been like for him. I think what he did was both brave and honorable.

He only shrugged when I shared that with him. I knew he would never mention it ever again. He had invited me into his private

world for a few minutes to share a story that I would never forget.



Eddy made the All-State team as a second baseman exactly like Duke had done in his glory years. We watched him play American Legion baseball nearly every night that last summer of his senior year. Duke sat in his spot behind home plate, often with one or both of his sons, Will and Perry, next to him, especially when Eddy pitched. Duke sat there dying with every pitch my boy, I mean our boy, threw.

After every game, Eddy's eyes would scan the bleachers looking, not for me, but for his best friend and coach, Duke. The thousands of hours of playing catch, going to the batting cages together, and the many discussions about strategy and the mental aspects of being a star player helped cement a bond between my two favorite men. I felt so much love and pride for both of them.

Eddy hugged Duke after every game and cried like a toddler when he loaded up his car and headed for college after Duke gave him two gloves as a send-off. One, a brand new top of the line Rawlings, and the other his old Wilson A-2000 that he had paid to have restored to mint condition that Duke had used in his day.

Duke rarely showed emotion. It was like he had seen and experienced so much that he had built up an armor of sorts to protect him from some of the horror and sadness this world had caused him to confront. One of the few times he teared up in front of me happened when he hugged me tight the night of Eddy's graduation. He sat me down.

“Sherri, I was reluctant to get involved with you because of Eddy. I didn't want to open him up to any pain. Our age difference was so wide and Eddy so young. I have to tell you, I have been hoping this day would come ever since we made a go of it. I hoped I could live long enough to see him become a man. I have loved no one like I have loved your Eddy. I hope I did okay for both of you ... The two of you saved me. I hope you know that. Thank you for letting me be a part of Eddy's life and yours,” he said.

As the years ticked by, Duke slowly reduced his client load and took pleasure in training new staff members. He stayed involved and continued to do more than his fair share, like being in charge of the crisis line on the weekends.

He continued doing the on-call emergency hours. Even in the winter when night traveling became difficult for him. He had clients who had been with him for years that he had to see.

The trait was his greatest strength and turned out to be a great weakness.

Chapter 14-A Bitterly Cold Night on the Road



DUKE WAS ON CALL IN THE MIDDLE of one of those nights. A bitterly cold, ferocious January winter snowstorm had blown in and covered the area with more snow than usual. I heard the phone late that night. Shortly, I heard him gathering up his clothes. He came over, kissed me, and told me he had to head out. I sat up when he shared he was going to have to negotiate the Clearwater River road. A client needed some help. I got up, put on a robe, and checked the thermometer on the snow-covered deck. It read 20 degrees and would be colder up the river.

I heard him out there in the middle of the night, scraping off the windows as the car warmed up and watched him from a distance through the window; almost ran out and begged him not to go. I

knew it would do no good. Somebody was in trouble and he was going to help.

It's what he did.

The phone rang at 3:07 in the morning. I will never forget that time. I vaulted to the phone. Duke's voice spoke to me, calling from the hospital.

"Hey, kid. Gary took all his meds at once. Got him in the van, somehow, and slipped all the way to the hospital. They pumped his stomach. He's spending the night in the hospital. Heading on home after I get the nerve and some coffee. Pretty crazy out there," he said.

I pulled back the curtains and couldn't even see the neighbor's house.

"Duke, go get a room. Come home after the snowplows are out," I ordered.

"Not a bad idea, but I better get home before my younger wife sneaks over some young buck to take my place," he joked.

"God, Duke, no joking around. I can't see more than a few feet, even here. You made it all the way to Gary's place in this shit? How did you get that big guy in the van? He has to weigh over three-hundred pounds now."

"I really don't know how I did it. Nearly dead weight," my comic husband had to say.

“You aren’t funny. Go get a room and come in the morning,” I repeated.

“You forget my sterling driving ability, my love. Seriously, I’ll pop it into four-wheel drive and take it slowly. I should be home in two hours, at the latest. The plows are already out and there’s no traffic. I love you, Sherri. The doctor wants to speak to me. I have to go.”

“Okay, get behind one of those plows and take it slow. I love you, Duke,” I said.

“Hey, Sherri. You have always been my angel. Don’t you ever forget that. Don’t worry, now.”

The phone went dead.

I took the call at near daybreak from an Idaho State Police officer with the last name Craig is all I remember. Duke had hit some black ice and couldn’t make one corner. He smashed through the guardrail, landing upside down on top of two gigantic boulders, inches from the frigid waters of the river. The officer claimed he died instantly.

Of course, he shouldn’t have been driving at all with the one eye, but he had done so for years. I will never recover from that call. I know this and am learning to accept it. Duke’s legacy was that he lived and tried to make things better in this cruel world. It’s what I will try to do for the rest of my days. He taught me that and a thousand other things.

The phone rang incessantly for most of the week after the news of Duke's death circulated throughout the area in which he lived and worked for so many years. He often talked about ripples. He said our actions are like ripples and we needed to always make certain our ripples of influence are good ones.

I felt proud as well as sad. Over 2,000 people signed the book at the funeral service. People he had helped and kids he had coached came. Students he had taught, foster kids he treated as his own, and an entire section of his clients made up the audience. A bunch of admiring women came too, which amused me. JJ was a pallbearer as were clients Tom and Sylvester, his two boys Will and Perry, my son Eddy and his best friend, Creighton. Perry got them all to wear black eye patches as a tribute.

I used to keep his ashes on the mantle in a ceramic baseball in our house near the ballpark. I don't anymore. Last Memorial Day, the night before the NAIA World Series tournament's opening game, Eddy jumped the fence. He let Duke's two older boys, Perry and Will, and me in the side gate. The wind blew out to left field and clouds covered the sky. I poured out the ashes 20 feet away from second base. The breeze picked them up and spread them. The four of us hugged for a long time near the white bag.

The full moon popped out. The boys carefully smoothed out the area to leave no trace. We made it home, the four of us, arm in arm.

Later, Eddy came downstairs where I was reading in front of a cozy fire.

“Mom, that was a cool thing we did, huh? I was up there thinking of him and you too. Thanks so much for finding Duke. I promise I’ll try to be as good of a father to my kids as he was to me,” Eddy said.

He gave me a hug.

“Oh, Eddy honey, I know Duke would have appreciated that remark more than all the treasures of the world. He loved you. We were lucky to find a man like him. I hope you’re lucky enough to find someone special like I found Duke.”

“Mom, I finally understand what he meant when he talked of ripples; I’m going to make good ones.”

“You know what, son? That sounds perfect. I know whenever someone slides into second at the ballpark when I am at a game I’m going to smile.”



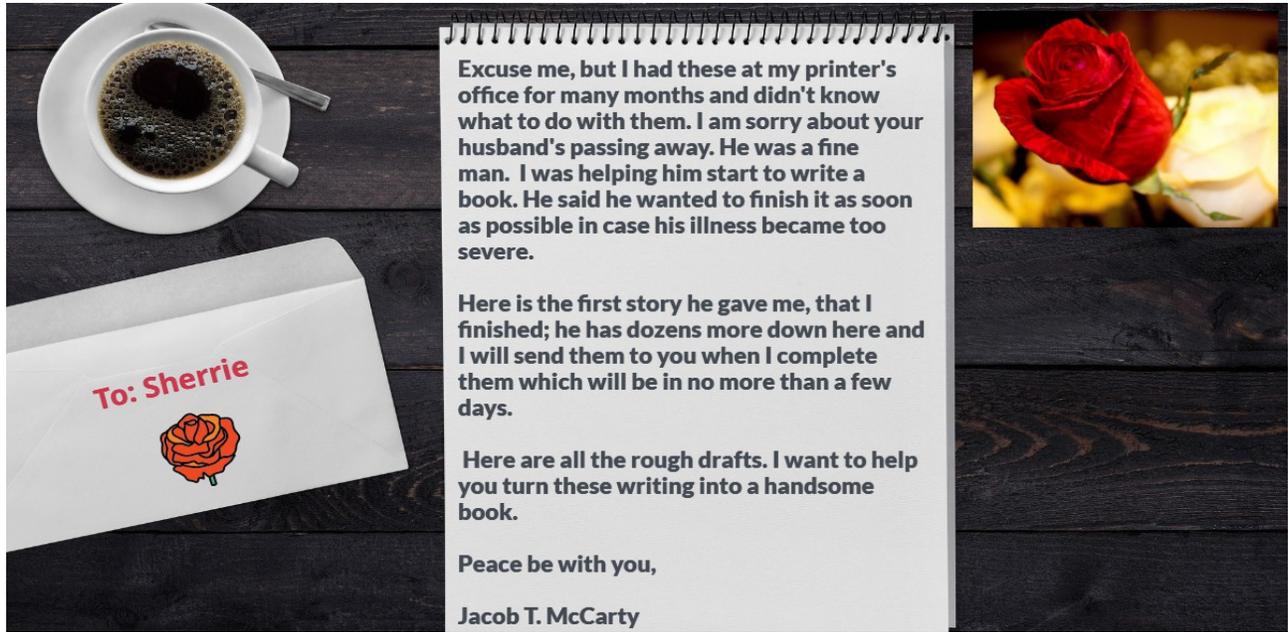
Franklin “Duke” Wilde

Chapter 15-A Surprise Message is Received



It was late June when I received a handsome package that had been left on my porch. It contained some papers with a typed note on fancy paper taped on the top page.

I fumbled through the pages for the third time when it hit me. Had I read that correctly?



“In case his illness became too severe?”

What did that mean? I grabbed the phone and got JJ.

“JJ, this is Sherri. I need to speak with you immediately.”

“How you doing, Sherri? What’s up?”

“No, bullshit, JJ. Get over here and talk with me.

I made myself some tea and flipped through Duke's papers. I fell into a sobbing session until the doorbell rang.

I wiped my eyes and hustled over to the door.

“Sherri, I got over here as soon as I could,” gushed JJ, “is everything okay?”

“Hi, JJ. Good to see you again. Thanks for coming over so quickly. Here, I got this in the mail today.”

I handed him the note and pointed toward the papers on the

desk. He stood there reading the note and then thumbed through the papers.

“I’d like some copies of these, if that would be okay, Sherri,” he finally whispered.

“No problem. Let’s get right to it, JJ. Of course, you can have some copies but that isn’t why I called you and you damn well know it. I want the truth—no bullshit, no protective crap—the whole fucking truth. What illness was the guy referring to, JJ?”

“Sherri, I don’t know ...”

“No, JJ. I mean it. There is no dilemma here. He was your best friend. We’ve been very close too. Don’t you dare lie to me, goddammit?”

He collapsed into Duke’s old recliner and rubbed his head with both hands.

“I’m serious, Sherri. I know he had brain cancer. He was getting treatment for it and the reports were all good, at least that’s what he told me. I begged him to tell you, and I got damn nasty about it. Even threatened to tell you myself. He responded by slapping me in the face and yelling that if I said one word to you or anyone else, he would never speak with me again. I got him calmed down some and let him talk. But that was many, many months ago.”

“Okay, thanks, JJ. That’s a good start. Now, don’t give it to me in

pieces. I want the entire story.”

There was a pause with the only sound being the ticking of the clock on the mantle.

“Duke closed up after that and wouldn’t say a damn word about it. He claimed he told you and you were okay with it. The guy simply refused to give me anything on how the treatment was going or anything else.”

“That’s it? That’s all you know? Really? What did you talk about, JJ, the night he slapped you? Answer that, please.”

“Just a bunch of stuff, Sherri. Come on, let it go. What difference does any of it make now?”

“Did he call you the night he died, JJ?”

JJ sighed, opened up his hands, and rubbed his temples.

“So, that’s a yes, is it?”

“He left a message on my answering machine, is all.”

“Dammit, tell me it all. Why are you making me beg?”

“Because he was the best friend any guy could ever have, and you’re forcing me to dishonor him by telling you things he only wanted me to hear. This is a mistake and you can hate me forever. But I will not say one more damn thing. In fact, I leaving.”

He got up, zipped his jacket, and stomped toward the front door.

“That bastard killed himself, to save me and Eddy, didn’t he?”

Over some false pride or some other bullshit. He and his crap about ripples. What kind of a ripple is that? He left this life, our life, to save me and my boy? Jesus Christ, what a pile of shit that is. He saved us and then wouldn't let us help him when he needed some help. What a selfish bastard."

JJ turned around and glared at me.

"You watch your tongue. No way you should speak such words. Duke lived his entire adult life helping others, thousands of others. He loved you like few men have ever loved another woman and your boy? He treated him like a precious angel from the moment you two got together. You have no right to speak about my best friend in such a way."

The words stung me because I knew they were true. I brushed back my tears and whispered.

"Oh, please don't leave me, JJ. Help me. Oh, please help me understand."

JJ stood at the door with his back turned away for a long few minutes.

"Okay, Sherri. Get your coat, if you want it all. We need to take a ride up toward my place. I'll tell you all I know, on the way. Come on, before I change my mind."

"I'll get us some coffee," I said and went into the kitchen to find a

thermos.

“Bring some Bailey’s too,” he called out.

We sipped on the Bailey’s and coffee as we headed out on the highway. We drove in silence for a few miles before he spoke.

“Sherri, Duke was always worried that the age difference between you two was going to be the downfall. I told him he was crazy. That you had proven your love a thousand times over, but it was his worst fear and he had few fears at all. First, he told me he hoped he could stay alive until Eddy became a man. That was something he always worried about. He didn’t want to be the source of a scar on your boy’s mind. My pal told me how relieved he felt when Eddy graduated and headed off to college. He knew he would always be okay then, no matter what. His greatest fear then became imagining ending up a burden for you. He didn’t think it would be fair. That simple, Sherri, he didn’t think it would be fair to make you take care of him in his last years. Especially, if he got ill.”

He took a sip of coffee and sighed.

“But I wanted to, JJ. I really wanted to be the one to take care of the great caregiver, himself. I looked forward to it, seriously. I saw some signals. He slowed down some. I could tell he didn’t feel right sometimes. But I didn’t care. I saw myself comforting him, wiping his brow with a warm cloth, feeding him, making him smile when he was feeling down. Why couldn’t he see that?”

“You called it bullshit pride, Sherri. But it was love and it may indeed have been a flaw in his otherwise nearly flawless character, I don’t know. Now, let’s be fair to Duke for a minute. He spent his life caring for others, often at great personal expense. That became his identity. You’re questioning his entire identity, Sherri. Think about it. You wanted him to give up the biggest part of himself.”

“But I miss him, JJ. Damn, I miss him so much.”

“Fuck, me too, honey. The little guy inspired me and damn. He could always, always, make me laugh.”

“You were a great friend to him, JJ. Don’t forget that and you’ve been a great friend to me too.”

“Cheers to you, Sherri. Here’s our turn.”

He put on the blinker and took a left off the highway and headed up a steep roadway.

“Where are we? Where are you taking me?”

“My place is only two miles down the road. I need to show you something up here. You’re going to see a dream that nearly came true. Duke’s dream.”

JJ had his van geared down enough to make it through two small creeks as the roadway became narrower and narrower. We drove for minutes with the drone of the engine echoing through the hills, the only sound. We kept climbing until it leveled off and a vast clearing

appeared.

“Here it is ... big surprise for you, Sherri. I’ve had a crew up here working for a month now. It’s almost done. I wanted you to see it totally complete. However, we don’t always get what we want, now do we?”

He shut off the engine, came over, and opened the door for me. We walked through the muck to an enormous log building. He took out a key, opened the door, and turned on the lights.

“All it needs is the furniture and pictures and such. Look around, Sherri. Duke built a group home. It can house up to fifteen residents at a time. There’s a barn, milk cows, a chicken coop, farm equipment, and three horses with a huge pasture. Look at that fireplace. Made all from river rocks carted up from the Clearwater below. Come out on the deck.”

There were enormous beams, monstrous windows, and the deck went entirely around the building. You could hear the river below and see the moonlight shining off the water. I could not take it all in.

“He’s been working on this from the day he married you, Sherri. It’s his dream come true. A shelter for those who need shelter. Now, the rest of the story. I’ll light a fire and tell you. Roam around, go upstairs, look at it all.”

I did just that. I explored the log castle and came down the stairs

where JJ's fire cracked and popped.

“What do you think?” he said.

“I can't believe it's real. How did he do it?”

“He planned it out one section at a time. He would get the money, finish one section. Stop the work, get more money until he had enough to finish the next section. The main living room, this room, took him five years alone to do.”

“But who did it?”

“Oh, he designed it himself. Did much of the building with some helpers he recruited here and there over the years. He got one big donation from one of the Silcott brothers when he helped save one of the Silcott kids from being put in State Hospital North and the family loved him for it.”

“How long have you been coming up here, JJ?”

“The sneaky prick never even showed me a thing until two falls ago, and I'm only two miles away. Know what he told me? ‘Now laugh at my ripples stuff, motherfucker.’ Those are his exact words, can you believe it?”

“Yes, I can hear him say it.”

JJ cupped his hands and yelled out as his voice echoed off the windows.

“Hey, Duke boy, I'm gonna spill the beans on you, so buckle up.”

Sit here, Sherri.”

We took a seat on the rock mantle, and the fire warmed us. He looked over at me.

“So, here we are, JJ.”

He sighed, blew out some air, and began.

“Here’s what I think happened. I don’t know for sure. I think the treatment wasn’t working. He would have told me if things were getting better. When he got all mum about it, I figured the worst. Duke probably had months to go, is my guess. He saw an opportunity that icy night and took it for he feared he would become an invalid and all the money would be used for his treatment and he would be powerless to do anything about it. That prideful guy would not risk losing this place, his life’s mission, for a few months or years living in pain and discomfort. He told me he would never put you through it. I think he figured out the odds and took what he thought was the safe play. He dies in a wreck, I finish his place—he knew I would—and you and Eddy are spared any suffering. Probably made perfect sense to Duke. And guess what? I will never doubt him, Sherri. You can if you must, but not me. I will never speak of this again, ever. Yes, I think he killed himself to save you from suffering. Perfectly consistent with the man I knew. He loved you with all he had and to think any less or to doubt him is the ultimate in disrespect and dishonor to his life, his duty, and his very being. I

wish to hell that you had never received that note today, but it happened. And now this has happened too. I need a swig of the Bailey's. I shall return."

He got up and hot-footed it toward his van while I sat with tears flowing down my cheeks. The sobs erupted as the shame of my earlier words reverberated in my mind. My dear man had sacrificed his last precious days on this blue orb to spare me what he thought would be suffering. Always looking out for me, even in the way he died. I thought my love for him could never increase but it had; this trip I had unknowingly demanded had sealed that.

JJ walked back in with two cups and filled mine to the brim with the Bailey's. We didn't need any coffee. We sipped in silence as the fire crackled.

"I don't want to leave this place, JJ. Not now or ever. Look around, I feel him..."

"This is a damn cathedral, no doubt about it. So, when do you open, Sherri?"

"Open, JJ? You think I should run this place?"

"Well, of course, silly. Who else is going to do it, and do it the way Duke would want? Sherri, this is the life he left you, his final damn ripple deal. Jesus Christ, what a flipping philosopher you fell in love with, an old baseball-loving, living damn poet."

“Is this really happening? It’s going to take me a long time to soak it all in.”

“Sherri, come spend the night at my place. The furniture is coming in the morning and you’ll need to be here to tell them how to arrange it all. By the way, I would like to apply for a job here, seeing as I am only two miles away and all.”

“You got it, JJ. You are our new director. Get this place filled up with those who need some shelter from the world. What shall we call this place, anyway?”

“Ah, that is already taken care of my dear. Come with me and I’ll show you.”

He helped me up, and we walked outside.

He took out a flashlight and shined it above the main outside door.

“Check it out, Sherri. A dream come true. He passed the torch to you.”



Sherrie & Duke's Ripples of Hope

Thanks for reading! Come visit for more tales.

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