

PETER
AND
THE AMULET



Steve Dunn Hanson

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CHAPTER 1



Peter

“ARE YOU PAYING ATTENTION, Peter?”

“Huh? I mean, ma’am?”

“I asked you a question. Do you know the name of the president of the United States?”

“Yeah. Uh, I mean, yes ma’am. Ike. It’s Ike.”

Miss Meyers looked at me like I had a potato for a brain. “His *name*, Peter. Not his nickname. I want his *full* name.”

“Uh, President Eisenhower.”

She rolled her eyes. At least I think she rolled her eyes. She was always squinting. “Can we have someone help out our Idaho transplant? Maybe they don’t go by first names where he came from.”

Josie Abramovic raised her hand, but before Miss Meyers could call on her, Nava whispered, “Dwight David Eisenhower.” Nava’s desk was right in back of mine so Miss Meyers

couldn't see what she did and nobody else heard.

"Uh, it's Dwight David Eisenhower," I said. I was louder than I wanted to be, and everybody turned to look at me. Josie looked mad and just stared at Nava.

Miss Meyers raised one of her eyebrows. I could see that. It was like a big black caterpillar on her forehead. "Pay attention, Peter, and think before you answer next time."

"Okay... Uh, I mean yes ma'am." I half turned in my seat so Nava could see the corner of my mouth. "Thanks!" I mouthed.

"You're welcome," she whispered.

Nava was cool. Josie wasn't.

Miss Meyers kept talking about President Eisenhower and how he was the most important general in World War II, and I just looked around the room and at the kids and thought about how different everything is here. I mean we moved here from Willow two months ago, but it's still almost like I'm in a foreign country or something. They talk so fast, and they kinda mumble with sort of a funny accent. I hardly know what they're saying sometimes. Miss Meyers doesn't talk that way, or I'd be in big trouble.

I rubbed the top of my wood desk. There's nicks all around the edges, but at least the middle's smooth. It looks a lot like the desk I had in the sixth grade in Willow last year. As old anyway. I thought they'd have newer desks here. I mean it's 1953, and this is a big city not a punky little town out in the sticks like Willow.

The blackboard here's a lot bigger too and goes clear across the front wall. It's a lot cleaner for sure because one of the boys in the class has to clean the board every morning recess. It's no big deal, and it's my turn today. It only takes a couple of minutes, and we use this old bucket with a big sponge and water that smells like vinegar.

The bell rang for recess, and Miss Meyers stopped talking and went to her desk. Everybody ran to the coatroom to get their coats and boots. I mean except me, because I had to clean the board. I went to the bucket and squeezed out the sponge. Miss Meyers just sat at her desk and watched. I wiped off the bottom part of the board then pulled over a chair so I could reach the top part. I'm the only boy in the class who needs a chair to do this. Embarrassing. When I finished, she looked at the board then said I could go.

I smelled my hand. Yuck. Vinegar. I went to the coatroom and put on my boots and coat. They're the same ones I wore last year in Willow because I haven't grown any. So what's new? I think I'm still as short as I was in the fifth grade. I have gloves, but they're my mom's old dress gloves, and I don't want the other kids to see them so I just keep them in my pocket.

I ran down the stairs to the schoolyard. I don't like the playground here. It's asphalt, and the one in Willow is grass. You fall down on this one and you get scraped real good and that's easy to do when it's wet and slick. I know. I look down at the patch in my jeans. It's not raining now though, and everybody's out here because you can't go into the lunch room if it isn't raining or snowing.

I see Nava playing hopscotch with Lisa Sennert and Zoe Lampros. I wanna tell her thanks again, but I'll wait til she's by herself. Everybody has cool names here. I like Nava's the best. Nava Silbertasch. I never heard a name like that before. I guess I never heard a lot of these names before. In Idaho everybody's a Hanson or a Smith or a Cox or a Holland or a Parker. Nobody has cool foreign sounding names like these. At least, I didn't know anybody in Willow with that kinda name. Well, maybe Paul Tew. But his name's just weird. Maybe his great great grandpa was a second child or something, and they

didn't know how to spell the number two.

I look over at the guys playing soccer. I haven't tried to play with them yet, and nobody's invited me either. I'm not very good. I'm not very good at football or baseball or basketball either. Actually, anything. I'm always chosen last. Maybe my size has something to do with that. Joke. It has everything to do with it. Well, maybe I'm not very coordinated either. Mom told me I was growing, and it'd all come together. Ha. Like when I'm 60 or something. Then it won't matter.

"Hey Dumbo."

Josie! I'm not gonna even turn around to look at her. She started calling me that a month ago. Duh. How original. I've been called that because of my ears since I was 10. So my ears stick out. Okay, they look kinda strange too, but at least I can hear.

"Not raining Dumbo. Think your ears are up to flying?"

That got me, and I turned to face her. "Not even a plane could lift you." Shouldn't have said it. Her body looks like she's an older teenager or something, but she's not fat. Cory LeGrand said she's built like a brick outhouse. I don't know what he meant. I sure know what outhouses are. Some people in Willow still have them. But brick? Why would anybody build an outhouse with bricks? I mean, you have to move them around when the hole gets full. Anyway. Shouldn't have said it. That's being like her. I don't want to be like her.

For a second she stared at me. Then her lip kinda curled down, and she walked away.

"Sorry!" I called after her. She just kept going.

"Sorry for what?"

It was Nava. She came up behind me, and I didn't see her. "Uh..." I stammered. "Uh, nothing. Just something I said that I..." I shrugged and looked down.

"Josie's mean," she said, like she knew what had happened.

“She’s always calling me a...” She didn’t finish. “Want some M&M’s?” She held out the bag.

“Thanks.” She poured a couple in my hand. “Thanks for helping me with Eisenhower. I don’t know why I’m so stupid!”

“You’re not stupid! There’s only two or three kids in our class who could’ve answered that question.”

“Yeah? And how many say dumb things to the teacher like ‘huh’ and ‘uh-uh’ and ‘yeah’ instead of ‘ma’am’ or ‘no ma’am’ or ‘yes ma’am’?”

She laughed. “Did you say ‘ma’am’ to your teacher when you were in Willow?”

“That’d be stupid. Everybody’d think you thought you were better than everybody else and trying to be a toady to the teacher or something.”

“So, you’re just getting used to talking like we do here. Everybody knows that. Most of us think it’s funny. And cute.”

“Cute?” My ears turned red.

She laughed. “Yeah. Cute. Like your ears.”

My whole face turned into a beet. She must have heard what Josie said to me. I touched one of my ears. “They’re weird,” I said. “They stick out.”

“So? Your head will grow into em.” She looked down her front. “I have some growing into to do too.” She laughed. “I hope.”

I knew what she meant, and I blushed even more. She was two inches taller than me, and her hair was the color of red wheat and hung down past her shoulders. Her eyes were blue, like cornflowers, and sometimes looked like she liked you. And sometimes like you better get out of her way. And sometimes they looked heavy and sad like she had a story she didn’t want to tell. I thought she was pretty. Well, maybe not

like Josie exactly, but who she was made her look pretty to me.

The bell was gonna ring in a minute to end recess, so we started walking back to the school building. “Where’s Willow?” she asked. “I know it’s in Idaho, but I never heard of it before.”

“That’s because it’s nothing,” I mumbled. “The street we lived on was dirt. Doesn’t have a name. We got our mail at the post office. Mr. Dunn’s the postmaster, and he always gave the mail to me when I came into get it. His brother was our principal at school, and his name’s Simeon. Kind of a weird name huh?”

“I’ve heard of Simon but not Simeon. That’s cool you knew the postmaster.”

“Yeah? Why wouldn’t I? Everybody knows everybody in Willow.”

“C’mon. You can’t know everybody in the whole town. How big is it?”

“I don’t know, but I bet there’s more kids here at Dewey school than people in Willow. Most of my friends live on farms though. Spud farms.”

“Spud?”

“Yeah. Potatoes. Spuds are potatoes.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember now. But you lived in town?”

“Yeah. I mean, we had a cow and some chickens, but we didn’t raise any crops. We had a garden though and some fruit trees.”

Her mouth dropped. “You lived in town...and had a cow?”

“Yeah. Lots of people in town have cows, and some had horses. We had a couple acres of land with a pasture and a bunch of trees. Most people in Willow did.”

“That’s cool! How would it be to know everybody in your town and have your own garden and cow and fruit and...” She gave me kind of a confused look. “Why... Why would you

want to come to...” She held out her hand. “Uh, come to St. Louis? I mean, it’s okay, but... I mean, there’s so many people and cars and houses and...”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Why?” I left all my friends there. Jolene and Errol and Paul and Butch our dog and all the cool adventures I had. I just shrugged. “Money. My dad’s a mechanic. He had a tractor place in Willow, and he fixed and sold tractors and farm stuff. McDonnell Aircraft here’s building jets and things, and they’re hiring mechanics for a lot more money than Dad was making. So that’s why we came.”

“Tractors? I’ve never seen a tractor. I mean except in a movie or on TV.”

“Huh? You never seen... I drove em all the time. Dad even had me ride one in the Willow Spud Day parade.”

“No way! That’s cool!”

“Yeah. I could get my driver’s license there to drive a car in just two years when I’m fourteen, and kids my age and even littler drive tractors all the time.”

“So, can you drive a car?” She looked really impressed.

“Yeah. I guess I could but...” I turned red. It was my favorite color this recess. “But my legs aren’t long enough for me to reach the brake and clutch and gas pedal with my feet.”

She laughed. “Good point. Don’t you have a sister here at Dewey?”

“Yeah. Ronette’s in the first grade.”

“Ronette? I’ve never heard a name like that before.”

“Ron’s my dad’s name. They named her sort of after my dad. It’s an Idaho thing. Kinda dumb I guess, but you get used to it.”

The bell rang and some kids started running by us. An arm slammed into my back, and I stumbled but didn’t fall. It was Zach Hobusch.

“Just seeing if you could fly, Dumbo!” He laughed and

walked by us.

“Jerk!” Nava yelled at him.

“Elephant!” I said, not as loud.

He turned around. “Jew!” he spat at Nava, then came over to me like he was gonna hit me or something. “What did you call me?”

He was the biggest kid in the class and just as mean as Josie. I’d be stupid to get in a fight with him. “Elephant,” I said like I was explaining something to him. “I was just saying Dumbo’s an elephant.”

He glared at me then walked away.

Nava grinned, and so only she could hear, I said, “You’re right. I’m not the dumbest kid in the class.” She laughed.

“Uh, why would he call you Jew?” I asked.

She gave me a funny kind of look. “You think maybe because I’m Jewish?”

CHAPTER 2



My House

St. Louis Is Not Willow

I WAITED FOR RONETTE to walk her home from school then remembered she didn't come today because she was sick, so I headed home. It's five blocks to my house on West Park Avenue, but they're short. It takes me less than 10 minutes to walk it. I mean when I'm by myself. When Ronette's with me it's a lot longer. We never get a ride, because Dad leaves for work an hour before school starts. No big deal. Ronette complains about walking, but she's getting used to it. Besides, the way home's kind of interesting. Most of the houses are brick or stone and look really old like they had stories or something. Houses in Willow aren't like that. They're just wood and plain. But they're kinda like your friends too.

I walked across the playground, then down the middle of the street toward home. I don't worry about getting hit by a car, because the street's one-way coming toward me, and

cars can only park on the one side, and I can see way ahead, and the streets are never busy anyway. Besides, they're made outta bricks, and I really like how they feel on my feet. I mean especially when I'm not wearing my rubber boots. I didn't even know they made streets out of bricks until I got here. Better than the dirt streets in Willow for sure.

It started to rain again and felt cold enough to snow. Nava said it doesn't snow until December, and it's only the first week in November. I wonder if she's wrong. I stop in front of Ross Froehlich's home. It's like a little grocery store on the first floor, and they live above it. I went in their store once, and they just had bread and milk and that kind of stuff for sale. It all looked like it'd been sitting there forever. I wouldn't buy anything there. I mean if I had any money.

I put my books down under the shade thing that was over the door going into the store and put on my mom's gloves. They're better than nothing, but I sure don't want any kids to see me in them. I can just hear what Josie and Zach would say if they found out I was wearing my mom's gloves.

I opened my umbrella and picked up my books and started home. I'd gone about a half block, and Cory LeGrand yelled for me to stop. I turned around and waited for him. Sometimes he walked with me after school, and I liked talking with him. He never made fun of me. Actually, most of the kids didn't. Mainly it was Josie and Zach and the two they hung out with, Lu and Willy.

Cory was three inches taller and thin like me. But his ears didn't stick out, and his hair was cool. It was almost black, and he put stuff on it to make it stay in place. My hair was the color of dirty sand. Yuck. Mom made me comb it before I left for school, but I only used water, and by recess it was back into hanging all over the place. Mom told me to take a comb to school, but I didn't. When could I use it? I mean, I wasn't

gonna get my hair wet in the bathroom so I could comb it. Nobody did that! Anyway, it'd be right back to a mess. Maybe I could find out what Cory uses on his hair. Nah. Mom would probably say we couldn't afford it.

Cory didn't have an umbrella so he ran up under mine. Then I remembered I had my mom's gloves on! Oh well. He won't say anything. Probably.

"Forgot my umbrella," he said. "Didn't think it'd rain. Weird weather huh? Wait 'til you're here in the summer!"

"Huh? Why?"

"You'll see. Feels like it's always raining even when it's not. Like you're in a steam bath all the time. Temperature never goes down." He looked at me. "What's it like in Willow?"

I shrugged. "Snows a lot. Wind's always blowing. I mean it can get really cold."

"Ever get below zero?"

"You kidding? Every winter. Dad said he's seen his spit freeze before it hit the ground."

"No way!"

"Yeah. It's true. I've tried it, but mine didn't freeze because it didn't have as far to drop as his did. But whenever I take a deep breath when it's really cold it hurts my lungs."

"Maybe St. Louis isn't so bad," Cory said, and a dog started barking. Loud. Same one that always barked when I walked by. It's head pushed through the drapes on the big downstairs window of the old brick home on our right.

"That's the Lambros dog," he said. "I think it's part wolf. I'm glad they keep it locked up."

"Somebody said this is called Dogtown here," I said. "Is that because of all the dogs?"

Cory shrugged. "Mom said she heard it was because a hundred years ago they had coal and clay mines here, but I don't know why they'd call it Dogtown because of that. Must al-

ways had lots of dogs.”

It stopped raining, and I put my umbrella down. We were coming to the street Cory turned on, and I said, “Uh...did you know Nava was Jewish?”

“Yeah. Everybody knows that.”

“Uh, why would Zach call her ‘Jew’ like it was a bad name or something?”

Cory looked around like he wanted to make sure no one else could hear him. “Zach Hobusch’s the bad name!” His voice sounded like he was growling. “He doesn’t like anybody who’s different. Jews. Negroes. Japanese.”

“Yeah?” I said. “And now he doesn’t like short kids from Idaho with weird ears.”

Cory laughed. “Don’t let him get you. Everybody knows what he’s like. Uh...and what Josie’s like.”

“I guess,” was all I said. I thought about Zach nearly knocking me over, and how I felt when Josie said mean things to me. How do you don’t pay attention to that?

We were getting close to where he would turn off, and I asked, “Uh, how come we don’t have Negroes in our school? I never saw one in person until I came to St. Louis, but they aren’t in our neighborhood here, and they aren’t in our school. How come?”

He looked at me like I was dumb. “They have to stay the other side of Delmar Boulevard.”

“Huh? The other side of Delmar Boulevard? Where’s that?”

“The long street the other side of Forest Park.”

“Why.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s the law or something. They got their own schools. They do their own thing.”

“You don’t have Negro friends?” I asked.

“No! Course not. Why would I?”

“Uh... Why wouldn't you? I mean, the ones I've seen in movies and heard on the radio sound like they'd be fun to know.”

He didn't say anything. We came to his corner, and all of a sudden he said, “Hey. You want a job?”

“A job? What do you mean?”

“A job! You ever have a job that paid you money?”

“Yeah. Course. I've picked spuds since I was eight.”

“Spuds?”

“Yeah. Spuds. Potatoes.”

“Oh yeah. Sure. I'm talking about a real job though. You sell newspapers.”

“Huh? You mean like deliver them door to door? You need a bike to do that, and I don't have one. Dad said I don't need one here.”

He gave me that *you're dumb* look again. “Kids don't do the door to door thing here. That's adults in a car. I'm talking about the newspaper corner up at Hi Pointe. You know, the one on the street where cars come out of Forest Park.”

I didn't know, but I kinda nodded.

“Yeah. It's super easy. You get a hundred papers and make a penny a paper you sell. I usually sell out, so I make a buck plus tips. I've made a half-dollar just in tips before.”

My eyes kinda got wide. “Wow! How long does it take you to do that?”

“About an hour. I do it after school. Hank Beal drops the papers off at the newspaper stand there at the Forest Park corner before five o'clock when people are getting off work. He picks up your money and the papers you don't sell at around six-thirty by the drug store at Hi Pointe. That's it.”

“So, you make a dollar a day?” I was getting excited.

“Yeah. Pretty much. I mean if you sell all your papers. Of course you can make more than that with tips.”

“How long you been doing it?”

“Since school started. Two months maybe.”

“Uh, why don’t you want to do it anymore?”

“Can’t. Haven’t been doing my homework, and my mom said no homework, no job.”

Well, I do my homework. I mean usually. I could do it after I got home from my job. Maybe have to skip a TV show, but a buck a day...

“Yeah. I can do that!” I said. “Have to talk to my mom and dad, but I think they’ll let me.”

“Okay, talk to em.” He tore a page out of his looseleaf binder and wrote down his phone number and gave it to me. “Call me tonight, and I’ll tell you what you need to do. Gotta go.” He headed down his street then stopped and looked back at me. “Uh... Negros. You better not ask those kinda questions about Negros, okay?”

I watched him go and thought about Zach and Josie and Negroes and Jews. “Why did we leave Willow?” I mumbled.

I got to my house and just looked at it. It’s on a corner and has kinda creepy purple like shingles along its sides. Not brick like most of the other houses. At least our front porch is covered, but you can’t even call our front yard a yard. Just a little sidewalk that goes to the porch with a little grass around it. That’s it. And our backyard isn’t much bigger. The whole place looks like it’s worn out. I don’t mean that our house in Willow was any prize or mansion or anything, but... But why did we leave Willow? I let out a big breath. At least Nava’s cool. And Cory... He’s okay.

I skipped up the three steps to the porch, wiped my feet on the mat, and went into our house. “I’m home,” I yelled. I dropped my books on the floor and hung my coat and umbrella on the hall tree and took off my boots. I went into the kitchen and Mom was at the stove.

“Can I have a Twinkie?” I asked.

“An apple,” she said. She always said apple or a carrot or celery when I asked to snack on something neat like a Twinkie.

“How’s school?” she asked.

“Same.” I sniffed to see what she was cooking, but I already knew. Today was Thursday so it’d be fried eggplant and green beans or peas. Monday it’s always hamburger and rice. Tuesday, macaroni and cheese. Wednesday, spaghetti. Tomorrow, fish. Saturday, left overs. And Sunday... Yes! Sunday! Chicken or pot roast and mashed potatoes and gravy and maybe cherry pie.

“Clothes are washed,” Mom said. “Ready to wring out and hang up, then do your homework before any TV and before your dad gets home. We’ll eat at six.”

She didn’t need to say that. We always eat at six. That’s when Dad gets home. And clothes! The wringer we used to wring out the clothes before we hung them up to dry broke when we moved here. Dad said we couldn’t afford a new one until we got really settled, so guess who’s the clothes wringer now? I have to do it all by hand and hang them up to dry. I usually hang them on the clotheslines in the backyard, but today I’ll hang them in the basement where the washer is because it’s been raining. Sometimes Mom helps me hang them up, but I always have to wring them out.

“It’ll build your muscles,” Dad says. Right. When I’m six feet tall and grown into my ears and I’m sixty. In other words, never.

I put my books on the table and headed for the stairs to the basement. “How’s Ronette feeling?” I asked.

“Not too good,” Mom said. “She stayed in bed all day. She has a fever and says her arms and legs ache. She’s been having nose bleeds all day and has these funny little red pinprick looking dots all over. I’m taking her to the doctor’s tomorrow.

Dad will carpool to work and leave me the car. Hope it's not measles."

"I thought she had measles when I had them last year."

"She did. But who knows. There's a couple different kinds." She glanced at me and smiled. "Thanks for always doing the clothes."

I love Mom's smile. It always says more than words could say. It takes over her whole face. I hope someday I can make my smile as good as hers. Her name's cool too. She was sort of named after her mom. My grandma's name is Isabelle, and Mom's name is Isa. Mom's name is cooler. Like my mom's cooler. I don't mean Grandma Holland isn't cool, but... Well, nobody's as cool as Mom.

I went down the stairs to the basement and took off my shoes so I wouldn't get em wet when I wrung out the clothes. I flipped on the switch to turn on the light bulb that hung from the ceiling in the middle of the basement. One light's all you need. Nothing down here except the furnace and washing machine and boxes of stuff from our move we aren't using and the wire clotheslines Dad put up when we got here.

Oh yeah. And there's a zillion cockroaches. I mean there used to be a zillion until I put Sparky down here. He's a box turtle we found along the roadside when we went on a drive in the country a couple weeks ago. He's eating them. I've seen him do it. He's the only pet Mom and Dad will let me have because he doesn't make any noise or much mess, and it doesn't cost anything to feed him. I mean as long as we got cockroaches.

I opened the top of the washer and pulled out one of the sheets. Water streamed from it, and I put it in the clothes basket by the washer. I picked up a corner and squeezed out water from the first couple of inches and worked down until I'd done the whole sheet. I tossed it into another clothes

basket then stopped and looked at my hands.

“Hmm. Wonder if I *am* getting stronger.” My arms and hands don’t hurt like they used to when I did this, and I’m a lot faster now. Dad keeps testing how strong my handshake is. He said I was getting a hero’s grip. Yeah. Right.

Then I thought about Ronette. “Hope’s she’s okay.”

CHAPTER 3



Negroes

“WANT TO SAY A blessing on the food, Peter?” Dad said.

I nodded and closed my eyes. “Heavenly Father, thanks for our family and our house and for the food and help us do good with the strength we get from it.” I opened one eye to look at Ronette. She usually looked real healthy with her pink skin and blond hair and real clear blue eyes, but tonight she was white like the sheets I’d been wringing out, and she was shaking. I closed my eye and said, “And please bless Ronette that she won’t be too sick. Amen.”

Mom smiled at me, then put food on Ronette’s plate and passed the bowls to Dad. Mom was always the last to take her food. Our dishes are like hard plastic or something, and we’ve had em ever since I can remember. They used to be dark blue, but they’re pretty faded now. Dad passed me the food, and I helped myself and gave it to Mom.

Everyone was eating, and I took a few bites then said, “You okay if I get a job?”

They stopped eating.

Mom and Dad looked at each other, and Dad said, “A job?”

I know what he was thinking. Who would hire a 12-year-old short kid with weird ears. Well, maybe he wasn’t thinking about the stick out ears but the rest for sure.

“Yeah!” I said as excited as I could. “My friend Cory sells newspapers on the corner up by Hi Pointe, and he has to give it up and wants to know if I can take it.”

Dad put his fork and knife on his plate and looked at me. “Tell us about it.” He was pretty cool, and his voice wasn’t putting me down.

“It’d be every school night from 5:00 to about 6:30. And I can make a dollar a night and maybe more.”

“What do you do?” Mom asked.

“Just sell newspapers on the corner to people driving home from work where the street comes out of Forest Park. I get a penny for each paper I sell. There’s a hundred papers, and Cory says he usually sells them all. I can do that! So, is it okay?”

“What about your homework?” Dad asked.

“And what about wringing out the clothes?” Mom said.

“The clothes are only once or twice a week, and I can still do that right after school, and my homework I can do when I come home from work. Can I do it?”

“When would you eat?” Ronette said. She looked at Mom. “We always eat when Daddy comes home.”

I hadn’t thought about that. “Uh, I’m okay if you just make me a plate and put it in the fridge.”

Dad smiled and winked at Mom. “I don’t think it would hurt me to wait ‘til 6:30 or so to eat.” He looked back at me. “If your mother’s okay with it, I am. As long as you get your

homework done. That's the priority."

I thought about Cory saying he had to give up the job because he's not doing his homework. "I promise I'll do my homework!" I looked at Mom. She had that smile and nodded.

"When would you start?" Dad asked.

"I don't know, but I think next Monday. I'll find out. I have to call and tell Cory I can do it."

"Let's give it a try," Dad said. "You okay walking home from Hi Pointe that late? It's pretty dark this time of year."

"There's some light on most the streets," I said. "And I'll walk on the sidewalks. I promise."

They both laughed because they knew I usually walked down the middle of the street. Everybody went back to eating, and when we were through, Mom brought out Jell-O for dessert and put whipped cream she had made on the top. I like raisin cookies better, but Jell-O's okay.

Everybody finished and started to clear the table. My job was to wash the dishes. Ronette usually dries them, but not tonight. No big deal. I can do that. Besides, I'm getting a real job!

I had one more question I wanted to ask Mom and Dad before they went into the living room to watch TV. "How come Negroes don't live in our neighborhood?" I said. "And how come no Negroes go to my school? Is there a law against it or something?"

They looked at each other, and Mom nodded at Dad to answer. I could tell Dad was trying to figure out what to say. Then he said, "Some white people here think Negroes are different and don't want to be around them. So, the whites stay in one place and the Negroes in another."

"That's stupid!" I said. "Is there a law that says Negroes can't come below Delmar Boulevard? Cory says they stay the

other side of it?”

Dad shook his head. “There’s no law like that. Just what people are like and what they do. We better get used to it though. That’s the way it is here. There’s only a couple of Negroes in my department at McDonnell, and they’re really good workers. Maybe better at what they do than I am. Nice guys too.”

“Cory said I shouldn’t ask questions about Negroes at school. Why?”

Dad shrugged. “Like I say, people here think the whites should be in one place and the Negroes in another.”

“Do you agree with that, Dad? I think it’s stupid!”

“No. I don’t agree. But that’s the way it is. Maybe it’ll change someday.” He put a hand on my shoulder and ruffled my hair with his other one. “I sure hope it does.”

I finished the dishes while Mom and Dad and Ronette went into the living room to watch TV. “Can I call Cory?” I yelled.

“Have you finished your homework?” Mom yelled back.

“Yeah. Can I call him?”

“Okay. But don’t tie up the phone long.”

I won’t because I wanna watch “You Bet Your Life.” Groucho Marx is really funny. Miss Meyer’s eyebrows remind me of his. Our telephone is in the corner of the kitchen on a little table, and I just pull a chair over to it. This phone is different than the one we had in Willow. They’re both black of course and the same size, but this one has a dial with numbers on it. You can dial who you want on this one without talking to an operator. Our phone in Willow you picked up and waited for the operator. Then you told her the four numbers of the person you wanted to talk to. I like this one a lot better.

I dialed Cory’s number, and his brother answered. He was in high school I remembered. I asked for Cory.

“What do you want him for?” he demanded.

“Uh...he asked me to call him. Uh...about his newspaper corner.”

“Who’s this?”

“Uh...Peter. I’m his friend at school.”

“Your parents know you’re using their phone?”

I looked at my phone, and for some reason I wondered if Cory’s brother was like Josie and Zach. “Uh...yeah. They said I could.” Then I heard him yell.

“Cory. One of yer friends wants to talk to you. Keep it short. I need to use the phone.”

A few seconds later Cory spoke. “Who’s this?”

“Peter. You asked me to call about the newspaper job.”

“Oh, yeah. Can you do it?”

“Yeah. What am I supposed to do?”

“Simple. You start Monday. You have to be at your stand no later than about quarter to five. You know where it is?”

“Uh...I think so. You said it’s the road coming out of Forest Park by Hi Pointe?”

“Yeah. There’s a tin stand there that you put your papers in so they don’t get dirty or wet. You can’t miss it.”

“Uh...how do I get my papers?”

“Just be there before five, and Hank Beal brings a hundred papers to you. He puts them in the stand and gives you fifty cents in nickels in case you need to give somebody change when you start.”

“What do I have to do to sell the papers?”

“Nothing much. Just stand there close to the road and look at the cars and hold one up and yell ‘ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH PAPAA’. That’s it. You’ll get the hang of it fast. They cost a nickel, and you get a penny for every paper you sell.”

“How do I know when I’m through?”

“You’re always through at six. You can tell the time by looking at the big clock at Hi Pointe. Then you just take any papers you have left and your money and go to the drug store at Hi Pointe and wait for Hank. He picks up the papers and your money and gives you what you’ve earned. That’s it.”

I was getting nervous. “Uh...you really think I can do it?”

“Yeah. Course. Anybody can do it. I’ll tell Hank tomorrow that you’ll be there Monday. Remember, be there by quarter to five.” He hung up.

I looked in the front room. Mom and Dad were watching the news. Groucho Marx wouldn’t be on for another 10 minutes, so I went upstairs to get into my pajamas. I walked through the hallway to Ronette’s bedroom and then through hers. I have to walk through hers to get to mine and mine’s in the gable and the ceiling of my room slopes down real steep on both sides. My bedroom’s small. That’s because our house is small and all the rooms are small. Mom and Dad’s bedroom is the biggest, but it’s still not that big. Our house in Willow was a lot bigger, and it had carpets in the bedrooms. This house just has old linoleum everywhere, and it’s cracking.

My bedroom’s the smallest room in the house though. I mean besides the bathroom. At least I have a window. I don’t have a closet, just an old dresser with two drawers. That’s all I need really. My bed’s right under the middle of the slanted ceiling so I won’t bump my head when I get up. I have a poster of the St. Louis Cardinals tacked on the ceiling that I can see when I’m in my bed, so that’s cool. In Idaho, I was a Dodger’s fan, but now I like the Cardinals, and I really like listening to Harry Carey. He announces all their games over the radio. I mean he did. They don’t play in November of course.

Dad took me to two baseball games when we first moved here. One was the St. Louis Browns. He said this was the last

year they'd be here. They're moving to Baltimore. I watched a guy by the name of Satchel Paige pitch. He's really old and is a Negro. He was cool. The stadium is really rickety old, and you can get splinters if you slide on the benches. We also went to a Cardinal game, and I got to see Stan Musial. Cool. And they were playing the Dodgers, and I got to see Roy Campanella and Duke Snyder and Jackie Robinson. In Willow, I never dreamed I'd ever see a big league game or real baseball stars. But I have!

I changed into my pajamas and thought about Satchel Paige and Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella. They're colored and everybody seems to like them. What Dad and Cory told me about Negroes here didn't make sense at all. Anyway, I had to hurry. Groucho Marx was on. I ran downstairs and sat next to Ronette on our couch. It's the same one we had in Willow. Kind of orange and lumpy. But we have a TV here! There were no TV stations near Willow so none of us had TVs there. Our TV here is big. At least the cabinet it's in is big, and the screen is 21 inches. Cory's TV is 19 inches he said. Dad said they were going to start making color TVs, but they'd be really expensive. Something we could probably never afford. Anyway, black and white is okay.

Groucho was saying all these funny things, but I wasn't listening tonight. I kept thinking about Negroes. Nobody on television was a Negro. I mean except for Rochester on the Jack Benny show and Nat King Cole the singer of course. Nobody else I could remember anyway. That didn't make sense. And what really doesn't make sense is why Josie and Zach make fun of Jews.

CHAPTER 4



Nava Is an Orphan

I DIDN'T BRING MY umbrella to school because it wasn't raining today. And it wasn't as cold as last week, so I didn't have my mom's gloves either. I didn't get a chance to talk much to Nava last Friday. She just asked how Ronette was then, and I told her that Mom was taking her to the doctor's. Josie and Zach left me alone today, but Josie's friend, Lu Stanley, looked at me at recess and put her hands behind her ears and wiggled them. I just puffed out my cheeks because she's kind of heavy and walked away. What I did didn't make me feel very good. I don't know why I do that.

"How's your sister?" Nava asked as we walked across the playground on our way home.

"Mom said she's taking her in to test her blood today. She said it'd be a week to know anything."

"What'd the doctor say when your mom took her in on

Friday?”

I shrugged. “Mom didn’t tell me. Just that they needed to test her blood.”

“Hope she’s okay.”

“Yeah. Me too. Thanks.” But she wasn’t okay. I never saw her so sick. She didn’t even come to the table to eat Sunday.

“Does she like M&M’s?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. Nobody doesn’t like M&M’s.”

She reached into her coat pocket and handed me an unopened packet. “Give these to her, okay?” She gave me a look like she knew what I was thinking. “And don’t open them before you give them to her.”

I looked guilty. She did know what I was thinking.

She laughed. “So, you start your job today?”

“Yeah. I have to be at my corner fifteen minutes before five.”

“Where do you live?”

“West Park Avenue.” I pointed to the street where we were headed. “I go down there to West Park. Then it’s just a block to my house.”

“Uh...what street would you go on to get to Hi Pointe?”

“Forest Avenue. My house’s pretty close to it.”

“I live on Forest Avenue,” she said. “You’d pass my house on your way to Hi Pointe. Would you like to see where I live?” She blushed.

“Sure.” I liked it when somebody else besides me turned red. She looked a lot better with a pink face than I did though.

“She pointed to the street that ran into the road that bordered the playground and started walking toward it. “C’mon. I go on that to my street. My house is just a couple of blocks from here.”

Unfortunately, Willy Ocello was coming toward us, and we couldn’t avoid him. I’m not as afraid of him as I am of Zach. He’s just a little taller and heavier than me, but he’s Zach’s

best friend, and he's always got the corner of his mouth turned in a sneer like he'd hurt you if he could. His hair's weird. It sticks up maybe three or four inches on top of his head in really tight curls, and he wears horned rim glasses that look like a turtle's shell. We tried to walk as far away from him as we could but weren't far enough.

He gave us his smirk look and laughed. "Hey Dumbo. So you're a Jew lover too, huh?"

I balled up my fists, and Nava nudged me with her elbow to keep going. We passed him, and neither one of us looked at him. As we went by, though, Nava spoke in a fake sweet kinda voice.

"I like your hair, Willy. Your mom did a great job with the permanent."

"Jew!" he yelled at our backs. "You guys deserved what you got from Hitler!"

Nava's face turned white, and she started walking faster. I almost had to run to keep up with her. Neither one of us said anything until we reached her street where she turned to her left and kept walking.

Finally, I said, "What did he mean? What did he mean by you guys got what you deserved from Hitler?"

She just took a deep breath and kept going. About a block and a half down she stopped in front of a two-story brick house that had been painted white. It sat on kind of a hill and there were eight or nine stairs up the hill before you got to the steps of the porch. A real cool porch. It had white bricks around it and was as wide as the house. It had neat flower pots and two brown wood rockers. Definitely a nicer house than ours. At least on the outside.

"This your house?" I said, and she nodded.

"Cool. How long you been here?" It was pretty good sized and I asked, "How many in your family?"

“I been here about eight years,” she answered quietly, “but the Pogorzelski’s have been here for more than fifteen.”

“Huh? Uh...uh, the Pogorzelski’s?” I stammered. “I don’t understand. I thought your last name was Silbertasch.”

She looked at me with a weird, sad kind of look. “It is. I don’t live with my parents. They’re dead.”

Now, I really didn’t know what to say. *I’m sorry? How’d that happen? When did they die?* It’d all sound stupid. So, I just stood there trying to look like I wanted to be her friend. Because I did.

Her eyes got real wet, and she pointed to her porch. “I’ll tell you. If you want.” She motioned for me to go up with her to the chairs. “If you have to go because of your papers though...”

“I’m okay,” I said. “I got time... I mean, I’d like to hear about... You know.”

She gave me the kind of smile where your lips stay together and don’t move much and sat down in one of the rockers and pointed to the other for me to sit.

“I’m the only one left in my family,” she said as she looked at her hands. “At least I think I am. Anna Pogorzelski. She’s my mother’s sister. They came here from Poland about fifteen years ago. Came here to St. Louis. They’ve got two daughters. Esther goes to Southwest high school, and Sarah’s a freshman in college. She goes to Washington University here. She wants to be a doctor.”

She stopped talking and just looked at her hands. I waited. Finally, she said, “I was born in Warsaw, Poland. That’s what my aunt said. And Hitler...” She stopped again, and her hand started to shake. “You know...” She sniffed. “You’ve heard...what Hitler did... Did to the Jews. Huh?” She looked at me.

I knew that Hitler hated Jews and killed lots of them. I

nodded.

“My aunt says that when I was about two or three they took my mother and father and me to a concentration camp in Poland. She said it was Auschwitz. I can just barely...” Now she cried, and I waited. “I can just barely remember them,” she said. “My mother had hair like mine. Aunt Anna says she looked like... She looked like... Like me when... When she was my age.”

Nava put her face in her hands and sobbed. I wanted to put my arms around her or something. I wanted to tell her it was okay, but... It wasn't okay. I'd heard what happened to the Jews in Auschwitz.

She stopped crying and wiped her eyes. “Aunt Anna said a nurse there risked her life to get me out. I don't know how she did it, but she did. She said she got me to Hungary, and I was given another name and told I was Catholic. Since I was so blonde then, she said I looked like one. But the people I stayed with secretly kept my papers that told about my aunt. When the war was over, they got hold of her, and... And she came over by ship to pick me up, and I've been... Been...”

I reached over and touched her arm. Nava was my friend. And I understood now what Willy meant when he told her, “You deserve what you got.” I wanted to beat the crap out of him. And out of Zach. And out of everybody who made fun of the Jews. Fun of the Negros. Fun of short kids with stick out ears.

“Thanks for being my friend,” I said. “It was the only thing I could think of. “I better go so I won't be...”

She looked up at me through her wet eyes and tried to smile. “Peter...don't say anything to anybody about what I said, okay? I don't...” I could tell she was trying to keep from crying. “You're the only one at school...” She gave a loud sniff. “Who knows this. I don't want...”

“I won’t tell anybody!” I said. “I promise!” I felt like I’d die before I’d do that. I leapt off her porch and ran most of the way to my house.

“I’m home, Mom,” I yelled as I came through the front door. I hung my coat on the hall tree and put my books on the kitchen table. I looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost 4:00. I wouldn’t have time to do my homework.

“You’re late!” she called from upstairs.

“Been talking with Nava,” I said as I ran up the stairs. She was in Ronette’s room reading her a story. “How you doing?” I asked Ronette. “How was it getting your blood...” I stopped when Mom gave me *the* look.

“Your sister is really brave,” Mom said and hugged Ronette.

“You’re going to get better in no time,” I said, trying to sound positive. “You like M&M’s?”

Ronette gave me a little smile and nodded, and I handed her the M&M’s. Her eyes lit up.

“From Nava,” I said. “She wants you to get better.”

“What a neat girl!” Mom said.

“Yeah. She is.” I went into my room and got Mom’s gloves and my scarf. I might need them tonight when the sun goes down. I hurried back into Ronette’s room.

“Have to go,” I said as I ran by them. “Don’t want to be late my first day.”

“Good luck!” Mom said. “Don’t forget you need to do your homework before any TV tonight.”

I didn’t have that much homework but would probably miss *George Burns and Gracie Allen*. I’d be able to see *I Love Lucy* though. I don’t ever want to miss that one. I ran downstairs, put on my coat and scarf, shoved the gloves into my coat pocket, and took off out the door.

When I got to Hi Pointe I looked up at the big clock. 4:32pm. I was on time. I waited at the light there and crossed

over to Forest Park and walked to the street that came out of it. There was the newspaper stand just like Cory said. I'd never noticed it was there before. I could see why this street would be busy now. People were getting off from work downtown and coming home through the Park.

Forest Park was cool. Nothing like this in Willow or anywhere around there. I mean it had beautiful gardens and play areas and a zoo. Wow! The zoo. It had everything that I'd never seen before. Giraffes and kangaroos and tigers and lions and gorillas and pythons and ostriches. Everything. It was cool! And when we'd go to the park just before dark for a picnic, there were these fireflies. Their tails lit up like tiny lightbulbs. I caught some once and put their tails in a jar and their lights stayed on for a long time. Yeah. There's things about St. Louis I like better than Willow. Maybe a lot of things.

"You the kid who's doing the papers here?"

I didn't see the man in the small truck pull up. He was about as tall as my dad but really heavy. His khaki pants and shirt were pretty dirty, and his coat looked like my jeans.

"Uh...yeah. I'm Peter Leavitt and Cory said I could sell newspapers here." For some reason I was nervous.

"I'm Hank Beal. I'm your boss. Call me Hank not Mr. Beal. Cory tell ya what your s'posed to be doin'?"

"Yeah. He said I take a paper and face the cars that are coming and yell, ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH PAPAA."

He kind of smiled. "Yeah. That's what you do." He pulled a bundle of papers out of the back of his truck and put them on top of the stand. He cut the cord that bound them then put the papers on the shelf underneath. "Leave the papers you're not carrying in here so they won't get wet," he said. "Cory tell you what to do at six o'clock?"

"Go over to the drugstore there at Hi Pointe?" I asked.

"Yeah. Don't be late. Quit exactly at six. I don't like to be

kept waiting. Bring whatever papers you haven't sold with you. If you lose a paper it'll cost ya."

He reached into his pocket and counted out 10 nickels and gave them to me. "This is in case you need change. When you're through, you give me all the money you've collected plus this fifty cents. I take out this and four cents for each paper you've sold. You get the rest."

"So I sell the papers for a nickel each?"

He looked at me like Miss Meyers sometimes looks at me. "Yeah. Course. Five cents a paper."

I felt like a Duh!

"See you at six." He left.

For a few seconds I just looked at the papers, then picked one up and read the headline. Didn't look that important. Just about some local stuff.

"Hey! You sellin papers or just readin em?"

I looked over at the yellow Chevy that had pulled up just a few feet from me. A bald guy in a brown suit had his window down and was staring at me.

"Sorry," I mumbled and took a paper to him. He gave me a dime.

"Gimme the change," he said like I wasn't going to.

I gave him a nickel. "Thanks," I said. He took it, rolled up his window, and drove away. But I just earned a penny. Good enough for a Tootsie Roll or a licorice stick. The beginning of my newspaper career. It got better. Pretty soon I was getting the hang of it and began yelling, ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH PAPAA.

One older guy pulled up with a big smile. "Your voice's bigger than you are!" he said and gave me a dime. I reached into my pocket to give him his nickel change, and he shook his head. "You keep it." And he drove away.

Cool!

For a while it was really busy. Sometimes as many as five or six cars lined up waiting to turn out of the park, and I walked by them yelling my thing. Sometimes two or three of them bought my papers. But the best one was this white Lincoln with a really handsome Negro who was wearing a black suit. I thought he looked like a movie star. His smile was so big and bright it almost blinded you. He said, "What's your name?"

That's the first time a Negro ever talked to me. "Uh...Peter. Peter Leavitt."

"I'm Joshua Josephson. Call me, Joshua. Haven't seen you here before, Peter. You're doing a great job! Keep it up!" He glanced at my gloves, and I turned red and wanted to hide my hands. Then he gave me a quarter when I handed him his paper, and he said, "Keep the change. I don't like extra coins in my pocket!" He smiled again. "Probably see you tomorrow, Peter." He waved and drove off.

Wow!

I sold all my papers, and it wasn't even six yet. In an hour, counting my tips, I made a dollar and thirty-five cents! In Willow, when I picked spuds, I'd be there all day, like 10 or 11 hours, and I'd make maybe two dollars. Maybe a little more. Wow! St. Louis was better than Willow in a lot of ways! I almost skipped to the drugstore to wait for Hank and wondered what he'd say when he saw I sold all my papers my first day.

I didn't know whether I was supposed to wait outside the drugstore for Hank or inside. It was cold so I decided to stay inside and just watch for him out the window. I'd never been in this drug store before. It's soda fountain was huge! The one in the drug store in Willow only had four stools. This one had 10! But the price for hamburgers and fries and shakes and root beers was the same. Twenty-five cents for a hamburger, twenty cents for a shake, fifteen cents for fries, and a nickel

for a root beer. I made enough today to buy all those things twice! Cool!

I went over to the magazine rack. *LOOK* Magazine had a picture of Moscow, Russia and the Russian army. It gave me the creeps. We had regular duck and cover drills at Dewey in case they dropped an atomic bomb on us. The school bell would ring three times, and we'd dive under our desks. We didn't do that in Willow. I guess they figured the Russians wouldn't be interested in us there. *What? Russians don't like potatoes?* I laughed to myself at my thought. I picked up the magazine to read the article.

"Put it back or buy it!" the guy behind the soda fountain shouted.

"Sorry," I said and put it back.

I walked around the store a little. They had a shelf of kids things including a box of crayons for ten cents. Yeah! Ronette's crayons were down to nubs, and I could buy those when I got my money from Hank. I looked at the guy behind the counter, and he was staring at me like maybe he thought I was going to swipe them or something. So I went to the glass door in front to wait for Hank. In a few minutes he came and parked in front of the store, and I went out.

He saw I didn't have any papers, and said, "Good day, huh?" He held out a little bucket for me to put my money in. My pants pockets were full, and I dumped everything in his bucket. He counted out \$4.50 and put it in his pocket, then held the bucket out to me. "Rest is yours." I took my money and put it back in my pocket. "Same time tomorrow," he grunted and left.

I went back into the drug store and got the crayons and held up a dime so the guy would know I wanted to buy them. He took my money and put the crayons in a little sack, and I headed home. I walked on the sidewalk like I promised

Dad and began to whistle. I hadn't had this much money in my pocket since we came to St. Louis. I started counting in my head how much I could earn. By Saturday, I'd have maybe at least \$5.00 and maybe even \$6.00 or \$7.00. And in a month? I'd be able to buy Mom and Dad and Ronette real neat Christmas presents. And maybe one for Nava too. I mean if Jews liked to get Christmas presents. And maybe...

"Hey...if it isn't Dumbo!" I looked around. Zach! He was behind me maybe 75 feet. I started walking faster. So did he.

"How come your mommy let her little boy out so late?" he yelled. "You running an errand? Maybe you got something in that sack I might like."

He started to run toward me, and I took off. But there was no way I'd make it home before he caught me. And then I remembered. Nava's house was just a half block away.

CHAPTER 5



Zach

IT WAS DARK NOW, and I couldn't see far enough ahead to keep from tripping if there was a big crack in the sidewalk, so I ran into the street. Zach was right behind me. I reached the little hill in front of Nava's porch and started to run up the steps. But I wasn't fast enough. Zach grabbed my coat and yanked me to the ground.

"Nava!" I yelled. I didn't know what else to do. "Nava!"

Zach laughed as he sat on me and held my arms to the ground. "Oh, brave Dumbo's calling for his little Jew girl-friend to save him. What's she going to do, call me a bad name?"

Suddenly, the porch light went on, and Nava came out. "Get off him!" she yelled.

Zach just gave her a stupid smile. "You and what army's gonna make me?"

She picked up one of the big flower pots from the porch and marched down the stairs. The way she looked at Zach was scarier than any army she could've had with her. And that gave me some courage, or made me stupid, and when he let go of my arms and started to stand up to keep from getting smacked with a flower pot, I pushed myself onto my knees and gave his legs a big shove. He was off balance anyway, and he tripped and rolled down the little hill.

Nava was standing by me now with her pot, and when Zach got up, he looked like he wanted to kill us. "I'm gonna get you two!" he yelled, and he started up toward us.

"No you're not!" a deep voice behind us said. A man had just come out of the house, and he was as much bigger than Zach as Zach was of me. I figured he must be Nava's uncle. He looked at Nava. "Is this the guy in your class that keeps harassing you because we're Jewish?"

"He's one of them," she said.

There was like a blaze in Nava's uncle's eyes. Like the one in Nava's eyes a minute ago. He came down the stairs and stood by us. "Listen up, bully!" he said to Zach. "You so much as look at my niece wrong again, I'll make sure you're expelled from Dewey so neither she nor her friend will ever have to worry about you again. You got that?"

Zach just looked at the ground.

"And in five minutes," her uncle continued, "I'm going to get in my car and drive up and down Forest Avenue and the side streets here, and if I see you, or if I see you by my house *ever* again, I'm going straight to the police to report you as a vandal and a trouble maker. You just might find yourself in juvenile hall. Now get outta here!"

Zach turned away and slowly headed back up toward Hi Pointe.

"Not fast enough!" her uncle called. "Five minutes is all you

got!” Zach broke into a run.

Her uncle turned to me. “Where do you live?”

“Just a couple blocks from here on West Park,” I said as my face got the Peter-red that seems to happen all the time when I’m around Nava. “Uh...sorry to... I mean...sorry to get everybody involved...” I looked down at my feet. “Uh...I didn’t know what else to do.” I held up my sack with Ronette’s crayons. “I thought he’s going to take this. And take the money I earned tonight selling papers. So I yelled Nava’s name and hoped somebody’d hear me.”

Nava looked like she wanted to put her arms around me. That would really be embarrassing, but maybe... Maybe not so bad.

Her uncle smiled. “You did the right thing. What’s your name?”

“Peter. Peter Leavitt.”

“His family just moved here from Idaho a couple of months ago,” Nava said.

“Oh!” her uncle exclaimed. “This’s the one you keep talking about.”

Now both Nava and I got red, and her uncle laughed. My name’s Jacob. “How about if I give you a ride home. Just in case your friend... Well, no sense in taking a chance, huh?” He motioned me to follow them on the sidewalk around their house. “Car’s in the garage, and this is the way to it.”

He drove me home, and Nava came with us. Neither one of us talked, but I was sure glad she was there. I thanked them for what they did for me and went into my house. The table was all set and the food was on the table. Mom and Dad were in the kitchen and came to the table when they saw me, but Ronette wasn’t there. I hung up my coat and joined them.

“Uh... Sorry for being late, but...” I didn’t know whether I wanted to tell them about what happened or not.

We all sat down, and Dad said a blessing on the food.

“Uh...how’s Ronette?” I asked.

“Not so good,” Mom said. “I’ve already taken supper up to her. How was your paper selling?”

I pulled my money out of my pocket and put it on my napkin. I was beaming. “I made a dollar and thirty-five cents!”

“Wow!” Dad said. “Way to go!”

“That’s wonderful!” Mom said.

Then I went to my coat and got the box of crayons I bought and brought it to the table. “I got these for Ronette. Hers aren’t very good.”

Mom and Dad just looked at each other, then at me. “She’ll love those, Peter!” Mom said. “Why don’t you put your money away and go wash your hands. Then take the crayons up to Ronette. We’ll wait for you.”

I went into our bathroom right next to the kitchen. The sink and the bathtub are old but pretty cool. The sink has these porcelain handles, and the bathtub is huge and has claw feet. I washed my hands with the Lava soap and took the crayons up to Ronette. She was still awake but was just laying there.

“Where’s your coloring book,” I asked.

She shrugged. “My crayons don’t work.”

“Where is it?” I asked again.

“In my dresser. Top drawer.”

“Are your crayons there too?”

“I told you. They don’t work.”

I got her coloring book out and put it on her bed. “How about these?” I handed her the crayons I bought. “Will they work?”

She stared at them. “Mine?” she asked.

“Yours! I bought them for you.”

For the first time in maybe the last week I saw her smile.

“Thanks. Thanks, Peter.” Her eyes looked alive. “You’re the best brother...”

“I love you,” I said. “Have fun. I gotta go eat.”

I ran down the stairs and to the table. Tonight was hamburger and rice and cheese. One of my favorites. When Dad passed the bowl to me, I heaped the food on my plate then gave the bowl to Mom. I put a forkful in my mouth and started to put in another mouthful then stopped. After a few seconds they saw I wasn’t eating and looked at me.

“You okay?” Mom asked.

For a second I didn’t say anything then decided I’d tell them. “There’s a reason... A reason I’s late,” I said. “Zach Hobusch started to beat me up. I was afraid he was going to take my money.”

They put their forks down, and Dad’s eyebrows raised like they always did when he got mad. “Tell us *exactly* what happened,” he exclaimed.

I did, including what Nava’s uncle told Zach and that he drove me home so I’d be safe.

“Did he say he was going to tell the principal?” Dad asked.

“If Zach made fun of Nava being a Jew anymore, he would,” I said.

“Has Zach ever hurt you before?” Dad asked me.

“Uh...not really. He came up behind me and tried to knock me down on the playground last week. No big deal.” I was going to tell them about how he and the others made fun of my size and ears, but that’d just make it worse for me. So I didn’t. I could handle it. Especially because how good a friend Nava was now. Besides, most kids aren’t like them. Not that the others are my friends exactly. Except for Nava and Cory. But nobody else made fun of me like they did.

Dad looked at Mom. “Do you have the phone number for the principal?” he asked.

“I have all the information they gave me when Peter and Ronette started school. I’m sure his phone number’s there.”

“I think you should call him tomorrow and tell him what’s happened here. At least he’ll know to be on the lookout for this kid’s behavior.” Mom agreed. Then he looked at me. “For the next week, I’m going to pick you up when you’re through with your papers so you won’t have to walk home. Maybe by then this kid will get the message that that kind of behavior will bring him serious consequences.”

Everybody went back to eating, but for me the food didn’t taste so good anymore. I kept thinking about what Zach and Josie and their friends were going to do to me tomorrow.

CHAPTER 6



A New Friend

ZACH WASN'T AT SCHOOL today. Neither was Nava. I hope she's okay. I had a hard time listening to Miss Meyers because I kept thinking about what happened to Nava's mom and dad and how Zach and Josie and Willy made fun of Nava being a Jew. And I kept thinking about what I could do to protect Nava, and I had this idea. Probably stupid, but I'm gonna try it.

Recess came, and I looked for Willy. He was with Tim Murphy and Sam DiMartino. Those two guys never bothered me. Weren't exactly my friends but didn't call me names either. I walked up to them and put my hand out to Willy like I wanted to shake his hand. He was so surprised that he put his hand out. I took it and squeezed.

He sneered at me. "Oh...want to see who says 'uncle' first huh, Dumbo?" And he started to squeeze. But he hadn't been

wringing out clothes by hand for two months.

In just a few seconds, his face looked like blood was trying to get out. He tried to pull his hand away, but I wouldn't let go. Just squeezed harder.

"Uncle!" he yelled. "Uncle! Stop it! That hurts!" He looked like he was gonna cry.

I finally let his hand go. "I don't care what you call me," I said, "but you make fun of Nava being a Jew again... You do it anymore, and I'm gonna tell the principal." Then I looked at him as fiercely as I could. "And I'll break your hand next time."

They all three stared at me, and I walked away looking for Josie. She was playing tetherball with Lu, and I went up behind her and yelled, "Josie!"

The ball was coming toward her as she turned around to see who called her name, and it nearly hit her head. She was really mad. "Dumbo, you jerk! You made me miss!"

I stared at her and spoke loud enough for Lu and the other girls around to hear. "You can call me anything you want, but... But if you ever call Nava 'Jew' again, like it was a dirty word or something, or try to make her feel bad because she's Jewish, I'm gonna tell the principal and that you do it all the time and hope you get kicked outta school."

I didn't wait to see their reaction. I just turned away and went to watch Cory and some of the other boys play soccer. I still had a hard time concentrating in class after recess but felt I had done the right thing. I was getting worried though about what Zach was going to do when Willy told him. At lunch hour and the next recess, Willy and Josie and Lu stayed as far away from me as they could. But Lisa Sennert and Zoe Lampros and Betsy Jones smiled at me at lunch, and Carol Meierhoff waved. She was the prettiest girl in our class. Well, at least I used to think that, but now maybe I think Nava is.

And Chuck Friedland came up to me at afternoon recess and said, "C'mon. Play soccer with us."

I couldn't keep my mouth from staying open. He was maybe the best soccer player in the whole school. "Uh... Uh, thanks, but I'm not very good."

He kind of slapped me on the back. "You can't get good by just watching. C'mon, we'll teach you."

What was happening? All of a sudden some kids who hardly ever talked to me before were paying attention to me. After the afternoon recess, I *really* couldn't get my mind on schoolwork. What was happening? When I went out onto the playground to go home after school, Cory was waiting for me, and we started to walk home.

"How's selling papers last night?" he asked.

That got my mind back to the positive. "Great! I sold out!"

"Way to go! What did Hank say?"

"Not much. He brought the papers like you said and collected my money at the drug store. He was happy I sold out."

"Yeah. He would be. He makes something on the papers that are sold too. Get any tips?"

I smiled for the first time today. "Thirty-five cents! So I made a dollar and thirty-five cents. And one guy gave me a quarter and told me to keep the change!"

"Was he a Negro in a white Lincoln?"

"Yeah! He said his name was Joshua Josephson."

"Joshua always gives me a quarter and tells me to keep the change," Cory said. "He doesn't come by every day but pretty often."

"Wow! He was sure nice. Thanks for giving me the job!"

He didn't say anything for a minute. "Yeah. You're welcome. When I get going with my homework though, I'd like it back, okay? Maybe in a couple of months?"

That surprised me a little. I thought the job would be mine

forever. But he gave it to me, and I needed to be willing to give it back when he was ready. “Uh... Uh, sure. That's only fair.”

He seemed to relax a little and then said, “Everybody's talking about you today.”

I stopped walking. “Me? Why? What'd I do?”

“Everybody knows what you did to Willy. What you said to him and Josie. That was cool.”

“Cool? Why? I mean...” I didn't know what I meant. I was confused.

“Nobody likes the way... Uh, I mean most of the kids don't like the way those guys treat you and Nava, but everybody's too scared of them to do anything about it. But you did. And we're all glad you did.”

Wow! What a surprise! I didn't think anybody cared. I just shrugged and said, “Don't know what Zach's going to do when he finds out though.” I was going to tell Cory what Zach did to me last night but didn't.

“Yeah?” Cory said. “Well, us guys were talking about that, and we decided he's not going to do anything to hurt you at school. We won't let him. He's bigger than any of us, but not that much bigger than Chuck and Al and Calder. Any two of them could take him, and there's at least a dozen of us that would help. And Josie and Lu already know that most of the girls in the class won't have anything to do with them if they start badmouthing either you or Nava again.”

I didn't know what to say and just kinda mumbled. “Thanks. Thanks for being... Thanks for everybody being my friend. And...and Nava's friend.”

We were at his corner, and he turned off to go to his house. “Good luck with your papers tonight,” he called back.

I thought about walking to Nava's home to tell her what happened today, but if she was sick I didn't want to bother her. So I just went home. Mom wasn't in the kitchen, and I

yelled, "I'm home, Mom!"

"I'm up with Ronette," she hollered back. "Clothes need to be wrung out."

That meant I might have to do my homework after dinner. I ran up the stairs to see how Ronette was doing. She had her coloring book out and gave me a little smile. Mom was sitting on her bed by her.

"I talked to your principal today about that boy, Zach," Mom said.

I was thinking of telling her what I did today but didn't. It was just between me and Nava and those kids.

"He said there wasn't much he could do with Zach off the school grounds, but he'd keep his eye on him when he was at school. He didn't tell me much about him. Said it was confidential, but said he was sent to Dewey from another school for disciplinary issues, and that he was two grades behind his age group. So, he's got some challenges. Apparently, he lives with his mother about a mile from school somewhere north of Hi Pointe, and he usually walks to school because they can't afford the bus." She looked up at me all serious like. "Be careful with him, Peter."

Be careful with him? What am I supposed to do when he's beating up on me? At least that won't happen tonight because Dad's picking me up from work. I went down to the basement and did the clothes. There wasn't as many to do this time, so I did some homework too. Actually, I did all my homework because there wasn't very much, then headed off to my newspaper corner. It had started to snow so I put mom's gloves on and my scarf around my neck. I walked by Nava's house and was tempted to knock on the door, but I didn't have time to stop. Besides, maybe she was sick.

Hank dropped my papers off, and I was as busy as I was last night. Then the white Lincoln pulled up. Joshua motioned

for me to come over to his window, and he gave me a quarter, and I gave him his paper. Before I could give him change, he said, "Keep it."

I thanked him and started to go back to my corner, but he stopped me. "I don't know whether you'd be interested in these," he said as he held up a pair of black, men's leather gloves. They looked brand new and had what looked like fur lining inside. "These aren't my size," he continued, "so I'll never use them. I don't want them just sitting around my house, so would you do me a favor and take them? I think they might fit you."

I just stared at them. Then I looked down at my mom's gloves and up at him. He was smiling and handed them to me.

"Uh... Thanks! Thanks a lot, uh...Joshua." It felt a little weird calling an adult by his first name.

"Probably see you tomorrow," he said, and drove away.

I went back to my stand and put the papers I was carrying on it. I pulled off Mom's gloves and put on my new ones. They fit exactly. And they were warm. Really warm. I turned my hands over a couple of times just to look at them. Wow! I picked up a couple of papers and walked toward the cars that were coming. "ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH PAPAA," I yelled. And I was more excited about my job than ever.

Wow! What a day this was! But for some reason or other, I had the weirdest feeling that something was coming. Something big. Ehh. Probably just a weird feeling.

CHAPTER 7



Worst and Best

“WHAT DID YOU DO yesterday?” Nava asked. “Lisa said everybody’s talking about you. And everybody’s so friendly to me today.”

It was lunch hour, and I didn’t have a chance to talk with her at morning recess because Chuck pulled me over to play soccer with them. It was snowing and some of the kids had gone into the lunchroom, but Chuck said this was the funnest time to play. He was right. It was fun. I was lousy, but they were all good to me, and I think I was a little better by the time recess was over. Maybe I could be an okay player with Chuck’s help.

Nava and I sat on two chairs in the corner to eat our lunches that we brought from home. We weren’t by a table so we could talk in private. “I’ll tell you what I did,” I said, “but how come you missed school yesterday? Were you sick?”

She shook her head. "It's what happened Monday with Zach. I didn't want to see him yesterday, and my aunt said it was okay to stay home."

"Don't blame you. He wasn't here yesterday. I don't know if I'd do what I did if he was." I told her what I said and did with Willy and Josie and what Cory told me.

Her eyes were glistening. "You were so brave, Peter. Thanks for doing that for me!" She looked at me in a way that made me blush. But I liked it.

"You're the one!" I said. "I mean, what you did Monday..."

She shook her head like what she did was nothing, and we started eating our sandwiches. Mine was egg salad, but I couldn't tell what hers was. She saw me looking at it.

"Pastrami on rye bread," she said. "It's good. Want a bite?"

She pulled off a corner and handed it to me. I ate it and smiled. "Good!" I said. "Really good!" I thought about offering her some of my egg salad sandwich, but who'd want that when you had pastrami?

"Zach's not at school today, and he wasn't here yesterday?" she asked.

"Nope." I thought about him holding me on the ground and probably taking my money if Nava didn't do what she did. "Maybe I wouldn't have been so brave if he was. You and your uncle were pretty scary Monday. Maybe he's afraid to come to school now."

"Hope so!" she said. "I don't want to see him again."

"Why do you think he's like that?" I said. "Mom talked to the principal yesterday, and I guess he has to walk a mile or more to school because they can't afford the bus."

"I don't know," she said. "I heard that he lives in an apartment with his mom way up north of Hi Pointe, and she's a waitress and works at night so he's home by himself most of the time."

“Who told you that?”

“Zoe. Zach came to our school just a couple of months before it let out last year, and he had a crush on her then.”

“Sounds like he’s had it real tough.”

“Yeah... I guess.”

I looked at her. Her eyes were somewhere else. I don’t know what Zach’s challenges are, but Nava knows everything about challenges.

“How’s your sister?” she asked.

“Really sick. We don’t know what it is. I think Mom’s taking her to the doctor’s next Tuesday. They’re supposed to know something because of her blood tests by then.”

“Hope she’s okay.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Hey loser!” It was Willy Ocello, and Nava and I turned to face him. He was glaring at me but kept his distance. “We’ll see how tough you are tonight!” Then he scowled at Nava but didn’t say anything and strolled away.

Nava looked at me. “What do you think he meant? You think Zach’s going to try to do something to you?”

“I don’t know what he can do. Dad’s picking me up after I get through with my papers tonight. He’s gonna do it all week, so I won’t be by myself out on the street coming home after dark like I was Monday.”

“Okay, but be careful, Peter! Zach’s crazy!”

“He’s not gonna be on your street anyway, and that’s how I get to my corner. Your uncle said he’d get the police after him.” I was trying to act like it was no big deal, but I was worried.

That afternoon, I got to my paper stand without any problem, so I thought Willy was gas like he always is. It was cold and wet and slushy. The snow around my stand was like a dirty snow cone, and the gloves Joshua gave me were great.

My hands were warm!

Hank brought the newspapers and put them inside the stand. He looked down at the ground. "Careful with these. You get them wet, you pay for them."

He left, and I took out two papers and went over to where cars were coming and did my yell like I always did. Not as many were buying though. Probably because of the bad weather, and I was getting depressed.

Then while I was handing a paper to a guy who just bought one, Zach ran up to my stand and yelled, "Hey tough guy. See how you like this!" He yanked all of my remaining papers out from under the stand and threw them into the slush and stomped on them. I ran over to try to stop him, but what could I do? I was going to try to tackle him, but he just laughed and ran away. It was a disaster! My papers were ruined! All of them!

I stared at the mess thinking that Hank would keep any money I earned for the rest of the week to pay for them. And maybe next week too. I tried not to cry but couldn't help it. I rubbed my gloves against my eyes and tried to save some of the papers. It was no use, and I started picking them up and throwing them in the big waste can by my stand.

"Hey, Peter. What happened?" It was Joshua. He'd parked his Lincoln and was walking toward me.

I tried to tell him, but I couldn't get the words out, so I just kept taking the ruined papers to the trash can. He picked up a bunch to help me. He didn't act like he cared that he got his suit dirty. When we got them all picked up, he put his hand on my shoulder.

"Was it that big kid I saw running away?"

I nodded. I still couldn't speak without crying. I was mad and embarrassed and worried about the money.

"You responsible for the papers you don't sell?" he asked.

I nodded again.

“Let’s see. I’m guessing you have about a hundred papers you have to account for. Is that right?”

“Yeah, that’s how many there are, and I have to pay for the ruined papers.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of money. He peeled off two five-dollar bills. “Let’s see, a hundred papers at five cents a paper would be five dollars.” He handed me a five-dollar bill. “That ought to take care of what you owe for these ruined papers. Give that to your boss. That means you get to keep all the money you’ve been paid for the papers you’ve sold so don’t give him any of that money when you see him tonight, and he will owe you a dollar since he only keeps four cents a paper. That make sense?”

My mouth just dropped open. “Five dollars? Why... Why would you...”

He smiled. “Look. Bad things happen. So do good things.” He handed me the other five-dollar bill. “And this is yours because you’re a good kid. Now remember this, and you help somebody else when they need help. Okay?”

I didn’t know what to say. I just held the two five-dollar bills and stared at them. I don’t think I ever had a five-dollar bill before.

“Put those in your pocket so you don’t lose them,” he said. Then he reached into his coat and pulled out a small box. It was sort of a purple color with strange gold markings on it. He handed it to me. “What’s inside here is special,” he said. “Very special. Put this in your pocket too and take good care of it.” Then he looked at me with really serious eyes. “You can only let one person know that you have it. Somebody you trust.” He winked. “You’ll know who *she* is. But if you show it to anyone else I will take it back, and you will never know all that it can do for you. When I see you again, we’ll talk about

it.”

He watched me to make sure I put it in my pocket then smiled again and left. I took my glove off and rubbed my fingers around the box to see if I could feel those weird markings. For some reason, I remembered the strange feeling I had yesterday when he gave me the gloves, that something big was gonna happen. Something that maybe would change my life. Then I put my hand around the box, and it was like the box was warm and talking to me. Like it was saying, “Yep! Your life’s about to change!”

CHAPTER 8



The Amulet

ZACH WAS AT SCHOOL today, and at recess most of us were in the lunchroom because it was too cold to be outside. Nava and I were sitting at a table when Josie and Lu walked by. “Hi Josie! Hi Lu,” Nava said with a big smile.

They were surprised. They both looked at me, and I smiled and waved at them. Then together they said, “Hi.” It was almost under their breath, but it was a “Hi.” Then they went to another table.

“You think they’re changing?” Nava asked. She didn’t sound like she believed that.

“I don’t know. Maybe they’ll be more friendly now because of what I said to Josie and how the other girls are acting about it.”

“You said you were going to tell me what happened to you last night,” Nava said.

Before I could, Zach and Willy came up to us. Zach had a look on his face like a fox that just ate a chicken. “Sell a lotta papers last night?” he sneered.

I thought of the three dollars and seventy-five cents I got from the papers I sold since Joshua paid for all of them and the extra five dollars Joshua gave me to keep for myself. I made eight dollars and seventy-five cents! That’s way more than I could ever make in a week!

I gave Zach my biggest smile. “Thanks!” I said. “I made more money last night than I’ll ever make again because of you! Thanks for doing what you did!”

I don’t know how to describe the look on Zach’s face. And Willy’s too. They looked like they were in shock maybe. He wasn’t sneering for sure, and his mouth plopped open and stayed there. I just kept smiling.

“You’re crazy!” he said, and they stomped away.

I waved at them and said loud enough for everybody around to hear, “Thanks Zach for helping me!” I knew he wouldn’t tell anybody what he really did because he’d get in big trouble. So, he’d have to live with knowing everybody thought he was being nice to me. Cool. There goes his tough guy image. At least for today. Probably the worst thing that could happen to him.

Nava stared at me. “What happened?” she begged.

I told her.

She shook her head. “I don’t know whether to cry or laugh. He’s nuts, but...”

“Yeah. But...” My smile was big. Real big. “If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t have eight dollars and seventy-five cents!”

I looked around to make sure nobody else could hear and then kind of whispered. “Joshua gave me something else.” I patted my pocket. “He said I could only tell one other person, and it had to be somebody I trusted, and I’d know who *she*

was.” I pointed my finger at her.

“Uh, me? How does he even know who I am?”

“Don’t know, but that’s what he said.”

“Well, what is it?”

I looked around again and, in my really quiet voice, said, “I’ll show you after school.”

It was snowing when Nava and I left for home. She looked at my new gloves. “Wow! Those are nice. When did you get those?”

“Joshua gave me them to me Tuesday.”

“Wow!”

“He’s the one that always gives me a big tip, and here’s what he gave me.” I took off one of my gloves and pulled out the strange box from my coat pocket and opened it. Last night when I was in bed I took the thing out of the box and kept turning it over in my hands trying to figure out what it was, but I didn’t have a clue. It was metal and maybe even gold with all these markings on it. It was thick in the middle and shaped like a four pointed star or something. There was a big sorta blue sorta green jewel in the middle that you could almost see through like there wasn’t a bottom to it. And these little red ruby kinda things were all around its four corners. The back of it was really smooth and polished, and it looked old. I mean *really* old.

Nava picked it up out of the box and kinda gasped. “It’s warm!” She ran her finger along its back and front and edges. “It’s so beautiful! It almost feels... Feels like it’s alive. Is it an amulet?”

“Amulet? What’s an amulet?”

“You know. Like a magic thing. A magic charm.”

“Magic?” That got me excited. “Like what do you think it does? I mean do you think it’s like Aladdin’s lamp and can give me my wishes or something?”

“That’d be cool, but that’s just fairy stories. What did Joshua say it was?”

“He didn’t. I think he’ll tell me about it tonight.” I took it back from her and put it in the box. I was really pumped up now.

Nava was grinning. “Wow! I can’t wait to tell Aunt Anna about this!”

“Uh...you can’t tell your aunt.” I shoved the box into my pocket and put my glove back on. She stared at me like I was being stupid. “Joshua said we can’t tell anybody. You... You have to *promise* you won’t tell anybody.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Why? I mean, yeah, okay, I’ll promise, but why?”

“Because he said if I tell anyone about this besides you, or if you tell anybody, he’ll take it away from me. So don’t tell anybody, okay. Please.”

“I won’t, but are you going to tell me what he tells you about what it does?”

“Yeah. I mean if I can. If he says it’s okay to.”

She touched my arm and smiled so wide I could see all her teeth. She was as excited as I was.

That night it stopped snowing, and I was selling my papers a lot faster than last night. Joshua came by when I had about 20 minutes left to sell my papers. He parked his car, and waved for me to come over. I did, and he opened up the passenger side door.

“Don’t get in, just stand there,” he said. “I don’t want people thinking I’m trying to kidnap you.”

Kidnap me? I thought that was a little weird, but I did as he said. I handed him a paper, and he gave me three dollar bills.

“That’s for this paper and should make up for the papers you don’t sell because you’re talking to me.”

“Thanks!” I said. “But that’s way more than I’d make if I

sold *all* my papers.”

He smiled and said, “I have a question, Peter.”

I looked at him and waited.

“If I were to ask one of the kids who know you to describe you, what would they say?”

I sorta looked down. “Probably say he’s the shrimp with weird ears that’s kinda dumb and isn’t good at anything.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Interesting. And if I were to ask *you* to describe yourself, what would you say?”

“I don’t know. Same I guess. That’s who I am if everybody thinks that.” Then I thought about Willy and what I did to his hand and sort of smiled. “But maybe I have a better grip than some other guys because I wring out my mom’s clothes.”

He chuckled at that, then asked, “Do you have the box I gave you?”

I took off my gloves and pulled out the box and handed it to him. I was almost shaking because Nava thought maybe it was magic.

He took out the thing that was in the box and rubbed it like it was real special. Then he asked, “What did your friend think it was?”

I stared at him. “How did you know that...”

He just gave me this look like maybe he knew everything. “What did she say?”

A feeling suddenly came over me that made me feel all warm and safe and calm, and I didn’t say anything for a second. Then whatever that was left me, and I said, “She thought it was an amulet. You know, maybe something magic.”

He held it up. “And what do you think?”

I thought about the strange sensation I just had. “Maybe... Maybe what she said.”

He turned it over in his hand. “Yes. There *is* power in this, Peter.” He didn’t say anything else, just looked at it.

"Uh, what... What is it? What does it do?"

He put it back in the box but didn't put the lid on. "It is called *The Prompter*. Have you heard that word before?"

"Well, maybe. I mean, in Willow our class put on a play once for the rest of the school, and I was kinda in it and..." I stopped. I didn't know whether to tell him what I did.

He raised an eyebrow. "You had a part?"

I shook my head and decided to go on. "Uh-uh. I wasn't good enough to do that. But I was the shortest kid, so Miss Grey...that's my teacher... said I was gonna be a prompter. She put me under the table in the middle of the stage that had a cloth over it so nobody could see me. I had what everybody was supposed to say, and when they forgot their parts I said their words so they could hear me and..." I stopped again and just looked down at the seat.

He waited for me to continue.

"And... And I didn't remember I was supposed to whisper and when they forgot their words I said them out loud. The audience laughed every time I did it, and when the play was over everybody was mad at me. I mean everybody except my friends Jolene and Errol. They were laughing and said I was the best part of the play. Miss Grey didn't think it was funny though. All she said was, 'A prompter whispers! They don't yell!'"

I looked back at Joshua and it was like he was trying not to laugh. That made me feel not quite so embarrassed, and I asked, "Is that what a prompter does?"

For a minute he sat with a pleased look on his face, and then his eyes were like they were grabbing mine. "Yes. That is what a prompter does." He said it quietly and all serious like and held up the box. "And this is a prompter just like you were. It is going to help *you* remember. To remember who you *really* are, Peter. To see and feel what the *real* Peter can do." Then

he sat back, and the smile that was almost always on his face appeared again. "Peace. It will bring you peace, Peter."

Peace? Was that what I just felt a minute ago? I liked that! And then I had a weird thought. Was this gonna be like having my Mom and Dad in my pocket reminding me all the time what I need to do? I mean, that'd be great but... I mean *most* of the time it'd be great.

Joshua nodded like somehow he could hear what I was thinking and took *The Prompter* out of the box again. "This will help you know what to do to be happy, Peter. To be free. To be *safe*." He gave a quick smile. "Something like what your parents *would* do huh?" Then his face got real solemn like. "But it will only work if you let it, Peter. Only if you want it to. You must always act when it prompts you. If you don't..." He closed his hand tightly around the amulet and put it back in its box.

"How?" I asked. "I mean, how can that... That thing do all that?"

"You will find out."

Now I was really puzzled. "You're saying if I use it right, it works, but what do you mean? I don't understand. How do I use it right? How do I even use it?"

He got that serious look again. "I will tell you how you cannot use it. You can never use it to try to hurt another person or to take away their right to make choices. You cannot use it for anything that will not make you free or safe or *truly* happy. And it will stop working, Peter, if you ignore what it is prompting you to do."

"But how will I know what..." I just stood there with a duh expression on my face.

He gave me this really kind and patient look, and said, "You will find out how to use it. How to listen to it. How to *feel* it. It will all work out, Peter. And yes, you can share with your

friend what I've told you. She will help you." He put the lid on the box and handed it to me. "And you need to help her. But remember, neither of you must tell anyone else about this." He shook my hand and motioned for me to close the door.

"Uh... When will I see you again?" I muttered.

"When *you* are ready, Peter, I will be back." He motioned again for me to shut the door. I did, and he drove away.

I sold all my papers but seven, and at 6:00 o'clock I left for the drugstore to wait for Hank. It was cold. Really cold. I went into the drugstore and was looking at the magazines without touching them when a Negro kid came in. He was skinnier than me but a little taller. He didn't have a coat, just a couple of heavy shirts. He didn't have boots either, and his hands were stuck deep into his pants pockets. He was shivering.

The owner of the drugstore was behind the soda fountain. For a second he glared at the kid. "You got no business in here," he almost yelled. "I don't want your thieving kind in my store. Get out!"

The kid was going to say something, but his teeth were chattering. His shoulders slumped, and he left.

I just stared at the owner. "He wasn't doing anything," I said. "He's cold!"

"He's a n——r!" the owner said. "Mind your business, or you can leave too."

I clenched my teeth and glared at him. "I'll never buy anything from you again!"

"Suit yourself," he said. "Now you get out of here!"

I did and saw the kid waiting at the stop light. Then a thought just pushed itself into my mind. *Help somebody else when they need help.* Where did that come from? That's what Joshua told me yesterday when he gave me all that money.

The box the amulet was in all of a sudden felt warm in my pocket. Then another thought came. *Act when it prompts you.* That's what Joshua said today when... What's going on? I just stared at the kid, and then it was as though my legs started walking toward him. "Okay!" I muttered to myself, "I'll do it." And then I had the neatest feeling. I really *wanted* to do it.

I hollered at him. "Hey. Wait up!"

He looked at the papers under my arm then looked at me like I was stupid or something. "I don't wanna buy no paper," he said. His whole body was trembling, and he turned his back to me.

The light was still red, and I hurried over by him. "I saw what happened in the store," I said. My voice was shaking a little. Not because of the cold, but because I was mad. "He had no right doing that!" I said.

He faced me. "You from around here?"

"Uh...just moved here from Idaho couple months ago."

He gave a laugh that wasn't exactly a laugh. "Have a lot to learn, boy."

Boy? He wasn't much older than me. And I knew what I wanted to do. I pulled off my gloves and reached in my pocket and took out the three dollar bills Joshua had just given me. "Here," I said, and handed them to him.

He looked at me like I was crazy. "Whatta you want from me?"

"Nothing. Here. Please take this."

He looked at the money. "I ain't gonna do nothin for this," he said. "Why you wanna do this?"

"My friend Joshua gave it to me because he thought I needed it. You need it. Please take it."

"I don't wanna owe no white kid nothin," he said, but he kept looking at the money.

"Joshua's a Negro," I said, "and he gave it to me, and he's

my friend. What's the color of my skin got to do with it anyway?"

The kid looked up at me then slowly took the money. The light turned green, and he started to go. I handed him my gloves. "Joshua gave these to me too, but I have another pair of gloves at home." I looked at his hands that were shaking from the cold. "Please. Would you take these too."

He looked at me, and I couldn't tell whether his eyes were wet because it was so cold or because of something else. "Thanks," he said quietly. He took the gloves and ran across the street.

I put my hand into my pocket and wrapped my fingers around the little box. It was hot.

CHAPTER 9



Telephones

AT RECESSES TODAY I played soccer with Chuck and Cory and the other guys, and at lunch, Lisa and Zoe were at our table so I couldn't tell Nava what Joshua told me yesterday. All I said was I saw him. We started walking home from school, and as soon as we were alone Nava grabbed my arm. "What'd he say! Tell me what Joshua said!" But before I could say anything she said, "Where's your new gloves?"

I'd almost forgotten I was wearing mom's gloves again. I was gonna say I lost em. But that was stupid, and I told her everything that happened with that kid, and what I gave him.

"Mr. Curtis at the drugstore did that?" she said, and her eyes were like they were when Zach was beating me up.

"If that's the name of the owner, yeah," I said. I described what he looked like.

"That's him! Aunt Anna buys stuff from there all the time,

but she won't now when I tell her! He's horrible!"

"I don't know what the kid was doing at Hi Pointe," I said, "but he was freezing to death. Why would somebody treat a kid like that just because he was Negro?"

She looked at me like I didn't have a clue what the world was like and smiled. "I like you, Peter."

Blush time.

"So, what did Joshua say about that thing you have?"

I wasn't gonna tell her the questions Joshua asked about what others thought about me or the dumb thing I did in the play in Willow. Maybe sometime I will, but I said he called it *The Prompter* and told her the kinds of things it was supposed to do.

She laughed when I said it was like having my mom and dad in my pocket. Then she got serious. "This is so cool, Peter, but how does it work? "I mean, how does it prompt you?"

I half closed my eyes, and the face of that shivering kid came into my mind. I didn't say anything and started to walk. She did too and didn't say anything either, but I knew she was waiting for me to answer her. Would she believe me? That was dumb! Of course she would. She's my friend. So I stopped and looked at her and took a breath.

"All Joshua told me was I'd find out for myself how it worked. When I came out of the drugstore and saw the kid waiting at the stoplight I was just going to maybe apologize for what happened and tell him not everybody was like that. But then it just popped into my mind what Joshua told me the other day about trying to help others like he was helping me. I mean, it was word for word what he said. I mean, I could almost see and hear it again, and I knew for sure I wanted to help that kid, and I knew exactly what I needed to do. So that's what I did."

"Wow!" she said. "You think that's how it works then? Just

puts thoughts in your mind like that?”

“Yeah. Probably.” I pulled *The Prompter* box out of my pocket. “When I put my fingers on this box right after, it was warm. I mean, not warm because it was in my pocket, I mean really warm. Almost hot.”

“That is cool! When are you supposed to see him again?”

I shrugged. “All he said was when I was ready I’d see him again. I don’t know what he meant.”

Nava grinned. “This is getting to be kind of like a really neat mystery!”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “And he said you’re gonna help me, and I’m gonna help you.”

“What? What did he mean by that?”

I shrugged again. “Don’t know, but... But...” I smiled, and she smiled too.

“Oh!” I said. “I almost forgot. We’re still not supposed to tell anybody about...” I held up the box. “He’ll take it away if we do.”

“Who’d believe us?” she said.

“Yeah. If Cory or Zoe or any of those kids told us this happened to them, I’d think they’re nuts!”

We started walking again and came to the street where she would turn off to go to her house. “Okay if I go home your way?” I asked.

“Sure. It’s almost the same distance either way isn’t it?” I nodded, and we went her way.

“Uh... If we’re kind of going to work together,” I said. “I mean, you know with this *Prompter* thing, shouldn’t we... Uh, I mean maybe have each other’s phone numbers, huh?” The blush came.

“I’d like that,” she said, and opened her note pad. She wrote down her number, Adam 5-6689, and tore out the sheet and handed it to me. “What’s your number?”

“Sterling 1-6250.”

She wrote it down. “Do you still remember your phone number in Willow?” she asked.

“Yeah. Of course. 4179.”

“That’s it? Just four numbers?”

“Uh... That’s all we needed. Probably didn’t need that many even.”

“So, you just dialed four numbers to call somebody?”

“Uh-uh. We couldn’t dial anybody. Our phones didn’t have a dial on them. You just picked up the phone and told the operator the number you wanted, and she’d ring it for you.”

Nava’s eyes got big. “Like when we want to make a long distance call we dial a zero to get the operator to make the call for us? I mean, that’s what you had to do every time you wanted to make any call?”

“Sort of. Except we didn’t dial zero because we didn’t have a dial. We just picked up the phone and the operator answered. Uh... I mean she’d answer if nobody else was on the line.”

“What do you mean if nobody else was on the line?”

“We had three other families that used our same telephone line. Not our same number of course but our same line. If any of those families were using their phone we had to wait ‘til they were through before we could call anybody. Or before anybody could call us.”

“No way!” she said. “That’s horrible! What if you had an emergency and somebody was using the line? Or what if you’re expecting a really important phone call?”

“You just tell who’s ever on the line why you need it and ask them to hang up.”

“Would they?”

“Yeah. I mean most the time. We’d always hang up when we were asked.”

She scratched her head. “So when your phone rang, how

did you know it was for you and not one of the others on your line?”

“Oh, that’s easy. If it was just one ring, it was for us. If it was two rings, it was for the Sorensen’s. Three rings it was for the Cox’s, and four rings the Huntsman’s.”

“What if you picked it up when it was three rings?”

“Then the operator would tell you it wasn’t for you and to get off.”

“What if you picked it up and somebody else was already on the line.”

“I don’t know. Usually, you just hung the phone up if you didn’t need them to get off.” I sort of laughed. “But sometimes, I mean depends on who it was and what they’re saying, you just kept silent and listened.”

She frowned and crinkled her eyes. “You’re kidding!”

“Well, I mean you know... Yeah. Sure. Course that’s not exactly polite. So... I mean, we didn’t do it very much. Besides, you could tell when somebody else was listening, and you’d just tell them to get off.”

“That’s disgusting! I’m sure glad I don’t live in Willow!”

We didn’t talk anymore until we got to her house. She went up the steps, and I called, “Uh, see you tomorrow?” She turned and waved. I could feel my grin push my cheeks up, and I said, “Bet you’d have listened to other people on the phone sometimes too.”

She put her hand on her hip. “I would never do that!”

I kept grinning.

She turned away so I couldn’t see if she was smiling, but I knew she was.

CHAPTER 10



How to Treat a Bully

I WAITED UNTIL EVERYBODY had left for recess. Except for Calder who had to clean the blackboard. Miss Meyers was looking at me. “You need to go to recess, Peter.”

“Uh... I mean, ma’am, can I talk to you?”

She moved her hand for me to come to her desk.

I pointed at Calder to show her I wanted it to be private. She got up from her chair and took me with her to the coat-room. When we were in there, she folded her arms and raised her caterpillar eyebrow. “Well, what is it? I’m busy.”

I know she doesn’t like me. Probably because I have trouble remembering to say ma’am. And probably because she thinks I’m stupid. Anyway, I put my hand in my pocket and touched my box to see if that would help me. You know, whatever it does. Like give me courage or something.

“Uh... I mean ma’am, can kids who live pretty far from

school get special bus passes? I mean, I know we don't have school buses here but, I mean like to ride a city bus to school?"

"What are you talking about, Peter? You're only a couple of blocks from school."

I felt the box get a little warm. "It's not for me, ma'am." *The Prompter* was working! I said ma'am!

She cocked her head. "I don't think I understand."

I looked at the floor then back up to her. "I want to get one for Zach." I wasn't mumbling! "I mean if I got enough money to do it. He has to walk a long way to school. I don't think he can afford one."

She didn't say anything, and her arms weren't crossed anymore, and she had a look on her face that I'd never seen there before. The corner of her mouth was kind of turned up, and her eyes... Well, they weren't frowning anymore.

"That's...very nice," she said. "Students can buy a pass that allows them to ride on city buses for no other charge. It's only good on school days between six o'clock in the morning and seven o'clock in the evening. It costs five dollars and lasts for the school year."

I pulled out a five dollar bill that Joshua gave me. "Where do I get one?" I asked.

She stared at my money, and then said, "The principal has them. He has to verify that the student is in need."

"How can I get one for Zach then?" I was surprised I wasn't stuttering like I usually do when I talk to her. And I felt my box get warmer.

She actually smiled and held out her hand for the money. "I will get one for you."

"Thanks!" I said. "Thanks!" I was gonna look at the floor again but I didn't. I looked right at her. "Would you... Would you give it to Zach? I don't think he'd take it if he knew it was from me."

"I'll be happy too." She smiled but looked kinda suspicious. "By the way, where did you get your money?"

"I have a newspaper corner now. Cory gave me his."

"That's a lot of money for a twelve-year-old," she said. "You sure you want to do this and sure you don't want me to tell Zach?"

"Yeah... I mean yes ma'am. I'm sure. And please don't tell him." I let loose of *The Prompter*. I guess it's job isn't to always help me say ma'am.

She put her hand on my shoulder. "It'll just be between you and me then," she said. "Better get out there for recess or some of the kids might wonder what you've been doing. I'll tell Calder you just had a question for me."

I put on my coat and left.

Nava and I walked home together after school again. Before we got across the playground, an ambulance came up the street. It didn't have it's red lights going or anything and it's siren wasn't on either. "So, that's what a real ambulance looks like," I muttered.

Nava stared at me. "You've never seen an ambulance before? They don't have ambulances in Willow?"

"We don't even have a hospital there," I said. "Closest one's in Linburg, and that's nine miles away."

She stopped. "What happens if somebody's real sick, and they need to get to the hospital fast?"

"Mr. Tew takes them. He has a mortuary and furniture store across from where my dad's shop was, and he uses his hearse."

She stared at me. "He uses a hearse for an ambulance?"

"Yeah. It's the only car big enough in Willow for somebody to lay down in. He just puts a board on the floor where the casket would go and a mattress on top for the person to lay on."

Her mouth dropped. "Wouldn't you feel weird if you were a patient going to the hospital in a hearse? I mean, wouldn't you think you were going to die before you got there?"

"Maybe. But if you did die on the way to the hospital, no problem." I tried to keep my lip from turning up. "They'd just turn around and take you to the mortuary. Probably give you a discount on your funeral cause you were already in the hearse when you died."

She slugged my arm. "That's not funny!" But she was laughing. "Did he really use a hearse for the ambulance?"

"Yeah! Really! Paul...that's his son...was one of my best friends, and we were always trying to get his dad to let us ride in the back of his hearse."

"That is sick!" Nava said, but she was still laughing.

"He never let us though. Said it would be undignified or something. I mean, like being dead is dignified?"

She just shook her head, and we started walking again.

When we were almost to her house she said, "Isn't today when your mom finds out about your sister's blood tests?"

"Yeah. She's pretty worried. Dad's worried too."

"What do they think it is?"

"I don't know. If they've been told something, they haven't told me."

"Will you tell me as soon as you find out?" she asked.

"Sure. I'll tell you tomorrow."

"I mean..." She stopped. "Uh, would you call me if you find out today?"

Here came my red face again. That'd be the first time I ever called a girl. "Uh, sure. I mean if my parents say I can use the phone."

Then I thought about Zach. I wasn't going to tell anybody what I was doing for him, but now... Now, Nava was my friend, and Joshua said we were supposed to work together.

So I told her.

She touched my arm and gave me that look I really liked. Yeah. The blush came.

“How much did you say it cost?” she asked.

“Five bucks.”

She had a small purse that hung by a strap from her shoulder. She opened it, and I could see two dollar bills and some change. She pulled out the two dollars and handed them to me. “That’s my share,” she said.

“Your share? What are you talking about? I’m the one who decided to do it so I’ll pay for it!”

She squinted her eyes. “Joshua said you’d help me, and I’d help you. So, we’re a team!”

I felt *The Prompter* get warm in my pocket, and I smiled. “We are a team,” I said, and I took her money. “Thanks.”

CHAPTER 11



Ronette

I WAITED FOR HANK to drop the papers off. My hands were cold, and I thought about the gloves I gave away. I'll buy me a pair like that maybe for Christmas. I should have enough money. That kid would never get gloves like that unless somebody gave them to him. I laughed. Like me, huh? I wouldn't have had them except Joshua gave them to me. I was sort of dancing it was so cold, and I was anxious to get my papers sold so I could go home and find out what was happening with Ronette.

Mom took her to the doctors today, and she said he had the test results. She wouldn't tell me though what was happening with Ronette. But she wasn't smiling either. She said she'd wait until Dad got home to tell me. Which meant I wouldn't know until after my papers were sold. Dad wasn't going to drive me home today either. Last week was the only time

he said he'd do it. Anyway, Zach hasn't bothered me since ruining my papers. Maybe he won't be so mean when he starts to ride the bus to school and doesn't have to walk all that way.

"Here's your papers," Hank said. I didn't see him come up. He cut the cord around them and put them on the shelf in the stand. "Not snowing today. Shouldn't have a problem keeping them dry." He drove off.

I looked at the front page. One of the articles said that the polio virus was identified. Wow! That was big! Everybody knew they were working on a cure. Dad said a guy by the name of Salk thought he had a vaccine for it. My friend, Danny Dial, in Willow got it and was in an iron lung. They didn't think he'd die but maybe be crippled the rest of his life. I've been wondering if that's what Ronette has. I sure hope not!

"Selling papers today?" a guy yelled from his car. I recognized him. He was the same bald guy in a yellow Chevy that yelled at me my first day of selling papers. I picked up four papers and handed him one. He gave me a nickel and looked like he'd just done me a big favor.

"Thanks," I said with a smile and walked to the cars coming toward me and yelled, "POLIO VIRUS IDENTIFIED!"

I sold out early. Joshua didn't come by. I hadn't seen him since he gave me *The Prompter*. I missed his 20 cent tips, but I still got 30 cents in tips today. I stood by the drugstore to wait for Hank. I hoped he'd come early. It was cold, but I wouldn't go inside that drugstore ever again. The owner peered at me through the window. He looked like he wanted to sweep me off the sidewalk. I smiled at him and waved and not because I wanted to be friendly. When somebody's mad at you, smiling back at them makes them even madder.

For a second, it felt like there was an ice cube in my pocket. That was the pocket *The Prompter* was in. Weird. I walked up

and down the sidewalk looking in the drug store windows. The store looked empty, and I wondered if Nava's aunt had told people what I told Nava. Hank came, and I gave him the money, and he gave me my share, and I hustled home.

Mom and Dad were at the dinner table when I came in, but Ronette wasn't. They were waiting for me. I took off my coat and put my money in a jar on the cabinet in the kitchen Mom put there for me. I washed my hands and went to the table. It was macaroni and cheese day. Mom's M&C was the best because there was so much cheese and rosemary. I love rosemary! They weren't smiling. Dad nodded to Mom to say the blessing.

"Heavenly Father, bless the food please. And please bless Ronette. Amen." She sounded like she was gonna cry.

I like short blessings, but this one... I mean I was worried and was almost afraid to ask but I did. "Uh... What's happening with Ronette?"

Mom didn't answer, just passed the bowls of food to Dad. He took his helping and handed the bowls to me. I got my food and slid the bowls to Mom, but she didn't take anything and tears just ran down her cheeks. Dad reached over and held her hand. Nobody was eating.

I looked at Dad, and finally he said, "Ronette is very sick. She has leukemia."

I'd heard about leukemia but never knew anybody who got it. From what everybody said you didn't ever get over it. You died. I swallowed and felt my own tears roll down my face. "What... What... What's going to happen to her? Is... Is she..." I couldn't say anything more and rubbed my eyes and nose with the napkin by my plate.

Dad's Adam's apple moved up and down like he was swallowing too, and his eyes were getting wet. "It's cancer," he said quietly. "There's no cure for it. The doctors will try a

new treatment they call chemotherapy. They'll try to keep the cancer from taking over her body for as long as they can."

Mom wiped her eyes with her napkin and reached for my hand. "We're all going to need to be really careful that we don't bring any germs into her room. She'll be staying in bed most of the time now. We'll be going to the doctors a lot for her to get checked up on and to the hospital when she needs her chemotherapy. And we'll bring her downstairs for her to watch *Howdy Doody* and some of the shows she likes. But... But..." Her chest started heaving up and down, and Dad stood and pulled her up to him and held her tight. She was sobbing loud and Dad was crying, and she was saying, "My twins... My twins... Now Ronette... Ronette..."

I held my napkin over my eyes and everything just hurt. Not my body exactly, but... But something inside me. My twin sisters died nine years ago. They only lived a few days, and I used to dream about them all the time. In my dreams we'd play together and talk so I wasn't the only kid in the family, and then Ronette came, and I had a sister, and I didn't dream about the twins so much and now... Now... I felt my breath catch again and again and again, and I couldn't stop it. Then Mom and Dad put their arms around me and pulled me to them, and we all cried and cried and cried.

None of us felt like eating, and I helped Mom put the stuff in her Tupperware bowls. She'd been trying to hold Tupperware parties to sell the Tupperware stuff to make a little money, but she didn't know enough people yet to have many parties. So we had plenty of the containers to use. I didn't have that many dishes to wash either and finished them fast.

"Can I go up and see Ronette?" I asked.

Mom nodded. "Wash your hands and face good and stay at least five feet away from her. And..." She started to cry again.

“And don’t say anything about leukemia. We don’t want her to get worried.”

I washed myself good like Mom asked and went upstairs to Ronette’s room. I wished I’d bought some licorice or a Tootsie Pop for her, but I wasn’t gonna go back into that drugstore for anything. She was sitting up in her bed reading *Charlotte’s Web*.

“Hi Ronette.”

“Hi.” She didn’t look up.

“You like the book?”

“Yeah. A lot.” She still didn’t look up.

“You been doing some coloring?”

“Yeah.” She kept reading her book.

“Sorry you’re sick. How was the doctor’s today?”

Now she looked up. “Didn’t like it. He said I was gonna have lots of shots.”

“I wouldn’t like that either, but it’s going to make you better.”

“You think so?” She was almost pleading, and I rubbed my sleeve across my eyes.

“That’s what doctor’s do, huh?” I said.

“You think I’ll get better?” Her voice was almost a whisper.

“You have to get better. You’re... You’re my sister. I love you.” I was really fighting to keep from crying so I wouldn’t upset her.

She reached her arms out to give me a hug. At first I didn’t do anything because Mom said to stay five feet away, and then I thought, I’ve washed real good. And besides what’s worse, give her a couple of germs or act like I didn’t love her. I sat on her bed, and we just hugged each other. I could tell she was crying. So was I.

After a minute she let go and wiped her eyes. “Have to get back to my book.”

I tried to smile. “Tell me what it’s about when you finish, okay?”

“Okay,” she said without looking up.

I went downstairs. Mom and Dad were in the living room. The television was not on. They were quiet and sitting on the couch holding hands.

“Can I use the phone?” I asked. “Nava asked me to call her to tell her how Ronette’s doing.”

They both nodded. “She sounds like a real nice girl,” Mom said. “I’d like to get to know her and her family.”

I went into the corner of the kitchen where the telephone was. I really didn’t feel like talking to anybody tonight, but I promised Nava I’d call. I dialed her number. She answered.

“It’s me,” I said.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she said. “Thanks for calling.” I could tell she meant it.

And I lost it. I couldn’t talk. I knew she could hear me cry, and I didn’t care. She didn’t say anything. Just let me cry.

“Ronette...has...leu...leukemia.” I said at last. That’s all I could say.

She was silent for a long time. I think she was crying too. Then she finally said, “I’m so sorry. I’ll pray for her. I’ll pray for your whole family.”

I thought about Joshua saying how Nava and I will help each other. And I thought about Nava losing her parents. “Thanks,” I mumbled. “Uh, can we talk about this tomorrow?”

“Uh huh,” she said. And we hung up.

CHAPTER 12



About Death

I WAS ALREADY AT my desk this morning before Nava came in. She sat behind me and whispered, “Can we talk after school?” I nodded.

At recess, I hurried to catch up to Chuck and Cory and the others who were going to play soccer. My mind wasn’t on soccer though. I hardly slept last night thinking of Ronette, and I almost cried in my class this morning. So I didn’t see Zach until it was too late. He stuck his foot out, and I tripped and slid on my hands and knees in the snow.

“Oops! Sorry, Dumbo,” he said. “Too bad you couldn’t fly today.”

I stood and checked my hands for scrapes and my knees to see what it did to my pants. Nothing serious. I was just wet from the snow.

“Look! He wet his pants!” Willy sneered. “Poor boy’s gotta

go home now.”

I stared at them. I'd spent five bucks on a bus pass for that moron. Well, actually only three dollars. Nava gave me two dollars. But now... Now, I was going to tell Miss Meyers not to buy it if she hadn't already done it. If she had, I'd tell her to give it to somebody else.

“Hey Jerk!” It was Chuck. He'd run up behind me and was looking at Zach. “You lay off Peter!”

Zach tilted his head. “Oh! We have a new tough guy, huh?” He glared at me, then back at Chuck. “You telling me Dumbo has a protector now?” He laughed. “He'll need more than you. Wimp.”

Chuck didn't back down at all and Al and Calder and Cory and the other kids I played soccer with joined us now. And they were all mad.

“You think I'll need more than these?” Chuck said as he and the rest walked toward Zach and Willy.

Willy looked like *he* was going to wet his pants, and Zach... I didn't think it'd ever be possible, but he looked scared. Real scared.

“You better listen!” Chuck said. “You ever touch Peter again, and we'll beat the crap outta both of you! Same goes if you touch any of us.”

Zach and Willy just backed up.

Chuck glanced at his friends, then glared back at those two. “You got Peter wet in the snow. We're gonna get you wet in the snow too.” He waved to the others. “Let's get em.”

I felt my pocket get warm. “Uh... Please don't!” I yelled. “Won't do any good. I'm okay. They'll leave me alone now.”

Everybody stared at me. Including Zach and Willy.

“They deserve it!” Chuck said. His face was red and his fists were doubled up. The other guys shouted, “Yeah!” and kept going toward Zach and Willy.

“Please don’t!” I said again. My voice was real calm, and I wasn’t afraid at all. “I don’t want anybody else to get hurt. Doesn’t make any sense at all.” I looked right at Zach. “Please leave me alone now, okay? Let’s just be friends. Okay?”

And my pocket got warmer.

Zach stared at me. His look was like he was wondering who I was or something. Then he grabbed Willy’s shoulder. “Let’s go.” And they left.

Everyone else looked at me. I shrugged. “Thanks,” I said. “Thanks a lot.” And I walked back to the school building. I didn’t feel like talking with anybody right now. And the weirdest thing...I just felt sorry for Zach and Willy. And I wasn’t going to say anything to Miss Meyers either, because he needed the bus pass. I hadn’t been thinking about Ronette, but all that came back now, and I wanted to talk to Nava.

School finally ended for the day, and Nava and I started to walk home. “Heard what happened at recess,” she said. “Why did you stop them from throwing Zach and Willy in the snow? They deserved it!”

I pulled out my little box and pointed at it. “Was the right thing to do,” was all I said.

She looked at it and then at me and just kind of muttered, “I guess.” We walked for a while, and she said, “Been thinking about Ronette all day.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“What’re the doctors going to do now?”

“Dad said she’d get chemotherapy. I think that’s the word. I never heard of it before, but I think it means a lotta shots. He said it’s to try to keep the cancer from taken over her body. But...” I kept swallowing to keep from losing it, then said, “But he didn’t sound like that’d work very long. So... So...” I lost it.

I brought a handkerchief just in case today, and I pulled it out of my pocket and wiped my eyes and blew my nose. Then I did it again. And again. Then I put it back in my pocket.

“I’d like to help your family,” she said after we’d walked for a while. “I could be there with Ronette if your mom had to go somewhere while you were selling papers and before your dad got home from work. And my aunt and I could make dinner for you when your mom can’t do it because she’s at the doctors. That’s what my aunt said when I told her about Ronette.”

“Thanks! I’ll tell Mom. I don’t know how much she’ll have to take her to get her shots or when, but I’ll tell her.” I sucked in a deep breath. “Mom showed me this thing about chemotherapy that the doctor gave her, and it said you get real sick when you get those shots and... And you’re really weak and somebody’s got to feed you and help you and... So maybe... Yeah. That’d be great if you could do that. I mean when we need help.”

I didn’t tell her that what I read also said hardly anybody ever lives more than a year after they find out you got leukemia and most don’t live anywhere near that long. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the small picture I kept in a little frame on my dresser and handed it to her.

She gasped. “Babies! They’re only babies, and they’re dead?”

The picture was of my twin sisters. They were in white kind of lacy dresses and laying in a little coffin by each other. I wanted to tell Nava about them, and I put my hand on the box in my pocket hoping I could do it without blubbering all over the place. It was warm.

“Yeah. Those are my sisters. They only lived a couple of days. I was about three when they...” I sniffled and wiped my handkerchief across my nose. “A month or so before they

were born I was in our basement playing, and Mom called me to come upstairs, and I didn't come. And she came after me and fell down the stairs and... And the babies were born too early and... And... And so maybe it was my fault that they..." And that's as far as I got before I lost it again.

Nava took hold of my arm and squeezed it. "How could it be your fault?" she said. "You were only three!"

I took deep breaths and wiped my eyes. "Yeah. Maybe. That's what Mom keeps telling me but..." I swallowed hard. "But I wanted sisters so bad and I dreamed about them all the time and all the fun we'd have and... And when Ronette was born and I had a sister and I could play with her and I didn't have the dreams so much anymore and now Ronette... And my mom won't have any daughters now and..."

Nava put her arms around me and held me tight. Like I held Ronette. And I didn't even blush. Then she let go and said, "I want to show you something." She got into her purse and pulled out a picture just a little bigger than my picture of the twins. There was a man and a woman. He was handsome and wore a suit and tie, and she had a neat kind face and was really pretty. They were holding a little blond girl who was maybe a year old or so.

Nava pointed to the woman. "That's my mother." Then she pointed to the man. "And that's my father." She pointed to the girl. "That's me."

It was her turn to cry.

Then, like it was the most natural thing for me to do, I hugged her like she had hugged me.

After maybe a minute, maybe less, she pushed herself away and got a handkerchief out of her purse and wiped her eyes and nose. "The nurse who saved me," she said as she tried to control herself, "gave this picture to the people she left me with in Hungary. She told them that it was to stay with me so

I'd know... So I'd know I had a mother and father. So I'd...I'd know what they looked like.”

For a minute she just sort of wept and then looked at me like she was going to tell me a secret. “You want to know what I've been thinking for a long time now?” she whispered.

That caught me by surprise. “Uh-huh. Yeah.”

“When I die...I think I'm going to be with them. I mean, how can heaven be heaven if... if I'm not with my mom and dad? So I'm thinking maybe when people die...they're just gone for a little while. You know, like when my uncle goes on a business trip for a couple of days and comes home, and we're all together again? Like that.”

Then her eyes grabbed me, and she said, “So maybe that's like it'll be with you and your twin sisters and with Ronette when she...” She didn't finish and her face drooped and she said, “You think I'm crazy, Peter?”

I touched the box in my pocket. It was really warm, and I had the weirdest feeling. I mean, it was like my whole body was really calm. “No. You're not crazy.”

CHAPTER 13



The Hospital

THE LAST TWO DAYS it's like I've been in a dream. A bad dream. This morning Ronette was having a hard time breathing and had a high fever. Mom was really worried and was going to call the doctor when his office opened. I wanted to stay to see what the doctor said, but Mom said I had to go to school, and she'd tell me everything when I got home.

I tried hard to listen to Miss Meyers, but my mind kept going back to Ronette. We had geography this morning. About a place called Petra in Jordan. I think that's an Arab country maybe by Israel. And this Petra was a whole city dug out of a bunch of cliffs. Pretty cool. She showed us some pictures of it with men riding camels and donkeys with stuff on their backs and that got my mind off Ronette for a while.

Then for English she said that we'd have to memorize a poem, and we could choose one from any of the ones that

were in our English book or any other one that she approved of. She didn't say when we had to have it done by though. I really like one I think that's called *Opportunity*. I can't remember who wrote it. I have a really hard time memorizing things, but I'll try to do it I guess. I mean, I have to.

At recess, Miss Meyers told Zach to stay behind. I wondered if she'd heard about what happened on the playground yesterday when he tripped me. He looked worried anyway. I went out to recess and played soccer. Chuck and the other guys are sure being nice to me. And at lunch I sat with Nava. Lisa and Joe and Cory and Chuck sat with us. They were all joking around. I tried to laugh with them, but it was kinda fake. I'm sure they could tell. Nava looked at me and then got them talking about Petra at Jordan and the poems they were going to memorize. I tried to listen but kept thinking about Ronette.

Zach and Willy were sitting by themselves on the other side of the lunchroom. That's where they usually sat. I saw Zach hold up something, and he had a big smile on his face. I couldn't hear what he was saying. I was too far away. But he was happy about something. I wonder if I'll ever be happy about something again.

When school was out, Miss Meyers motioned for me to stay. When everybody left she told me she gave Zach the bus pass today.

"Uh, did you tell him who gave it to him?" I asked. I was kind of worried.

She shook her head. "That's only between you and me. I didn't even tell Mr. Gambles."

"So not even the principal knows?" I asked.

"No one but you and me."

I remembered how happy Zach looked at lunch and asked, "Uh...how'd he take it? I mean did he like it?"

She smiled. "He was surprised, of course. Really surprised. He kept asking me who did it, and I just told him it was someone who wanted to help him. He was *very* excited to get it."

"Uh, did he... Did he say to tell whoever gave it to him, uh...thank you?"

She shook her head. "But you made him happy, Peter. And that's worth a lot."

"Yeah, I guess," I said, and thanked her for helping me out with this.

Our classroom was on the second floor and this school has the coolest bannisters. They're cement I think and painted gray and really wide. They're pretty slick on top, and I was bigtime tempted today to slide down them. Maybe because I just wanted something to take my mind off Ronette. Anyway, I kept feeling with my hand how slick they were and how easy it would be to slide off at the bottom without getting hurt.

Then I remembered my school in Willow. The bannisters there were wood and a lot skinnier. Errol dared me to slide down it, so I did and landed on my butt. That was during recess, and when I was in class the school secretary came in and said the principal wanted to see me. I'd never been to his office before and all the way I's wondering if he was angry because of what we were calling him. His name was Simeon Dunn, and we called him Cinnamon Bun. I don't mean to his face but when we were messing around. But somebody had told him I'd slid down the banister, and that's why he wanted to see me. He gave me a lecture about getting hurt and stuff and said he was going to help me remember not to do it again. He got the paddle he always had in his office that had little holes in it and told me to grab my knees. And when I did he gave me a whack that made my sore rear end a lot sorer.

I didn't know whether Mr. Gamble had a paddle like that,

but it would be stupid to take a chance, so I walked down the stairs. Nava was waiting for me, and we headed home.

“What did Miss Meyers want to see you about?” she asked. “You’re not in trouble are you?”

“Nah. She just told me she gave Zach the bus pass.”

“How’d he act about that?”

I shrugged. “She said he was happy and wanted to know who gave it to him, but she didn’t tell him.”

“You think he’s going to be any better now?”

I shrugged again. “Who knows. At least he couldn’t get much worse.” I didn’t really believe that.

I walked Nava to her house. “How’s Ronette?” she asked as she went up her stairs.

“Not so good. Mom’s worried.” That’s all I wanted to say.

She stopped and looked at me. She could tell I didn’t want to talk about it. She was cool. “See you tomorrow,” she said and ran up the stairs.

I went home, hung up my coat, and hollered, “Mom, I’m here.”

No answer.

I was going to go upstairs when I saw a note on the kitchen table, and I read it.

“Dad came home this morning, and we’re taking Ronette to the hospital. The doctor was very concerned. I don’t know how late we’ll be tonight. If she has to stay in the hospital overnight, I’m going to stay with her, but your dad will come home. There’s leftovers in the fridge, and please go to your newspaper corner. There’s nothing you can do, and it won’t do any good for you to stay home and worry. We’ll be home later this evening. At least Dad will. Love Mom.”

CHAPTER 14



Peter's Dad

I WENT TO MY newspaper corner but didn't feel like holler-ing, ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH PAPAA. Hank asked me if I was okay. I just said yeah. I only sold 91 papers and got just a nickel in tips.

Coming home, I walked past Nava's house a little ways then stopped. I wanted to talk to somebody about what was happening. And I didn't want to go home and sit by myself watching TV or something so I wouldn't think about Ronette. At least no more than I had to. So, I went back to Nava's house and up her stairs.

Their door was dark wood and really nice with three panels on the bottom and a little window at the top. Our front door was just plain white wood. But this one had this thing that was stuck on the door frame that looked like a silver pencil case with funny writing on it. Maybe I'd ask Nava what that

was but not tonight. I rang their doorbell. We didn't have a doorbell. You just knocked.

A really pretty girl answered the door. She was four or five years older than me I guessed and maybe that many inches taller. Her hair went down past her shoulders and was sort of combed and sort of wasn't. It was beautiful. Like you took blonde and red and mixed them together. I just stared at it. And at her.

After a couple of seconds, she said, "Uh, can I help you?"

I realized I was being a dope. "Uh, sorry," I said. "Is Nava here? I'm her friend. Uh, Peter."

Her eyes lit up. "You're Peter?" "I'm Esther. Nava's cousin." She opened the door. "C'mon in." She looked down at my boots that were wet and a little muddy. "She's told us about you. Wait *right* here, and I'll get her."

I was in kind of an entry room or hall. There was stairs that curved up to the next floor with a white wood banister, and a really big mirror with a gold frame hung on the wall underneath it. On the left of the stairs was a living room with what looked like antique furniture. I mean like right out of a museum. And on my right was a dining room that had a chandelier and everything and a huge table and dark wood chairs that looked like they were carved. On the table was this large gold looking thing that held candles. Seven of them. And in front of me, there was another door that looked like it was maybe going into the kitchen.

They must be rich! I thought.

"Peter!" It was Nava. That door *was* to the kitchen, and she came through it and looked at me for a second. "You okay?"

I don't know what it was. Whether it was Ronette or seeing my friend and wanting her to help me or... Anyway, I didn't say anything. I couldn't. My eyes just got real wet.

"Is it Ronette?" she asked kindly. I nodded.

She pointed at a really nice coat rack. “Hang your coat here.” Then she looked at my boots. “And would you please take those and your shoes off?” She pointed to a large shallow box where other shoes were. “That’s so the floor won’t get dirty.” She smiled.

At first I worried that maybe I had holes in my socks, and I kinda waited. Maybe I could just tell her here in the hall I was worried about Ronette and then go home. But the way she looked at me, I knew she wanted to help. So I hung my coat up and took my boots and shoes off. Yes! My socks didn’t have holes in them! So I kind of loosened up a bit, and she took me into the living room.

She motioned for me to sit on this blue velvet couch with a large round picture of a bunch of different colored flowers stitched into the back. It was so beautiful I wanted to look at it not sit on it. But she sat on it and tapped the seat by her for me to sit. So I did. She looked at me and waited.

I wiped my eyes with my sleeve and looked at my legs and took a big breath and said, “So when I got home from school, Mom left me a note that they took Ronette to the hospital this morning. She’s having a hard time breathing. She has a real high fever.”

Nava’s eyes got big. “How’s she now?”

“I don’t know. Mom’s note said she might stay at the hospital if they kept Ronette, but Dad would be home sometime late tonight. She wanted me to do my newspaper thing so that’s where I’ve been.”

“Do you think they’re home now?”

I shook my head. “Her note said for me to eat leftovers in the fridge, and it would be late tonight before Dad got home.”

“So your there by yourself?” she asked.

“No big deal,” I said. “Somebody’ll be home tonight.” I looked at her. “I just wanted to... I mean, I just wanted to tell

you that Ronette...” I tried hard to blink my tears back but still had to wipe my eyes with my sleeve.

She stood up. “C’mon.” She took my hand and pulled me up. She led me into her kitchen. It was huge with a bright blue and white linoleum floor that didn’t have any rips in it like ours did. A large white table sat in the middle with chairs that went with it and that had dark blue cushion seats.

She poked her head into the room on the left that was kind of dark with paneling on the walls. I could see her uncle and who must’ve been her aunt sitting on a sofa. They were watching TV.

“Can I get Peter a sandwich and some soup?” she called at them.

The woman got up and came into the kitchen. She looked a lot like Esther who I saw at the door but older. “So you’re Peter,” she said with a big smile. “I’ve heard so much about you. I’m Anna. Nava’s aunt. How’s your sister?”

“She’s in the hospital,” Nava said before I could say anything. “That’s where his parents are now and won’t be home until late.”

“We’d love to have you eat here,” Anna said to me. “We had pastrami sandwiches and lentil soup this evening. Just something light. Would you like that?”

I remembered the pastrami sandwich Nava gave me a bite of the other day and opened my eyes wide. “Yeah. I mean, yes ma’am. Thanks.”

She smiled. “‘Yeah’ is good enough in this house. We just got through eating, and the soup’s still warm. I’ll heat it up a little. Nava, why don’t you make a sandwich.”

Within a few minutes they had the food in a bowl and on a plate in front of me with a glass of grape juice. They both sat at the table, and Anna encouraged me to eat. I did. I didn’t realize how hungry I was. Maybe it was because I was

in Nava's house or maybe because the food was so good or maybe both.

They just talked to each other and let me eat and didn't ask questions, and when I finished, Anna said, "How about a brownie and some milk?"

That really sounded good, but I didn't want to be a pig and just curved my mouth up a little.

"I'll take that for a yes," she said, and brought those to me.

When I finished, Nava cleared the dishes, and Anna, who was sitting across the table from me, asked, "Would you mind telling me about your sister? Nava's told me a little bit."

I felt real comfortable talking to her, like I did with Nava. It wasn't like she was a grownup at all. It was like she was my friend. For the next few minutes I told her about Ronette. And for some reason I felt like telling her about my twin sisters. So I did. And how my mom would probably not have daughters now. I can never even think about that without crying, and that's what happened now.

She didn't say anything, but her eyes were teary too, and she reached her hand over and took mine, and after a minute I stopped looking at the table and looked at her. I could tell she really cared about me. And for some reason the box in my pocket got real warm, and I felt like I did when I was with Joshua when he told me about *The Prompter*. I mean I felt all calm and warm and safe like then. And he said *The Prompter* would bring me peace, and that's what this was. I'm sure that's what this is. And I stopped crying.

Anna looked up at the clock on their wall. It was after seven. "I think you better call your home to see if your family's back. We don't want them to be worried. She pointed to their phone which was on a shelf built into the wall near the door to their family room. "Go ahead and call your home," she said.

I dialed our number. It rang three times, then Dad answered. “Hi Dad,” I said. I was surprised he was there.

“Peter! Where are you? I’ve been worried sick. I was about to drive around looking for you.”

“Uh, sorry. I didn’t think you’d be home ‘til late, and I stopped at Nava’s house, and they gave me supper. Is Mom and Ronette home too?”

“They’re at the hospital,” he said. “I need you home, okay?”

“Okay. I’m leaving now.”

Anna and Nava were watching me. “Sounds like they’re home,” Anna said. “Jacob?” she called into the family room. “Would you be okay driving Peter home?”

“You bet!” he said and came into the kitchen. “How you doing, Peter.”

“Good thanks.” And that’s how I felt just being in this home.

I thanked Anna for the supper, and Nava said she would ride with her uncle to take me home. When we got there I thanked her uncle for the ride and thanked Nava for listening to me.

“Don’t you remember?” she said, real serious like. “We’re a team.”

“Yeah,” I said as I got out of the car. “We’re a team.”

I ran up to our door and opened it. My dad was standing there. He shut the door behind me and picked me up in his arms. And cried. My dad hardly ever cried. And my dad never picked me up like that. Not since I was a little kid anyway. I didn’t quite know what to do, so I just hugged him back. He carried me into the living room and put me on the couch and sat by me. He kept his arm around me, and for a second I thought about the difference between Nava’s living room and this one. But so what? I had a mom and dad and sister. I had a family.

“You really had me worried,” Dad said. He wiped his eyes with his hand. “With Ronette... And if something happened to you too...”

“Sorry Dad. I wanted to talk to Nava about...” We were both kind of crying now. Not loud or anything just tears kinda thing. Then I wiped my eyes with my sleeve. “How come Ronette has to stay at the hospital?”

“She’s having a tough time breathing, so they’ve got her on oxygen,” he said.

“Uh, oxygen? What do you mean?”

“They have a big tank that’s filled with oxygen, and there’s a tube from it that goes into a plastic mask they put over her face that helps her breathe. And she’s got a real high fever, so they’re giving her medicine for that.”

“How long will she be there?”

“We don’t know. A couple of days anyway. And they’re going to start her on chemotherapy while she’s in there.”

“What’s that s’posed to do?”

“It’s going to make her maybe sicker for a while, but they hope it’ll kind of slow down the cancer so it doesn’t spread so rapidly.”

“Is there any chance... I mean I read that leukemia always... I mean nobody ever lives when they have leukemia, but... But can this chemotherapy thing maybe stop it?” I had a hard time talking because I wanted to bawl.

Dad pulled me to him. “Chemotherapy’s a new thing,” he said. “Maybe someday they’ll find a cure but...” He bit his lip. “But this’ll only slow it down a little. Only give us a little more time with Ronette. That’s what we’re hoping for.”

I swallowed. “How much time?”

“I wish I knew,” he said. “Maybe a month. Maybe six months. Maybe more.”

Then he took a big breath and turned me so I was looking

at him. "So that means we're going to do everything to help make her happy while she's with us, huh?" And he tried to smile but didn't do a very good job of it. "And that means your mom and me and you have got to be happy too. We're not going to feel like it all the time, but that's what we have to do. Okay?"

For some reason I thought about how much Grandma and Grandpa Holland didn't want us to leave Willow. Mom was born there, and they'd lived there their whole lives, and Grandpa was the mayor there. And Grandma told me all these bad things that could happen to me in a big city.

"Uh, you think we should have stayed in Willow?" I asked.

"No!" he said immediately. "No! For lots of reasons. One of them is Ronette. The doctors can do things for her here that they can't do in Willow or anywhere around there." Then he looked at me. "Do you wish we'd stayed in Willow?"

I didn't answer for a minute. I thought of my friends there and Butch our dog. And I thought about Zach and Josie and Willy and what a pain they were. And then I thought about how nice Miss Meyers was treating me the last couple of days and about Chuck and Cory and about selling newspapers. And about Joshua and *The Prompter*. And then I thought about Nava. And about her aunt.

"I think I'm glad we moved," I finally said. That's all I said for a while. But I wanted to ask him about what Nava told me, and so I did. "Do you think... I mean, do you think it's possible that we'll see the twins when we die? And when Ronette..." I couldn't say it. My breath kept catching, and then I kinda gasped, "Will we be... Will we be family there too?"

For a long time he closed his eyes. Tears were coming out the corners. Then he opened them and smiled at me. A real smile. "I'd like that, Peter. I'd like that a lot."

CHAPTER 15



A Team

DAD LEFT EARLY. I mean an hour earlier than his regular time. He said his boss told him to come an hour early, and he could leave work an hour early so he could go to the hospital and see Mom and Ronette. He said he wouldn't be home before 8:00 tonight and for me to go ahead and eat the leftovers. It felt weird to be by myself in the house. Of course, I've been by myself lots of time, but this time was different. I didn't like it and wanted to get to school so I wouldn't be alone. For some reason I thought about Zach and him being by himself all the time at home and wondered if that's why he was so mean.

But I wouldn't be mean if I was by myself all the time. At least I don't think I would. I'm sure glad I'm not by myself all the time though. Then I thought about being with Dad last night. He hardly ever says he loves me or hugs me or any of

that kind of stuff that Mom does. But last night was different. I liked it a lot. I mean, I know he loves me, but maybe it's just what men do. They don't tell their kids they love them. They just show them by giving them a place to live and food to eat and be nice to them. I mean nice to them *most* of the time. Dad used to spank me with his flat-headed hairbrush sometimes, but not anymore. I probably deserved it maybe, but I don't think I'll ever forget last night.

Dad woke me when he left this morning, and I got ready for school and fixed my lunch. Chicken salad sandwich and my regular stuff. An apple and some carrot sticks. Then I had my breakfast. Raisin Bran. None of my friends in Willow liked raisins. I love em! They didn't like spinach either, and that's my favorite vegetable. Maybe that's because I'm a short kid with weird ears. Ha! Or maybe I believe Popeye when he says spinach makes him so strong. Nah. Not really. He's just a comic book guy. I just like spinach. And raisins too.

I finished breakfast. It was still too early to go to school, and I didn't want to sit and think about what was happening to my family, so I turned on the TV. It was all local stuff, and I turned it off and decided to start trying to memorize the poem I'd have to recite for Miss Meyers. I got my English book out. The poem I really liked was called *Opportunity*. The guy who wrote it was Edmund Rowland Sill. I don't know if we had to know that, but just in case, I decided to memorize his name too.

But here's my problem. I can't even repeat the TV commercials that I hear a zillion times. Maybe I just don't want to and don't try to. Anyway, Miss Meyers's been real nice to me lately, and I have to try. I mean the poem's really cool, and maybe I can do that.

I read the first couple of lines.

*This I beheld, or dreamed it in a dream:
There spread a cloud of dust along a plain.
And underneath the cloud or in it, raged
a furious battle*

Pretty cool except I can't memorize anything. Huh? That's weird. The little box in my pocket just got warm. Why would it... Oh man! I'm so stupid! Joshua told me *The Prompter* can help me remember things. So, why not my poem? Wow! It just got warmer! Yes!

In the next 23 minutes before I had to leave for school, I memorized the first three-and-a-half lines. At least I was able to say them once without looking at the book.

I patted the box in my pocket. "Thanks!"

I was one of the first at their desk in class today. Most of the kids when they came in either said hi to me or waved. Even Josie and Lu waved. Zach and Willy didn't say anything to anybody.

Nava came in just before Miss Meyers did. "How's Ronette?" she asked.

"Tell you at recess," I said, and Miss Meyers rapped her crystal paperweight that had a thousand sides to it on the top of her desk. She always did that to get our attention.

"We will be studying current affairs this morning," she said, "but I want to say something about the poems you are to memorize. You'll have plenty of time, but don't put it off. You will start reciting your poems the Monday that we come back after Christmas vacation. That will be January fourth, and if you start early, you won't have to worry about memorizing it during the holidays. You will not only recite your poem to the class then, but you will tell the class why you selected that poem to memorize and what you learned from it. Any questions?"

Josie raised her hand, and Miss Meyer's pointed to her. "Will we know which day we will do this?" she asked.

"All of you are to have your poems memorized by that Monday. I will call on some of you each day, and all of you will recite your poem that week." She sort of smiled. "So the answer is no. You will find out who I'll call on each of the days of that week and not before." She got a smile on her face that still wasn't really a smile, but close, and said, "There's one exception. If you haven't given your poem by Friday of that week, you will know that's the day you will give it."

There was a bunch of groans, and Miss Meyers tapped her paperweight on her desk again. I wanted to tell Nava I'd already started but decided I'd keep that a secret.

"Now for current events," Miss Meyers said. "The Korean War ended this year, but we have a Cold War. What is the Cold War?"

Three kids raised their hands. Josie and Nava and Willy. Willy? Miss Meyers was as surprised by his hand going up as the rest of us were, and she called on him.

He looked around the class like he was cool and said, "Russia wants to bomb us, and if they try it we're gonna kick the snot out of em."

Everybody laughed, and so did I. Miss Meyers even kind of smiled then hit her paperweight on her desk again for us to be quiet.

"Does someone have a more informed answer than that?" she asked.

Josie and Nava raised their hands again. "Josie, let's hear from you, then Nava." Miss Meyers said.

Josie gave a little smirk, like maybe she thought she was Miss Meyers' favorite because she was first.

"Stalin died this year, but Nikita Khrushchev still wants Russia to be the strongest country in the world," she said.

“But he knows he can’t beat the United States in a real war. So he’s got all these countries in Europe that he’s trying to keep behind the Iron Curtain and hopes to get powerful enough to beat the United States and the rest of Europe.”

“Thank you, Josie. Very good,” Miss Meyers said. “Nava, what are your thoughts?”

I couldn’t see Nava’s face because she was behind me, but my box got warm, and I could almost feel what she was going to say. I turned around and smiled at her. She didn’t smile back, and there were tears in her eyes.

“Any kind of war is horrible,” she said quietly. “And the wars come because evil people want to force everybody else to do what they want. So people get... People get hurt. And people are killed. And families... Families are torn apart and... And an Iron Curtain keeps people from helping other people, and there’s no such thing as a Cold War because people are still dying and getting hurt and hating everybody and... And...” She signaled she was through.

The class was silent. Miss Meyers was looking at the floor. All the kids were looking down at their desks, and I wanted to put my arms around Nava because I know she was thinking about her mom and dad and the brothers and sisters she would never have because of evil men and war. And I thought about Zach and Willy and Josie and Lu and how what they’d been doing was something like Hitler and Stalin and all the others that made wars and I knew... I knew I never wanted to cause a war, and I never wanted to hurt another person even if they hurt me, and the box in my pocket got warm. Really warm.

At recess it was snowing, and Nava and I sat in the lunchroom. Some of the kids were out playing in the snow but most were in the lunchroom too.

“How’s Ronette?” Nava asked.

I told her she'd be in the hospital at least a couple of days and that she was on oxygen and her chemotherapy would start there and that Mom was staying with her and that Dad would go there after work and not get home until late. I didn't tell her about how neat my talk with Dad was last night, but maybe I would sometime.

Josie and Lu came to where we were sitting. "I liked what you said today about the Cold War," Josie said to Nava. "And..." She kind of swallowed. "And I want to be friends."

Lu nodded. "Me too."

Nava looked at them for a second, then stood up and hugged Josie and then Lu.

"And I liked what you said too," she told Josie.

They smiled real smiles and left.

"That was cool," I said.

"Yeah. That was cool," Nava said and sat down. "Want to come over for supper after your paper corner?" she asked. "I mean if it's okay with your dad. Aunt Anna said I should ask you."

I thought about not wanting to be alone. "I feel like I'm...you know...taking advantage of you or something," I said. "But..."

"But nothing! We'll plan on you being there and get you home before your dad comes home."

"Okay, thanks," I said. "And what you said in class was..." I stopped. Zach and Willy just walked up.

"I guess you thought what you said about the Cold War was better than what I said, huh?" Willy said to Nava. It was like a threat.

Nava was totally calm. "I thought what you said was funny and pretty accurate."

Willy seemed to like that, but Zach stared at me and smirked. "I guess it's too cold outside for you seeing as how

no hat's big enough to cover those ears of yours." They both laughed.

Nava got the same look on her face she had when she came at Zach with the flower pot.

She stood up and put her hands on her hips and glared at him and then at Willy. "What kind of scum are you anyway?" she said. It was like she was spitting fire. "Peter's sister's dying, and all you jerks can do is try to make him feel worse. Go back in the hole you came from!"

She sat down, but her eyes shot daggers at them.

Her saying Ronette was dying turned on my tear faucet, and I tried to blink them away. Zach and Willy stared at me with looks I'd never seen on their faces before. Maybe shock. But maybe they even felt sorry for me. Sorry for what they said.

"Uh...I didn't know," Zach mumbled, and they left.

Nava put her hand on my arm. "Sorry," she said. "Shouldn't have said anything about your sister, but..."

I wiped my eyes. "It's okay," I said. "It's okay."

Neither one of us said anything for a while, then Nava's face got a little brighter, and she asked, "You want to come with me to the movies Saturday at Hi Pointe theater? It's 3-D."

That got me excited. "3-D? No kidding? Don't you have to wear special glasses?"

"Yes! They give them to you there, but you can't keep them. And the sound is like it's all around you, and these things look like they're flying right at you, and you duck and everything!"

"What's the name of the movie?"

"*It Came from Outer Space*. My cousins saw it last week, and they said I have to see it. They said it's super scary and so real!"

"Uh...how much does it cost?"

"Forty cents. And if you want popcorn that's fifteen cents."

I kind of shuffled my feet thinking I didn't have money to do that and then, duh! I had a can full of money from my paper corner! "I'll ask my dad. I don't know when Ronette's coming home, and I want to be there when she does. What time do we have to be there?"

"It opens at one o'clock, and the advertisements before the movie start about ten minutes later. Then there's a cartoon or something and a newsreel, and then the movie starts at one-thirty."

I was really getting excited. "I think I can go! I mean, I'm... I'll ask Dad, but I'm sure he'll say yes!"

She gave me a big smile. "And you'll eat supper with us tonight?"

I smiled back. "We're a team!"

CHAPTER 16



Grandpa and Grandma

I LOOKED AT THE clock on our kitchen wall. It was after eight. Dad should be home pretty soon. Nava's uncle dropped me off at my house, and Nava rode with us again. Mrs. Pogorzelski's chicken noodle soup tonight wasn't even out of a can and was the best I ever tasted. And her bread and jam... I mean Mom's a good cook but... Anyway it's been a super evening. I even sold all my newspapers and got twenty cents in tips.

I went into the living room and turned on the TV. *Dragnet* was on, and I watched it for maybe five minutes then turned it off. I wasn't in the mood. I got out my English book and thought I'd try to memorize more of my poem. But I kept thinking about Ronette and about what Nava said in class about war and bad people and then about Zach and Willy and what Nava said to them and how they looked. Would they

stop bothering me now? Would they bother me if I was bigger and my ears didn't stick out?

And I looked in the mirror in our living room. "But that's who you are!" I said to the wimpy kid with stick out ears. Depressing.

I put my book on the kitchen table and went upstairs to Ronette's room. This house is a lonely place without Mom and Dad and Ronette. Her coloring book and the crayons I gave her were on her bed. She should have taken those to the hospital so she'd have something to do. I tried to imagine her with that oxygen thing on her face Dad told me about and probably a bunch of tubes and stuff stuck in her arm. At least that's what I've seen people on television who are in the hospital have. And I felt like crying, but I couldn't. I was just numb.

"Peter? Peter? Are you home?" It was Dad!

"Upstairs!" I yelled. "I'm coming down!"

I ran down, and both Mom and Dad were there! She was looking in the fridge.

"Mom!" I yelled and ran to her and hugged her. She hugged me and kissed my hair.

"Where's... Where's Ronette?" I asked. "I thought you'd be with her in the hospital until she came home."

Mom just kind of smiled. She looked so tired. She didn't have much makeup on, and her hair wasn't brushed real straight and nice like it usually was.

"She's still in the hospital," Mom said and led me to the kitchen chairs to sit down. "They're taking really good care of her there, and I just had to come home to get a bath and some fresh clothes and..." She put her hand on my shoulder. "And to make sure you and your dad are doing okay."

"Do you have to go back?" I was really worried about how tired she looked.

“Yes. Dad will drop me off there tomorrow morning on his way to work. And guess what?” She tried to sound enthusiastic, but she wasn’t exactly.

“What? Is Ronette getting better?”

She kinda pushed on a smile. “We should be able to bring her home tomorrow afternoon if she’s doing okay! We may even be here when you get out of school! Is that exciting or what!”

“Yeah! But... Is she getting better?”

“They’ve been able to get her breathing to what it ought to be, so she doesn’t need oxygen,” Dad said. “And her fever’s way down. She had her first chemo injection this afternoon, so she’s real groggy and will be that way until tomorrow morning. She won’t even miss your mom not being there tonight.”

“Chemo?” I asked.

“Yeah. Chemotherapy. They call it chemo for short.”

He really didn’t answer my question, but I guess maybe he did. She wouldn’t be getting better.

“How long does it take that chemo to work? Does she have to have it more than one time?”

Dad just shrugged. “This is a new kind of treatment, and there’s a lot about it they don’t know. We’re hoping it can get her in remission for a while. That means the cancer has been at least reduced some. We’ll go back in two weeks for another blood test and go from there.”

“Your dad said you ate at your friend’s last night,” Mom said. “Was it good?”

“Yeah. Really good. And I ate there tonight too. They’re really nice.”

“Well, I’ll call and thank your friend’s mom for doing this tomorrow.” She sort of laughed. “And guess what we’ll be having tomorrow night for dinner?”

“Fish. We have fish every Friday.” That’s my least favorite meal, and I tried not to sound disappointed.

“Yes we will. And we’ll be a *family* having fish tomorrow, huh!”

That got me to smile. Fish was worth that.

She turned to Dad. “I better call my folks to let them know what’s happening with Ronette.” They looked at each other for a second like they do when they’re talking with their eyes.

“Just a reminder,” he said. “It’s two dollars and seventy-five cents for the first three minutes and with what’s happening, we need to be...” He didn’t finish.

“I’ll make it short,” she said and went to the phone. She dialed “0” and said, “Operator, long distance please.” Then she gave her my Grandma and Grandpa Holland’s phone number in Willow.

Dad stared at the clock on the wall like he was timing her. He was the youngest of eight children in his family, and both his mom and dad died before the twins died. I don’t remember them at all. They lived in Boseman, Montana, and that’s where most of his siblings still live. We hardly ever got together with them. Mom has two sisters and a brother, and they still live in Willow by Grandma and Grandpa. We did a lot with them. Like went to Yellowstone Park every summer. That was cool. Mom said maybe we could do that next summer too, but that’s a long trip from here.

Grandpa owns Holland’s Department Store in Willow. Of course, it’s nothing like Famous-Barr in St. Louis. I mean Willow only has a couple of hundred people and maybe that many farmers nearby so his store’s pretty small. But they live in one of the nicest homes in Willow. Almost as nice as Nava’s and a lot nicer than ours. Anyway, I always had new school clothes that they gave me each year so that was cool. Grandpa gave me black licorice strings all the time too. That’s my

favorite candy. And Grandma was always complaining about something. I would just laugh at her, and she'd laugh back. Well, most of the time she'd laugh back.

Mom started talking on the phone, and both Dad and I listened to her. "Hi Mother," she said, "It's Isa." Then she was silent, and it looked like she was listening. "Yes, Peter's doing fine," she said. "But Ronette..." Her mouth started to quiver, and Dad got up and brought her some tissues. She held the phone away from her ear as she wiped her eyes and tried to keep from crying.

"I could hear Grandma's voice. "Isa, what's wrong? Isa? Isa?"

Mom handed the phone to Dad and motioned for him to talk.

He took it and said, "Isabelle, this is Ron. Ronette's very sick. She has leukemia and is in the hospital."

I could hear Grandma's gasp, and Dad pulled the phone away from his ear because it was so loud. She started talking again, and he put the phone back up to his ear. Then he said, "Yes. Thanks. That will help." Then he hung up.

He looked at Mom. "She's going to call right back, so except for the first three minutes we don't have to pay any more for the phone call."

It was almost five minutes before the phone rang. Mom looked like she was in control of herself and answered it. "Hello, Father," she said. "Can Mother hear too?" She put her hand on the mouthpiece and said, "He's holding the phone so they can both hear and talk."

She got back on and told them all about what was happening with Ronette. She listened for a minute then put her hand over the mouthpiece again and looked at Dad. "My father wants to know if we have any health insurance. What should I tell him."

Dad just shrugged. “My company will help pay for costs for any accident at work, but that’s about it.”

She reported that and listened. Then she said, “We don’t know.” She put her hand back on the mouthpiece. “They want to know how much we think it’s going to cost to treat Ronette.”

Dad’s face drooped. “I guess we’ll find out. All I know is the hospital’s going to cost us over a hundred bucks this time, and I don’t know how much just that one chemo session will cost yet. But from what I understand, it could even be more than the hospital.” He looked at Mom. “But tell them we’ll make it work!”

Mom repeated what Dad said and listened. Then she said, “I know how you feel about us moving here, but it was the right thing to do. There’s no way Ronette could get the treatment in Willow that’s she’s going to get here.” She listened again. “I’ll tell him,” she said, “and I love you too. Bye.”

She hung up the phone and looked at me. “Grandma said to tell you to be safe and that she loves you.” She started to cry and Dad stood up and held her. His face wrinkled up like it did when he was really worried or regretted something, and I remembered how almost angry Grandpa was when he found out we were moving here and Grandma kept telling me how dangerous it was going to be with drug dealers and gangs and stuff and that maybe she wouldn’t ever see me again, and I’d just laugh. But she didn’t laugh back.

Then Mom pulled away from Dad a little and put her hand on his cheek and kissed him and then kissed him again. “We made the right decision to leave Willow, Ron,” she said. “We’re where we’re supposed to be. I know it!”

CHAPTER 17



The Date

I RANG THE POGORZELSKI's bell, and Nava's cousin, Esther, opened the door. "Hi Peter. C'mon in." She was dressed in cheerleading clothes with the head of a longhorn bull across the front, and I just stared at it. She laughed. "I have cheerleading practice at my high school this afternoon." Then she gave me kind of a funny look. "Big date today, huh?"

"Uh... We're just... You know. Just going to a movie. It's not..." I could feel my body turn into a beet.

She laughed again. "You look good in red. I'll get Nava. Have fun."

Wow! Nava's cousin's a cheerleader! I mean, she's pretty enough to be...

"Hi Peter!" Nava said as she came in where I was. "I'll get my coat."

She went to their hall closet and pulled out her green coat

with a fur collar she sometimes wore to school and then a dark green scarf that she wrapped around her neck. She put on her thick woolen gloves and smiled. "I'm ready. Let's go."

I thought about the old coat I was wearing. I mean, it wasn't that old. Grandpa Holland got it for me last year, but it wasn't anything as nice as... And my gloves! My *mother's* gloves! Oh well. I opened the door for her, and we left. It was cold. I mean really cold. All the tree branches had ice on them and looked like they came from a fairyland or something.

"It's going to be slick," she said.

"Yeah. I almost fell coming up your steps. Is it okay if we walk in the street? It isn't so slick there." She agreed, so that's what we did.

"You know where the theater is?" she asked, then laughed. "Course you do. You only see it every time you sell papers. Have you gone to a movie there yet?"

"Nope. Haven't been to a movie since I last went to one in Willow."

"There's a movie theater in Willow? I mean, you talk about how small it is."

"Yeah. It was small too and really old. I mean the seats were kind of worn, and it wasn't all that clean. And the movies were kinda old too. I mean like they played in the big theaters a long time before they got to Willow. Maybe that's why the Saturday afternoon shows were only fifteen cents. That's the one I'd always go to." Then I laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"There was a hole in the screen, and if the show wasn't that good, me and my friend Errol would go behind the screen and stick our hand through it and wave at the people watching the movie."

"No way!" She looked at me like that was the worst thing I could possibly do. Then laughed. "You're kidding, right?"

“I’m not kidding. And if the manager came, we’d run out the side door and into the alley behind the theater.”

“Wouldn’t the manager know who did it? You said everybody knew everybody in Willow.”

“Yeah, he knew. And sometimes when I came to a movie he’d say, “Stay in your seat today, Peter.” But I could see him smile a little bit.”

“He wouldn’t do anything about it?”

“Nah. We never ruined anything, and the people watching always laughed.”

“Willow sounds like a fun place to live!” she said. “I mean you know everybody and...” She glanced at me. “You sorry you moved here?”

I shrugged. “Maybe sometimes, but... I mean, I’m glad I got this job selling papers and I’m glad...” I was getting red again. “You know. Glad you and me are a team and... And you’re my friend and... Well, you know.” I could see she was getting a little red too. And maybe not from the cold. “And Ronette couldn’t get the help there she gets here.”

“She came home last night, didn’t she?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t talk to her because... I mean, I told her I loved her and she sort of smiled, but her eyes were closed. Her face’s all puffy, and she’s as white as her sheets. Mom said she’s going to lose all her hair because of the chemo. That’s the chemotherapy they’re doing on her, and we have to be real careful about germs and stuff. But she’s home, so we’re a family again, and...”

I looked at Nava. She was sort of staring at the ground, and I knew what she was thinking. I *wasn’t* thinking. Wasn’t thinking about how talking about family could make her feel bad. I was going to say sorry, but that’d probably make it worse. So I just changed the subject.

“It’s cool Esther’s a cheerleader,” I said, “I didn’t know

that.”

She looked up and kind of smiled. “Yeah. Sarah was a cheerleader when she was there too. They’re both really beautiful, huh?”

“Yeah. They are. And so’s your aunt and so are y...” Now we were both red. But Nava’s at least as pretty as the others, and I’m not exaggerating. I mean the longer I’ve known her the prettier she gets, and I said, “All you girls there are really pretty, and your uncle’s really lucky.”

She wasn’t looking at me, but she was smiling.

We walked for a little while, then I asked, “Why was the head of that bull on Esther’s sweater?”

“It’s a longhorn. That’s the mascot for Southwest high school.”

“Cool! What do you think the mascot for Willow high school is?” I was trying not to laugh.

“I don’t know. A bear? A coyote? A wolf? I don’t know.”

“It’s a potato.”

She stopped. “A potato? C’mon, what is it really?”

“It’s a potato. Really.”

“A potato? A potato?” And she got the giggles. She could hardly talk, but she said, “What was their fight song?” Then she broke up laughing again. “What did they do? Just have somebody dress up like a potato and yell, ‘Fight, Fight, Fight!’” She laughed and laughed. “That’d scare everybody!”

“If you think that’s funny,” I said, “you should hear what the kids in the school they’re playing against yell at them. ‘Bake em! Fry em! Boil em! Dice em! Mash em! You’re rotten! You’re rotten! You stink! You stink!’”

We were both laughing so hard we had to stop walking. Then Nava said, “We’d better get going or we’ll miss the movie.” We started moving again and went a little faster.

I got the laughing pretty much out of me and said, “I’ve

got a question. What's that thing that looks like a silver pencil case by your door when you come into your house? It's pretty cool."

"A Mezuzah. Jewish families have them. There's some paper inside that has God's name on it and some scriptures."

"So, why do you have it there?"

"Well, you know, to just sort of remind us who we are and to kind of protect our home."

"That's pretty neat. And on your big table there's that really pretty thing that has seven candles. Does that mean something too, or is it just sort of decoration?"

"It's a menorah. Uncle Jacob said it means a couple of things but especially wisdom and getting knowledge."

For some reason that got me to think about *The Prompter* in my pocket. How it would get warm when I was doing things that... Well, things that made me feel good and maybe happy. And sometimes it got cold like when I was kind of doing the opposite. Like when I sort of made fun of the owner of the drugstore. And then memorizing my poem. Was it helping me do that somehow? Joshua told me it would help me remember so maybe... I don't know, but if it helped me memorize that poem that would be really cool. And...

"What are you going to do for Thanksgiving?" Nava asked.

"Huh? Oh. Just the regular I guess. Turkey and stuff. Then we'll watch a football game. This'll be the first time a football game will be on television across the whole United States on Thanksgiving. Pretty cool."

She shrugged. "I guess...if you like football. We'll watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. That's the first time that'll be on TV too. My aunt makes a really neat thing for dessert for Thanksgiving. It's Polish and called a sernik. It's like a cold cheesecake with cream cheese and raisins and other fruit on top."

"I love raisins!" I said.

"I'll save you a piece."

Suddenly the box in my pocket got so hot it was almost burning. "Get on the sidewalk!" I yelled. "Now!" We were in the middle of the road, and we dashed to the sidewalk just as a black Plymouth slid around the corner on the icy street and right over the spot where we had been standing. The driver, a boy who was probably about Esther's age, got control of his car and brought it to a stop. He got out and came toward us and was shaking. "You guys... You guys okay?"

We just nodded. We were both shaking too.

"Sorry!" he said. "I was turning the corner and hit some ice and was trying to control my car and didn't see you in the road and... And how... How did you get on the sidewalk so fast?"

Nava looked at me, and I put my hand on the box that had been so hot just a few seconds before. It was cool to the touch now. I shrugged. "Don't know. Just had a feeling to get off the street."

The guy looked back at his car and then at us. "You're lucky!" He went to his car and drove away.

Nava stared at me. "How... How *did* you know?"

I pulled out my box. "This just got really hot, and... And then I knew we had to get on the sidewalk fast." She kept looking at me. "That's all I know," I said. "Honest."

Then she gave a nervous kind of laugh. "You think the movie will be this scary?"

I laughed too. But it was as fake as hers.

We got to the theater and paid 40 cents each. I grumbled a little when I thought about paying only 15 cents in Willow's movie place. But this was 3-D and a lot nicer theater. Inside, we put on these weird cardboard framed glasses with strange colored lenses and watched the movie. I don't think either of us thought about almost being hit by a car during the whole

movie. The girls in the theater were screaming all the time, and even Nava screamed a couple of times. I didn't scream, but when that meteor was coming right at us and when those big rocks were falling all around us, I closed my eyes. And that new thing they called stereophonic. The sound was all around you. And the movie just kept coming right at you. I mean if you didn't close your eyes. It was like you were in the middle of everything. Like you were part of the whole thing, and my heart felt like it was trying to push itself out my ears!

When we left the theater all we talked about was the movie until we walked by the drugstore at Hi Pointe. "Aunt Anna told all her friends about Mr. Curtis and that Negro boy," Nava said, "and she said most of them were so angry that they weren't going to shop there anymore."

"Does your aunt know a lot of people?" I asked.

Nava rolled her eyes. "She's president of the Hi Pointe Women's Book Club and on lots of PTA committees at Dewey and Southwest. It'd be easier to count the people she doesn't know than those she does."

I looked in the drugstore window. The store was pretty much empty. Like it was most of the time now when I was in front of it waiting for Hank. I guess Aunt Anna can take credit for that.

"Does your mom belong to any clubs or work in the PTA?" she asked.

"Uh-uh. We've only been here a couple of months and now with Ronette... She'd like to hold Tupperware parties though to bring in some money, but she hardly knows anybody."

Nava got a look on her face like she just had a neat idea but didn't say anything.

"What does your uncle do?" I asked. "I mean for a living?"

"He's an accountant with Gateway Electric. He's always flying to Georgia and Pennsylvania and Florida."

“An accountant? I thought accountants were all small guys. Your uncle’s huge.”

“He lifts weights all the time in our basement. Nobody better mess with him, huh?” She laughed. “Especially Zach!”

I thought of my dad. Of course he’s a lot bigger than me but not like her Uncle Jacob. Then I thought about the talk I had with him the other day and how much I liked that. Maybe I could be like my dad but as strong as her Uncle Jacob too. I smiled at that thought but then remembered seeing myself in the mirror. I’ll probably always be a wimp with weird ears. Depressing.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“Nothing. Only like it’d be neat to be as big and strong as your uncle.” I wasn’t going to say anything about my dad, because I didn’t want her to be sad because she didn’t have a dad.

“Who knows, maybe you will,” she said, like it was actually possible. “But if you do, I hope you’ll still be the kind of person you are now because you’re really...” She didn’t finish but turned away so I couldn’t see her face.

I’m glad because... Well, you know. The red stuff. And I felt all warm inside and wasn’t thinking about the movie at all. And it wasn’t the box in my pocket either.

CHAPTER 18



Coollest Poem Ever

I WAITED ON THE playground for Nava to walk home with her. She was talking to Miss Meyers about something. Zach and Willy went by and kind of waved. I didn't know what to do, so I just waved back. Josie and Lu and a lot of the other kids in my class told me they were sorry about my sister. So did Chuck and the kids I play soccer with. I guess it's okay that Nava told Zach about Ronette, but I don't want everybody asking me all the time how she's doing. I mean it's okay for Nava to do that because she's... Well, you know.

"Thanks for waiting for me," Nava said as she came up behind me.

We started walking home, and I said, "No problem. What did you need to talk to Miss Meyer's about?"

"Nothing really. I just wanted to do something a little different with the poem I'm memorizing and wanted to make

sure it was okay with her.”

“Was it?”

“Yes.”

“What poem is it?”

She smiled. “You’ll find out. What poem are you going to recite?”

“Ditto.” She gave my arm a little slug. So, our poems would be a mystery until we recited them. I mean a mystery to everybody but Miss Meyers of course. We had to clear them with her.

“I’ve been thinking about the movie all weekend,” I said.

“Yeah, but I’ve been thinking about how we almost got hit by a car! You think it was *The Prompter* that warned you?”

“All I know is it got super-hot, and I just knew we had to get on the sidewalk. Fast. Maybe I’ll ask Joshua about that. I mean if I ever see him again. He said something about it keeping me safe. Maybe that’s what he meant.”

“Anyway, we’re still around to talk about it and not in the hospital or dead,” she said. “Your family ready for Thanksgiving?”

I heard Mom and Dad talking about money yesterday. Dad seemed to be really worried about how much everything was costing for Ronette. Then they were talking about how they could cut expenses down and they mentioned Thanksgiving...and Christmas. That’s all I heard.

“Yeah, pretty much,” I finally said. “What about you?”

“We’ve already got the turkey, and we’ll start fixing everything Wednesday. This is really a fun time for my fam...” She stopped and then started blinking her eyes real fast.

“Well they are your family,” I said. “They’re a neat family! I mean you couldn’t have better sisters than Esther and Sarah and your aunt and uncle are just like your...”

She pushed her lips tight together, and her eyes kept blink-

ing. Oh-oh. Maybe I'd gone too far.

"Sorry," I said. "What I meant was..."

"You're right," she said softly. "They are my family. I couldn't ask for a better family."

We didn't talk for a while, then I felt my box get warm and a thought came into my mind.

"Uh... Does your aunt tell you much about your mother?"

I could almost feel Nava relax. "She talks about her all the time. It's almost like my mother and father are just on a little trip and will be home anytime."

Her saying that reminded me of when we talked about maybe being with our family after we die, and I asked, "What was your mom like? And your dad?"

"Aunt Anna is as much older than my mother as Esther is of me. She's told me a lot about when my mother was a kid and keeps telling me she was beautiful and says I look like my mother when she was my age." Nava got her embarrassed look and said, "I don't mean... I know... I know I'm not beautiful, but my mother is."

"You are too!" I said. And yeah, I got red.

She sort of did too, and then said, "And Aunt Anna says she was a really good cook and fun and funny and was always teasing my father who was kind of strict and serious. She said he really loved mom and would finally start to laugh with her. He was an accountant like Uncle Jacob. And then Aunt Anna and Uncle Jacob came to the United States with Sarah and Esther before I was born and couldn't get any letters from my mother because of... Because... You know. So... So Aunt Anna didn't hear anything until the woman who was taking care of me in Hungary wrote her."

"It's almost like you got two sets of parents. I think that'd be kind of cool."

She sort of looked depressed. "Yeah. I guess so." Then she

brightened up and said, “Yeah. It is cool. I get to learn all about my parents from Aunt Anna, and I get this neat family with my aunt and uncle who are like a mom and dad and cousins who are like sisters and they love me and... And...”

Now, she really cried, and I took her hand. I don’t mean like a girlfriend-boyfriend kind of thing. But because we’re friends, and I wanted her to know that. She looked at me with a really neat look that made me feel fuzzy inside and... Yeah. You guessed it. Red again.

We were near her house, and I wanted to ask her about something that I was curious about because I knew Jews didn’t believe in Jesus

“What do you think about Christmas?” I asked. “I mean do you do anything then?”

“I love Christmas!” she said. “We treat it like a giving-receiving holiday. I mean we sing fun Christmas songs and that kind of thing but not Christmas carols. We put up a Christmas tree and have presents and have a really good dinner like we do at Thanksgiving.” Then she looked at me. “What’s your family going to do?”

I thought about what Dad was saying about money but didn’t want to bring that up. “Probably just the regular,” I said. “Christmas tree and presents. And Christmas Eve we read the scriptures about Jesus’ birth and have eggnog and sugar cookies that Ronette and me decorate. And Dad plays Christmas carols and we sing. It’s pretty neat.”

“What does your dad play?” she asked.

“The piano. We have an old piano we brought with us from Willow. He’s really good. When he was younger he used to play in dance bands.”

“That’s totally awesome! Nobody in my family plays a musical instrument. Do you play the piano?”

“A little. He’s given me lessons, but I haven’t been that

great at practicing. Especially since we left Willow.”

“Can I hear you play sometime?” She was looking at me and grinning.

“Nah. You don’t wanna do that. I’m not good enough, but my dad is. Maybe you could hear him play.”

We were at her home, and she started going up the stairs then turned around. “Thanks for asking about my parents and for what you said about my...” She pointed her hand at her house. “About my *now* parents.” She gave me a big smile and ran up her stairs.

Mom did washing today, and I wrung out the clothes when I got home then went to my paper corner. It was another good day. I sold all my papers with thirty cents in tips. My tips alone tonight almost paid for the cost of the movie Saturday. Cool. Mom had the table set when I got home, and I washed up and came to dinner. Ronette and everybody was at the table.

“How was it tonight,” Dad asked me.

“Real good,” I said, and Dad asked Ronette to say a blessing.

She bowed her head and in a real weak voice said, “Heavenly Father. Thanks for the food. Thanks for letting me come home. Please help me get well. Amen.”

She was a little pinker tonight, and her eyes were almost sparkling. Was the chemo helping? I hope so, but I was just glad she could eat dinner with us. Mom did the usual with the food. She helped Ronette and passed it to Dad and then he to me and then me to Mom. I started thinking Mom ought to take it first. That’d be the polite thing to do. Dad was the boss, kind of, but Mom ran the house. What we did with the food was what she wanted to do, so that’s what we did.

“Tell me about the movie again,” Ronette said as she lifted a spoonful of rice and cheese and hamburger to her mouth.

She’d only asked me to do that a hundred times since I told

her about it Saturday. I gave her my real short version. Just the part she really liked about the meteor flying at you and all the rocks. I didn't tell any of them about almost being hit by a car. Or about being warned by my box, because they didn't even know about the box. I couldn't tell anybody about *The Prompter* except Nava.

"I called Nava's aunt today to thank her for feeding you," Mom said. "What a nice lady!" She smiled at me. "She seems to like you a lot, Peter."

"Totally cool family," I said, and shoveled some food into my mouth to try to keep from turning *my* color.

"Did you tell her that I wanted to hold Tupperware parties?"

I finished chewing my food and said, "No, but I said something to Nava about you wanting to do that but didn't know very many people."

Then Mom got this huge smile. "She said she wanted to help me and asked me how many I wanted at the party. I told her anywhere from six to ten and she said she'd like to hold them at her house, and she thought she could do at least a dozen parties for me! And then with referrals she thought I could be as busy as I wanted to be for as long as I wanted to be. It won't be until after the first of the year, of course, because everybody's so busy during the holidays, but she said we could start by the middle of January."

Dad put his spoon down. "How much do you think you could make?"

"It depends, but I've heard that women who've done this can usually sell as much as forty to fifty dollars worth of Tupperware at a party, and I'd make thirty percent of that."

Dad looked like he maybe didn't believe that. "But how long does a party last? Does it take a whole morning or afternoon or evening?"

“Depends, but it shouldn’t be longer than an hour or so.”

“Wow!” he said. “If you can do that, that’s twelve to fifteen dollars an hour and that’s a lot more than I make. That’d be great, but what about Ronette though?”

“We’d hold the parties when either you or Peter were home. Or, she said, one of her daughters or Nava could be here with Ronette while we held the party.”

Dad was smiling. Something he hasn’t done much lately. “That’d help. A lot.”

We finished dinner, and I did the dishes, and they all went into the front room to watch TV. It was Arthur Godfrey’s *Talent Scouts*. I wanted to work on memorizing my poem and wanted to watch *I Love Lucy* that came on after *Talent Scouts*, so I went upstairs with my English book. I hadn’t memorized anything more than just the first few lines of my poem, but I repeated those enough so I was pretty sure I had them down.

I opened my book and turned to *Opportunity* and read the next lines out loud.

*And men yelled, and swords
shocked upon swords and shields.
A prince’s banner wavered,
then staggered backward, hemmed by foes.
A craven hung along the battle’s edge,*

This was getting cooler and cooler, but I’d have to find out what a craven was. I touched my box to see if it was warm. It was, and just like before, I was able to memorize the words as I said them over and over. Then I put those words together in my mind with the ones I’d already memorized and said all those verses a whole bunch of times. I was doing it!

I could hear *I Love Lucy* was starting, so I closed my book

and ran down the stairs and watched it with my family. Ronette was there too, and when it ended, Mom said, "Time for bed Ronette," and led her upstairs.

Dad was looking at the TV Guide for what shows were next, and I asked, "What's a craven?"

He looked at me, "Craven? Where in the world did you hear that word?"

"Just heard it." I wasn't going to tell him or anybody about my poem.

"It means a coward," and he looked back at the TV Guide.

Yes! The coolest poem ever! And I was starting to figure out how I wanted to present it. But whether I had the guts to do it, or what Miss Meyers would do when she saw it, was another question.

CHAPTER 19



My Mom

“WHAT HAVE YOU GOT?” Mom asked as I set the plate of sernik on the table that Nava gave me when I stopped at her house on my way home from school.

“It’s from Nava. It’s what they had for dessert on Thanksgiving.”

“It looks delicious! Let’s put it in the fridge, and we’ll have it for supper. They’re so kind to us, I think...” She got into our little pantry and brought down a large, new Tupperware bowl. “When you take their plate back, please give this to Nava’s aunt. It’s not much, but... I’ll write a little note with it, but we need to say thank you with something more than just words.”

“Are you sure you’re okay doing that, Mom?” Just about every day for the last week I heard her and Dad talk about what the cost for Ronette’s care was going to be, and how

they didn't know how they were going to do it. For Thanksgiving, Mom made a pumpkin pie and her rolls, but we didn't have turkey. Just a small chicken.

"This is nothing compared to what they're going to do for me. For us. I just wish I could do more."

I scratched the back of my head. It'd been itching most of the afternoon and kind of stung. And when I put my finger on the little spot where the itch was, it felt almost like it was bare. I mean it didn't feel like there was any hair there. Like my hair was pulled out or something, but I sure would've known if it was pulled out.

"Something wrong with your head?" Mom asked.

"Probably not. Just itches a little and... And kind of feels weird."

She came over and pushed the hair away from the spot so she could see it better. "Hmm. That's a little strange. It's like your hair has worn off in that place, and the skin's flaky and red. When did you first notice it?"

"I don't know. For a day or two it felt like I had kind of a pimple there, but this afternoon it started to itch and sting."

"Well, it may not be anything, but it won't hurt to have a doctor take a look at it. Your dad's going to leave the car for me Thursday so I can take Ronette in for her blood tests to see how the chemo's working. That'll be in the morning, and the family doctor who we took Ronette to before we saw her cancer doctor is in the same building. I'll make an appointment for you, and you can miss school that day."

"How much will it cost?" I asked.

"That's a funny question, Peter. Why are you asking that?"

I just looked at one of the chairs at the table and rubbed my finger along the top of it and didn't say anything.

"Why did you ask the question, Peter," she said and put her arm around me.

"I don't know. It's probably nothing, and I don't want you to have to spend any money on me with all you have to spend to help Ronette."

Mom didn't say anything, but she was sniffing. Then she turned me around. Her eyes were teary, but she had a mom smile. "I don't know how we're going to do all this, Peter, but we will. And I will never sacrifice one of my children's health for..." She didn't finish. "I'll write your teacher a note that you'll miss Thursday," she said. "Now, do you have any homework to do before you go to your paper corner?"

I did. I got my English book and went upstairs. I hadn't memorized anymore verses in my poem since last Monday, but I'd gone over the verses I'd memorized so many times I was even dreaming about them.

I passed through Ronette's room. She was sleeping, and I just looked at her. Her light blond hair had been falling out, and there were just wisps left. She was so frail. She was small anyway, and now maybe a wind could blow her away. I opened the door to my bedroom, went in and shut it so I wouldn't wake her up. I sat on my bed with my book and glanced up at my Cardinal's poster and wondered if we'd ever be able to afford to go to one of their games next year. Mom said it'd all work out, but she sure didn't look like she thought it would.

I opened the book to my poem and read the next verses I would memorize.

*And thought, "Had I a sword of keener steel--
That blue blade that the king's son bears, --
but this blunt thing!"
He snapped and flung it from his hand,
and lowering crept away and left the field.*

Oh wow! I was really getting excited about how I was going to present this to my class. I'd have to find out what lowering means though. Bet it has something to do with the guy being a coward. And blue blade probably means like the Gillette Blue Blades to shave with they advertise on TV. Like it's really sharp.

For the next 30 minutes or so I repeated these verses, then combined them with the ones I'd already memorized. I mean it felt like they were digging a valley or something in my brain. Would I remember this poem when I was getting old like Mom and Dad? Or when I was as old as Grandpa Holland? I laughed. "I'll never be that old!"

It was time to leave for my paper corner, and I passed through Ronette's room being as quiet as I could and went downstairs and put on my coat and gloves. Mom was in the kitchen at the table looking at bills. She wasn't smiling and glanced at me.

"What does lowering mean?" I asked. She pointed at the dictionary on the shelf above the telephone, and I looked up the word. *Disgraceful*. Of course! That fits.

"Bye Mom," I said.

"Be safe and sell all your papers." She looked so sad.

I tried to smile. "I love you, Mom," I said. "I'm glad you're my mom."

And she cried.

CHAPTER 20



Am I Dying?

OKAY. I'M GOING TO be bald, and I don't mean when I'm my dad's age. I mean now. And I don't mean I'll be *getting* bald like my dad, I mean I *will* be bald! Like I won't have any hair at all. Maybe some'll be left on the sides of my head, but that's it. That's what Doctor Schmitz said when he sent me to the clinic to have my head treated with x-rays today. They sat me in this chair and put like a lead blanket around my shoulders, and the doctor pointed what looked like a Pinocchio nose on this machine at my head then went behind a kind of a wall with a little window in it. The machine went BSSSST for a few seconds, and then he came out and moved the nose a little bit and did the same thing. Six times he did it.

He told Mom that my hair would start falling out in a couple of days, and when it started, to cover my head with wide strips of adhesive tape then pull them off. That will

remove all my hair, he said, and it wouldn't hurt because my hair would be dead. He said my hair would all grow back over the next month or two and might even be thicker and curlier than it was now.

Great! That's all I need. The shortest kid in the class with deformed ears is now going to be the only bald twelve-year-old kid in the world! Zach and Willy and Josie and Lu are going to love this!

Doctor Schmitz said I've got ringworm on my head. I've never heard of that before. He says I probably got it from a seat at the Hi Pointe theater when I went there to see *It Came from Outer Space* with Nava. He said if we didn't treat it immediately, it's going to spread, and it can cause me to lose my hair permanently. He said x-rays will kill it fast, and that's the best way to treat it. He told mom to get a stocking cap for me today that'd cover my whole head, and I was to wear it until my hair grew back.

So, besides Ronette getting her blood tests today, my whole life changed. Now when I look in the mirror I get to see a short wimpy kid with stick out ears who's bald! Mom did buy me kind of a cool hat though. It's a wool stocking cap, sort of brown and green, and it goes down low enough on my head that I can even cover my ears so nobody can see how much they stick out.

Yeah. Right. Everybody already knows I have weird ears. And they're going to ask me why I'm wearing a hat that covers my ears, especially when I'm wearing it all the time. Like in Miss Meyers' class. Then I'm going to take it off so they can see my bald head, and they'll be shocked, and they're going to laugh and Zach and Willy... Well, you get the picture.

Actually, it might be kind of fun to see the girls' faces when I take my hat off, and my ears will finally be warm while I'm at my paper corner. Anyway, I won't be bald forever. I mean

except when I'm Grandpa Holland's age, and I'll never get that old.

When Ronette heard what was going to happen to me she said, "You're going to be bald like I am!" And she had this huge smile on her face.

If me being bald was going to make her happy then maybe it's worth it. Sort of. "We're going to be twins!" I said to her.

"Twins?" she said. "I like that!" Her big smile stayed.

So, maybe it won't be so bad. What is bad though is what it's costing Mom and Dad. I watched her pay twelve dollars for Ronette's blood tests, five dollars to Dr. Schmitz for me, and eleven dollars for the x-ray treatment for me. Then she paid another dollar and a half for my hat. And I remembered what she looked like when she was working on the bills last Monday. Should I volunteer to pay for my doctor bills and my hat? I've got over \$18 saved from my paper corner. I could do that. But... But how would it make Mom feel if I offered to do that? I decided not to.

When we got home, Ronette and me went upstairs to our bedrooms. I had my English book to memorize my poem. When we got to her bedroom, she took her shoes off and climbed up on her bed, and I started to go into my room.

"What are you doing with that book?" she asked.

"Memorizing a poem I have to give at school."

"Can I hear it?"

"Sure. When I get it memorized and give it at school, I'll tell it to you."

She gave me her grin. "That's gonna be fun being bald together, huh?"

I wanted to roll my eyes but didn't. "Yeah, we'll be twins," I said.

Then she got real serious. "Peter. I'm dying, huh."

That was way out of the blue and after clamping my mouth

shut that had popped open as wide as it could get, I struggled to know what to say. She's dying, but do I tell her that? Or do I lie to her. Finally, I gulped and said, "Did somebody say you were?"

"Not exactly. But I am, huh?"

She was so sincere and not emotional about it at all. I'm the one who started to get emotional. And I wasn't going to lie to her. "You're really sick, Ronette, and... And, I don't know... Kids like you who've had what you have, haven't... I mean, they don't have a cure for what you have so they're just trying to... You know, to keep you going for as long as they can."

"I'm not afraid," she said, "but my body hurts, and I want it to stop." Now she did start to cry a little. "Do you think I'll die before Christmas?"

"No! No, you won't!" I said quickly. And that was the truth.

"I want to see the Christmas tree and see what Santa Claus will bring me." She kind of smiled. "What do you want Santa Claus to bring you?"

I was getting choked up, but I had to say something. "Gloves," I finally got out. "They'd keep my hands warm at my paper corner."

"I want a Tiny Tears doll," she said. "Did you know she cries real tears and wets her diaper and can blink her eyes?"

I didn't know what they cost or what Mom and Dad could afford, but I was going to make sure she got a Tiny Tears doll. "I'll bet Santa will bring you one," I said, and turned away from her so she couldn't see my eyes getting wet.

She picked up her coloring book from the stand by her bed. "You want to see what I've been coloring?"

I quickly rubbed my sleeve across my eyes and sat on her bed. "Sure."

By the time she finished showing me what she'd done, it

was too late for me to start on my poem. "Have to go sell my papers," I said, and got up to go.

She put her hand on my arm and gave me a big smile. She pretended like she was pulling out her hair, I mean what was left of it, and said, "We're going to be twins!"

I laughed. "Yeah. Twins!"

I went to my paper corner and sold 96 papers and got thirty-five cents in tips. I think people were being generous because of Christmas coming. We ate supper and Ronette went up to bed. Dad asked me to come with him and Mom into the living room. Mom and I sat on the couch and Dad in a chair facing us. Why did I know what he was going to say?

Mom reached over and took my hand, and Dad looked at me and said, "With Ronette, things are getting pretty tight money-wise, Peter, and..." Mom squeezed my hand. "And we're not going to have much of a Christmas, I'm afraid. We want to make this as good a one for Ronette as we can though. This may be her... Well, you know." Mom and Dad looked at each other, and she kind of nodded.

"So," he continued, "Mother and I won't be giving presents to each other and wanted to know if you'd be okay if we just gave some presents to Ronette this year. You know, some Santa Claus presents."

They were making me part of this! Sure, I wanted presents, but... "I don't need presents!" I said. "I'm okay doing that for Ronette. And I have over eighteen dollars saved, and I could have maybe thirty dollars by Christmas, and I could use that to buy her presents and you presents and..."

Dad stood and walked over to me. He took my hand and pulled me up and gave me the tightest hug he'd ever given me. "You keep your money," he said. "There's no telling what's going to happen, and you might need it."

Then the phone rang. "I'll get it," Mom said. She picked up

the phone then called out, "Peter. it's for you. It's Nava."

I knew why Nava was calling. I didn't tell her about that thing on my head or that I was going to see the doctor today. Who would tell a girl you liked you had this creepy thing on your head?

"Why weren't you at school today," she asked. "Are you sick?"

What should I tell her? Duh! She's going to know I've got ringworm when she sees me in my hat tomorrow! I told her everything.

"I haven't heard of ringworm being treated by x-rays before," she said. "But sounds like it's better than that cream that Calder used when he got it last year. And he wore a hat all the time too, but I don't think he was bald. Just had sores on his head. It really won't matter that you're bald, because you'll always be wearing a hat."

"Yeah. And I told Ronette we'd be twins. She's lost most of her hair already because of her chemo."

Nava laughed. "Twins, huh. And your hair's going to grow back better than ever, so, no problem!"

She told me what happened in class today and what I needed to read in my current affairs book and English book, and that was really all the homework there was. Then she said, "So, the doctor thinks you got ringworm from the seats at Hi Pointe theater?"

"Yeah. That's what he said.

"I hope I didn't get it!" She sounded a little worried.

"You'd probably have known by now if you did," I said. "And the doctor said it was mostly boys that got it anyway. I think because girl's hair is thicker."

"I hope so," she said. "But I'm sorry you got it."

"Yeah." And I thought of Ronette and what she said to me today about dying and Christmas and what Dad said, and it

all kind of just weighed heavy on me. Should I tell Nava? I didn't debate that very long. She was my friend. Maybe the best friend I've ever had. So I told her everything.

"You think Ronette will be..." She stopped for a second. "What are the chances that Ronette won't be here for Christmas?" she asked. I could tell by her voice she was maybe going to cry.

"I don't know, but my mom and dad seem pretty sure she'll be here, and we all want this Christmas to be the best it can be for her. I'll have about thirty dollars from my paper corner. I don't know what that can buy, but I can at least get her the Tiny Tears doll and some other stuff from Santa Claus. And maybe some things for my mom and dad."

For kind of a long time she was quiet, then said, "I think it'll all work out." She almost sounded confident. And I thought of Mom saying something like that too. Was it just wishful thinking? Probably. Nava was just being my friend and trying to make me feel better.

"Thanks," I said. "I better get going on my homework. See you tomorrow."

We hung up, and I took my books upstairs to my bedroom. I read the assignments, then opened my English book to my poem. For a moment, I just looked at it. How was I going to do what I wanted to do with this poem now? I was gonna be bald! Oh well. I read the next verses that I would memorize.

*Then came the king's son, wounded,
sore bestead, and weaponless,
and saw the broken sword,
hilt-buried in the dry and trodden sand.*

I don't know whether it was because I was getting used to

memorizing or that I was getting better at it, but I memorized these verses faster than I'd ever done before and recited all the verses that I knew ten times to make sure I had them down. And yes, the box in my pocket was warm. Then I went downstairs to look up what "sore bestead" meant. *A difficult situation*. Yes! That made sense! What was cool was all these words that I didn't know sounded so neat and had just-right meanings.

And then it came. I knew exactly what I was going to do with my poem and my bald head now! To kind of quote Nava and Mom, it was going to work out!

CHAPTER 21



What They Did for Me

“BEEN WEARING MY HAT a week, and nobody’s made fun of me,” I said to Nava as we walked home from school. “Zach just said, ‘Neat hat,’ the first day and nothin since.”

“I told you nobody’d tease you,” she said. “Has your hair fallen out yet?”

I yanked my hat off, and she kinda gasped. “You’re bald!”

“Yep.”

“Did it just fall out?”

“No! Mom put these wide strips of tape all over my head and yanked em off, and that took off most of my hair.”

“Did it hurt?”

I put my hand on top of my bare head. “Not here.” Then I pointed to the sides of my head where my hair was as thick as it’d always been. “The hair wouldn’t come out here, and I was almost crying when she pulled off the tape!”

She reached up and touched her hair. "That'd hurt!"

"Yeah, big time! And Mom kept saying she was sorry when she pulled off all the tape from my sides here, but that didn't help any!"

"When do you think it'll grow back?"

"Doctor said in a month or two it'll just look like I have a buzz."

"It doesn't look that bad," she said. "I mean, I'm glad it'll grow back, but..." Then she laughed. "Keep your hat on."

I laughed with her and put on my hat. I got over feeling sorry for myself pretty fast when I looked in the mirror. It didn't look as bad as I thought it would. I mean when I was wearing my cool hat it didn't look bad.

We got to Nava's house, and she said, "I've got something to show you." She ran up her stairs and told me to follow her. We went inside, and she pointed at my shoes to take them off. I did and no problem with holes in socks. I only wore good socks to school now. I mean sometimes I wore them a couple of times before they got washed because I only had a few of them. She waved me into the kitchen and pointed at the table.

"Wait here," she said.

Her aunt came in. "Hi Peter." She sat at the table and pointed at a chair for me to do the same. "How's your sister?"

"We got her blood tests back yesterday, and Mom said the chemo was helping. She said things were stabilized, but I don't know what that means. She goes back to the hospital for more chemo next week."

"Will she have to stay overnight?"

"No. Mom says they'll only be there five or six hours."

"Sorry about your ringworm," she said, "but I really like your hat!" She gave me her big smile.

Nava came back into the kitchen with a large brown envelope that bulged at the bottom. She didn't say anything but

turned the envelope upside down on the table, and all this money fell out. Most of it was coins, but there were a lot of dollar bills and even a ten dollar bill and some five dollar bills.

She looked at me and kinda glowed. “This is for you to buy Christmas presents for your family! There’s \$83.20 here.”

I just stared at the money. Then I looked at Nava with this big question on my face. I’ve never seen her with a bigger smile.

“Every girl in our class helped,” she said. “I told Josie and Lu and Lisa and Zoe about your sister and because of how much her doctor bills were, your parents couldn’t give her the kind of Christmas they wanted to give her. And Josie said, ‘I know what we can do to help!’ And she got all the girls in the class to have their mothers help them bake Christmas cookies and put them in little sacks. Then we all went through our neighborhoods selling the cookies and telling them what the money was for. And we sold all the cookies!”

“Josie...did that?” I stammered. “And... And they got all this money from selling cookies?” I must of been going into shock, because I could hardly even think.

“We raised \$47.55 this way, and when Zach heard about what we were doing he said he wanted to help too.”

“Zach?”

“Zach. And he got Willy and Cory and Calder and Chuck and the guys you play soccer with, and they shoveled snow off of sidewalks by businesses and at homes. They made \$35.65.”

Then I got a little depressed. I thought I knew why Zach would do that. “Uh, you told him about the bus pass, huh?”

“No! I’d never do that without you saying I could!” She almost sounded offended. “He just wanted to help out your family because of Ronette.”

“Bus pass?” her aunt asked.

Nava looked at me, and I shrugged an okay.

“Peter bought Zach a bus pass so he didn’t have to walk so far to school, and Zach doesn’t know it was Peter who did it.”

“You helped too, and he wouldn’t have taken it if he knew,” I said. “At least I don’t think he would.”

Her aunt looked at me with this kind of look like Mom does sometimes, and I did my red thing.

“You told me about how much you’ve saved from your paper corner,” Nava said, “but there’s enough money here to buy all the presents, so you keep what you’ve saved for when you might need it.”

For a second, I was going to protest, then just nodded. She was right about there being enough, but I knew what I was going to do with my money. At least part of it.

“Can you go Christmas shopping with us tomorrow?” Nava asked. “Aunt Anna will take us. We can buy the presents for your family and bring them here to wrap, then when your family’s not home we’ll sneak them over to your house.”

This was all too much for me now. “All those kids,” I said, “and you... And... Why would you... They...” I buried my head in my hands to hide my tears. That’s all I’m doing now is being a baby. Embarrassing.

Everybody was real silent, and then Anna said, “What would you do, Peter, if our family...Nava’s family...was in the situation your family’s in?”

I slowly wiped my eyes and looked at her and nodded. “Thanks,” I whispered. “I can do the shopping tomorrow. And next Thursday, Mom’s taking Ronette to the hospital to have her chemo and won’t be home until after four thirty or later. Maybe we can take the presents over to my house after school, and I’ll hide them in the basement so nobody sees em before Christmas.”

“I’ll talk to Miss Meyers to see if I can pick you two up early from school that afternoon so we’ll have plenty of time to do

this,” Anna said.

“What time should I come tomorrow?” I asked.

“How about 11:00?” she said, and looked at the clock on the wall. “Are you going to your paper corner today?”

“Yeah. I better get going.” I stood up and looked at Nava and then at her aunt and kind of bowed my head. “Thanks for...” I took a deep breath so I wouldn’t blubber all over the place again. “See you tomorrow.”

I went to their entry room and put on my shoes. Nava followed me. When I got them on, I turned to her, and she smiled.

“We’re a team, remember?” she said. Then she blew me a kiss and pulled off my hat and laughed. “I wanted to see if the top of your head turns red too!”

I about floated home thinking about what we were going to buy for Mom and Dad and Ronette, and the kind of Christmas they were going to have without even knowing it.

“I’m home, Mom!” I shouted when I came into the house.

“How’s your head today?” she asked. She was in the kitchen.

“No problem. Didn’t itch or anything. Been like that since I got the x-rays.”

“Have a good day at school?”

“Yeah. You know, regular.” It was hard to keep from smiling. “Okay if I go over to Nava’s tomorrow. She has kind of a school project she wants me to help her with.”

That wasn’t exactly a lie. We would be doing a project because of what the school kids did. Yeah. I know that’s a dumb excuse, but I wasn’t going to tell her what I was really doing.

“What time and how long? I want to do washing tomorrow.”

“Eleven o’clock, and I’ll be home before three, I think.”

“Okay. That reminds me. I’ll write a thank you note to Nava’s aunt so you can take the Tupperware bowl to her when you go.” She looked at me. “Got homework?”

I lifted my English book.

“Please get it done before you go to your paper corner,” she said. I poked my head in the living room. Ronette was watching Howdy Doody.

“Hi Ronette,” I called to her.

“Shh,” she said. “Clarabelle’s whispering something to Mr. Bluster.”

At least she was up out of her bed. I went upstairs thinking about the look that would be on her face when she opened her presents. My homework today was two things. Finish memorizing my poem and plan what I was going to get for my family tomorrow.

I opened my English book to the poem and read the last lines I needed to memorize.

*And ran and snatched it,
and with battle shout lifted afresh,
he bewed his enemy down.
And saved a great cause that heroic day.*

There weren’t any words there I needed to look up. Well, maybe *afresh*. But I was pretty sure it meant he was doing it again. I memorized these words quickly and then said my whole poem over and over again, so I had it down so good I wouldn’t even have to think about it while I was doing my other stuff with it.

And just to make sure, I touched the box. It was warm.

Okay, now what was I going to buy tomorrow? I’d already pretty much decided, but I made a few changes then wrote

it all down in my notebook and put that under my bed so nobody would accidentally see it.

I headed off to my paper corner, and that was really good too. I sold out ten minutes early with forty cents in tips then waited for Hank in front of the drug store.

“Yo!” It was the Negro kid I gave my gloves to. I hadn’t seen him since then.

“My mama wants me to give this to you,” he said, and handed me two paper sacks. A larger brown one and a smaller white one. The tops of the sacks were folded over and held closed with a clothespin. Then he handed me an envelope with a card in it.

“Thanks,” he said and lifted both hands to show me he was wearing the gloves I gave him. “Merry Christmas!” His teeth shone as he smiled, and he ran off.

I put the white bag under my arm and opened the other. It was filled with wheat and rice check cereal that was covered with some kind of sauce and smelled so good I wanted to eat it right now. I closed it and opened the white one. Fudge! I could hardly wait to get home! Then I opened the envelope. It was a Christmas card with a Christmas wreath on the door of a home and a beautiful Negro mother with her hand on a sign in the wreath that read: “From My House to Your House.” I wondered if that’s what his mother looked like.

I opened the card, and there was a note from her.

Thank you for what you did for my son. These are our favorite Christmas snacks. I hope you like them as much as we do.

Merry Christmas!

Virginia (Ginny) Johnson and Family.

“What have you got?” It was Hank.

“Uh... Just some stuff that somebody gave me.”

“Here, let me hold all that while you give me your money,” Hank said.

I dug into my pocket and put all my money in his bucket. He handed my stuff back and counted out his share.

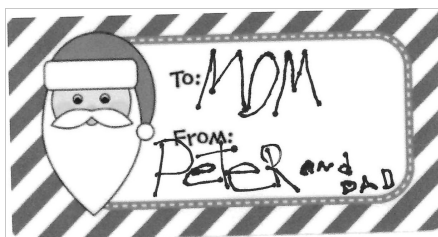
“Rest is yours,” he said as he took my things so I could put my money in my pocket. He gave me back the sacks and card. “It’s like playing hot potato, huh?” That’s as close to telling a joke as I ever heard him say.

“Thanks,” I said and started to go.

“Not so fast,” he said, and reached into his own pocket and pulled out a dollar bill and handed it to me. “Merry Christmas. You’re doing a good job!”

I just watched him as he got in his car and left. I looked at the dollar, then put it in my pocket with the rest of my money. I headed home and whistled, *Here Comes Santa Claus*.

CHAPTER 22



Christmas Memories

Wow! CHRISTMAS EVE ALREADY. I don't have to sell papers today or tomorrow. Dad got our Christmas tree last week before Ronette had her chemo so she could have fun decorating it. It's still pretty fresh today, but some of the needles are falling off. Like they always do. Dad got this kind of skinny tree that took lots of tinsel and ornaments to make it look good. But Ronette was sure excited to help with it.

"Mom!" I yelled. "Going over to Nava's to give them their presents."

"Okay. But don't be long. Your father will be home soon, and I want to eat early so we can watch Babes in Toyland with Laurel and Hardy. You and Ronette will love that."

"Aren't we going to do Christmas Eve like we did in Willow?"

Mom smiled. "Of course! It wouldn't be Christmas Eve

without that. We'll do it after we watch the movie, so hurry."

I didn't wear my hat when I was at home now, so I put it on with my coat and picked up the presents for Nava and her family and headed to their house. Mom took me Tuesday night to get these presents, and the presents I was giving her and dad and Ronette. She kept telling me not to get anything for her and dad, but I said I wanted to but wouldn't spend too much. The department store was open until 9:00 because of Christmas. It was the same one I went to with Nava and her aunt last week to buy the Santa presents for my family. The store was huge. I mean like three stories or something. You went on escalators to get upstairs, and they had everything from women's perfume to lawnmowers. It made Grandpa Holland's store in Willow almost look like a shack. I mean, you could put all the stores in Willow inside this store easily. And maybe the houses too.

I spent my own money on my family's presents and the presents for Nava and her family. I got a real neat ten carat gold frame that Nava could put the picture of her parents in and a game of Scrabble for the Pogorzelski's. Mom was excited for me to do this because of all the Pogorzelski's were doing for us. She still felt a little bad that all she gave Nava's aunt was that Tupperware thing just after Thanksgiving. I kinda smiled to myself about that. Wait 'til she sees what happens tomorrow if she thinks they've done a lot already!

I ran up the steps to Nava's house and rang the bell. Nava opened the door and looked at the presents I was holding.

"Uh..." She raised an eyebrow.

"It was my own money not my parent's money," I quickly said, and handed them to her. She took them and motioned for me to come in.

"Can't," I said. "Have to go home for our Christmas Eve stuff."

“Okay, but wait a second.” She took the presents in, then came back with a present beautifully wrapped in silver foil. The card on it read: “To Peter from Santa.”

“Since you wouldn’t spend any of the Christmas money we raised on a present for you, this’s so Ronette won’t wonder why Santa didn’t get you anything when everybody else has these really neat presents.”

“What do you mean?” I said. “I bought a pocket comb with that money for my stocking gift.”

She rolled her eyes and looked at my hat and laughed. “You won’t be using that comb for a while.”

I grinned and held up the present she gave me. “Thanks! Gotta go!”

“I’m excited to see what you gave us!” she said. “I want to hear what your family does when they see... You know. Call me tomorrow okay?”

“Okay. Merry Christmas.” I left, and when I got to my house I put the present under my coat so Mom wouldn’t see it. She wasn’t in the kitchen, so I hurried down into the basement and put Nava’s present with the ones I hid under the stairs. I came back up into the kitchen, and Ronette was there.

“How come you wore your coat and hat into the basement?” she asked.

I shrugged. “It’s cold down there.” I went to the hall tree and hung them up.

“I can’t go down there since I been sick,” she complained. “Mom won’t let me.”

She went into the living room to look at the Christmas tree. She got her chemo treatment last week, the day after we set up the Christmas tree and put up our decorations. She was out of it for the next three or four days. I was worried how she’d be for Christmas, but she’s got a lot of color today and

is walking around so that's good.

Dad got home early and instead of having eggplant and beans for supper, Mom made waffles. I love those! And tomorrow Mom said we'll have ham and cheesy potatoes and spinach and peach cobbler. It'll be like our regular Christmas dinner. Yes!

We had a super Christmas Eve. Laurel and Hardy are so weird they're funny and are almost my favorite movie stars. At least tonight. I was laughing through the whole movie. Even Ronette was giggling and giggling. Then Dad read the Christmas story out of the Bible, and he played the piano while we sang Christmas carols, like *Silent Night* and *Away in a Manger*. And then all the fun Christmas songs, like *Frosty the Snowman* and *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*. Mom had baked Christmas cookies and Ronette and I decorated them with icing, and we had those with eggnog like we did every Christmas Eve in Willow.

We pinned our stockings to the back of the couch. Some of my friends in Willow had these fancy Christmas stockings that weren't really stockings. Their moms made them out of red and white cloth, and they were big. I mean they were like sacks that looked like stockings. We just use Dad's brown and gray work socks for ours. They're large enough for what we ever got in our stockings, and that's okay.

"Time for bed!" Dad said after the stockings were hung. It was past our usual bedtime.

"I want a horsey ride!" Ronette squealed, and Dad put her on his shoulders and ran up the stairs with her.

I started to follow them when Mom took my arm and pulled me back into the kitchen. She had kind of a sad look on her face which was the opposite of what it had been during our whole Christmas Eve.

"I'm sorry there won't be much in the way of presents

for any of us tomorrow,” she said. “I hope Ronette isn’t too disappointed in what we could get her. Thanks for being willing to go without this Christmas.” She put her hands on my shoulder. “But we’ll make up for it! I promise!” Then she gave me a super Mom hug.

“No problem,” I said. “Just so Ronette’s happy.” There was no way I was going to tell her what would happen tomorrow, but it was tough to keep from letting her see how excited I was.

“Uh...did Grandma and Grandpa Holland send anything?” I asked. When we were in Willow they gave all of us really neat presents. Last Christmas they gave me a bike, but Mom and Dad didn’t want me to bring it to St. Louis. They said it’d be too dangerous, so we sold it.

She shook her head. “Haven’t heard from them since I talked to them when we found out Ronette had Leukemia. Not even a Christmas card. Of course, the way mail is at Christmas time...” She forced a smile and kissed me on my forehead then rubbed my bald head that was now getting a little hair. “It’s growing back!” she said.

I put my hand on my head. It felt like little prickles now. I liked that. “Night,” I said and went up to my bedroom.

I got into my pajamas and took the windup alarm clock off my dresser and got into bed. I was sure Mom and Dad would do their Santa thing no later than midnight when they knew Ronette was asleep. That wouldn’t take hardly any time. Not this year for sure. So I set my alarm for 1:00 in the morning and put the clock under my pillow so I’d be the only one to hear it. I got into bed but couldn’t sleep.

I thought about the Christmas in Willow that was the best Christmas I could remember. Mom took me to Grandpa Holland’s store to buy presents for Dad and Ronette. I was just a year older than Ronette is now. I only had twenty cents

to spend on Ronette and thirty-five cents to spend on Dad. I got my presents for them, then Dad brought me back to Grandpa's store to buy a present for Mom. Instead of going to where the thirty-five cent presents were, he took me over to where they had dishes and pots and pans, and he pointed to a set of four large really pretty kinda washed out blue matching glass bowls that cost three dollars and seventy-five cents.

"How would you like to go in with me on those bowls for your mother?" he asked.

I think everybody in the store heard me yell, "Yes!" I'd be able to give my mom something that cost that much and was super nice! We took the bowls home, and I wrapped them real careful and on the tag wrote *To Mom from Peter and Dad*. I wrote Peter in really big letters that almost took up the whole tag, and *Dad* in tiny letters that you could hardly see. I put the present way in the back of the tree behind a bunch of others, so Mom couldn't see it until Christmas day.

I'd never been so excited for Christmas in my life. I couldn't wait to see the look on Mom's face when she saw what I gave her. I didn't even think about what *I* was going to get. Well, not as much as I usually did anyway. And when she opened that present, she almost squealed. And she came over to me and picked me up and twirled me around and kissed me and told me thank you a million times.

Was that how I was going to feel tomorrow? I mean the presents really came from all those kids who raised the money and Nava and her aunt who helped me buy them, but my family will think they're from me. Just like back then when Dad paid for those, and Mom acted like it was from me. But back then it didn't matter to me who the present was really from. What really mattered was how happy Mom was. That's what I remember. That's what made that one of my best Christmases ever.

And I got this big grin. That's what it's gonna be like tomorrow.

CHAPTER 23



The Best Christmas Ever

“WHOA!” I WHISPERED AND quickly turned off the alarm on the clock under my pillow. It was like I had my ear against the school bell when it rang! I froze for a second then looked at the time. 1:00am. Yes! I got up and put socks on because the floor was cold, and one of them had a hole in it. No biggie. Just glad I made sure I wasn’t wearing that whenever I had to take my shoes off at Nava’s. I opened the door to Ronette’s bedroom as quiet as I could. She was zonked. I tip-toed through her room and stopped at Mom and Dad’s bedroom door and put my ear against it. No sound. I mean except for Dad’s snoring. He always snored. So far so good. I went super slow down the stairs, because sometimes they squeaked, and then through the kitchen and down to the basement.

It took me three trips to bring up all the presents. Nava’s aunt wrote the tags on them so Mom and Dad wouldn’t

recognize the handwriting, and they all said from Santa. We got this really beautiful paper when we bought the presents, and Nava and her aunt helped me wrap them.

I looked at the presents that were already under the tree. Not much. There were the ones I put there the other day that I bought for Mom and Dad and Ronette when I went shopping with Mom. I just wrapped them in our regular Christmas paper. Besides my presents, there were three envelopes from Ronette to Mom and Dad and me, and tonight, Dad had put two presents for Ronette from Santa, and a small one for me. I picked that up and squeezed it. It was soft. I knew what it was. I looked at my sock with the hole in it and smiled. Then I put all the presents I brought up under the tree. Now it really looked like Christmas. I mean except for the stockings we pinned on the back of the couch. They looked kinda sick. There wasn't much candy in them and maybe no presents either.

I went back to the basement and brought up the box with all the other stuff we'd bought. There was already a small bowl of Christmas candy on the table, and the cookie that Ronette had left for Santa had a bite out of it. I got four bowls out of the cupboard and emptied part of a bag of really good hard Christmas candy in one of them and one of my two bags of candy orange slices in another. Then I dumped part of my bags of hard shell nuts and peanuts in the other two. I took the four oranges we bought and the candy and nuts that was left and filled up the stockings on the couch and put a present in each of them.

I went back to the kitchen and put two large boxes of really good chocolates on the table by the bowls, then took all the empty bags and box down to the basement. I came back up and looked around to make sure I'd done everything I wanted to. I had, except... I picked up the cookie that had a bite in it

and took another bite out of it. Then I got a glass out of the cupboard and put some milk in it and drank it and put the empty glass by the cookie.

I smiled at what I'd done and went upstairs to bed.

It felt like I only just got to sleep when somebody shook my shoulder. "Wake up! Wake up!" I popped open an eye. It was Ronette.

"It's Christmas!" she yelled. "C'mon! Wake up!"

I looked at the clock that I'd put back on my dresser. 6:34am. Good grief! "We can't go down without Mom and Dad," I muttered.

"They said we could wake them when we got up!" she yelled.

Well, her yelling had to be a good sign. She's been so quiet and sicky for so long. I sat up. "We need to be dressed," I said. "That's the rule." She stood there with a huge smile. She *was* dressed.

"Okay. Okay. Let me get dressed."

She ran out of my room and slammed the door behind her. Well, she didn't run exactly. My bed's only four feet from the door, but she got out of my room fast. I put my clothes on, including my sock with a hole in it because I didn't feel like going through my drawer to find an *unholey* one (ha-ha). I went into her bedroom, and I don't think I've ever seen her so excited. I mean at least for a long time, and I was all awake now and getting as excited as she was but for a different reason. She bammed on Mom & Dad's door. "Wake up! Wake up! We're dressed! We want to go down!"

I heard some mumbling, then Mom said, "Okay. Give us a minute."

We waited and Ronette was hopping up and down like she had to go to the bathroom. We didn't have to wait long. They didn't follow the had-to-be-dressed rule and came out in their

pajamas and robes and slippers.

“Okay. Mom and I will go down first,” Dad said. “You can see what’s in your stockings, but I’ll hand out presents like I always do.”

“Yes! Yes!” Ronette squealed, and we followed them down stairs.

And then the gasp.

And it wasn’t Ronette. It was Mom when she saw what was on the kitchen table. She turned to Dad, and his mouth was open.

“He was here! He was here!” Ronette yelled and picked up the empty glass and the cookie with two bites out of it.

I heard Dad whisper to Mom, “I only took one bite and no milk.”

Ronette ran into the living room and screamed. I followed her in and tried to act as excited as she was. It wasn’t hard. I was excited for her. And for Mom. And for Dad. I kept thinking about the blue bowls and Mom’s face when she opened her present back then.

“What in the...” Dad said real loud when he saw what Ronette saw.

Mom stared at the room and then looked at the stockings that had oranges in them and were filled to the top. She and Dad just shook their heads like they’d seen a miracle.

I guess maybe they had.

Everybody dumped out their stocking candy in the bowls Mom brought in. In Dad’s stocking there was a pearl handled pocket knife. In Mom’s, a tortoise shell comb and brush, and in Ronette’s a box of 48 crayons, which I, Peter-Santa, had given her, and a pair of long socks which Dad-Santa gave her. And in mine was the pocket comb. Not as nice as the presents in the other stockings, but nobody noticed. I hoped.

But Mom and Dad looked at me with a

did-you-do-all-of-this kind of a stare, and I gave them a how-could-I-do-all-this look back and held up my comb. They didn't look convinced. Dad sat near the tree and gave me that look again and said, like he did every Christmas, "I'll hand these out one at a time so everybody can see what everybody else gets." He started with the packages that weren't wrapped in expensive paper. He handed my present for Ronette to her. It was a coloring book, and she got a big smile and shouted, "Thank you!" He gave Mom the present from me which was bath oils, and he opened my present to him, a small box of handkerchiefs. They both got up and hugged me.

Then he handed out the envelopes that Ronette had made for each of us. I opened mine. It was a picture of me bald that Ronette drew and colored, and she wrote, "Peter loves me. I love Peter. We're twins." And her name was printed below it. "Wow!" I said. "I'm gonna put this on my ceiling with my Cardinal's poster!" She just grinned.

The only presents left, except the surprise ones, were the "Dad-Santa-ones" for Ronette and me. Mom and Dad didn't buy any presents for themselves. I got two pair of brown socks. Big surprise, huh. And Ronette got a pretend makeup kit and a pink Minnie Mouse shirt.

For a minute Dad just stared at the fancy wrapped presents that were left. They looked like they could have been under the huge tree at the department store where I got them. He picked up two that were the same shape. The tags on both were also the same. "To the Leavitt family from Santa." He handed one to Mom to open and one to Ronette.

Ronette tore off the paper and squealed. "Candyland! It's the Candyland game!"

Mom held up the Peter Pan board game she unwrapped and smiled. "This's going to be a lot of fun!"

Dad handed a present to me that had, "To Peter from Santa," written on it. It was Nava's. I opened it and pulled out gloves. They were almost identical to the gloves Joshua gave me. Leather with fur lining. And all I gave her was a picture frame! I held them up for everybody to see.

"Now your hands can be warm at your paper corner, huh!" Ronette yelled. She was excited for me, but she kept staring at a big present under the tree.

Dad pulled it out and read the tag. "Ronette from Santa." He pushed it over to her.

"I hope! I hope!" she shouted as she tore off the paper. Then screamed. "Tiny Tears! Tiny Tears!" And there it was. The deluxe version with a cradle and all the clothes with diapers and bottles and everything. Ronette pulled out the doll and hugged her and kept laughing and crying, and I felt like doing the same. I mean laughing and crying, not hugging the doll. Ronette didn't look like she was dying at all, and I saw Mom and Dad wipe their eyes.

We all watched her for another minute, then Dad said, "Well, let's see what else's under here." He looked at the tag on one. "Isa from Santa," he said and started to pick it up. "Whoa. This's heavy." He set it down and slid it to Mom.

She opened it and gulped. It was a Mixmaster. It was their biggest and best electric food mixer and was on a stand and had all the attachments. Mom did all her mixing by hand ever since we left Willow because her little electric hand mixer got broke when we moved here. She stared at Dad, and he just shook his head a little to show it wasn't him.

There was one more present, and it was for Dad. He opened it and didn't act like he was all that surprised. Maybe because of what Mom and Ronette got. It was a power drill with a lot of bits with it. He took it out of the box and kept touching it like it was the most valuable thing in the world.

Then he reached his hand out to Mom to take hers. "Who in the world did all this?" he whispered. She didn't have an answer.

He took a big breath. "Looks like that's it," he said. "Everybody happy?"

"Yes!" Ronette shouted.

I sure was.

Then Mom looked all mysterious like and held up a Christmas card envelope. "Well, I have one more present for everybody." She handed it to Dad.

He looked at her like he didn't know anything about this, then opened it. He read the card to himself, and his mouth just kind of fell open. Then he looked at Mom like she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

She smiled. Her eyes got wet, and she said, "Read it to the children."

Dad swallowed hard, then read it. "I am going to have a baby. It was confirmed by the doctor last week and will be born in June. Everything is going well! Love Isa/Mom."

Mom and Dad stood up, and he put his arms around her and kissed and kissed her and I was going to have a brother or sister and I looked at Ronette and she was jumping up and down and yelling, "Yea! Yea! Yea!" and I felt like I was gonna cry because I was so happy. But also because... Because... I grabbed Ronette and hugged her.

Dad and I took all the used wrapping paper out to the trash can in our back yard, and while we were out there, he said, "How did you do it? You couldn't have done all this with your own money."

And I told him.

When we came back in, Mom was in the kitchen, and Ronette had taken her Tiny Tears doll up to her bedroom and was playing with it.

“Tell your mother,” Dad said. And I did.

“This was Nava’s doing?” she exclaimed.

“Nava and all the girls in my class, and even Zach the kid who bullied me helped.”

Mom sat down. “Kids did this? For us?”

“Yeah. And Nava and her aunt took me to buy the presents and the paper and the candy and the nuts and the oranges and helped me wrap everything and bring it over here so I could put it in the basement.”

Mom kinda groaned. “And all I gave her aunt was a Tupperware bowl.”

“But I gave them Scrabble for Christmas and Nava a present too,” I said. “That was out of my newspaper money.”

Nobody talked for a while, and Dad looked at Mom. “What are you thinking?”

She looked at the Christmas candy and stuff on the table and the Mixmaster she had put on the shelf under the cupboard and smiled. “I’m thinking, thank you. Thank you to everybody who is so good to us.” Then she looked up at the ceiling and patted her stomach. “Thank you,” she said again, but this time really quiet, like she was praying or something.

She gave us a big smile and said, “Better put my new Mixmaster to use and get dinner going, huh?”

“Uh, okay if I call Nava?” I said. “I promised I’d tell her about... You know.”

“Yes!” Mom said. “And tell her thank you and that we *love* her and her family!”

I dialed Nava’s number, but I wasn’t going to say *love*. That’d be too embarrassing.

“Hello,” It was Nava’s uncle.

“Hi. This is Peter. Nava asked me to call her.”

“How was your Christmas?” he asked. I could tell he really wanted to know.

“It was great!” was all I said. I wanted to first tell Nava about the whole thing, and then she could tell her family.

“I’ll get her,” he said, and in a few seconds she was on the phone.

“Tell me!” she almost shouted.

And I did. Everything. Including that Mom was gonna have a baby.

“Oh, wow! You’re going to be a brother again? Wow! I wish I could’ve been there!”

“And Mom wanted me to tell you and Anna thanks for making this Christmas so wonderful and that we... Uh, I mean, she wanted me to tell you that we... You know. We like you and your family a lot.”

Nava laughed. “I bet she said *loved* us.” She laughed again. “Are you turning red?”

I was, but I wasn’t gonna to admit it.

“Uh, thanks for the gloves,” I said. “There just like...”

“I know!” she interrupted. “I remembered what those looked like. And thank you for that beautiful picture frame. It’s already on my dresser with my parent’s picture in it. How did you know what size frame to get?”

“I sort of guessed, so I’m glad it fits.”

“It’s perfect, and thanks for Scrabble. We all wanted to get that game, and we’re playing it today after we eat.” She didn’t say anything for a second then said, “Peter...I’m so happy for you guys.”

And I could tell she really was. That kinda got me for a second, then I said, “Yeah. And it’s because of you and the kids in our class and your aunt and...” I stopped because I was thinking about the word Mom wanted me to say that I was too chicken to say. Why couldn’t I say it? Anyway, I cleared my throat and said, “This’s like a Christmas I had when I was Ronette’s age.” And I told her about my mom and the blue

bowls, and then I said, “But this Christmas’s better. It made *all* my family happy and...”

Then this thought jammed into my head like it was from *The Prompter* or something. *Okay, Peter, you coward, say it!*

So I did. “And it’s because of what you guys did and... And my mom said to tell you that we... We *love* your family and... And... We *love* you.”

I looked like a beet, and it was okay.

“We *love* you too,” Nava said right back. “Thanks for telling me what happened today.”

“We’re a team, remember?” That’s all I could say.

“Yeah,” she said real soft. “We’re a team. Bye.”

I hung up the phone but kept looking at it.

Mom came over to me. “Did you tell her what I told you to say?”

I gave her my this-is-my-best-Christmas-ever smile. “Yep. I did.”

We had our Christmas dinner, and everybody helped me do the dishes. That was cool. Then we played Candyland and Peter Pan and were watching TV when the phone rang. Mom answered it. She was gone a long time, and when she came back she was crying. She motioned for Dad to come into the kitchen. Ronette was asleep on the couch, so I went to the kitchen too. I wanted to find out why Mom was crying on a day that’d been so spectacular. When she saw me, she started to wave me back into the living room then stopped.

“You need to hear this too,” she said, and she was smiling even though she was crying. She took Dad’s hand. “That was my father,” she said. “He wanted to know how Ronette was doing, and I told him. Then he asked if we got their Christmas card, and I said we hadn’t. He apologized for mailing it too late to get here before Christmas and said we’d probably get it Monday and to call when we got it.”

Dad raised an eyebrow. “He called long distance because he was afraid his Christmas card didn’t get here before Christmas?”

“Yes,” Mom said. “There’s a check in it for \$1000 to help with our medical bills. It’s a gift, he said, not a loan. And if we need more, we’re to let him know.”

And Dad cried.

CHAPTER 24



Auschwitz - Nava's Secret

LAST WEEK, I BOUGHT a bunch of little thank you cards with my own money. That's what Mom suggested I do. I wrote inside each one that Ronette and my family had the best Christmas ever and thanked them for their help and signed it. I got to school early and put a card on each of the desks in my classroom. I mean except for Nava. I'd already thanked her a million times. I wrote a special thank you note to Josie and Lu and Zach since they were kind of the leaders. Josie and Lu smiled at me when they got theirs, and Zach kind of waved.

At the recesses and lunch hour today I had a whole bunch of kids ask me what our Christmas was like. I just told them thanks and how happy they'd made Ronette because she got a Tiny Tears doll. Anyway, everybody was super nice so it'd been a good day, and it was getting late enough so I thought maybe Miss Meyers wasn't going to have anybody give their

poems today.

I was wrong.

After we finished the social studies quiz she gave us, she said, “We will spend the rest of our class time today having you recite the poems you have memorized. Just a reminder, you can be called on at any time this week to give your poem, so be ready.” She looked out over our class like a hawk looking for a mouse. “When I call your name, you will come to the front of the class, tell us the name of your poem, the author, and then recite it. When you have finished, you will explain to the class why you chose that poem and what you learned from it.”

I froze. I had my poem memorized but reciting it in front of the class and doing what I was going to do scared me to death! Everybody’d be staring at me. And probably even make fun of me. I mean, what would Zach and Willy and Josie and Lu do? They were great to help raise money to make Ronette’s Christmas so super, but that was Ronette and her leukemia not me and my bald head and stick out ears. And what would Miss Meyers do? She knew the poem I was going to give but didn’t have a clue what I was going to do with it. Would she flunk me out of 7th grade? What would Mom and Dad say then? I couldn’t keep my hands from shaking, so I put them under my desk.

“Okay, is everyone ready?” Miss Meyers said and sat behind her desk. “If you get stuck, I’ll help you with a word or two, but I won’t give your poem for you.” She looked right at Lisa Sennert and smiled. “You will be our first one, Lisa. Good luck.”

I thought, *aka victim*, and I heard Nava behind me let out a breath. For a second, my hands stopped shaking. But when I thought I could be next, they started shaking again. Lisa recited *The Children’s Hour*, by Longfellow. She did a

really good job, and Miss Meyer's only had to help her twice. Then Miss Meyers called on another kid and then another and another. I kept my hands under my desk the whole time.

Then she said, "Our last poem for the day will be given by Nava." Nava gave a little gasp and got out from her desk and walked to the front of the class. My hands didn't stop shaking even though Nava would be the final one today. They were shaking *for* Nava.

When Nava walked up there, I could tell her hands were also shaking a little, and she put them behind her. She took a really deep breath and said, "I have chosen for my poem, *Rock Me to Sleep* by Elizabeth Akers Allen. I will recite the first stanza, and Miss Meyers gave me permission to change one of the lines."

*Backward, turn backward,
O Time, in your flight,
make me a child again
just for tonight!
Mother, come back...*

She stopped. Her lips kinda shook and tears ran down her cheeks. She rubbed her hands against her eyes and swallowed real hard. She took a deep breath and continued.

*Mother, come back
from the echoless shore.
Take me again to your heart as of yore;*

She stopped again and glanced at me. Not a good thing to do, because I knew about her family and was close to crying. She swallowed and went on.

*Kiss from my forehead the furrows of care,
Comb again tangles from out of my hair;
Over my slumbers your loving watch keep;
Rock me to sleep, mother, rock me to sleep!*

I looked around the class and most of the girls were crying and even some of the boys were. Like me. Zach put his fist up to his eye and rubbed it quick.

Nava took another deep breath. She didn't look at the class but at the floor. "I chose this poem because I know my mother loved me," she said, "and this is how she treated me when I was a baby and...little and..."

She stopped talking but did nothing about her tears. She sniffled a little and then it was like she got some extra strength from somewhere. Like she had *The Prompter*.

She looked up and said, "I was born in Poland, and my mother and father and me were put into a concentration camp by Hitler. That's what he did with all the Jews there. When I was two or three, a nurse rescued me and took me to Hungary where I was hidden and kept safe. I never saw my mother and father again. They were killed. When the war was over the people who were taking care of me contacted my Aunt Anna Pogorzelski here in St. Louis. She's my mother's sister. I've lived with them ever since, and she's told me all about my mother."

Nava kind of smiled now. Not a smile-smile exactly, but like she knew something important. Really important.

"What have I learned? That I want to be with my mother and my father again. And I think I will."

As she walked by my desk, I held my hand out, and she brushed it with hers. I couldn't even see her face, my eyes were

so cloudy. I did see Miss Meyers turn her back to the class, and you could tell by how her arms were moving that she was wiping her eyes. Then she turned back around and stood up.

“Thank you students,” she said in a quiet voice. “Those of you who have recited today have done an excellent job. The rest of you learn from what you have seen and heard and be prepared for tomorrow.”

I turned around to Nava. “I’ll wait for you in the playground,” I said.

She nodded.

I went to the coatroom and got my coat, then went down stairs and waited. I was about to go back up to find out what was going on when she came down.

“Sorry, I took so long,” she said.

“What happened?” I asked as we walked across the playground.

“All the kids are so nice,” she said. “Especially Josie and Lu.”

“Josie and Lu?” That shouldn’t have surprised me since they were the ones who led the project for Ronette’s Christmas.

“Yeah. They both hugged me and told me how sorry they were for calling me a... You know.”

Yeah. I knew. “What about Zach and Willy?” I asked. “They say anything?”

“Zach gave me a thumbs up and said he needed to treat his mother better, and Willy just looked like he was embarrassed or ashamed or something.”

“Did Miss Meyers say anything to you?”

She came to all of us who gave poems today and told us how good we’d done. That’s all. I mean, she was kind of crying when she told me though.”

“I was surprised you told everybody about you and your

mom and dad,” I said. “When did you decide to do that? You’ve kept that secret for a long time.”

“When Josie and Lu and Zach wanted to help Ronette have a great Christmas. They were being so good, I just thought it was time they knew about me. That all my friends knew about me. So they could maybe understand me better.”

I thought about how everybody reacted to her and her poem, and said, “Yeah. It was the right thing to do. I think you helped everybody there. And me hearing it again... Well, I’m... I’m just... Thanks for being my friend, Nava!”

She gave me her smile. “We’re a team, huh?”

“Yeah. And the way you read your poem. The other kids did really good jobs with theirs but you... I mean, I’ve never heard a poem read like that before. It was like you were telling about your own mother. About your own life.”

“I was,” she said quietly. “And maybe that’s what poems are supposed to do, huh.”

I thought about the poem I’d memorized. “Yeah.”

“You ready with your poem?” she asked.

“Hope so.” I didn’t want to tell her how scared I was though.

“What did you do for New Years?” she asked.

“New Years Eve we just played games with Ronette and watched TV. I went to bed before midnight. On New Year’s we watched the Rose parade and Rose Bowl game. How about you?”

“Nothing much. We don’t really celebrate this New Years. Ours is called Rosh Hashana, and we did that in September.”

That’s all she said, and I didn’t ask her to explain.

“Cory told me today he wants his paper corner back next Monday,” I said.

She stopped. “You okay with that? I mean, what are you going to do for... You know. Money. I mean, with what’s

happening with your family?”

“That’s kind of changed,” I said. “Something really good’s happened. I mean besides this Christmas that was so amazing because of you and your aunt and all my friends and my mom telling us she’s going to have a baby. My grandpa in Willow sent us a lot of money. Maybe enough to pay for most of Ronette’s medical stuff.” I looked at her. “Please don’t tell anybody that, okay? My parents don’t want people to know.”

She agreed, and I said, “Mom’s starting her Tupperware parties in a couple of weeks, and they think we’re going to be okay. I mean for money. They even said they thought they could pay me an allowance. You know, for helping with washing the clothes and doing the dishes and helping clean the house and watching Ronette when they need to go somewhere. That kind of stuff.”

She looked at me in kind of a funny way. “So...if you’re not working every night, maybe... Uh, maybe sometimes we could study together or something. I mean if you wanted to.”

I did want to. And yes, my ears turned red.

CHAPTER 25



Goodbye Amulet

TODAY, I WAS GOING to give my poem. How did I know? It was Friday, and Josie and Calder and I hadn't recited our poems yet. Was I nervous? Maybe. Sort of. I think maybe the nervousness wore out of me because of the four days I didn't have to give my poem. At least my hands weren't shaking anymore. Miss Meyers had been having the poems at the end of the school day, and that's what she did today too.

Most of the kids, so far, had done a pretty good job. Yesterday, Zach had kind of a rough time and had to be helped five or six times with words he forgot, but he made it through. I told him I thought he did a good job. He just mumbled a thanks. I think he was glad to be complimented.

"Our final poems will be today," Miss Meyers announced. That was a duh. Like we didn't know that already.

"We will first hear from Calder, then Josie, and then Peter,"

she said. "Okay, Calder."

Great! I'm going to have to sit through two more poems before I give mine, and I'm the last one so everybody's going to leave thinking... Thinking what? My hands started shaking again, and I put them under my desk. Calder did okay and Josie was the best one yet except for Nava, and then Miss Meyers called my name.

"You'll be spectacular!" Nava whispered behind me. I was going to turn around to tell her thanks, but that probably wouldn't be too cool.

I got out from my desk and said to Miss Meyers, "I have to get something out of the coatroom."

She lifted her caterpillar eyebrow, and the kids started to mutter. I hurried real fast to my coat where I'd hid this half-inch thick and two-foot long dead branch from the sycamore tree in our backyard that I'd carved the best I could to look like a sword and nailed kind of a handle on it. I went back in front of the class and put the sword on Miss Meyers desk and brought the chair that was by the side of the blackboard to the middle of the room.

Everybody was staring at me. Including Miss Meyers. Her look was so scary that I was ready to just take my seat and tell her I couldn't do it. But then the box in my pocket got warm. Really warm. And I had the strangest feeling. It was like I *needed* to do this, and the class and Miss Meyers needed to see me and hear me do it, and I felt super calm. Well, maybe not exactly super calm, but I wasn't shaking, and I knew I was going to remember all the words.

I'd been practicing it this week in a different way than I had before. How Nava gave her poem, like it was all about her, was like how I wanted to give my poem. Because my poem was about me. At least about who I wanted to be. And I wanted the way I said those words to mean that.

“My poem is called *Opportunity*,” I announced, and thank goodness my voice even sounded kinda normal. “And the author is Edward Rowland Sill. And if you don’t know what a craven is, it’s a coward. And lowering means disgraceful.” With that I stood up on the chair and put my hand to my forehead, like I was trying to see far off, and began my poem.

This I beheld, or dreamed it in a dream.

I kinda paused, and then said,

*There spread a cloud of dust along a plain,
and underneath the cloud, or in it,
raged a furious battle, and men yelled,
and swords shocked upon swords and shields.
A prince’s banner wavered,
then staggered backward, hemmed by foes.*

I put this worried look on my face and got off my chair and pushed it back to the wall and went to Miss Meyer’s desk and picked up my wooden sword. I looked around like I wanted to hide, then pulled off my hat so they could see my bald head and slouched my way to the center of the room and went on with my poem.

*A craven hung along the battle’s edge,
and thought, “Had I a sword of keener steel—
That blue blade that the king’s son bears—”*

I looked at my wooden sword like I was angry and disgusted with it.

*"But this blunt thing!"
He snapped and flung it from his hand!*

I crashed it across my knee, and it broke in half with a loud crack and some kids in the class screamed because of the noise. I tossed the two pieces on the floor.

And lowering crept away and left the field.

I kinda slithered across the front of the room back to Miss Meyer's desk and put my hat back on and stood up as straight as I could and puffed out my chest.

*Then came the king's son,
wounded, sore bestead, and weaponless.*

I went fast, but with a limp, back to the two pieces of the sword I destroyed that were on the floor.

*He saw the broken sword
hilt-buried in the dry and trodden sand
and ran and snatched it,*

I grabbed the part of the sword that had the handle and looked like I was going to get in a fight.

*and with battle shout lifted afresh,
he hewed his enemy down.*

I swung it like it was a whole sword and like I was fighting others with swords. I did that for a couple of seconds and then lifted it straight up with my one hand and got this big satisfied look, like I'd just won.

And saved a great cause that heroic day.

It was like all the strength just went out of me, and I dropped my hand and kinda just smiled at the class and bowed so everybody could see I was through. Then all the kids started yelling and whistling and clapping. I looked over at Miss Meyers. She was smiling. She wasn't going to flunk me!

She lifted her hand to quiet the class, then said, "This has been a little surprise, Peter." She was still smiling, so that was good. "Why don't you tell us why you selected the poem and what you learned from it."

Now came the hard part. I wanted *The Prompter* to get warm. It did.

"Why'd I choose this poem?" I began. "Well...because it's about what's inside you not outside you. The king's son and the coward...they had the same sword. I mean the king's son only had half the sword. The difference was what they did with it. It wasn't the sword, it was them. I mean, it was who they were that was the difference. What they chose to do with it."

I sucked in a deep breath and sort of looked at the floor. "What did I learn?" I looked over at Nava, and she was nodding her head, and I think maybe crying.

I looked up at the ceiling and then at the class. "Maybe it's like we're all sons and daughters of kings and queens but just don't know it. Or maybe, just don't remember it. And we

look at our bodies and our clothes and our houses and stuff like that and think they're not very good swords or something. And like these things that are just things are telling the world what we are or something. That we're not very good. I mean, like me being short and having weird ears..." I took my hat off and forced a laugh, "and being bald. I mean, that stuff's outside me not inside me. So, what if I choose to be like the son of a king and not let this stuff outside me control me but use it to get things done? I mean to do what would be good. To do what I really want to get done and choose to get done." And I kinda smiled. "Anyway, that's who I wanna be."

I looked at Miss Meyers, and in a voice that just came out quiet, said, "That's what I've learned."

She smiled, and I put my hand in my pocket because *The Prompter* was really warm.

When I went to my paper corner late that afternoon, I told Hank that this would be my last day because Cory wanted it back. He just nodded. "You done a good job," he said, and put the papers inside my stand and left.

I touched the box inside my pocket and wondered what I was going to do with it. Joshua said he would take it back sometime, but... I put a couple of papers under my arm and held one up and went over to face the cars coming.

"ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH PAPAA" I yelled. And again and again.

Papers were selling pretty good. Would I miss this? I looked at the gloves Nava gave me. Well, at least I was warmer now, and I still had over \$15 of my savings left and Mom said my allowance might be \$2 a week and maybe I could get another job if...

"Hey! You going to dream all day?" It was the bald guy in the yellow Chevy. His window was down, and he was glaring

at me. Like he always did. But he always bought a paper too, so that was good. I gave him his paper and told him thanks and that this'd be my last day.

"So what do you want me to do, give you a tip or something?" He closed his window and drove off.

For some reason I thought about the craven who hung along the battle's edge, and I smiled. *Don't let what's outside control what's inside* I thought, and yelled, "ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH PAPAA!"

It was about twenty minutes before I had to go meet Hank, when a white Lincoln pulled up. It was Joshua! He rolled down his window and smiled. "Can you talk with me for a minute?"

"Yeah!" I almost shouted, and he drove around the corner and stopped. He opened up the passenger side door and waved me over.

"Just stand there," he reminded me and handed me a five dollar bill. "That'll make up for any papers you don't sell."

I didn't protest and put it in my pocket.

He held out his hand and smiled. "*The Prompter*, please."

I reached in my pocket and pulled it out but held it for a few seconds. It was warm. Maybe because it was coming home. Or maybe because it was saying goodbye. I handed it to him.

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks a lot."

He opened the box and put *The Prompter* in his hand. "What did you learn about what makes you free and happy?"

The Prompter led me to so many things that made me happy. Like giving and not judging and helping other people and other people helping me and seeing that I could do hard things when I really tried and not letting the outside control my inside and knowing how to keep from being hurt.

And it was like he heard what I was thinking. He smiled and put *The Prompter* back in its box and slipped it into his coat

pocket. Then he looked at me. No. He looked *inside* me.

"I asked you this question before," he said. "If I were to ask someone who knew you to describe you, what would they say?"

I thought about Zach and Josie and Miss Meyers and Mom and Dad and Ronette and Nava. "It'd depend on who you asked," I said, "but... But I don't think now that what others think of me is as important as what I think of myself."

He nodded. "And what do you think of yourself?"

I thought about my poem today and all that's happened to me since we moved to St. Louis and my experiences with Nava and Ronette and the kid I gave my gloves too and Zach and Josie and how they'd helped us have a super Christmas.

"I still don't like to look in the mirror much," I said with sort of a laugh, "but my body will grow and my hair will come back and my ears..." I shrugged. "Well, they'll still stick out, but Nava says my head will get bigger so they won't be noticed so much."

Joshua lifted his eyebrow as he waited for my *real* answer.

I took a breath. "What do I think of myself?" I kind of smiled at him. "I think... I think I like the person I'm becoming."

Then I started to get a little panicked. I knew I wouldn't have *The Prompter* anymore! Maybe never again. What was I going to do? That's why I was who I was! That's why I could do all I was doing!

He put his hand gently on my arm and shook his head. He was reading my mind again. "*The Prompter* is just that," he said quietly. "It just reminded you who you really are. You were able to do what you did because that's what you wanted. The strength and ability to do it was always within you. You know that now. You don't need to be reminded all the time anymore."

He was right.

I looked at him, and there seemed to be kind of a glow to him. Maybe it was just the way the light inside the car was hitting his face. But who was this man who had that amulet thing that helped me? And who seemed to be able to read my thoughts? And who was so generous with his money? I was pretty sure I would never really know.

Now, he seemed ready to go, but I had a question I needed to ask. And like always, he knew it before I asked it.

“You are thinking about death aren’t you?” he said.

I hung my head a little. “Yeah. About my twin sisters. About Nava’s mom and dad. About my sister, Ronette.”

“What did you want to know?” he asked.

I cleared my throat. “Is death... It isn’t the end is it?”

He gave me his special smile. “If it was, that would make our lives here kind of a waste wouldn’t it.”

“Yeah. It would.” I said.

Then I thought of what Nava said about being with her mother and father again. “Uh...when we die, do you think we’ll still be families like we’ve been here?”

“Would you like that?”

I kinda teared up and just nodded.

“Since we have families here, why wouldn’t we there?” he said. His eyes smiled, and he motioned for me to shut the door.

I did, and he waved to me as he drove off.

I watched until I couldn’t see his car anymore, then went back to selling my papers.

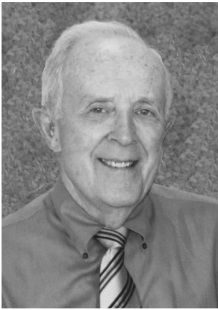
I had a lot to talk to Nava about.

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And to be transparent, I need to divulge that there is a healthy smattering of autobiography here. It is fiction, of course, but let's just say I *really* identify with Peter.

About the author



Steve has a seemingly never-ending supply of exciting and meaningful tales. From a small Idaho farm town to racially segregated St. Louis in the early 1950's, and from Australia to Romania he has lived in places where his adventures overflowed. While the characters and circumstances in his novels are fictional, his fascinating experiences and acquaintances have provided fuel for his mesmerizing stories.

He graduated from BYU in economics, received an MA degree in political behavior from Arizona State, and throughout his life has been a community and church volunteer. He is a poet, composes lyrics for children's songs and hymns, has written and published young adult and adult novels and inspirational non-fiction, and is a musical playwright. His wife, Joyce, and he are the parents of eight children and a never-ending supply of grandchildren.

He says one word describes his life: *Grateful*.

