

# And Then There's Hope

By Bill Judge

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Throwing his hands up in the air towards a grey splotched sky, a gangly long haired kid said, "Really, Finn? You've got to hit it into the Nazi's yard?" Another kid, about thirty yards behind him, dropped his baseball glove to the brown and green grass and bent over with his hands on his knees. They both stared at Finn.

"I sure didn't mean it," Finnegan 'the Finn' Hogan replied weakly. "The pitch was high and outside." He shrugged, with his baseball bat still in his left hand, and added, "And fast."

Buzz grinned at the compliment but said, "Ah, your grandma." He dropped his arms, "The pitch was perfect. I wish you'd give me one of those kinds of pitches."

Ignoring Buzz, Finn stared away over at Nagel the Nazi's yard. A sharp breeze stirred some of the dead leaves around behind the six foot grey wooden fence with the red rust chain link gate. The grey trees in the old man's yard still had a few straggler leaves hanging from the branches, but most of them lay on the ground, on and around the uncut weeds and brush that had grown wild over the summer. From where he stood, it looked like a disaster of a yard. Nobody took care of it. In fact, they've hardly ever seen old Nagel but, maybe, once or twice a year, stumbling around in his front and back yard, doing God knows what.

A tangle of weeds grew along the back of the fence and the area was littered with trash – brown bags, wrappers, discarded bottles and cans, and uncut grass and rush. A small pile of broken rock and brick had been lumped towards one end of the fence. It was just the kind of place that attracted snakes and rats.

"You gotta get it."

Finn looked back at Buzz, then turned toward the Nazi's yard again, way off, directly to the right, and blew out a breath. How did he hit it so far over there? And on the fly. It would've been a home run if he could have just straightened it out. A home run off Buzz. That would have been cool. A thin smile crossed his face and then escaped. He scanned the upper stories of the Nazi's house.

"He's probably looking out the windows right now," Finn said to no one in particular. Nagel was known to be mean and unfriendly. Nobody went to his house on Halloween except on a dare. And the ones that did go were considered stupid in the head. Best to just leave the crazy old man alone.

Finn had his back to the kids and stared even longer at the big, rundown, three story, unpainted, wooden frame house. A couple of dark windows could be seen through the barren oak and scraggly evergreen trees. A red brick chimney, capped by battered, blackened sheet metal, provided a backdrop to the swaying branches. Sticks and twigs were scattered on the black, shingled roof and a few clung to the gutters like skeletons wrapping their fingers around a dead man's neck.

Buzz waved to the kid out in the field. "May as well come in, JB. Numb nuts doesn't have the guts to get our ball." He hooked a thumb towards Finn.

JB ambled in and both Buzz and he walked and stood next to Finn.

"My ball," Finn corrected Buzz. "And I could just get another one, if I wanted. I might have one at home." He said it but he wasn't sure about that at all. In fact, he didn't know where he would have gotten an extra ball. The one they had been playing with was won with a bet at school.

Glancing up above the trees that surrounded the empty lot, Buzz said, "Even if you find another ball, it'll rain by the time you get back." They all heard a far away rumble and felt the wind kick up. "Besides, your mom will probably find a job for you if she hears you home."

Finn raised his eyebrows at that. It was true. They lived alone, just her and him, and she could always find something for him to do.

"You can't leave it." Buzz persisted.

"Why don't we all get it?" Finn asked, hopefully. He turned back to his friends.

"Not likely."

"Why not? You pitched it."

"You hit it," Buzz lashed right back. "How in the world could you hit it over there? That's darn near impossible." It had been hit at least two hundred feet on the fly and directly to the right of the batter. Finn shrugged his shoulders. "Muscles built on muscles, I guess."

"Between your ears," Buzz replied.

Nobody said anything and they just stood facing the tall fence and overgrown yard.

"Well, what's wrong with just going and getting it," asked JB. JB was a year younger than the other two.

"You wanna go?" asked Finn. "We could go together."

"Don't let him talk you into it, JB. He hit it. He's gotta do it. When you're a numb nut, you gotta pay numb nut prices."

Finn gave him a dirty look. "When you did it, we just left it there."

"Oh yeah, I knew you'd go there, chicken brains. I just knew it. First of all, it wasn't an almost new ball, it was a banged up Frisbee. And second, if you remember, you wanted me to throw it hard and high and that's what you got."

"I'm not in the NBA."

"You could have jumped for it."

"It was five feet over my head."

"No, not that much."

"Pretty much."

"Well, the wind got a hold of it."

"What's your point?" Finn asked. "It still went over my head."

"Quit fooling around. Just get the ball. We still got time to play."

Buzz towered over Finn and Finn turned back to the fence and looked it over again. The house was dark. The windows and doors were black. The yard was quiet. The fence was old and too tall to climb. But it had a gate.

"Go ahead. Are you chicken?" Buzz sneered at him.

Chicken. Big deal. Who cares what Buzz says. However resigned to the inevitable, Finn shook his head without answering. It wouldn't hurt to look at the gate, he thought. He took a few steps toward the yard and kept his eyes on the house. He remembered seeing something like it in the horror movies but, in this case, at least it was still day time. If he saw as much as a change in the shadows, he'd just call it off. He kept walking. Buzz and JB didn't move. They just watched.

Old man Nagel had been living alone there since he could remember. He was never, ever friendly. In fact, he seemed downright hostile when they passed his house on the front street. He'd seem to sneer when they were talking like he thought they were talking about him. Their friends, Sarah and Ashley, swore that he cursed them and it sounded something like German. After that, he became 'The Nazi' and they learned to walk on the other side of the street to avoid him.

One time, after playing in the common lot and going home, Finn had said something to his mom about old Nagel when he had seen him in his yard drinking whiskey from a bottle like the drunks on TV.

His mom, busy putting away groceries, turned to him with a jerk and snapped, "Stay away from him." She had barked so harshly it frightened him. Then she said something really strange and it stuck with him.

"Men like him are like your father. They never heal. They have no faith that things can get better. They just hurt and ache all the time and blame everybody else." She touched him under the chin. "But you and me, kiddo - we'll get better if we just stick together. Okay?"

Finn nodded.

He had no clue what hurt she meant until he had turned his ankle and it ached for a week. He still had a hard time figuring out what she really meant but the ache was pretty miserable. Somehow, though, he knew she didn't mean a sprained ankle.

Finn reached the wooden fence near the gate, bent his head toward the opening and peered through the chain links. He listened to the wind shaking the leaves on the ground and the bare branches above. Squirrels scampered up the trunks and limbs. Speckled grey grackles swooped from the eaves of the house to the trees. There was nobody outside and nobody at the windows, at least nobody that he could see. He scanned the yard for the ball and then realized how hopeless it would be to run in and grab it.

It was nowhere to be seen.

The old man probably had an acre lot and there wasn't a clear patch in the whole darn thing. The ball could be anywhere. Behind a tree, in the weeds, under the pine shrubs, hidden by the dead leaf piles and stray newspapers and dried twigs. Sniffing the air, he realized somebody was burning their yard leaves and he wished the old man was more normal. He chuckled at the thought of a normal Nazi, whatever that was, despite the hopelessness of getting his ball back.

"You going to go in or are you going to stand there like a dope?"

Finn heard Buzz and he ignored him. They had crept up closer behind him but he knew Buzz would never set foot in the yard. He just wanted to get him to do it. And despite all of his not wanting to do it, he might.

"Running out of time."

The wind whipped up, rattled the fence, and Finn wished he had worn his jacket. The day had started out warm enough for a sunny November weekend but had slid into grey. The clouds swirled overhead.

"You going?"

"I don't see it," Finn called back over his shoulder.

"I knew it. Chicken." Finn heard Buzz mumbled, presumably to JB.

A chain was wrapped around the gate and the fence post. He shook the gate to see if it had any give. The clanking startled a crow that flew up with a squawk from the leaves in the back of the yard to the top of a pine closer to the house. Finn glanced at it and then at the back door to make sure the noise didn't alert old man Nagel.

The chain eased a little. He reached down and played with it. It wasn't locked but it was too rusted to work loose and too hard to unwrap it. He managed to get a little slack in it and he pulled on it again. He thought he might be able to wriggle through.

He pushed the gate forward and snaked his body through the narrow opening, being careful to avoid getting hooked by the latch or chain. Because he had to wriggle back and forth, it sounded to him like a string of tin cans being dragged by a car. He tried to detect any movement from the house but nothing stirred. He wrangled himself from the gate and snuck forward. He picked up a fallen tree limb and snapped off some of the little twigs. It seemed straight enough for his needs. He had made himself a weapon and a tool.

Keeping himself hidden by the trees and shrubs from the peering eyes of the house, he scraped away the leaves on the ground with his foot and poked with the stick.

"What are you doing?" Buzz asked, still far away from the yard.

"Looking for it. Where'd it go?"

"How do I know?" Buzz called out as loud as he could.

Finn groaned. Of course, he thought, Buzz didn't care if old man Nagel suddenly jumped out of the bushes. "You're about as helpful as pimple on a first date." Finn grumbled. He was growing tired of Buzz's bullying.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

“Look under the bushes.”

“Gee, thanks.” He got down on his hands and knees. “I should look in your empty head.”

“What’s that?”

“Hah,” was all Finn answered.

He twisted his way through the scraping, scratching pine brush and finally got inside the tall overgrown bush where he could halfway sit up on top of the dried dropped pine needles that had gathered in thick piles over the years.

“See anything?”

Finn shook his head and said nothing. Buzz was a pain. The ground underneath the pine was damp and cold. Moisture from the earth seeped through the needles and into the knees of his jeans. Its wicking spread around a larger area of his pants and caked the palms of his hands with muddy debris. He snaked through the branches and swiped with his stick. A half a dozen dark walnut brown beetles scurried between the disturbed leaves just to disappear again. A reddish brown centipede crawled over his free hand. Disgusted, he shook it off and looked around and under his other hand for any other insects. He jabbed with the stick.

With the sun hidden by the clouds, there was barely enough light to see anything further out in the pine. He dismissed any thought of creepy, crawling, poisonous spiders and inched forward under a couple of branches. Reaching out, he felt a cold, wet metal object that was buried under the needles. He pulled and dragged it back. Surprisingly, it was an old yellow Tonka dump truck.

What a surprise, in old man Nagel’s yard! It was similar to the one he had played with when he was a kid but it was heavier. It had a thicker gauge steel and solid rubber wheels. Tilting it on its side, water drained from the truck’s open windows. He pushed it to the side and swung the stick. He stirred up a hard rubber ball. It was dark green, the kind a dog would play with. It had a hole in the top and the little metal bell was still inside.

He rattled it next to his ear. It didn’t make much of a noise. Something muted the bell. He turned it over and let a couple of drops of sludge drip out. He tossed it outside the opening where he had crawled in. He pushed the truck that way, too. He kept swinging the stick and feeling with his hand but nothing else turned up. His heart sunk. He was running out of time.

His baseball wasn’t under the bush and there were so many other shrubs and trees. He couldn’t look everywhere and he didn’t have all day. He had proven himself and that’s all that he really wanted to do. He just wanted to prove that he wasn’t afraid to go into the yard like some other people. He turned his head back at Buzz for a second. Buzz would have nothing to say.

Ball or no ball, it was only a matter of time until the old man spotted him. He backed out of the bush. Almost completely out, something slammed viciously against the house and the winds shook the trees and tall brush.

“What was that?” Finn called out to Buzz.

“Don’t know for sure. I can’t see the back porch. Might be the wind banging something on the house. You better get out of there.”

“Yeah.”

He had just extricated himself from the bush when he heard a loud voice bellow, “Hey, what are you doing back there?” Another heavy bang clapped through the air. “Darn it. Darn door blew right out of my hand.”

A voice carried across the yard. The crazy old guy was talking to himself, Finn thought.

Surprised, but then, not surprised, Finn stared at Buzz as Buzz took off with JB across the field. He debated whether to stay and hide, or run. He could jump back under the bush and the old man would be none the wiser. Or he could run. Fight or flight. Better now than never.

He dashed for the gate.

“Hey, you, kid!”

Finn never looked back as he pushed against the gate and slithered through and took off across the lot cussing Buzz under his breath. Buzz could have stayed. He could have warned him. But Finn knew Buzz didn't really care. It wasn't his ball in that yard. He just wanted to goad him into getting it. It was a power play. Finn wasn't sure who won and he knew that was something worth thinking about.

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Nagel watched a slip of a kid run to the back of his yard and push on his gate. He must have wriggled his skinny little body through to the other side because he saw a bob of tangled black hair bounce once on his side of the fence and then on the other side. And then the kid disappeared.

He wondered what the hell they were up to. Kids were nothing but trouble. They were always throwing trash in the front yard. Yelling and laughing on their way home from school. More than once he wished they'd find another way home and he growled that wish again. All of them were delinquents and trespassers, given half a chance and, by God, right in his own back yard, there were kids plucking that chance. He had better investigate.

Taking a deep breath and then a swig from his bottle of Jim Beam, he clenched his polished wooden cane and took a step across the porch. He set the bottle down on an empty metal chair. Holding steady against the already opened, torn screen door, he dropped one leg down and descended the first step. He twisted his body the other way and grabbed onto a wobbly rail. He knew he had drunk too much to free step it even with the cane. He glanced back at the bottle with red rimmed, blood shot eyes to be sure the bottle was safe. He'd want his baby back again when he was done.

Winded, he descended again and then sat on the lower steps and heaved a sigh and then lifted himself up using the guard rail and gripping the curved handle of the cane. He could see the top of the gate once he stood upright and he didn't like that it was open enough for somebody to squeeze through. He didn't want nobody in his yard. They could just stay the hell out.

He thought about getting his gun but knew from his military days, in his condition, that it would be dangerous for him to have a loaded weapon in his hands. He could end up shooting anything - the perp, himself, or one of the houses across the lot that he couldn't see. Can't just discharge a weapon any more without attracting attention. At one time he had friends in high places, at least in the military, but, he wasn't sure he knew any of the cops. They were gone. Everybody was all gone. He wanted a drink. Using his cane, Nagel negotiated his way through the brush and reached the gate. He gazed out at the empty lot to the left and right. Satisfied that the kids had run away, he checked the entry.

The post was solid but the chain had been worked loose. There was a lock on it but it only went through one link. He pulled on it and jiggled it, knowing it wouldn't come undone. Can't lock the fence that way, he thought to himself. It was too rusted to open any longer and refit it, even if he had the key and a can of WD40.

He rubbed at his back and felt for the bigger divot in the skin. He knew it wouldn't help to rub it, not really. The pain never went away and he knew, if he rubbed a finger in there wrong, the pain would make him jump or fall to the ground. It was like playing with a live wire and it was best to just let it alone. But it hurt. That sum of a gum did hurt.

Rewrapping the chain tightly between the fence post and chain link, he made a mental note to find a lock in the basement and secure the whole thing. He shook the gate and it barely moved a half an inch. That was good enough.

He scanned the lot again and noticed the houses across the way. Back when, they were all going to be neighbors but he didn't know anybody any more. He shook the gate again, grunted, gave one more look around and headed back to the house.

Up on the porch and grabbing the screen door spring, he pulled it to himself, closed the door and locked it with the little hook latch. A part of the lower screen flapped in the wind. He promised himself that

he'd fix it one day when he got his energy. Which reminded him to pick up his bottle and take another quick nip - just to get his juices flowing and dull the pain.

Walking through the dark kitchen, he ignored the pile of dishes and used pots on the stove. He continued through the dining room where his disinterest prevented him from noticing the coordinated mahogany china cabinet, separate hutch and buffet, and covered table and chairs.

Once in the library, he sat in his worn recliner and poured himself a drink. He swallowed the burning liquid and sneered.

The TV was still on and still broadcasting a commercial. It was almost as if he hadn't left to check out the bang of the door in the back of the house.

He watched the cable news and listened to the rumble of the thunder as the rain eventually rolled in. Lightning flashed behind the thick curtains that kept his room almost impenetrable to the outside world. The chyron at the bottom of the TV screen predicted possible tornadoes later in the night and urged the residents in various counties, including his, to prepare to seek shelter.

"Shelter this!" he slurred out loud and held up his glass. He still had a couple of hours and enough whiskey in the bottle to wait it out.

He drank and drank until his chin hit his chest and he couldn't raise his liquor to his lips. My God, why, he thought. On a crooked, rainy night just like this, he had lost it all. Why? Twenty years later and he still didn't know.

He closed his eyes. With slobber oozing from the corner of his mouth, two tears ran down either side of his face. To hell with it. To hell with it all.

## 2

A year after 9/11, almost twenty years earlier, he had just returned back to the base in Afghanistan from a top secret mission. It had lasted several months and the communications were restricted to abort only.

He had been awake for over twenty four hours when he was summoned to General Briggs' command center. They had gone through the first rounds of debriefing on their return flight and he knew, under the circumstances, that General Briggs wouldn't ask for him without a good reason. He wondered what was so important that it couldn't wait to go through his own CO. It could only mean more action.

After reporting to the general's aide, he was shown into the office. It was two in the morning and Briggs looked every bit like his nickname, Brig Iron. He had a black flat top hair cut, a chiseled chin, a shaved shadow, and square shoulders with a single star on each. Nagel saluted and was returned with the general's salute.

"At ease, Captain," the general said as he walked from behind the desk.

Nagel relaxed but then tensed at the movement of the general towards him. There was something in his eyes.

"I've got bad news, Mike. I wish we could have told you sooner."

Nagel's heart instantly stopped and he didn't fathom why. He found it hard to breathe. Panic ran up the sides of his neck through his veins and gripped his throat, choking him, racing to his brain. He tried to cough to start breathing just as he was taught.

"Your wife, your kids."

Oh my God. Noooo! His brain screamed at him.

"Mike."

He sat.

"I'm sorry. I don't know how to say this."

Nagel groaned. He dreaded every breath and every word.

"A car wreck. They're, they're, they died."

Every syllable. He sat numb and didn't breathe. He couldn't breathe until he had to breathe and finally he asked, "When? How?"

"She was driving. Somebody ran a red light and they were killed."

"Who?"

The general just stared at him with an open face. "Mike, I'm sorry," he said and shook his head.

"Who was killed?"

Briggs tilted his head ever so slightly and then almost whispered, "Your wife and the kids, James and June."

Nagel closed his eyes. He couldn't think. He couldn't process the news. He had to fly home right then and make sure they were okay. They'd be alright. If he had wings. If he could only be there. It's ot his wife and kids. It had to be somebody else.

"It can't be. They were okay."

"I'm so sorry."

Mike sat and twisted his hands. A thousand thousand thoughts ran through his brain but nothing made sense. "The other driver. What'd he say? What happened?"

The general cleared his throat. "From my understanding, the other driver was killed, too."

Mike blinked and gulped.

"I see," he said, but that was a lie. He didn't see or understand anything. "Can I go home? I've got to see them." Nagel pleaded.

The general's face screwed up into a question and then he said, "Mike, I'm sorry, you can't see them."

"I've got to see them."

"You can't."

"They'll be alright."

"Mike."

"I just need to get there."

"Mike. Wait."

Nagel stopped and looked up at the general.

"You can't see them, Mike." Briggs spoke slowly. "It's too late. They've already been buried. The funeral. They."

"What?"

"We couldn't pull you out."

"What? Why not?"

"The mission you were on. You know this. Top secret. We'd have blown everyone's cover. We couldn't get you out. All the planning, the entire operation."

"What the, when? When did it happen?"

"The day after your CO got the 'All Go'."

Nagel bobbed his head. He understood. All Go. Airtight. Nothing in, nothing out. That was part of the risk but nobody thinks something like that would happen. He always, always thought about the danger of IED's and fire fights and the possibility that he might die.

Never did he think about his wife and kids dying while he was away. And that it happened months ago. He couldn't wrap his mind around it. He had planned to call them first thing in the morning. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real. A car wreck? All of them?

The general half sat on his desk and let Nagel sit and think.

Nagel cupped his nose with his hands and drew a breath. That was right before Easter. His brain just skipped around. Jenny. Blue jeans. Spring vacation. She would have taken them to a church service.

Maybe they were praying for him. Pray? They were just kids. How could God take them in the middle of a prayer? He looked up at the general.

"Who took care of the funeral? What about the house? Who was there?" Mike dropped his head. "Good God, I can't think."

"Mike, it's too much. Slow down." The general stood up and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm not sure what was done. Your family was involved, I was told. Your father, I think." He walked over to the desk and looked at his computer. "Yes, your father."

Nagel nodded in agreement. His father. Of course. "My brother? Was he there?"

"I don't know, Mike."

"He lives there."

"I didn't know that."

"Jenny had no family," Nagel said, absently, "except for me and the kids." He looked around the room at nothing in particular. "And, most of the time, she didn't have me," Nagel trailed off.

"Don't Mike," the general cautioned.

Nagel stood up. "I'd like to go home, sir, if that's possible."

"Sure, Mike, sure. I'm very sorry." The general reached out his hand. "I started that. Picker has been working on it. He'll finish the arrangements and call for you."

"As soon as possible?"

"Of course, Mike. He got right on it. Again, I am truly sorry."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Nagel saluted him and left the office. The next day he flew out of Afghanistan and, eventually, back to DC. From there, he made his way home, or what was left of it, with another, shorter flight, and a long drive in a rental car.

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Nagel squinted through the afternoon sun that shone over the big oak in back. The burst of light outlined the right side of his quiet Victorian home. He opened the driver's door, pulled a small bag across the seat and got out. He placed the travelling bag on top of the car, clicked the trunk release on the key fob and took out his other, larger, bags.

Standing at the curb, Nagel stared at the grey, unlit house and unfriendly windows. The upper shades were pulled down. The lower blinds were three quarters closed and then the background was further masked by lacy curtains. He picked up his bags and strode to the door. He turned the knob and discovered it was locked. Of course, it was locked.

He had tried calling his father before he had rented the car but he had gotten no answer. He left a message and told his father that he was going to the house.

In the fall of 2002, neither Nagel nor his father had a cell phone. Nagel had an Army issued pager and he left his pager number on his father's answering machine. Knowing how old folks were, he wasn't too sure his father would listen to the messages.

Dropping his bags, Nagel walked around back to a down spout and lifted a supporting brick. Underneath, in a blue Band Aid box, he picked out a spare key. Using the key, he opened the front door and walked in.

He wanted to feel their arms around him, even if he knew they weren't there.

Instead, he was hit with a musty smell. The daylight that poured in with him showed a room full of swirling, darting dust. Nothing had been touched in four months. There were no kids, no laughter, no Jenny.

He flicked the foyer light switch and nothing happened. He flicked it again with the same result. He scowled. Maybe it was the bulb but he figured the electricity had been turned off. He tried a lamp and got nothing.

If he was lucky, somebody had simply turned the master switch off in the basement breaker box. If he was unlucky, and he usually was, somebody had called the utilities and had everything disconnected. Getting the utility company to turn it back on would be a hassle. He couldn't handle hassles.

Remembering where Jenny kept the candles, he slid open a side table drawer and was able to find a pack of matches and a few white candles. He wouldn't need them in the afternoon light but knew he

would need them later when he went into the basement. He opened the front and side blinds. If nothing else, maybe the light would scare away the fusty smell.

He wondered about the refrigerator. If his father had taken care of things, then the fridge would be empty. But. But if his brother had a hand in it, there would be nothing but a big mess waiting for him.

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He brought his bags with him to the staircase and remembered a previous Christmas morning and the thump of children's feet as they ran down the steps and jumped onto the landing.

Two years prior, he had been in bed with his back to Jenny. She lay under the covers with him as she faced the doors. He felt her stir. He knew she was awake. As soon as the kids opened their eyes, she would be awake. She was like a radar. He rolled over and put his arm around her just before she could slide out from under the covers.

"Merry Christmas," he whispered.

She tried to wriggled from underneath him but couldn't. So she giggled, turned to him, smiled, and said, "Merry Christmas. Not much sleep for you, soldier."

He had just returned home the night before, on Christmas Eve night. "Not much for you, either." He gave her a short kiss and they both got up.

He thought she was the prettiest girl in town, almost twenty years after they met.

Nagel lifted his bags. That memory of Christmas fluttered away like smoke.

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Nagel climbed the treads of the main staircase and passed Jimmy's room. Even if he could see in the dark, he didn't have the heart to open his son's door and look in. He stood outside. He wasn't with Jenny when his son was born.

She had given birth at the LeJeune base hospital a few days before he returned from an overseas deployment. The other military wives brought her home. They helped her and the baby settle in. It was a way of life with the wives and they understood or so they said, when the husbands were around. He thought he understood it back then but wasn't so sure any more. He put his hand up on the door post but didn't touch his son's knob.

He paused when he passed Juney's room. Tears welled up in his eyes but he didn't open the door to his little girl's room either. Not yet.

His breath came in short pants. All of the battles and danger and death in the wars he had fought hadn't prepared him for death in his own house.

He stood outside the master bedroom door. He looked down the hall, past the spare bedroom and bath to the secondary set of stairs that led up to the third level and down to the kitchen. He turned his attention back to the door and stared at the knob. In a way, he knew it was like a live grenade but worse than any grenade he had previously encountered. More crippling. More damaging. More capable of ripping him up from head to gut.

He set a bag to the floor and wrapped his hand carefully around the handle. Although there was really no question, he questioned if he should open the door. Could he? Could he deal with what was coming? He twisted the knob, opened the door to their bedroom and his head exploded into a million bits.

He smelled her instantly. Oh my goodness, she was there. His brain melted, his stomach fluttered, his groin tightened. His chest heaved.

He dropped his bags and frantically worked the wall switch. But the lights wouldn't flip on. He forgot about the breaker switch.

She was there! He waved in front of himself, grasping. It was still dark but she was there! He knew it. He could feel her presence. He could swear to it from the hairs on the back of his neck to the tingle of his arms. He could smell her as if she was right next to him.

All he had to do was touch her. Why couldn't he see her? He rushed over to the windows and threw open the curtains and the late afternoon sunlight burned through the slice of clear glass and blinded

him. But not so blind that he didn't know she was there. He reached out to hold her but she didn't come. In that immeasurable split second, the same kind of split second that created the earth, that split the atom, that irradiated the sun, that sent a million billion stars spewing across the universe in a Big Bang, he couldn't understand an even greater mystery. She was there.

Why couldn't he touch her? There was no doubt she was there. Why didn't she let him hold her? In the field, he had thought, if he had died, he'd be reunited with the ones he loved in the after life but, what if?

What if he died and he could never see them again? Was that what awaited him?

"Jenny," he called. He called again and then yelled, "Jenny!"

He panicked. They didn't teach him how to avoid this kind of panic. "Jenny, come here!"

He had pulled the pin on the grenade when he turned the knob and it blew up in his hand.

Tears rolled down his cheeks and he rubbed at them with the corner of his knuckle, brushing through his day old bearded stubble.

His eyes adjusted, he breathed deep and he swirled in circles in the room looking for her. Her scent was everywhere like a beautiful, shiny iridescent ghost.

He got dizzy and disoriented. He slid with his back against a wall, then sat on the floor, sobbing. He wrapped his arms around his knees and laid his head against them and bobbed and moaned as his body shook. He tried to take a deep breath. He sucked for air. He couldn't breathe or, felt like he couldn't breathe. He tried again and managed to get some into his lungs.

He sat for the longest time.

The blackness of nothingness became the greyness of almost as he came back to consciousness.

He couldn't get enough air although he knew it was because he couldn't get enough of her. He panted and almost hyperventilated and tried to calm down.

Even though he couldn't get enough air, he swore he would never want to open the window because he was afraid he'd lose her scent. Still dizzy from spinning and breathing like a crazy man, he sat on the bed and a new waft of her puffed up from the bed, and assailed him like a cloud bomb. He was willing to die right then. Oh yeah, he was willing to die.

He lay back, grabbed her pillows, hugged them, smelled them and closed his eyes.

When he woke, the sun had almost gone like the glimpse of a loved one floating over a hill. The shadows of the window dressings faded into the darkness of the room. He could still smell her, and sense her but only if he held her pillows away from his face and then buried his face in them. He did it again and again until his arms were tired.

As much as he wanted her back in the room with him, he knew he couldn't keep doing that. As he lay with his head on her pillow, he retraced his steps up to their room in his mind, remembering the musty smell, the dust, Jimmy and June's rooms, the staircase, and, then randomly, he began to wonder if he had closed the front door.

He raised himself on one arm and lay on his side. Once more, he probed their bedroom for just a glimpse of her but she wouldn't show herself. He lay back down with his nose in the pillow until her fragrance faded again. He slipped an arm across the bed where she used to sleep but she had gone. With a reluctant groan, he slid his legs to the side of the bed and sat up. He had to close the front door.

He stood up and stepped to the hall. He looked at the kids' rooms.

There were worse things to face than going into their bedroom. He had to go into their rooms but he didn't want to even think about it. He had hoped she would have helped him through the loss of the kids like she did so many things. But he was alone. Jenny. Where did she go?

He stood outside June's door and reached for the knob but stopped with his hand just an inch away.

Jenny was supposed to help him and she didn't. He was just a soldier and not equipped for heartache.

She didn't even show herself in their own room, in their own bed. No. No. No.

How could she hold back? How could it happen? She should help him with the kids.

He withdrew his hand and pushed away as he hurried past June's door and then past Jimmy's and on down the hall in the dark until he descended the stairs.

He wouldn't go in their rooms without her. He needed some sign that she cared. That she still cared and didn't blame him.

Did she blame him? Did she care?

When he reached the bottom of the steps, he tried to relax. He tried to convince himself that she did care for him. That she loved him. He told himself that his mind was messing with him and playing tricks on him. But he wanted a sign. Something. Anything. He had her smell but then it faded so fast. He needed something more.

He decided to continue to check on the rest of the house. Not the rooms upstairs, but the rest of it. Despite his feeling, the front door was closed and the front window provided enough light for him to find the candles. He lit one and stuffed his pockets with a couple more.

The creaky old basement stairs were always a concern and he wished that he had redone them, but he immediately wondered, when? He was always gone. A shaft of guilt pierced him like an arrow.

He sat.

He was always gone. He either volunteered or was selected. It was always some essential mission that he couldn't talk about. Jenny, he thought, became suspicious of his absences or, if not suspicious, just resentful. He wasn't sure. They didn't have the time to talk. He had been absent just too darn much. And the kids grew up too fast. Did she hate him for that? For not knowing what he was doing? Did she trust him at all?

He couldn't divulge any secrets. He had gotten used to holding things inside, except he didn't always want to hold everything inside. Like his love for Jenny and the kids.

But they were dead. All the love in the world wouldn't bring them back.

The flame of the candle flickered as if influenced by a moment's breeze or maybe, he thought, a spirit. He didn't really believe in that kind of thing. Not really. But it crossed his mind. The flame sputtered and almost went out.

He looked for an open window or door and then saw that his hand was shaking. He leaned against the white stone basement wall to compose himself.

Whatever had just happened, he thought, the breeze wasn't the sign that he wanted. He wanted more than a flickering candle. He wanted them to know he loved them. He wanted a real sign.

He breathed heavily and gathered his thoughts. He had gone downstairs for something. But what? Oh yeah, the circuit breakers. He came down to turn on the electricity. One thing at a time he told himself. The flame sputtered again and came back to life.

He crossed the floor and opened the grey metal breaker box and lifted the candle. The main switch was off. So. It must have been his dad who closed the place up, he reflected. Thank goodness. He flipped the switch and some of the basement lights turned on.

His cocaine sniffing brother would have just turned off the lights and left.

He surveyed the room and most of it was familiar to him. There was the ironing board set up by the furnace. The boxes in the corner. A pile of old clothes underneath the laundry chute. A box of Jimmy's sports items with inline rollerblades, skates, a couple of hockey sticks, baseball bats, baseballs, pucks. A tennis racket was set to the side. A tin tube of tennis balls with 'June' magic marked on the side.

Maybe, he half-grinned, Jenny wrote that to keep Jimmy from stealing the balls to play fuzzi ball or street hockey with them.

He remembered that Jenny had mentioned in a letter that Jimmy's latest craze was hockey. He touched one of the sticks and then a bat. He tried to imagine Jimmy running around, swinging his stick, yelling, "G-o-o-o-a-a-!" And realizing he had never heard him, never saw him, play hockey.

He didn't know June played tennis. What was she like? Was the racket too big for her? When did she learn? Did she enjoy it? How well did she play? And, even worse, who taught her? He picked up the

racket and felt a buzz in his hand and wrist as if some electrical spark tingled up his arm. Feeling the connection, he swung it lightly, imagined her running to the net, grim and all business at eight years old, holding her racket above the net, and waiting for the volley. He would have loved to have seen her in her white oxford shirt and shorts. June would have dressed the part, he smiled. He swung it again and set it down.

He grabbed a Wayne Gretzky hockey stick and leaned on it. God, he would have given anything to see them play hockey or tennis, or anything – what did they draw, what did they sing, what did they say or laugh about? How fast did they run? Who cares how fast they ran? Just to see them. Anything at all. Just one more time. Just one more time.

He dragged the side of his wrist across the bottom of his nose and heaved a sigh.

Was a man's hell the desperate want of a good and decent love?

Lifting the lid of the washing machine and looking in, he blanched. He forgot about hell. The tub was full of towels that were covered in a dry, black mold. He'd have to pull them out and throw them away.

He walked over to his workbench and saw that somebody had used his tools. Pulling on the cord over the bench, the fluorescent box lights flickered. He straightened up the hammer, screw drivers and other miscellaneous tools.

The light pulsed, unsteady, and unable to make up its mind to stay on. He knocked on the ballast with a ball peen hammer and the lights steadied.

His drill was still plugged in and fitted with a three eighth inch bit. Squeezing the trigger, he listened to the whirl and then set it down. He could smell the sawdust that somebody had left on the table.

Probably Jenny. He took a pinch and lifted it to his nose. Although the sawdust scent was pleasant, he couldn't smell her any longer. Disappointed, he dusted off his hands on the back of his pants.

He removed the drill bit, placed it in the case, round up the cord and stored the entire set under the bench. Lifting a corn whisk brush from a hook, he swept off the table with a swish, swish into a wastebasket.

Satisfied, he pulled the string on the lights over the workbench, shuffled over to the washing machine, all the while looking at the last little clues left by his kids and wife. He noticed the black tape around the handle of a hockey stick standing upright next to the water heater and then saw a roll of his cloth electrical tape on top of the heater. He picked it up and walked it back over to the work bench.

He yanked on the light cord again. That was when he saw the empty two prong electrical plug box on the floor next to the side of the bench. Jenny must have replaced a plug. It was something that he had always done for her. He forced himself to quit thinking. He picked up the package and threw it in the trash.

Loading a laundry basket with the dry but moldy towels, he hauled them upstairs to be thrown out. Crossing the dining room floor, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the liquor cabinet with the etched glass window casing on top and the scrolled wooden doors on the base. The bottles were stored behind the doors. He wondered if she still had any of his favorite whiskey. He hadn't had a drink in a long time.

After dumping the towels in the bin, he walked back to the cabinet and checked the liquor supply. He still had some Jameson Black Barrel Reserve. It was just what he needed. He poured a tumbler, and then another.

Flipping through old photos, he drank until the windows darkened.

He woke up the next morning on the family room couch. A different bottle of whiskey sat on the coffee table, almost empty. He didn't remember if he had opened a new bottle or if he had continued on an opened bottle. His head was swimming and was no help to him. Everything was numb, which was good and bad. But mostly bad. Feeling guilty, he couldn't remember the last time he had ever drunk like that. His tongue felt like a dirty piece of cotton wadding. His nose was stopped up and it wouldn't clear up when he tried to blow it into a Kleenex. Stumbling into the hall bathroom, he lifted his red eyes to the

mirror and he didn't like the man that stared back. He looked gaunt and gray and dead around the edges.

He turned the faucets and listened to the water splash in the basin. He leaned over it and the drops splattered up on his skin. Then he threw the water on his face and looked again. It didn't help.

He had packed a toothbrush but that was in the upstairs bedroom's bathroom. He didn't want to go up there again. At least, not yet. She wouldn't want to see him in the condition he was in. Opening the medicine cabinet, he pulled out a tube of toothpaste and squeezed some on his finger. Using just his finger, like he had so many times in the field, he cleaned his mouth as best as he could. He rinsed. And splashed some more water on his face. He looked up.

He didn't like the look.

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Working his way back to the family room, he was tempted to drink again, to take just one drink, to chase away the dull, mind numbing hangover that haunted him but he walked past it. He needed to find out where they buried his family. He had no idea. He was disgusted with himself. He had relied on his father to call him and give him all of the information but he knew a real husband and father would have found out right away.

Looking up some numbers in the Yellow Pages, he called a couple of the local funeral parlors but they didn't have any records. Finally, he called the local newspaper. They were able to find the obituary and the cemetery.

He cleaned up one more time. He showered and shaved and used his own toothbrush. His nose and sinuses were still stuffy. Although he couldn't smell her any longer, he wanted to look his best when he went to see her at the cemetery. Still slim and in shape from active duty, he pulled a pair of slacks from a hanger in the closet and tried them on. They fit. He added a dark sport coat, white shirt and conservative tie. Stopping at the florist, he bought a bouquet. He drove out to the cemetery where the office located the plot for him.

He walked slowly to the gravesite, scanning the names on the headstones until he found their grave. He also counted the stones - twelve back, away from the road.

His family had been buried together in one plot and had a single sloping grey granite stone. The stone itself was rough on the three exposed sides. It was eighteen inches high with a polished, slanted face. He paused, with his hands folded over his waist, and read the inscriptions. 'Jennifer Nagel 1960 - 2002'. It had been chiseled in an arch, with flowers and leaves and little cherub like angels on the borders. 'James Nagel 1991 - 2002' and 'June Nagel 1994 - 2002' were etched a little lower and to either side of Jenny. He dropped to his knees and bent forward, holding the flowers over his heart with one hand and onto the stone with the other.

He dropped the flowers in front of the marker.

He leaned forward and traced their names with his finger.

He remembered everything he could possibly remember about her, and the kids. He spoke out loud. He shifted. Accustomed to maintaining a position in the field, he never left. He waited after he spoke, just to give her a chance. He'd think some more and then recite a prayer or a story. Or something about him. He knelt and sat there all day until a groundskeeper came to him at sunset and told him that they were closing. He nodded.

Jenny hadn't said a word to him. He had talked to her but she hadn't said anything back, not a single word. He told her about his last mission, why it was so secret. He told Jimmy and June how much he loved them and missed them and wished he could see them play. How he would give them anything if they would just come back.

He asked God why.

Why?

The breeze blew. The birds flew. The sun went up and it went down. He heard nothing. It was time to pick up the pieces and leave.

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He only drank a little that night. Just enough to pass out and block out any dreams.

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The next morning, he cleaned up and, feeling shaky, he went out for breakfast. Filled with bacon and eggs and several decent cups of coffee, he drove over to the police station. From the lot, he called his father again and left another message, then, he went inside and asked for help at the front desk. They sent out a balding, middle aged guy with black horned rimmed glasses. Dressed in a white JC Penney's shirt and half-tied tie, the consummate image of mediocrity shuffled out of the offices and greeted him with an extended hand.

His heart sunk. If Deputy Dog had held out a paw, he would be no more disappointed.

"I'm Sergeant Sain. Mr. Nagel, how can I help you?"

Nagel finished his once over. He tried to think of some positive points. The man seemed pleasant enough. At one time, he might have been in shape. But desk work and Dunkin Donuts had added a lot of mileage.

He wanted to give the detective the benefit of the doubt despite his ho-hum appearance and his last name. 'Was he Sergeant Sane or Insane?' Nagel stopped himself. He knew he was stuffed full of the special kind of cynicism that only a career in the Special Forces could give and he really didn't want to go there. A slow burning hangover had made him extra sardonic and he had to guard against it.

He realized the sergeant had risen through the ranks of a good sized city police department so he had probably seen his own share of tough times - enough to make his pleasant appearance a sincere and polite effort on his part.

Nagel tapped the brakes on his impulses and explained his circumstances.

"So you want to see the file? We don't usually do that," Sain replied. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," Nagel replied. "If you could just let me look at the file."

"We don't do that."

"But," Nagel tried to object.

Sain held up his hand.

"But I don't have any information at all. It's my wife and kids." Nagel pleaded. He shifted his stance, not trying to intimidate him but to persuade him. "I was deployed overseas and off-limits when they died. I don't know anything."

Sain gave him a glance up and down. "Unreachable, huh? Navy? On a ship?"

"No. Special Forces. Recon."

Raising his eyebrows, the sergeant regarded him for a moment, and tapped his thigh. "Recon, huh?" He added, "Wait here. Let me check something."

Ten minutes later, Sain had returned, wearing his sportscoat. His tie was properly tied. He carried a manila folder. "How about this? Let's go look at the scene of the accident. Okay?"

"Yes, thank you."

"We'll drive over there and I'll explain what we think happened."

Nagel assented.

The sergeant drove across several large streets, keeping quiet, and then down a two lane avenue.

"Up here," Sain said, as he slowed down. "See this?" he asked, as he crossed over the top of a hill and started to descend. "It was raining and we think she was driving at the speed limit as she came over the hill. That's a little fast in the rain, as you'll see. But then, seeing the water, she slowed way down, suddenly, right at the intersection."

The words came out staccato as Sain twisted around to both look at the road and set the scene for Nagel. He pointed ahead. It was a throughway for them but a stop sign was placed on each side of an

intersecting street. "It was raining pretty good that night. The water pooled at the bottom, see here?" The road had a slight depression. "So she slowed. And see the tracks? The train tracks?" He motioned up another half a block.

A set of rails rode on a crushed grey cinder stone incline, which contributed to the depression. "There was a train that passed around then. We looked it up. She might have heard it. Maybe." Sain paused and restarted. "It might have already been there but we think it wasn't. Not yet. I doubt if the crossing signal had even been activated. So she might not have even known about the tracks. And the other guy might not have seen the stop."

"Why?"

"The other guy, the other guy," Sain repeated himself, pulled over and pointed to the opposite side. "See that stop sign? There was a van parked to the side in front of the sign. We think it blocked the other driver's view."

Nagel was still thinking about the train.

Sain looked at him and continued, "See how the train runs parallel to his street? But then you got a curve on this street before you cross it?" His arm moved across their field of vision in a straight line.

"Yeah."

"We think a train was coming back there and he knew it or he heard it and was trying to beat it."

Nagel got out of the car and walked up the street to the sign on their side. Sain watched him from the driver's seat.

After checking for cars, Nagel walked into the intersection and looked up where his wife and kids would have come down the hill. A cold November wind blew into his eyes. He rubbed at them and squeezed the tears out. He sniffed and took another look.

Sain watched him closely.

Nagel saw the dip in the road at the intersection and figured out where she might have braked. The street would have been filled with water. Of course she would have slowed down suddenly, right in the middle of the intersection.

He looked down the street where the other car would have been speeding to beat a train. He factored in the rain and the dark of the night. He put himself in the other car. The guy would have wanted to cross the tracks before the train, rather than sit in the rain. Windshield wipers flapping. Who knows how far back the train was? In the other guy's mind, it probably was far enough away for him to speed and still make it. He didn't see the stop sign. He might have slowed down. Just not enough. He didn't see Jenny's car. He probably thought all was clear.

He had been out in the field many times in weather like that, invading a compound. Water gets in your eyes, in your gear, smears your glasses and windows, roads are wet, things are slick. You're moving fast, you're mind is on something else. And people die.

Nagel saw it all. Jenny practically stopped in the puddle. The other guy was speeding through the stop sign, seeing neither the sign nor Jenny as she rolled up. All because of the van and the train and the rain and the way people are when they are in a hurry. He might have had time to hit the brakes. But not enough time to matter.

She was a sitting duck.

Damn.

The cop had gotten out of the car and leaned with his back to it. His arms were folded. He watched Nagel's slow methodical pace as he pieced the scene together.

Nagel glanced over at him, walked away from him, back over to the opposite side of the road. He picked up a small broken piece of red plastic. It was the sparkly kind that came from a busted red tail light. He didn't know if it was from his wife's car or it even came from their accident. Maybe. He slipped it into his pocket. It was all he had from that night. It was all he was ever going to get.

Nagel walked back to the cop's car.

“Seen enough?” Sain asked.

“Yeah,” Nagel replied. He walked to the passenger side of the car. “I’d still like to see the files.”

“I don’t recommend it.”

Nagel nodded. They both got in and sat down.

“Not something you’ll ever forget,” Sain said with his hand on the folder.

“I don’t want to,” Nagel said in a hushed voice.

Sain bent his head and nudged the report towards him.

They sat in the car as Nagel read through the file and looked at the pictures. He looked at his mangled wife and kids. He didn’t recognize them with the gashes, cuts and blood. He had seen plenty of bodies like that in the war zone. Real bodies, real blood, real death. He sighed and tilted a typewritten page towards him with a finger.

“Report says there was a dog with them,” he said, without raising his head. He dropped the page and continued reading.

“Yeah,” Sain said.

“No pictures of it.”

“No, I guess the photographer didn’t see a need.”

“Yeah,” Nagel thumbed through the pages and then shrugged, “I guess he’s right.” After reading the last page, he handed the report back to the sergeant. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Sain looked at Nagel’s impassive face. Knowing the man had a military background, he thought it was curious that his file didn’t list exactly what he was or what he did.

He figured Nagel was a secret. He had heard of guys like him but never met them. He had always heard they were tough, a special breed. He guessed they were right. They were a special breed, the Special Forces.

Nagel had just viewed some of the worst pictures in the department’s files without so much as a flinch. As a cop, he had handled a few cases where an entire family had died but, usually, they all died. He never had a family member review a file like that. He would have bet the house that they would have thrown up. Nagel never showed any emotion. He was still breathing in and out as regularly as if he had sat through a Sunday school lesson.

Sain wanted to say something to him without sounding stupid. Something that would let Nagel know he commiserated with him in his time of sorrow without breaking that veneer of toughness. Because he was pretty sure that’s all that Nagel had right then. A thin veneer.

He didn’t want to show pity. He might not have worried about it with any other man, but, then again, he wouldn’t have shown the files to any other man.

“Semper Fi,” was all Sain could think to say.

Nagel turned to him. “Marine?”

“Four years.”

“Thank you for your service.”

Sain thought that was mysterious but telling. So Nagel was no Marine, or he wasn’t admitting it. Sain answered, “Thank you.” He started up the car and headed back. He caught a glimpse of Nagel looking back out of the window at the scene. The man was tough.

After thanking the sergeant again at the station, Nagel drove towards his home. He crossed a single lane bridge that spanned a small creek. Pulling over onto a gravel shoulder, he got out. Hidden by the balustrades, and down in the tall, brown, dead weeds, he bent over with his back to the road. He threw up.

He sat down on the wet, sloping bank in the damp, sandy mud, and cried.

The creek gurgled underneath the bridge. A swallow flew out from its nest in the girders.

A car passed overhead. A kid looked down at him. He looked up, and then, the car was gone.

=====

Waiting on his father to call or page him, he spent the next couple of days straightening up all of the things that had been left undone at home. He picked up the clothes, jewelry, brushes, shoes, cups, papers, books, and miscellaneous medicine and vitamin bottles in the master bedroom and put them away or threw them away. That was the hardest. Putting away her things. The pictures, the necklace he gave her, even her toothbrush in their bathroom. He didn't want to clean her toothbrush because she had used it and, for the same reason, he couldn't throw it away. He just laid it on its side in the medicine cabinet, behind some bottles.

Meanwhile, he kept cleaning and avoiding other issues, like the kids' rooms. He was afraid to open their doors. The anticipation was worse than the times he had approached an enemy. Out on a mission, he forced himself to push open a door or burst into building but he just couldn't go in the kids' rooms yet. No, not yet. He wanted Jenny to help him.

He emptied the dishwasher which had been run months ago. He even found two empty bowls on a mat on the porch off to the side of the back door. He thought about the dog in the report and figured they were for him. He brought them in and cleaned them up and stored them away under the sink. He wondered how long they had owned it and what kind of dog they had. Where did they get it? Was it a puppy? Was it a noisy dog? Did it chew things? He wished they had waited for him. But, he realized, they would have waited forever.

The kids had wanted a dog since Jimmy was five. With all of the pressures of the military, he kept putting them off. When he returned home, inevitably, he'd hear about getting a dog, but he didn't want one and he'd say no. But with him gone, he figured Jenny figured enough was enough. The kids wanted a dog, she didn't mind, and so they must have gone ahead gotten one. In hind sight, he couldn't figure out why he was so opposed. In the end, it didn't matter.

He swept the floors and vacuumed the main level. He didn't bother cutting the grass or trimming the trees. He knew it would all just grow again after he left. He would arrange for a lawn service.

Retrieving the plastic reflector from his pants in the laundry hamper, he placed it in a clear crystal candy bowl with a cut glass lid. He set it in the southern kitchen window where the sun would hit it and he could catch the red glints sparkle before his eyes. He'd think of the accident. He wanted to remember.

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A couple of days later, he was down in the basement, working on the banister when he heard a familiar voice boom out.

"Captain!"

Nagel put down his screw gun and held onto the sides of the stairwell. His heart started pounding. He knew it shouldn't bother him but he placed his hand over his chest.

"Captain! Where are you?"

"Down here, sir." Nagel replied.

With an eerie boyhood dread, he heard the same clop of leather shoes on the upper landing. He watched and heard the soles hit step after step until he saw his father's legs, knees, waist, chest, arms and then his ruddy, shaved, bony face. He had the same military shine to his shoes, the same crisp edge to his slacks and the same starched shirt and black tie that Nagel remembered.

"I didn't get your message until today." His father had kept his patented crew cut cropped so flat an architect could build on it. The hair was grey and the bony face was lined. Age had worked on the general like a sculptor roughs his stone with deep, strong, and long jagged lines.

"It's okay, sir," Nagel answered. "You know the Signal Corps." It was an old joke to blame the Signal Corps for any miscommunications and he almost cracked a smile on the old man's face. His father was combat tough, through and through.

"Babies."

His father stood before him and appraised him. "Been hitting the juice a bit." He didn't ask. He knew. Nagel didn't answer.

"Tough times," his father said, as a way of dropping his implication.

"Yeah." Nagel didn't expect a hug.

"She was a good wife."

"She was."

"A real trooper."

"Yes, sir."

"A good mother."

"I know."

"They were fine children."

"They were."

They stood, silently regarding each other. Nagel wanted to drop it. It sounded like they were talking about dogs or horses.

"How's mom?" Nagel asked.

"The same. I still go see her every day. Saw her today. Told her that I was coming to see you."

"You did? Did she understand you?"

His father shook his head. "No."

"I'd like to go with you and see her."

"No point. She wouldn't know you."

"We could go tomorrow. I could pick you up."

"Can't coordinate tomorrow or the day after."

Nagel bit his upper lip and blew out a breath. Can't coordinate? What did that mean? He figured his father was telling him no, he didn't want him to go with him to see her. Once his father had control of a situation, there was no room to maneuver. Not even adjusting his routine to let his own son see his own mother.

They stood there in silence, each thinking their own thoughts in silence, until Nagel said, "Should we go upstairs, sir?"

"Yes."

After he seated his father in the front room, he asked him, "Can I get you something to drink? Water, whiskey?" He knew what his father drank.

"Okay. No whiskey, though. Just a seltzer. A little bit of ice."

"No whiskey?"

His father hesitated and frowned ever so slightly. "I need to drive."

"How about just a tip of the bottle? It'll give the seltzer a little taste."

"Fine. No more than a taste."

"Okay."

Nagel brought their drinks in and they held up their glasses.

"For God and country." His father said, as he pushed his glass towards Nagel's.

"And Mom." Nagel added, and the glasses clinked.

The old man bent his head. "Fine," he said as he set his glass down. "Michael," he continued in an almost sad voice. Nagel looked up, unaccustomed to the tone.

His father went on. "When I heard, I knew what needed to be done. I made a few calls."

Nagel's head dipped. "I heard. I appreciate what you did."

"I didn't do much."

"Jenny's funeral. The kids. The cemetery. The burials. It couldn't have been easy. You weren't next of kin."

"I got the base to grant me authority. We both know the military."

Nagel acknowledged him. His father had been a brigadier general. "But, I wasn't there."

"Couldn't be helped."

"I guess not."

Nagel took a deep breath and a deep drink. His father watched him closely and then said, "I brought some papers over and put them on the table. You'll need them."

Nagel waited.

His father continued, "Death certificates, cemetery."

"I've been to the graves." Nagel interrupted his father.

His father barely acknowledged him, didn't ask any questions and continued, "There are some cards and items from the church, and the list of guests at the funeral parlor."

Nagel wasn't surprised. He guessed his father didn't want to hear about the cemetery. He changed the subject. "Did Tom show up at the funeral?"

His father dodged him. "Jenny and the kids had some friends attend."

"What about Tom?"

"Your brother?"

Nagel didn't say anything. There was no point. He'd just wait him out. Or not.

"No." His father finally answered as he looked into his drink.

"Is he still in town?"

His father lifted his glass and took a big sip. "No, I don't think so. I doubt it."

"When's the last time you saw him?"

"It's been awhile." He took a little sip. "It's been a long while."

"Wasn't he married?"

"Yes, maybe."

"Yes, maybe?"

"I don't know." His father's face tightened.

"It doesn't matter."

"What?"

Nagel heard the irritation in his voice. "I thought he might be there. At the funeral." Nagel pressed on.

His father's eyes narrowed. "Well, I thought he'd stay and raise a family after he knocked her up."

Nagel's face dropped.

"She's pregnant?"

"No. She's long past pregnant. She had the baby. It's been years."

Nagel half whistled and sat back. "I didn't know that. She had a baby. A boy or a girl?"

His father tilted his head and squished his eyes like he didn't know.

"He hasn't told you?" Nagel looked at him quizzically and then asked, "He hasn't been back? It's been years and he hasn't called or been back?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Not to see his own kid?"

His father just looked at him. Then Nagel felt guilty that he had asked. How often had he seen his own kids?

"Maybe he did, maybe he came back," his father said.

Nagel picked up, from his tone of voice, that he didn't and he wouldn't. He understood why. From what he had heard, though he had never checked it out, his older brother had been investigated for fraud, he had a drug habit and a load of personal debts.

"Did she reach out to you?"

"No, she wouldn't want us involved. He's been nothing but trouble for her. And we're nothing but more of the same in her eyes."

"I guess so." Nagel stood up. "You could reach out to her."

"What? And tell her I'm sorry she got involved with my son? No." He shook his head. "It's something your mother could have handled. Not me."

“No. I guess not. Not your territory. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

His father’s jaw tightened and then relaxed. “Ah,” he said as he held his glass with two hands and stared in it. “Don’t be sorry. Just don’t turn out like your brother.” He rotated the glass in his hands. “I don’t know what happened. I had him all set for a career. All he had to do was march in a straight line.” He tilted his glass at Nagel. “I don’t know why you didn’t go Marines.”

Nagel grimaced. “Not now.”

“It would have been easy to set things up.”

“I’ve done alright.”

His father frowned. “You’ll never make general.”

Nagel didn’t say anything.

“Well, too late now. Do your duty.” He set the drink down. “One day you’ll find out, when you’ve got nothing else, that’s all you’ve got. Just be faithful and do your duty.”

His father thought quietly for a second. “Jenny and the kids. They meant the world to you.”

Nagel observed his father’s face. He wasn’t sure if his father was stating a fact or asking a question. He suppressed his emotions, but it hurt. ‘Hell, yes, they meant everything to me,’ he wanted to scream. But he held his tongue.

His father looked at his son’s hands for a second, and then lifted his eyes up to his eyes. “Being sorry is okay, but don’t take too long. Do the right thing. Be faithful. Be strong.”

Nagel didn’t exactly ignore him but he drained the little bit left in his tumbler and eyeballed it. He tilted his glass. “I’m going to fix another. Want one?”

“No.” His father said. “I better get going.” He rose from his chair. “The papers are in the dining room,” he motioned with his hand and then walked to the front door. Nagel followed. His father turned and said, “You’re it for the family.”

He wasn’t sure if his father was disappointed.

=====

He watched his father from the door as he backed the car out of the driveway. He noted the cream colored leather driver’s gloves and the way he drove off in his black Mercedes. He shook his head. Try as he might, his whole life, he couldn’t be as tough as his father. He skipped the Marines because he wanted to prove to himself that he was his own man. US Army Special Forces was about as tough as a man could get. But maybe not tough enough.

And now he didn’t know if he could keep it up. Not any longer. The loss was too deep.

Jenny was the center of his life, his kids were his heart and he had nothing but a gaping bloody hole in the middle of his chest. He couldn’t breathe. He lifted his hand up on the door post to support himself. When he sucked in oxygen, it never seemed enough. He started to pant. What did they teach? Cough. He did it. Cough. Cough. Cough. Interrupt the pant. He thought of the police pictures. Their mangled bodies and bloody faces. Cough. Cough. Cough. He tried to think back to happier times but he couldn’t. He knew he had them but he couldn’t remember. He only saw their mutilated, lifeless faces like dead frogs with their bellies up in a pond. He had told the detective that he didn’t want to forget.

Some words shouldn’t be said out loud because they come back to haunt.

Cough. Cough. Cough. Just little coughs, slow breaths.

It seemed like he had held his breath the entire time his father was there. What did he mean, Jenny was a trooper? What a way to describe someone who was your whole life. A trooper.

And Jimmy. And June. June in her sparkling white and yellow Easter dress. The Easter baskets with the red, blue, green eggs, dusted with a golden glitter. The chocolate bunnies. The kids’ laughter, high and long and carefree. When was that? Ah, thank God, I am remembering. A tear ran down his cheek.

He backed away from the front door but left it open, hoping the fresh air would help. How could he deal with all of it?

He thought Jenny had a picture of the kids with June in the Easter dress. Where could it be? Did Jenny have a picture? She kept most of them in albums in their closet upstairs.

Picking up the bottle, he climbed the main stairs, opened their bedroom door, and thought he caught a whiff of her. He looked for her in the room and down the hall before he entered but all the doors were closed and there was no one there.

He dug through the back of the closet and pulled out some of the books of photographs. He sat on the floor, next to the closet, and took a swig straight from the bottle.

Jenny liked to make a craft of posting the photos when she had the time. She had created a fishing theme of the time they went to the lake. And a zoo theme when they had visited Lincoln Park. He didn't think the Easter picture was in a theme book. He flipped through others and nipped the bottle. Pictures of him in his fatigues. Jimmy in a baseball uniform. Juney with her skates and dolls. Jim's first bike with training wheels. Nagel wheezed as he flipped.

Finally. There was June in her dress wearing her new necklace. Jenny had given her a little gold necklace with some kind of inspirational word as the centerpiece pendant. Faith or Love or something. He couldn't read it from the picture. Not without his glasses. His eyes were watery. But he remembered that Juney had loved it. A smile, with tears, broke his face. He pulled the photo from the book and stuck it in his pocket.

There was another one taken on the same day with the entire family. Jenny, him, Jim and June. All together. He brought his hand to his face and pinched his temples and drew his finger and thumb down from his cheeks, catching the slippery, salty tears and smearing them and tasting them. Lost in his thoughts, he could look at them forever.

Then he heard a noise.

He quit looking through the pictures, set the book to the side and waited. There was no doubt he had heard a noise and it had not been outside. He took a drink and finished the bottle. He stood up and felt woozy. He figured he was a little drunk and a little over emotional but he knew he had heard a noise. Gripping the bottle as a weapon, he crouched down and peeked into the hallway. Juney and Jimmy's doors were open.

What the hell. He didn't open the doors. They were closed before. He was sure of it.

But Juney's was more than halfway open and Jim's was just cracked a bit. He crept down the hall to Juney's room and then jumped in, still bent over. The light wasn't good but he couldn't see anything or anybody. He kept the bottle ready. He checked the other side of the bed and furniture and closet.

Nothing. Then he heard another noise. Jimmy's room! Whoever it was, was in Jimmy's room!

He sprung to the door and then to the hall, but before he could hardly look up, he thought he saw a blaze of gold dart just before it disappeared down the secondary set of stairs. And the strangest thing, he heard the clicking of nails on the stairs like it could be a dog.

A dog. What would a dog be doing in his house?

He ran down the stairs after it but didn't catch so much as a glimpse of whatever it was.

At the bottom of the steps, he saw that he had left the front door open. He realized something, or somebody, could have gotten inside. It could have been anything but it sounded like a dog's claws.

Except. A dog can't open bedroom doors. Not unless they were never really closed. Were they closed? He didn't know. He never checked.

He stared out the front door and noticed something white on the driveway. He walked over to it and picked it up. It was an open envelope with the mailing still inside. The address no longer aligned to show through the clear windowed area.

He decided his father must have dropped it getting into his car. Nagel would have to mail it back to him. Another oddity. His father didn't make mistakes. Dropping anything was very unlike him. Nagel brought it inside.

Pausing before the stairs, he thought again about the noise. It sounded like a dog. Where did the dog come from? A stray? Was it the kids' dog? No, that was impossible. It would've been killed along with them. Right? The report had said there was a dog and, even though there were no photos of it, how would they know there was a dog unless the dog had been killed also?

He had to think about that. What if it wasn't a dog? What if somebody had been in the house? That was possible, too, but unlikely. It sure didn't sound like a person on the stairs. It sounded just like a dog.

He ascended the stairs more carefully. One, because he was drunk and two, because he wanted to see if there were any scratches on the wood.

That's when he found the string of pearls in the corner of the stairs. He picked them up. They were plastic pearls. Juney's. Just plain plastic pearls. Of no value whatsoever.

It wasn't a dog. And it probably was not a person, certainly not a burglar. Nobody would steal a string of plastic pearls. But it couldn't have been a kid. Only a girl would have wanted the pearls. Little girls don't wander into strange houses.

Strange was the key word.

Maybe the pearls had always been there and he had just missed them. They would have been unremarkable in a corner. He could have easily overlooked them.

He dropped them on the steps and they clicked on the hardwood. The sound was similar to what he had heard before but not quite. They didn't seem as loud. He thought he had heard somebody, or something, scramble down the stairs and that would have made a much louder click.

But he had been drinking. Who knows what he had heard?

One good thing came of it, he realized. He had gone into the kids' rooms. He could go back. He would go back but, first, he checked the front and back doors and passed through the dining room. He saw the papers that his father had left for him. He dropped the envelope onto the pile.

Before fixing another drink, he did a quick search of the house and turned up nothing. No dog, no cat, no squirrel, no burglar. All he had was a string of pearls.

=====

Sitting down with another drink from the supply in the liquor cabinet, his father's words seeped through his thoughts. "You're it for the family." When he first heard it, he thought he was talking about his brother and him and how he was the last hope of the family.

He pulled Juney's picture out of his pocket and set it on the table next to his glass.

Was he a disappointment? Nagel knew his brother was. He thought of the times they grew up. His older brother was the straight A student. The athlete who won all the ribbons and medals.

He wondered what had happened to him. Being the much younger brother, he didn't know any of his brother's friends and dealings and feelings. But something must have gone wrong.

Tom's interests changed as a teenager. He got into girls, naturally, but also late nights, running with the guys, and neglecting his books. He became more secretive and locked his door. He fought with his father and hid behind their mother.

He was smart enough as a student and good enough in sports to get a scholarship to a small college where he wasted his time. He somehow made some political connections and some real estate and drug dealings. Money passed hands like beer and hot dogs at a ball game.

He rode high for a while, making contacts and friends in high places, buying several properties – some in the city with one property nearby. But the shady deals came to light, the connections fell apart, the pay offs were too high, and he lost most everything. He ended up broke and hooked on drugs. He skipped town. And, it sounded like, he left a baby behind.

He broke their mother's heart. Nagel thought all the worry contributed to her mental decline. He didn't say anything. He wasn't sure. That was a lot to lay on a brother. They all knew he would probably never return.

In the end, he really didn't think his brother would come back for the funeral. That would have meant he cared. Outside of his mother, he wondered how much caring there really had been in his family. Not enough to worry about being the last of it.

So his father must have meant his own family with Jenny and the kids. That they were dead and he was the only one left. That was a cold way of thinking.

He shuffled through the papers that his father had left, and drank. His father had some old photos mixed in with the papers. There was a picture of Jenny and him walking hand in hand down the aisle after their wedding. A photo of his father administering Nagel's oath for commissioned officers. Another one at Jimmy's baptism. He wondered why his father was giving them back.

He found an empty frame and added Juney to it. She looked so happy in her dress that it made him cry. One stinking bottle later, he passed out.

=====

He woke up in the recliner in the family room with their wedding picture on his lap and his hand around an empty tumbler.

No way to live, Michael, he told himself. No way to live. They wouldn't want it.

Setting the glass on a side table and the photo on another, he closed his eyes. His hands were unsteady. He just needed a few minutes to gather his thoughts.

He remembered his father's visit, looking through the albums, hearing something upstairs and finding the pearls on the stairs. He remembered the kids' rooms. He had promised himself that he would go through their rooms. Having been in there once, it would be easier.

After picking up a black coffee Grande and an egg burrito at a local breakfast bar, he opened the door to Jimmy's room, and smiled. Setting down his coffee, he drew open the curtains and the sunlight spilled into the room. Everything came to him at once – the Boston Bruins bed spread and pillows, the cream colored painted plaster walls, the hockey team stickers stuck all over his highboy dresser, the dark walnut trim. The knotted rug on the hardwood floor. His long, low dresser. The mirror above the dresser. A Terminator model and a little dish with a few coins in it placed on the dresser. A t-shirt that was partly balled up and wrapped around the base of the Terminator. A Brett Favre poster covered the upper part of a wall. The sliding closet doors. The school books on a desk. The chair. His pants, shirts, socks and underwear on the floor. A pair of tennis shoes just under the bed.

He slid open the closet doors and saw Jimmy's clean shirts, pants, sweaters and a couple of coats hanging on hangers. A football and a hockey helmet were stacked up on the closet shelf. Several pairs of shoes lay on the floor in the closet. Two spaceships from either Star Wars or Star Trek hung from strings from the ceiling. A couple of baseball bats stood in the corner between the wall and the dresser.

Jimmy's baseball glove was underneath the dresser, next to the wastebasket. A can of glove oil sat on the dresser. He picked up the glove and smelled the cowhide. He remembered tossing a few balls to him.

Some baseball cards were scattered on the school desk next to a radio. He walked over and flicked through them. He recognized Derek Jeter, Chipper Jones and Jim Edmonds. He turned on the radio. It was tuned to a sports station. He clicked it off.

Nagel sat down on the bed, glanced at the side table with a digital alarm, and ran his hand over the hockey blanket. He laid his head upon one of the pillows and then kicked off his shoes, rolled on his back and stared at the ceiling, all the while picking up everything that was in the room.

The room was a happy kid's room. He could feel it.

=====

Eventually, he got up and went down the hall to June's room. Again, he crossed the floor and threw open the curtains. The sunlight played like a magic wand upon everything in the room. Shades of pinks and purples with a base of white seemed to be everywhere. Piggy pink, lavender pink, cherry blossom pink, baby pink, all kinds of pink and blush were part of the curtains, blankets, pillow cases, clothes, and

lamp shade. Royal purple, amethyst, mauve and mulberry partnered with the pink. June's toy horses and dolls and doll house had different splashes of pink and purple and white.

He noticed an extra set of glasses on her desk. She kept a bunch of plastic hats and a pillow with dalmations. The dalmations had red ribbons for collars.

Her closet held her shirts, dresses, skirts, coats and raincoat. She had more shoes on the floor than Jimmy and she kept them arranged together. She had clothes boxes stacked on her upper closet shelf. Posters of cartoon characters on her walls. A prayer, written over a sketch of Jesus sitting on a rock with his hand stretched out, hung in a glass frame. He walked over to it and read, "Let the children come to Me."

Nagel wiped away a tear.

He turned, overwhelmed. He had to look away. He had to look at something else, or leave the room. She was up there somewhere. Or right here with him. He could feel a squeeze on his heart. He placed his hand next to the picture frame and turned to the side.

One corner of the room held a pile of plush animals, mostly pink and purple, but there was a giraffe and an elephant and a monkey. While they weren't realistic, they weren't pink and purple. He left the wall and walked across the room.

She still had a toy box filled with Barbies and cars and toy horses and dogs. Her dresser mirror was draped with plastic necklaces and plastic headbands. He was right about the plastic pearls.

Ribbons had hair clips fastened to them. Her hair brushes were lined up on the dressing table. She had some sort of fragrance in a bottle. It had a picture of a princess on it.

He didn't realize kids had perfumes. He figured Jenny knew. He sniffed it and was pleasantly surprised at its lightness and sweetness. It was just the kind of fragrance a little angel might have.

A long Lady and the Tramp cotton nightie was draped over the end post of the bed.

The bed was covered in a fluffy creamy white and pink carnation blanket, with matching pillows. He sat on it and ran his fingers through the ruffles. He breathed in the goodness.

They were happy. Jimmy and June had been happy kids.

He was happy thinking of them that way, but he was hurt in the most God awful way that God could have ever made.

=====

Just when the hurt seemed the worst, most painful, when it became unbearable, when it felt like his ribs were pulled apart and his heart was ripped out of his chest, like a flash of lightning, out of the blue, he remembered what his father had said, "Being sorry is okay, but don't take too long."

What a cold, heartless man. What a little red imp of a man that the devil had made. Why would he say anything? He should have just kept quiet and shut his mouth. His father was despicable. How could he possibly know what he was going through? Did his little girl or boy die? Was his wife dead? Did he even know what real pain was?

Anger struck at him like a savage caveman with a club. Anger was something he knew as well as a cold, rainy, miserable night. Like a knife fight in the dark, man to man, and only one walks out of the room. He let the hate well up in him.

He wanted to strike out, to smash his old man. He could have killed him. He could have snapped his scrawny neck like a twig. What a perverse, shrinking little old man. Just awful, just simply. His hate flowed over him, overwhelmed him. He tumbled into the dark recesses where the demons hide. And he knew it and he stopped. He had to stop the hate. Somehow. Something was wrong. It wasn't his father. It was. What?

And then he understood. It hit him mid-thought – Yes! And he slumped in June's bed. He felt a terrible guilt.

Yes, his father did know what it was like to lose a child. Tom was gone and, in some ways, the loss of his son Tom was worse because he's out there, an empty shell of what he could have been and he'll never

come back. A degraded, hopeless junkie with no friends, no future and no family. He'll never soar with the angels like Juney. He'll never know innocence.

And yes, yes, his father did know what it was like to lose his wife. Nagel's mother was wasting away, brain dead in a care facility. His father had to get up every single day, get dressed and drive out to the center, knowing how she would be, how he would see her and she would not know him. His father chose to go everyday, not because he wanted to but because the woman he loved deserved to have someone by her side in her dying days. Even if she never appreciated that it was him. Even if, in fact, she resented him. And he saw that and lived that day after day. And he still went. He did, by god, he did his duty.

So, yes, he did know. He knew heartache and loneliness and rejection. And he had given his living son the only advice he knew how to give. It was cold, it was harsh and it may have seemed heartless but it was the best thing he could have done. He had told the truth.

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Nagel sat up straight and gazed throughout Juney's room. He loved his daughter. He loved her little girl crush on pink and purple and plush animals. He smiled like an unhappy clown.

He was grateful for her innocence, her silly giggles, dances and welcome home kisses. Her Halloween costumes, tea time parties and cartwheels across the grass. He loved everything about his angel but he had to leave her behind before his self-pity buried him.

He stood up, crossed the floor, closed the curtains, walked to the door and pulled it tight with tears in his eyes.

He opened the door to Jimmy's room, stepped in and welcomed all of the memories he had of his son. The games of catch and monster movies. Star Wars battles and baseball heroes. He had to say goodbye. He drew the drapes, stood in the middle of the room and shook with sobs. Brother and sister, son and daughter. So many memories. And even though he wasn't there for all of them, he had some memories and he could be thankful for that.

He shuffled over to the hall and shut the door. They would always be a part of his life but he couldn't let the memories kill him.

It hurt like hell. His father had given him the worst, and the best, advice he could have given.

With the kids' rooms closed, he only had one more to go. He stopped outside their master bedroom. He wanted her back so bad. He only wanted a sign that she was still with him. And would be with him in the future. That she wanted him as much as he wanted her. He wanted more than just memories. He wanted them together. He wanted them all together. He opened the door.

Whoa! He stopped just inside the door, and then took a step back. He couldn't see her but he could smell her. Again. She was in the air. Like a rare perfume, she floated in the ether. She was there, somewhere nearby but, for some reason, she didn't want to touch him. All he needed was for her to touch him. A kiss on his lips, a caress on his cheek, her fingers on his hand, anything. Just a little sign. He closed his eyes and waited. 'Reach out, Jenny. I'm here.'

But the tension eased and the scent faded. He tried to breathe more deeply. It didn't help. She had moved on. It was just a tease. He couldn't let anger get a hold of him. He had to move on.

He could only believe that she didn't want to touch him. For whatever reason. With a sigh that trembled in his chest, he stepped into the room.

He put away the photo albums and drew the curtains. He glanced one more time at their bed and her dresser. He turned off the lights and shut the door.

=====

Grabbing the pile of papers off the table, sitting at a desk, Nagel worked through the stack that his father had left. He opened the mail with his spare Gerber combat knife. The funeral, cemetery and gravestone services were paid for by his father. Puffing his lips, Nagel knew he wouldn't want to be

repaid. He wrote checks for the remaining bills and canceled several services including the phone and cable companies. He arranged for lawn service and a light caretaker while he was gone.

Bzzzzz. Bzzzzz. His pager buzzed. Anticipating the message, he held it up and pushed the backlit button. He had an early call back. He had to report to base in forty-eight hours.

He exhaled. He had half expected it. It was part of the gig. Go wherever he was sent. Shrugging, he reminded himself that he still had two days left and plenty of whiskey. He poured a couple of fingers into a glass.

He flipped through the envelopes, flyers and magazines one piece at a time.

Junk. Junk. Bill. Pay it. Paid. Junk. Junk. Bill. Then he turned a piece of mail over. "Oh hey." He mumbled out loud.

He held up the envelope to the light. It was the envelope that fell out of his father's car. It had already been opened. He pulled out the sheets of paper knowing it was very unlike his father to drop anything. He was the general of precision.

However, there was nothing inside remarkable about it. Just a statement for his mother's nursing home. He set it to the side.

Having made it through the mail, he picked up the statement again and stuck it in his shirt pocket.

His home phone rang. He looked at the caller ID and picked up the handset. He expected that one, too.

Holding the phone to his ear, he said, "Hello."

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"I meant to call you."

"Yeah."

"But I figured you'd need some time."

"Yeah." Nagel knew his friend, Jack Jimerson, meant it.

"Feel for you."

"Thanks." Nagel knew that was as close as Jack would get to saying he was sorry about Jenny and the kids. Jimerson was his best friend and would give his left and right arms for him in a fight but emotion was not his thing.

"But, now this," Jimerson said.

"Right."

"What do you think? You and me?"

"Can't say." Nagel knew exactly what Jimerson was saying. Jack, who was a military contractor, not regular military, was telling him that he had gotten the same page right around the same time, so they were probably going on the same mission. But they couldn't speak openly about it over the phone.

"No, I know. Well, I wanted to see how you're doing, buddy."

"I'm good."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Good."

"Yeah."

"See you later," Jack said.

"Later."

Nagel poured another two fingers and drained it. His father warned him that all he would have, in the end, was his duty. What he didn't warn him was that it would bring no comfort. Like a dry, burning breeze in a desert that rubbed the skin raw, his duty interfered with his life and then the memories of his family.

But it was all he had. He grunted.

He spent the evening drinking and packing. He had to drive back to the airport and catch a plane to the base.

=====

After loading his rental car the next morning, he nabbed his sport jacket, shades, NASCAR cap and placed the envelope with the address for his mother's nursing home on the passenger seat. He locked the door to the house, turned the key and backed out of the drive.

He drove the eighty miles to the Chapter Senior Living Home. He thought about his father, about the coincidence of him finding the envelope on the lawn. His father must have known he'd be called back to base. His father didn't just drop things or make mistakes. Somehow he knew and that was his way of telling him to go visit his mother. But go alone.

He wondered why his father didn't just tell him. Because he'd be breaking protocol? Apparently protocol didn't prevent a retired Marine general from learning the plans of a Special Forces deployment.

Was duty everything to them?

He signed in at the desk and was told that he still had twenty minutes left in the afternoon visiting hours. He asked if his father had been there earlier. He was told that Mr. Nagel never missed a morning. The clerk said they could set the clocks by him. They thought they were giving him a compliment. He was asked if he wanted an aide to go with him to see his mother. He said not to bother. An aide walked with him anyway and guided him to her room.

"I got it from here," Nagel said to the short haired, heavy set fortyish woman.

"Let me check on her, first."

"It's okay." Nagel replied.

"For her privacy."

"I'm her son."

"Sometimes they need a little help to be ready." The aide scooted in without waiting for any more discussion and she pushed and held the door with one hand. After a quick look, she pulled the door wide and said, "It's okay."

Nagel didn't reply. He angled his way past the nurse, slowed and stopped short of the bed. He frowned and his jaw jerked a little. She sat, bent, up and over in a chair in the corner on the opposite side of the bed. She wore a gown that draped over her knees and her legs were shifted at an odd angle. Wool slippers with fluffy insides hung precariously on her feet. Situated next to a window with the blinds pulled down, the TV was on but she didn't pay attention.

She looked years older. Her hair was thinner and white. Her face was gaunt. She wore no makeup. The skin sagged from her jaw and arms. Her hands were bruised and wrinkled. She had a bruise on her forearm and veins that bulged like termite tunnels.

He barely recognized her and it had only been a couple of years. Was that right, he wondered. He had had too many deployments.

He approached her more cautiously.

He noticed that the aide hadn't left the room and, at that point, he didn't want her to leave.

Walking up to her, he held his cap in his hand and said, "Mom."

She didn't look at him. She stared off in a corner.

"Mom. It's me. Michael. Your son, Michael."

At first, he wanted to hug but she didn't even glance at him.

He bent his face to hers, and lightly kissed her dry cheek. She didn't seem to feel it.

He sat on the bed next to her. Her lower legs and the upper part of her feet were covered in grape purple splotches. He noticed the veins also showed on her temples.

The skin on her face and hands were dry and a little scaly.

She was belted into her chair.

"Are you okay, Mom?"

She didn't say anything.

Feeling sorry for her, he reached out and grabbed her ice-cold hand. His poor mom.

"Get away!" She shrieked. She pulled her hands back and curled up. "Get away!" She stared wild eyed with her head bent crooked at her shoulder. Her nostrils flared.

The nursing aide ran up to her. "It's okay, Miss Nagel. There, there, honey. Just your son." She took his mom's hand and held it. His mother didn't pull away from her. "He's come to see you."

"I don't want anybody. I don't want to go to school." His mom said, wildly.

"It's okay."

"I have other things I have to do. Where are my keys? Where's my coat? I need to work on my things."

"That's fine, Miss Nagel. We will work on your things."

"What's she saying? What things?" Nagel asked.

The aide ignored him and soothed his mother. When she had settled, the aide whispered, "It's a good time to go." She took his arm and led him out.

He looked back.

His mother stared at him, blankly, and then her eyes seemed to focus, just for a couple of seconds, and Nagel's heart rose. But then, she faded. She averted her eyes and looked out the window.

After the aide had closed the door to a crack, she said, "I didn't want her to tire out. She's doing so well."

"So well?"

"All very normal for patients to get confused," the aide replied.

"I didn't realize. I didn't know," he stammered. "I'm her son."

"It has nothing to do with you. It's very common for dementia patients to get upset. Doesn't matter who you are."

"She's like that with my father?"

"Yes, Lord bless him. He's a patient man."

"He is?"

The aide tilted her head and looked at him with a question in her eyes.

"Will she get better?" Nagel asked, but noting her look.

"Better?" The aide tilted her head again. "If you ask me, she's doing better today but, if you want more than that, you should ask her nurse." The aide motioned to the nurses' station and took another step forward.

"Mr. Nagel is looking for Anne," the aide said to another woman in uniform. "I need to run down to three oh eight." The aide turned to Nagel, "It was nice to meet you, Mr. Nagel."

"I didn't mean to," Nagel started to say but the aide had already started down the hall.

"How can I help you?" A pretty RN walked up and asked.

"I really didn't mean to get everybody involved. I mean, I just asked if my mother was getting better. Mrs. Nagel."

The nurse looked behind the counter at a screen. "Mrs. Nagel? Three forty four? Yes, I'm told she had a good day, today."

"I'm her son. She seemed upset."

The nurse frowned. "Upset? What happened?"

"Nothing. She just seemed upset when I took her hand."

The nurse nodded.

Nagel squinted.

"Anything else?" She asked.

"What do you mean? No. No. I just took her hand and she got all upset."

The nurse relaxed. "That's normal."

"Normal?"

"Are you familiar with dementia?"

"No, not really."

"Oh okay. Yes, it's pretty normal. They aren't really aware of their surroundings, their stimuli. What you and I see as normal, can be very abnormal to them. You're a total stranger."

Nagel's face fell. "I'm not. I'm her son."

"Or a mugger."

His face darkened.

She kept on talking. "Or a neighbor from her childhood. It doesn't have to have any basis in the here and now."

"Huh," Nagel grunted. "I see."

"You do? It can be very difficult for a visitor to understand. They often come to see the patient once and never come again. I hope that won't be the case."

"I hope not, but I am not able to say."

"I see."

Nagel snapped a look at her. "No, I'm in the military on leave." He didn't know why he was apologizing to her. "I can get called back at any moment," he said. He couldn't tell her the truth that he was already called back.

"I understand."

He left, feeling inadequate, overwhelmed and defeated. And he was supposed to go fight a battle somewhere else in the world.

He missed Jenny.

=====

Nagel was preparing to go out on a mission when his mother passed away. He received a special pass for funeral leave and was able to return home. He had just enough time to fly and drive in, attend the funeral and burial and then head back to base.

After unpacking his bags in the guest room, he spent a few minutes in each of the others' bedrooms.

Each time he entered a room, he didn't want to leave. He could almost hear June and her laugh, Jim and his shout of victory. And, worst and best of all, he could still smell Jenny.

He fell asleep in their bed with his arms hugging her pillow tight to his chest and up to his nose.

=====

He arrived at the cemetery parlor for a viewing before the burial. A few of his mother's relatives attended as well as his father's friends. Tom didn't show. His father stood by the open casket and spoke with the guests as they came up to pay their respects.

Nagel heard a few of the greetings.

"Jeanne. Thank you for coming."

Mumble.

"She was. She always was."

Mumble.

"Dolores. Thank you."

Mumble.

"The flowers are nice."

Nagel wasn't sure if he should stand in line to approach her casket with the others or stand by his father. He knew most sons would just walk up and stand with their father. That would be most sons. He inched along and watched him. The nurse had said he was an attentive and caring husband. Nagel knew she said that but he just didn't feel it. That hadn't been his relationship with his father and, he wondered why.

A man stood in front of his father. "Kind of you, Larry." His father then faced a woman next to him. "And Beth. She would have loved them."

His father was polite and gracious.

He was right behind the next couple. He looked at his mother. She was peaceful but an eternity away.

"Michael." His father interrupted his thoughts. "You were able to come."

"Not much time," Nagel said as he nodded. He kept his hands folded. His father did not reach out for a hug or handshake.

"I know."

So his father did get involved. Things did seem to go almost too smoothly.

"They will take her to the gravesite," his father looked at his watch. "Any minute now."

"When did she die?"

"Sunday morning."

"Morning?"

"Yes."

"So you were there."

"Yes."

"Did she know? Did she know you were there?"

His father looked away distantly.

Nagel watched him. His father's lip seemed to quiver.

A funeral rep came up and said, "It's time."

His father said, "Okay."

Nagel bent his head. He wanted to know if she ever became aware of his father, if there was even a simple sign of recognition, but the moment was gone. He thought back to his Jenny, just a sign was all he wanted.

He wondered about his mother and father. Did his mother say goodbye?

They closed the casket and rolled her body to the hearse. As she passed them, his father reached out and laid his hand gently on the shiny charcoal grey metal. "Soon Maggie. My love and my life."

Nagel jerked his head towards his father. What did his father just say? Nagel had never heard him say the word love in all of his life.

The casket passed. Slowly. His father's hand remained on the casket for moment after moment. It seemed like it took forever. And then, he dropped his hand when she had fully passed.

His father lifted his head to watch her go down the aisle but spoke quietly, under his breath, to Nagel.

"Yes, she did know, Michael."

Nagel stared at him and saw his father's chest rise and fall with deep, heavy breaths.

"She knew I was there when she died. I think she knew we were there every hour of every day. Your mother wouldn't let her disease get in the way of her love. " His father bit his lower lip and remained steady. "She always loved you and was so proud of you."

A tear formed in the corner of Nagel's eye. His father lifted the crook of his index finger to swipe at the corner of his own eye.

They buried his mother together.

=====

His mother's funeral was the last time he talked to his father. He shipped out and stayed out for months. When he returned for leave, he found out his father had died as well. His father was buried with his mother.

He visited their gravesite and then, a day later, settled things with his father's estate lawyer.

His father had divided everything roughly in half between his older brother and himself. The house was to be sold, as well as the miscellaneous holdings, such as his father's car. If his older brother didn't claim his share of the property in ten years, it would revert to Nagel.

The lawyer handed him a satchel of papers. "Your father wanted you to have these."

"What are they?"

“Documents of some sort. Some personal papers.”

Nagel looked at him with a question in his eyes.

“There’s nothing in there that affects these proceedings.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“You can look at them at any time.”

“Thank you.” Nagel shook the lawyer’s hand.

“Your father was my friend,” the lawyer said. “He was a careful, but thoughtful, man.

Nagel could only nod.

Minutes later, even with only half the estate, Nagel left the office a wealthy man.

=====

He should have retired from active recon missions. He knew it. He had a place to live. The same house where he had raised his children with his wife. He had plenty of money. He had enough service time to retire.

But combat was the only thing he knew. He was good at it and his good buddy Jimerson was still active. Over the years, since his father’s death, Nagel rose to the rank of major. It appeared that his father’s prediction was true. He’d never become a general.

But a general doesn’t go out with the RRD.

=====

Nagel’s orders sent his group to an Iranian mountain village on the Afghan-Iran border to destroy a hidden facility. He wasn’t told what the facility did. Was it making centrifuges? Missile parts? Navigation equipment? Pressure gauges? Was it a training or communications facility? He wouldn’t know until they got there.

However, he knew two things. It wasn’t a bio or chemical lab or they would have packed protective gear. And he and his men were to slip in, set the charges, pull back and confirm the destruction. Then, most of them were to pull back and provide cover.

Two of the soldiers had to perform an extraction of a British female prisoner. Nagel assumed she was a scientist of some kind; otherwise she would probably be dead. Since they didn’t know which building she was held, a sniffer dog was assigned to a recon dog handler.

Dropped by an Apache helicopter in the middle of the night, his group fast lined and hit the ground running. They double timed through the hill country for three full clicks.

The site consisted of two ‘must have’ buildings and two IRG buildings that housed their main armed opposition. The buildings themselves appeared to blend in with the surrounding village homes and buildings, at least from the air. But the heat signatures, tire treads, and wear and tear marked the important structures.

Each man worked alone and set their charges. However, they were close enough to each other to provide cover. They had twenty minutes to set the explosives and pull back to a defensive position. Jimerson followed the dog and his handler as it sniffed its way up a path to a building that stood apart from the group’s targets. Nagel tagged with them a few clicks away, remaining out of sight and perpendicular to their approach until they found the structure. Then they converged like death’s angels. Jimerson and Nagel entered the building with their Yarborough knives drawn and CQBR Mk 18 carbines ready.

The handler loosened the detection dog and they followed him down the hall as he sniffed at each closed door. They were hoping that the woman’s scent was concentrated in one room. It was.

The dog stopped. They stopped. The dog remained quiet. They remained quiet for a moment as Jimerson put his head to the door panel and listened. He signaled and they burst in.

They spotted their targets instantly. The prisoner was cuffed to the bed with plastic straps. A guard standing next to her was just unbuckling his fatigues. Lunging forward with a swipe, Nagel wrapped his

hand over the guard's mouth. His eyes bulged. Nagel plunged his knife into his heart and snapped his neck. He tossed the body to the side and then withdrew his knife.

Jimerson stabbed the uniform in the temple.

Straightening up, Nagel put his finger to his lips and then cut her free. She quickly adjusted her clothing and Jimerson helped her stand up.

She was able to walk on her own. Peeking back outside the door, Nagel waved them forward. They hurried to the front and, again, checked the outside before proceeding. The handler was across the compound and signaled for them to come forward. The dog bolted to him without a sound. Nagel, Jimerson and the British woman hurried across.

Boom! Boom! Boom! The explosions began just as they all hit the perimeter. Jimerson gently hurried the handler, and the woman behind them, as he silently pointed to their next destination where another subgroup waited.

At the same time, a terrified Afghan child ran out of one of the homes, followed by another crying child. The explosions were deafening and the ground rumbled. Their mother and father ran for them. In the confusion, an IRG soldier raked the father with gunfire, cutting him almost in half. The submachine gun fire had hit the ground around them and detonated a buried IED just ahead. The dirt flew up all around them and the stunned mother and kids were trapped and uncertain which way to turn.

Nagel stopped and watched.

Jimerson hissed at him, "Come on, let's go!"

"Go on," Nagel hissed back.

The family was backlit by the burning building. Even though the IRG soldier had run away from them, they were stuck in the middle of a mine field. All three stared at the bullet ridden corpse of their father and husband. Only panic kept them frozen but Nagel knew that, at any second, they would run and be killed by the mines.

He thought of Jenny and his kids stopped in a puddle and trapped in their car. Did they see the other car coming?

He knew there was no way they could all make it out of the field alive. They had no training and no experience. He had to help them. He crept back towards them.

"What are you doing?" Jimerson growled.

"Go," Nagel called back. He took out his knife and poked in the ground at an angle, hoping to feel the explosives without triggering them. In the dark, it was suicide.

The dog suddenly ran out next to Nagel and began sniffing his way to the family. Nagel trailed behind him.

The guards spotted a retreating soldier near the perimeter and began firing. The Special Forces group laid a cover. Gunfire seemed to everywhere but none of the shots were actually near them. No one saw them in the dark.

Nagel took the little girl's hand and led her. The dog trailed in step with the little girl, a little behind Nagel. The rest of the family followed.

Just before they reached the all clear area, where Jimerson was holding up, a spray of bullets splattered the ground. They were spotted.

Feeling the gunfire closing in and time ticking away, Nagel jumped forward. He only needed to get them to the perimeter, out of harm's way, and then move on to the copter. He had lost time. His whole body felt the urgency as the time ticked. Another set of rounds kicked up the dirt.

The little girl wriggled her hand free from Nagel. He reached forward and tried to grab her swinging hand. She was hysterical. He hurried with his head turned towards her and was no longer looking forward. More bullets rained near them. The dog sprang in front.

Everything seemed to happen at once. The dog ran. The kid ran for the dog. And Nagel's head followed the kid. He twisted and, with a final lunge, grabbed her in his arms.

The dog seemed to hold still for an atomic second and then flinch on something and BAM! He triggered a buried IED. The boom and flash knocked Nagel off his feet. The dog's body hurled through the air back at him and knocked him and the girl down.

Stunned, he looked at the maimed body and then face of the dead dog and somehow, somehow it seemed to be smiling.

Nagel lay on his side and saw and felt Jimerson pull the kid from his arms. He helped the wife and kids move forward. As soon as they were free from the field, they ran down the road, away from him and the explosions. Jimerson let them go. He returned to Nagel.

"Let's get you up." Jimerson yelled in his ear and grabbed him under his arms.

His head ringing from the explosion, Nagel could barely hear him. He had trouble standing. He felt a searing pain in his back and wondered if he could stand. He managed to get his feet under himself. Jimerson pulled and pushed him along until they reached their subgroup. With the protection of the group, he stood Nagel up, draped Nagel's arm over the back of his shoulders. Jimerson squatted and hoisted Nagel's body up onto his shoulders using the soldier's carry.

"Are you good?" One of the soldiers asked Jimerson.

"Ready." Jimerson gave him a thumbs up.

"Let's go."

They had a much shorter distance to the Apache extraction point. They no longer had to worry about any loud sounds.

=====

After emergency surgery on a light carrier in the Arabian Sea, Nagel was flown to Italy for additional care. Given the green light for survival, he was flown to the US and ended up in the Walter Reed Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. He underwent a number of delicate surgeries to remove the trickier shrapnel pieces from the IED.

After undergoing a six hour surgery, Nagel found out that they were able to remove the largest pieces but there were still several slivers that they just didn't think were worth the risk trying to remove. He was told that they would probably cause him some discomfort but that, overall, he was lucky to be alive.

They kept him doped up enough that he wasn't feeling any particular pain. They warned him that he probably would. They said some of his pain was due to the dog slamming in the back and he needed to rest and then start therapy.

They sent him back to the base and outpatient care so he could work on regaining his strength. He was told he would not return to combat. Ever.

A year and six months later, Nagel retired from the Army. He had kept the home where he and Jenny had raised the kids. He could walk with a cane. He had more than just "some discomfort" and they prescribed pain medicines for him. They helped for a while but it seemed he needed more and more of them to get any relief. His doctor referred him to a pain control clinic which was a way of delegating his medications to another outfit.

Nagel routinely fought with them for the pain medicine. Nothing ever seemed enough. They wanted physical therapy. He wanted relief.

He drank more. He sat and watched TV. He brooded. He replayed the scene in his mind. The mother and the kids. He almost had them out of there. Just a few more yards and they would have made it and then the dog jumped ahead. He blamed the dog for setting off the bomb.

He hated dogs.

=====

Nagel was watching the afternoon news shows when he heard the doorbell rang. Groaning, he got up out of his chair, and, using the cane, hobbled to the front door. Mentally gearing up for an aggravating

Bible encounter, he expected some kind of a Scripture salesman. He opened the door with his teeth clenched, ready to tell them to scram.

"Nagel, you son of a gun!" A big voice boomed at him.

His jaw fell, his eyes opened.

"Jack-Jackson, my man!" Nagel stuttered.

Jimerson stood outside on the front porch. He was a black guy, hair cut close, still big as a house, six four, two fifty, and shaped like Superman's logo.

"You going to let a friend in? Or are you just going to stand there?"

Nagel gave a half a smile. "As soon as I see one." He pushed the door open a little wider and then stood back so Jimerson could step in.

"Ha!"

"Ha, yourself.

Nagel gave him a big bear hug and then pushed him back and asked, "What brings you here?"

"I was just driving by." Jimerson replied.

"Really." Nagel looked at him with a slight furrow around his eyes. "Driving by here? You mean, like driving down the interstate? An hour away?"

"Yeah. Okay. So, I wanted to look you up. So I happened to be driving by."

"Oh, I see. Circular logic. Kind of like our orders from headquarters, back in the day."

"Yeah."

"Thanks." Nagel looked toward the living room. "Come on in. Take a seat." He motioned towards a plush chair and the sofa. "You look good." Nagel stood next to a chair across from him. "Want a drink? I was just going to fix one myself."

"Okay. Sure. What do you have?"

"What do you want?"

"Godfather?"

"I remember. Scotch and almareto. Right?" Nagel didn't wait for a confirmation. He stepped out of the room and returned shortly with the drinks. "Shaken, not stirred." He handed the drink to Jimerson with a wry look on his face.

"Bond, James Bond." Jimerson said smoothly, and then chuckled.

They each took a drink and snuck a peek at each other.

"Haven't heard from you." Jimerson started.

"Ah, you know." Nagel didn't add anything.

"I called you."

"You did?"

"Yeah. You know I did."

"Must have missed it."

"I guess so."

Neither said anything for a moment.

"What's on your mind?"

"Not much. Just seeing how you're doing. How's the war wounds?" Jimerson asked.

"Not bad. I have my days."

"Still using a cane."

"Only when I get out of my chair."

"It's like that?"

"It is."

"That's tough."

"Damn dog." Nagel sneered.

"What do you mean?" Jimerson asked with the pitch of voice on the rise.

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. We were lucky that dog was with us."

"Lucky?" Nagel scowled. "We? I don't know about you but that dog nearly killed me and the kid." He gulped his drink.

"What do you mean? Brother, he saved your life!"

"Are you crazy? The dog triggered the bomb. Don't tell me you didn't see him." Agitated, Nagel's voice rose, and then dropped. Jimerson was his best friend. He toned it down. "Maybe you didn't. You were behind us."

"I saw him. And I saw you pushing forward without any caution. I know we were running a little late but."

Nagel cut him off with a scowl and a wave of his hand. He finished off his drink. "I need another. How about you?"

"No," Jimerson said as he held up a nearly full tumbler. He got up and followed him. "Maybe you don't know but that darn dog jumped in front of you to save you. Almost like it was sent to protect you."

"What a crock." Nagel poured the whiskey over an ice cube and took a deep drink.

"He did. You would have stepped right on that damn mine. He jumped ahead of you and saved you, and, by the way, us. Wouldn't be here to tell you."

"That's crazy talk. I don't believe it." He held his glass up.

"You can believe what you want, but I saw it."

"Ah," was Nagel's rebuttal and he topped his drink off. Then, he said, "Maybe you don't remember. The dog jumped out in front. The kid was going to run after him but I twisted around and down and grabbed him in my arms before the dog blew up. The shrapnel hit my back. Missed the kid. Killed the dog. The dog's body slammed against me and almost crippled me."

He stopped, took a huge breath, let it out in spurts, and then said almost wistfully, "I can still see that darn dog dead on the ground, his eyes staring up into nothing."

He trailed off. Nagel knew he lied. Although the dog smiled, it was like animal stared back at him, too. Accusing him. Like it was his fault. He was too aggressive. The copter would have waited.

But, then, the dog wasn't accusing him. That dog was staring but he looked peaceful, almost happy. It was the strangest damned thing he ever saw in his life. If dogs could smile, that dog smiled. He wasn't blaming him for pushing too hard. Almost happy he blew up the bomb first. Nagel felt uneasy. Maybe the dog wasn't blaming him. Maybe he was blaming himself.

It was crazy. Nagel had thought about it many times because that scene played in his head many times. The poor kid ran after the dog, the mother screamed for him, he scooped the kid up and the dog blew up. And then the dog stared at him with a smile. It was insane and this was crazy talk. He needed a drink.

"That would have been you. That dog sacrificed himself to save you." Jimerson said with emphasis.

"He didn't need to sacrifice himself. I knew what I was doing." The doubt showed in Nagel's eyes. He tried to think back once again, for the hundredth time. Where did the dog come from? Did he really jump ahead to protect them? That's idiotic. He took a drink.

"You were in a hurry."

"We were on a tight schedule." Nagel interjected.

Jimerson looked at him closely. "Didn't say we weren't, buddy. I'm not blaming you. I'm just telling you that the dog saved your life." He paused and then said slowly, easily, "I'm just saying."

Nagel sat down and put the glass down. "That family was out there all alone. They would have been slaughtered. The wife, the kids. I don't know what I was thinking."

"You were thinking you could save them."

Nagel stared at his friend, at first into his eyes for just a moment and then his eyes drifted out of focus.

"You're right. I was." Nagel sniffled. "I couldn't let that happen. I thought back to, you know." He gulped.

"Yeah, I know, brother."

"I had to stop and help." Nagel voice had a tinge of a plea in it.

"And we got behind in time."

"We had to hurry."

"It's alright." Jimerson rolled his head forward. "Dogs do sense things that we don't. He was trying to save you the only way he knew how."

"Maybe, maybe," Nagel grimaced. "But, he didn't save much of me." He felt the pain in his back and legs, but he remembered the dog's face.

"You're alive, buddy."

"Easy to say."

They looked at each other, with the drink cart between them.

"Well, I guess so, I didn't get hurt." Jimerson changed stances and said, "I didn't come here to make you feel bad. I just wanted to see how you're doing. Like I said, I was in the neighborhood and I didn't hear from you."

Nagel drank again. "It's been tough."

"I see."

"Sometimes, getting over a tragedy takes time," Nagel said, with a trace of bitterness.

"Yeah, it can," Jimerson agreed and bobbed his head. "Take your time."

Jimerson licked his lips. "Look, I got to get going. I just wanted to stop in and say hey. You going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

"I'll see you." Jimerson scanned his friend's face.

"Wouldn't want to be you." Nagel replied, somewhat grimly.

"You call me, or I call you."

"Sure," Nagel said.

They gave another quick bear hug, shook hands and Jimerson left.

====

Over the years that followed, Nagel gave up his rehab. No point to rehab when there's nothing to rehab for.

After ten years, Tom's share of the inheritance passed to Nagel. It made no difference to him. He set up a series of accounts for the money and assets, just in case his brother ever did return. He knew the chances were slim and none, but he did it anyway. He didn't need the money.

He thought about Jenny's accident and the incident in Iran. All that he lost. The police photos. Their dead and bloody faces. The dead dog that grinned at him.

He drank and cursed at the TV. Mumbled at the kids that crossed in front of the house.

Nagel didn't hear much from Jimerson. Maybe because he scared him away. Couldn't be helped.

But Jimerson did encourage him to polish up his computer skills. "The wars of the future will be fought using a keyboard." Nagel told him okay.

"It would be good for you," Jimerson said. "New era."

"They'll still need combat."

"Yeah, but we're out of combat. We can be part of the new wave. A lot less hand to hand."

"What's the world coming to?" Nagel asked.

People needed to learn to toughen up.

After finally catching up with Buzz, Finn called out. "You could have waited."

"We were only thinking of you."

“Yeah, sure.”

“Yeah. Old man Nagel would have hurried up and caught you if he saw all of us behind his house.”

“Is that your excuse? An old man with a limp was going to catch me?” Finn sneered a little.

“Whatever,” Buzz shrugged his shoulders just as a couple of drops of rain sprinkled their faces. “Too late to play. Looks like a pretty good rain.”

“Yep.” Finn glanced up at the darkening clouds. He didn’t care. After going into Nagel’s yard by himself, he didn’t want to play with them anyway. They veered off to the right and he headed left, to a path that led to the older, smaller homes. He crossed a couple of streets until he reached his house. He walked down the cracked, black asphalt drive to the back of the house and let himself in the backdoor with his key. Since his mom’s grey Civic wasn’t there, he knew he’d be alone. He turned on a light.

The back door led directly into the little kitchen. A pale yellow, well used hooked rug mat lay on top of brownish vinyl squares. Finn wiped his feet on the rug and took off his shoes. He laid them behind the door. His mom didn’t like him tracking mud and since he was the one who often had to do the chores, he remembered.

Opening the fridge, he peered inside, hoping for a miracle. Not getting one, he lifted up the carton of milk and put it back. He didn’t want it. Checking it was just a habit. He pulled out the water bottle and poured a glass and drank it. Since the bottle was half full, he refilled it and closed the door.

There was a note on the kitchen table, which was also the dining table and homework table. He picked it up.

“Working late.”

There’s news.

“Sweep the hall.”

Yep.

“Vacuum the living room.”

Okay.

“Did your laundry.”

Which meant it was in a basket on his bed to be put away.

“Mac and cheese in the pantry. Find a vegetable.”

That meant he had to open a can of green beans or carrots.

He glanced over at the round yellow clock above the stove. It was after five. It would be night soon. He could boil the water for the noodles and put away his laundry.

He swiped the computer on the end table in their living room and clicked Pandora. His mom had the Hits of the Century on. He didn’t mind Pink and Five for Fighting and he listened until he put away the laundry. Then he switched it to a country mix. Alan Jackson and Toby Keith. He liked Toby’s Red, White and Blue.

He really liked war movies and galactic battles and the American flag. At one time, he thought about being a soldier but they didn’t take eleven year olds, even though he’d be twelve in January.

Lightning flashed outside and the thunder followed and shook the house. He could hear the rain drum on the roof.

He popped in his older version of Call of Duty and played by himself again. He didn’t have the money to pay for online gaming and he was just glad that his mom had bought him the used game. He knew it was old and his mom got it cheap at the game shop. But it worked. He didn’t mind.

The lightning and the thunder provided the special effects.

=====

Nagel woke up in his chair. The TV was still on. His whiskey bottle was empty. So was his glass. He took a deep breath, kind of a mix between a yawn and a stretch. The room was dark. It was still raining outside but the storm had passed.

If he squinted, he could read the time on the TV without switching to the directory channel. It was just past six in the morning. He had slept the night. It was time to get up but his body rebelled. He was all aches and pains even though he didn't do anything the day before. And his bladder hurt. He had to get moving. First things first. He limped to the bathroom, took care of business and washed his hands.

He gazed in the mirror just long enough to assess the damage. He wasn't any worse than most mornings. He couldn't breathe through his nose because of the congestion caused by drinking too much. He ran the hot water in the sink until it steamed and then placed a wash cloth under it. While letting the rag heat up, he cupped his hands on the sides of his face and bent over the faucet and let the hot mist loosen his sinuses. Gingerly he touched and then pressed the hot cloth over and under his eyes and let the heat do its work. Dropping the cloth, he ripped off some toilet paper and blew his nose. He tried breathing through his nostrils. He reversed gagged, trying to force his nasal mucus down to the back of his throat so he could cough it out.

It helped. He felt better. He repeated the routine until he was breathing normally. Drying off, he stepped back into the hall. He felt it immediately. Something felt different in the house.

There was a door open.

He could smell the difference in the air and the difference in air pressure. Stepping into the dining and then the living rooms, he checked the front door. It was locked. He walked back through the rooms, the hall, and into the kitchen.

The kitchen floor by the porch was wet. The back door from the kitchen was open and the screen door to the yard was open, too, and resting against the house. He closed them.

With just a passing thought, he wondered if he had left the doors open when he had taken out trash or if the storm had managed to loosen them.

He retraced his steps. There was definitely water and mud on the floor. Popping his head into the narrow stairwell that led from the back of the kitchen up to the second floor, he checked the stairs. They looked wet but less wet and muddy. There was a little trail in the middle of the steps.

He stood at the bottom and looked up. He thought about the pistol he kept in the buffet in the dining room. He didn't think he'd need it because it didn't feel like a break-in. The air was clean and fresh.

There was something almost healthy about what he felt and smelled. But, he retrieved it anyway. He checked it for ammo and carried it with him to the stairs in the kitchen.

He flicked the dim light on the landing and climbed the stairs with one hand on the railing and the other on his gun. He realized that he hadn't been upstairs in a long time.

There had been no conscious decision to avoid the upstairs other than it hurt to climb the stairs because of the pain in his back and legs. And, yeah, it hurt to relive the memories when he couldn't do anything about them, when he knew Jenny and the kids were gone for good. So he just began to avoid it the upstairs altogether.

He began to sleep in his chair or the couch or the guest room on the first floor, and avoid the memories. He didn't want to relive anything. So, what started as avoidance became a habit, until he just didn't think about it. And, yet, there he was, staring up at the treads and risers and the memories started drifting back.

He took his time climbing the stairs, because he had to. The days of bounding up the steps had long past and each riser was a chore. But he had the rail to help pull himself up. And the gun to make it more awkward. He left the cane in the kitchen. Each step brought a memory of Jenny, or Jim or June, or all of them together, laughing. Everything he didn't have any more in life was a phantom at the top of the stairs. He didn't want to face it. He almost wished there was somebody up there who had a gun, a bigger gun. It would be a manly way out.

One step from the top, he transferred his gun from one hand to the other and reached around to the wall switch on his right. He flipped on the hall light.

He wasn't quite in the top hall but he could see spots of dampness. He grabbed the gun with his right hand and stepped out – ready for anything.

Surprise!

There, in the hall, on the floor, outside their master bedroom door, lay a large, darkish, wet dog. The dog was on its side. Its nose was pressed against the crack at the bottom of the door. Its legs and paws were pointed towards him. It lay as still as a pile of dirty laundry. Even as he approached it, down the hall, the dog didn't move a muscle. Not a twitch, not a breath.

All of the other doors were closed tight.

Nagel wondered if it was dead. He also wondered how someone would check to see if a dog was dead. He had no idea. He stood next to it and then struggled to kneel. He placed his pistol on the floor and then used the wall as leverage as he got down on two knees.

He laid his hand on the dog's chest. He didn't feel a heart beat or a breath. He looked for a collar. There wasn't one. He wondered what he was going to do with a dead dog that didn't have an owner.

And then, another thought ran through his head, why was the dog here? And why did it die outside Jenny's room? He corrected himself, 'outside of our room.'

It wasn't the dog in the police report of the accident. Even if that dog survived and ran off, that dog was dead from old age. The dog on the floor was a young dog which begged the question why?

And then, another thought came to mind just as quickly. How was he going to move it?

Usually something like that would call for a drink but he hadn't even had coffee.

He hoisted himself up, reusing the door frame and wall as assistance. He took a couple of towels from the hall bath and got down on the floor again and wiped the dog's fur.

The fur seemed to lighten the drier it got, from a dark tawnish color to a light, sandy fluffy burn. He didn't know many breeds of dogs but he knew that dog was a golden retriever. But the coat was even lighter than the normal gold, even though it wasn't dry.

And the dog still hadn't moved.

He draped a large dry towel over it and went downstairs. After brewing a strong cup, he sat at the kitchen table and thought about his next steps. He couldn't call the police to report a dead dog. That was ridiculous. He could try animal control.

He searched for a number in the area and talked with their office staff. They didn't handle family pets.

Nagel tried to explain that the dog wasn't his pet but that it was up in the hall of his home. Yeah. They advised that he call his vet. Nagel said he didn't have a vet because the dog wasn't his. They advised that he call the dog's vet then. "Wise guys," Nagel said, and hung up.

He called a nearby vet and explained what had happened. They advised him to check the dog again to make sure it was dead. He said couldn't imagine otherwise. He asked about arrangements. They told him that a dog should be removed quickly because they would begin to decompose almost immediately.

They asked if he had noticed.

He didn't.

They advised again that he check the dog and then call back. He wondered out loud about the cost of services. They told him that it varied on the type of service and they could discuss it when he arrived. He asked about a possible pick up of the carcass. No, they didn't pick up.

Nagel persisted. He didn't want to drive somewhere with a rotting animal corpse only to find out that he was going to get robbed. So he asked for a rock bottom price. The no frills, no visitation, no burial price. Just to take the body off his hands. He whistled, "That much."

Because of the body fluids, they advised that he place the body on a towel or a large plastic sheet. They suggested a leaf bag, and then he should carry it out of the house. He wondered how much a dead dog weighed.

The dead dog that hit him in the back had some weight and it hit him pretty hard.

It depended on the dog and its age, they said. He said he thought it was an adult golden retriever. When they answered with seventy something pounds, he blew out a breath. He thought about the stairs and then any fluids that might drip from it. He wondered what the little puddles really were on the kitchen floor.

He didn't think any of the disposal, or cleanup, would be easy.

Again, he thought about the dog in Iran and the way it smiled at him. Still one of the strangest things he ever saw. And wasn't it spread out like the dog upstairs? He answered, yes, somewhat, to himself.

The dog upstairs wasn't grinning but it was eerie. The dog in Iran was male. The dog upstairs was female. The dog in Iran was a shepherd. The dog upstairs was a retriever.

He quit thinking of it. There weren't enough similarities. He finished his coffee, grabbed a leaf bag from the bottom of the pantry and climbed the stairs.

He pulled the towel off and laid it out on the hall floor. He stretched the leaf bag over it. Leaning over the dog, he reached over and pulled its body up and over so it laid on the towel and plastic bag. He took a deep breath and stood up.

He took another deep breath, bent down, reached under, and pulled up on the dog. He held it against his chest. It wasn't nearly as heavy as he thought it would be. He had planned to take the front stairs, because they would be less steep, and then walk through the rooms to the kitchen but he thought he could handle the steeper, but shorter, set of kitchen stairs.

He leaned against the stairwell wall and eased his way down. It was simple.

He placed the body on the back porch and looked out across the yard. Although, the storm had knocked down a few more dead branches, nothing had really changed. It was a mess. He shook his head. Piles of dead leaves built up against the house, against the pines and bushes, and, looking back at the end of the property, they had heaped up against the fence.

Surprising himself, he bent down and stroked the dog's head. It really hadn't been all that hard to get down the stairs. He had expected it to be a lot more difficult and, after talking to the vet, a lot messier. But it wasn't.

He wondered what in the world had gotten into the dog to pick his house to die in. And then another thought, what killed her? Was it diseased? Were there diseases that could pass from dogs to men? He didn't think so. Was it the dog's heart? It looked healthy enough, for a dead dog. He knew that thought would sound uncaring if he said it out loud, and maybe it was, but he didn't care.

Why his house? It was a darn nuisance. He didn't even like dogs.

And upstairs? By their bedroom?

It was a mess. A real mess. He didn't like messes that he didn't make.

He decided on a refill and then he'd call the vet back.

After brewing another cup, he sat down and told them he'd bring the dog round in an hour or so. They told him they were so sorry. He looked up and out of the window above the sink. It was all grey outside. The rain had stopped but the clouds had stayed. The red piece of reflector in the crystal bowl didn't shine.

He replied, "No need," and disconnected the call with his thumb and then got his second biggest surprise of the day.

The dog lay at his feet!

Not on her side but on her stomach with her front paws forward and her nose on the floor. Her big brown eyes were turned up at his, staring at him.

What the heck!

"What are you doing here? I thought you were dead," Nagel said without a trace of sympathy in his voice.

The dog just lay gazing at him. Her eyes seemed to be pleading with him with a feeling of 'sorry' all over her face. Sorry?

“Sorry for what, girl?” Nagel asked out loud. “I’m the guy that should be sorry.”

The dog didn’t answer but she did wag her tail, barely. Just the tiniest, smallest, littlest bit of a wag. The sorriest wag a dog ever gave.

“Yeah, I’m sorry, too. Sorry that I carried you down the stairs when you were just as alive as me. That’s what I’m sorry about.”

The tail twitched again with a pathetic little tick-tock movement. Not much of an effort for a dog that seemed to be begging for a place to stay. But a darn good wag of the tail for a dog that was supposed to be dead.

Nagel studied the dog’s face. The dog’s warm soft eyes looked back without lifting her head from the floor.

Her coat was even lighter. Nagel reached down and rubbed her behind the ears. The dog wagged her tail again. Just the minutest movement. Her ears and fur were still damp, but her color was light. Nagel got up and told her to stay. He went to the bathroom pantry and dug around. He pulled out a hair blower and an old nylon brush and brought them back to the kitchen.

The dog watched him the entire time he was in the kitchen but she didn’t lift her head.

Nagel plugged the blow drier in and knelt behind the dog and aimed it from back to front.

“I don’t want you getting my floor any dirtier than you’ve already made it.”

He switched on the blower. The loud whirl of the fan didn’t startle the dog at all. Her hair waved with the air flow. Nagel made sure he didn’t scorch the dog.

Using the old brush, he stroked out the coat and it sprung back in tiny curls. He marveled at how the dry fur glistened like white platinum. He thought golden retrievers were yellow, even a pale orangeish yellow.

During the entire brushing and drying, the dog lay still and watched him without moving. Nagel began to worry.

“You okay?” Nagel looked down his nose at him. “Not diseased, are you?”

The dog’s tail swished at the tip.

“Is that a yes or a no?”

More wagging.

“Can you drink?”

Nagel thought about fixing his own self a drink but put the idea behind him. For now.

“Thirsty?” He set the dryer on the table. “Where did I put the dog bowls?” He asked out loud.

The dog watched him out of the corner of her eyes.

He remembered and pulled the bowls out from under the sink. He filled one with water and he set them both on the floor.

“What to do about food. You hungry?”

The dog looked at the bowls and then at Nagel but didn’t move.

“You probably got enough water last night in the storm. Huh?”

The tail moved.

The dog’s probably got to eat, he thought, but he didn’t know what to feed it. He checked the pantry for dog food but there wasn’t any. He thought that was odd. He didn’t think he threw any away, but if Jenny and the kids had a dog, they would have had dog food. They had the bowls. It was another mystery.

He put the empty bowl and the bowl of water out on the porch. He tried to coax the dog to the porch but she wouldn’t move. Nagel picked her up and set her out back.

“You can have a drink if you want but then you can just mosey out of here after that.” Nagel pointed to the screen door. “I left it unlocked.”

He closed the kitchen’s back door and called the vet to cancel his trip.

Passing through the dining room, he stopped at the liquor cabinet and pulled out a fresh bottle by the neck. He settled back into his chair and drank and watched the tube.

He limped into the kitchen a couple of times but forgot to check on the dog. The hours passed. The light behind the drapes faded and turned to black. The TV flickered against his face. He fell asleep in his chair. The TV shut off automatically. He grunted and coughed during the night and shifted in the recliner.

=====

Early the next morning, he rolled over onto his side and his body squeezed the remote control by mistake and turned the TV on.

“Not yet,” he groaned and tried to cover his ears but it didn’t work. He rolled around and used a pillow over his head. He could still hear the TV. He dug into the seam of the cushions for the controller and couldn’t find it. Irritated, he moved his body and slumped forward and felt behind him, and it hurt his shoulder but he found it. He turned it off and rubbed his shoulder.

Great, he was awake.

He turned it back on and headed to the bathroom to prepare for another day.

A little groggy but able to breathe through his nose again, he started up the one cup coffee maker in the kitchen and sat down. His eyes roamed the walls and he realized that he hadn’t done anything in the kitchen since Jenny died. He used the same knotty pine cabinets and open shelving. Teacups and saucers were displayed through the glass. Little painted ceramic birds and dogs decorated the bottom open corner shelf above the counter.

The birds were nice and the dogs were spaniels and pointers and --

Dogs! He forgot all about the dog. He wondered if it was still there but half hoping that, maybe, it was gone. It should be gone. He got up to look and crossed the floor to the sink to peer through the window on to the porch. He could see some of the decking but not enough. The coffee was done brewing.

He poured a cup and sipped it standing at the counter. There was no hurry. The dog was either there or not. And mostly likely not. Which was best. Right?

He sipped again. He didn’t need a dog. Dogs were a killer. Literally, he thought, remembering the blast in Iran. The coffee had cooled enough to take a good swallow. Though Jimerson had almost changed his mind about the dog, he wasn’t sold that the dog had saved anybody’s life.

He pivoted to the door and opened it.

The dog was still there. His heart rose and sunk a little at the same time.

She was still in the same position. On her belly, paws forward, facing the door. Almost like she had been waiting the entire night, and maybe she had. Maybe she was sick and couldn’t eat or drink.

Except the water bowl was empty.

His heart jumped a bit at that. She did drink something. “Well, I’ll be, you aren’t dead, yet, are you?” Nagel asked. “You can drink water. That’s a start.” Nagel finished off his coffee.

He filled her water bowl.

As much as he wanted to forget, he thought of the grinning dog. He didn’t have to like the dog but he wouldn’t let this dog starve. Not on his watch.

“How about some food? You ready for that?” He wondered what he had that he could feed her. He walked back into the kitchen but left the door open.

He looked in the fridge, thought about the dog for a moment, but pulled out a carton of eggs and a pound of bacon. “This isn’t for you,” he said, raising his voice over his shoulder, though she hadn’t come into the kitchen. “It’s for me. I need something decent.”

He fried up a couple of eggs and some strips of bacon, and popped two slices of bread into the toaster. He made a sandwich and still had some bacon bits left. Rather than throw them to the dog, he nibbled on the pieces.

After finishing his breakfast and another cup of coffee, he poked his head into the back porch. She was lying there, watching him, with her tail wagging.

“Not gone yet? You are the wonder dog.” He picked up his keys and then said, “You stay. Like a moron, I’m just going to get you some dog food.” He wondered why he was saying anything to her. He pulled the kitchen door closed and then, going out the front door, left for the store.

=====

“Here you go,” Nagel had pulled open the back porch door and greeted the dog. It had waited right where he left it.

“I got a bag of dry nuggets. Okay?” He held the bag up so the dog could see it. The dog’s eyes stared somewhere between his eyes and the bag.

He poured some in the empty bowl, next to the water. The dog didn’t move.

Nagel wondered if the dog had special needs. Was it suffering? Was it lame? Did she suffer some kind of brain damage? He felt stupid encouraging the dog. But, somehow it had moved from the back porch, when he thought it was dead, to lie down at his feet.

On second thought, he didn’t care. Not his problem. She was just another dumb dog in an indifferent world. The world was full of hard luck stories.

But he went ahead and checked the food and water bowls. Both were full. The dog could sleep on the towel on the porch if she wanted. He made sure the screen door was unlocked. He didn’t want to stop her from running back to where ever she came from - if she wanted. Darn fool dog. He couldn’t understand her.

Aggravated, Nagel stepped into the kitchen and pulled the door behind him. He heard it hit the door post but he didn’t turn around. He sure didn’t want or need a dog.

He made himself a nice, big early lunch. He settled in and watched TV. And, even though he didn’t hurt as much as usual, he took his pain pills and followed those with his usual doses of liquor.

After watching a couple of action movies, he forgot all about the dog. He hit the pills and the bottle and the remote control. He passed out or fell asleep. He didn’t bother to keep up with the proper somnambulistic terms.

=====

A couple of mornings after the storm, Finn’s mom sent him off to the grocery store for bread, butter, eggs, sugar and milk. She needed the basics but promised to make sugar cookies.

He strapped on an empty green Army canvas back pack and cut through the neighborhood to the open field behind Nagel’s house. Because the store was on Nagel’s side and he was in a hurry, he crossed near the property lines. He picked up a stick and trailed it along the fences and listened to the taps until he got to old man Nagel’s. He lowered the stick and held it in his hand. He didn’t want to make a sound near him.

Nagel had the biggest yard in the neighborhood. Some people said he was rich but he lived like a hermit. How they knew that, he couldn’t figure.

Finn had seen him a couple of times in the front yard and the old man growled all of the time but he didn’t pay attention. His mom had warned him about the old geezer. He tapped the stick against his leg and saw that the gate was a couple of steps away, and he then noticed something strange.

A dog’s nose poked out through the chain link fencing.

Finn took a step back from the fence, fully expecting the dog to snarl and jump and try to bite him, being the Nazi’s dog. But it didn’t. It just stood at the fence, looking out, like it had been waiting for something, for somebody.

And then Finn realized, the dog had been waiting for him, which seemed way too strange. But maybe it heard the stick rattling on the other fences. Dogs can hear things a mile away.

Intrigued, he stepped up to the gate. “Whatcha doing, girl?” He reached through the fencing and scratched between her eyes. “Did you hear me coming?”

The dog wagged her tail.

Wow, she was the prettiest dog he had ever seen. All golden white, almost like an angel dog, if angels' had dogs. Surely heaven had dogs.

"Whatcha doing in old man Nagel's yard? Can't get out?" Finn pushed on the gate and tried to loosen it up. "Did he trap ya?"

She sat and watched him, and it looked like she grinned at him.

He shook the gate, "Is that enough?" He had worked a little gap between the fence post and the gate.

"You could squeeze through there."

She didn't move.

He used the stick and waved it up and down through the gap. "See? No problem for a dog like you."

She jumped up and her tail thumped.

"You better get out of there."

She just looked at him, grinning.

"You don't know the Nazi like I do."

It made no difference to her.

He removed the stick and waved it. "You want this? Is that what you want?"

She paced back and forth with her mouth open.

"Want to play, huh?"

Her head bobbed.

"You understand?" He took the stick and threw it into the field behind him. "Go get it."

She stayed in the yard, watched the stick and swished her tail.

"Don't you want it, girl? Go, fetch."

She didn't go.

He walked back, picked it up and brought it back to the gate.

"We'll try it again." He said, and he waved it and threw it up high and a few yards out in front of the gate into the field. "Go get it. You can do it."

She didn't move. She just smiled for him.

"You are something," Finn said, as he brought the stick back. "How about this?" He waved it and threw it over the fence, into Nagel's yard. "Go fetch."

She tore after it like a bolt of white lightning, scooping it up and bringing it back to the fence. She was as happy as a clam, her tail waving. Right to the gap in the gate.

He reached through and took it.

"Oh, you do want to play. You certainly are a smart one." He threw it even further over the fence, all the way back to the fir brush where he had found the Tonka Toy truck. "Go get that one."

She flashed after it and, after rooting around in the bushes, picked something up. She brought back a dark object in her mouth. She dropped it right at the gate. It was a ball. The dog's ball that Finn had found when he had been digging under the tree for his baseball.

"So you found your toy? Is this yours?" He asked, but he didn't think it could be hers. It looked too old and, besides, Nagel wouldn't have a dog or a toy for a dog.

He picked it up and bounced it in his hand. "Is this what you want to play with?" He threw it way over the fence, past the tree.

The dog went running after it and Finn was amazed at how smoothly she ran. It was almost like she glided or flew. But, he remembered he had to get to the store.

She came back with the ball in her mouth and dropped it for him, again.

"Okay, last time, okay? I have to go." He tossed it back to almost the same spot. He watched until she disappeared behind the shrubs. She didn't come running back. He waited a few seconds. But nothing. He couldn't hear her and he couldn't call for her. Besides, he had to go. Oh well, he thought, it had been fun. Who would have imagined? In Nagel the Nazi's yard. Wonder if he'll ever find out there was a dog in his yard.

He took off for the store.

=====

When Nagel awoke, the dog was there, right next to his chair. She was sitting up like a regular dog. Nagel slowly shook the sleep from his head and stared at the fool headed dog. She was definitely white, or as close to white as a golden retriever would get. She was shiny even in the dim light, as if she glowed. He wondered if she was more spirit than dog. Nagel pushed himself forward in his chair until he was sitting on the edge of the seat.

"Come here," he said and he reached out with his hand.

The dog slid under and Nagel scratched behind her ear. She was real.

"How'd you get in here? Pick my lock? You are the trickiest darn dog I know."

He got up off the chair and shuffled into the kitchen. The back door was open. He looked out onto the porch. The food and water bowls were empty. He picked them up.

"Finally helped yourself, huh?"

He filled both bowls and set them back down. He pushed open the screen door. "Go on, go do your business." The dog just looked at him. "I'm giving you a chance. You do have latrine privileges in this man's army. But they are outside." He motioned towards the yard. "Out there. Got it?"

She didn't move but just watched him.

"Well, I hope you can hold it."

Nagel wandered off through the open kitchen door and cleaned himself up, finally getting the shower that he skipped before.

The dog pushed open the screen door and trotted outside.

=====

Finn returned from the store with his back pack full. He held the loaf of bread with one hand by the tail of the plastic bag and had a stick in his other hand. He checked out the houses as he passed. All were large two story homes from the early nineteen hundreds. Pretty big yards and mostly well kept, until he got to Nagel's. He knew what lay behind that fence, just a bunch of leaves, brush, branches and one miserable old man who wouldn't possibly have a dog as pretty as that dog.

But in the back of his mind, he hung onto the idea but then shook his head. "No way," he muttered out loud.

And yet, when he got to Nagel's, the dog was at the gate again.

Finn gave her a big smile, "Hey, where'd you go, pretty girl?"

She rose up on her haunches and let her tongue hang out.

"All ready to play again. Well, I can't stay, I've got to get the groceries home."

She sat down and she looked disappointed to him.

"But I can throw you one." He wriggled his stick. "How about this?" He held it up and waved it and then threw it way back into Nagel's yard.

He watched her bound after it. Hoisting the straps of his pack, he turned to head home.

She was at the fence in a flash and dropped the stick.

"Back already?"

She waited.

"I can't."

She looked down at the stick and up at him.

"I got to go."

Her tail wagged.

"Oh, all right, just one more."

He bent down and fished the stick through the gate and stepped back. He threw it as far as he could, over the brush. He wasn't sure where it landed but he watched it sail over the bushes. Adjusting the straps, he stared into the yard one more time. She ran back with the stick faster than he could get away.

“Oh my goodness.”

She dropped it and let her tongue loll out while she panted.

“I really can’t.”

She stared at him with her big brown eyes and she drooled.

The drool got to him and he laughed. “Well,” he said, and he picked it up through the fence. “Just this time but I’m running as soon as I throw it,” and he tossed it and took off down the field. She was the most funnest dog in the whole world, he thought.

=====

When Nagel walked into the kitchen in the mornings, the dog was on the porch, the same as the day before. The food and water bowls would be empty and he’d fill them. After he set them down, he’d close the door to the kitchen and head back to the TV room and sit, sometimes all day and by late mornings, he’d fix himself a drink.

But every once in a while, he’d get the itch to check on the dog. He’d set the drink down and walk out to the porch where she’d look up at him and wag her tail and, sometimes, follow him back through the house.

On those days, he’d forget the grudges he had, and he’d ignore the pain.

He got to the point of leaving the kitchen door barely open so, if she wanted to, she could get her nose between the door and the door post and wedge her way in.

On those days, he found that she would eventually make her way next to him while he sat in his chair.

He’d watch the screen or doze off but, at some point, she would just be there.

“Lonely, huh?” He’d ask, not knowing if he was talking to the dog or himself. He’d scratch her head and forget about his drink.

He missed Jenny and the kids and the holidays were easily the worst. For most Thanksgivings, he heated frozen Swanson turkey dinners and for Christmas, he made ham sandwiches. He saved the best scotch for those days, too.

The drinks used to make it a little easier to get through the holidays and the memories but they were getting old, like him.

He looked for the bottle a little less and the dog a little more.

=====

When Thanksgiving rolled around again, he walked into the kitchen to pop in the Swanson.

He sensed that the back door was open but the dog hadn’t joined him in the TV room. He preheated the oven and fixed his holiday drink and checked the porch. The dog was gone.

His heart sunk. He knew he had always left the screen door open so she could leave at any time but he had gotten so used to her that he began to think, and maybe hope, she wouldn’t.

But she had come to him in a mystery and she could leave like one, too. But, he didn’t believe it. He didn’t want to believe it.

He knew she could be outside but he didn’t think so. His sixth sense kicked in from his years in the field.

She was somewhere in the house. Maybe in the basement but maybe, she was curled up on one of the upstairs beds. He was skeptical about her jumping up on the beds after she seemed content to sleep on the floor but, he did think she was upstairs. He looked at his drink, ignored it and climbed the steps.

The door to the master bedroom was slightly open, just like he thought. He would have jumped in on her if his body hadn’t been so broken.

Just the same he pushed the door wide open and, without looking, grunted, “Okay, off the bed.”

But she wasn’t on the bed. His head swiveled from the bed to the window to the dressing table to the closet and just then the dog’s face peeped out from behind the closet door.

“There you are. What are you doing up here?” Nagel hobbled to the closet and pulled on the door. One of photo albums had slipped off the stack and lay open.

“Did you chew on the shoes?” He asked as he picked up the album and took a survey. Satisfied that she hadn’t, he tucked the book under his arm and growled at her, “Come on - out.” He jerked his thumb and pointed at the bedroom door. “Now!”

She followed his directions and then followed him down the stairs to the kitchen. He didn’t realize he had grabbed the album until he was about to sit. He set the photos on the table and pushed his turkey dinner into the stove. He sipped on his drink and then sat.

“What were you doing up there?” He asked. It was the first time she had ever wandered off in his house. He could count on her either remaining on the porch or going into the TV room. He was becoming used to her ways.

She lay down on the floor with her head on her paws and she looked up with him with her large eyes. He gave her a glance and then flipped open the book to somewhere near the middle.

It was a photo of him, Jenny and the kids, right before he deployed to Iran, before they died. They had driven up with him to the airport. It had been a long drive but the kids were happy, Jenny was happy. They sang songs. They all went in with him to see him off.

When they arrived at the departure gate, Jimerson took the picture on Jenny’s digital camera. Jenny must have had it developed and added it to the album.

He flipped another page. Another memory. Thanksgiving memories, Christmas memories. Wintertime. He glanced at the dog. “What were you doing up there?” Tears formed in his eyes.

Smoke rose from the oven.

“Oh, look what you did!” He yelled at the dog and jumped up, bumped the book, and pulled the dinner from the stove. Some of the dinner had bubbled over and caused the oven to smoke.

He quickly stirred the gravy and the peas.

The mashed potatoes looked dry but nothing was really burnt.

Carrying his tray, he sat down at the table. The book had fallen open to the picture of the family and him at their last Thanksgiving together. Jenny had placed the turkey on the table, he held the carving knife.

She set up the camera for a timed photo and they all managed to get in it.

How was it possible that the book flipped open to this picture on Thanksgiving?

He tasted the turkey and thought back to that dinner. The last one they all had when they were all together. His eyes were wet and he smiled when he chewed.

He looked down at the dog and tossed her a corner of a turkey slice. “Thanks,” he said. “I don’t know what you were doing up there, but thanks.” For the first time, he marveled at her and wondered.

She lapped it up.

=====

The day after Thanksgiving, with school out, Finn was supposed to meet Buzz in the field to throw a football. He cut through the houses and stood at the end of the field. Buzz lived up and over to his left.

He waited, and waited.

Bored, he wandered up on his side of the field curious to see if the dog was still in Nagel’s yard. He wasn’t expecting her to be out. Nagel would have chased her off a long time ago if he had paid any attention to his back yard. But he didn’t. That was fairly evident.

He made it to the gate and she wasn’t waiting for him there, like he had hoped, but he didn’t really expect her.

He looked back towards the part of the field where Buzz would emerge but he wasn’t there yet, either. Finn rattled the gate, frustrated by his friend, who promised him that he’d meet him, and a little irritated that his new friend, the dog, wasn’t in the yard. Even though he didn’t expect it. He just hoped it. He didn’t want to spend another day alone.

He shook the gate again, stared up at the Nazi’s house and then kicked the gate before turning his back.

He heard a clap of wood on wood, like something had hit against Nagel's house and he wondered if the Nazi had seen him hanging around the gate. Not that he was scared of the old man. But he backed away just the same and took a couple of steps back to the end of the field.

The gate latch tinkle against the gate post and Finn looked back. The white retriever had poked her nose through the cyclone fencing and looked at him.

With a smile, he returned and laughed when he saw that she had brought the ball with her.

"You are the playingest dog!"

He reached down and pulled the ball out of her mouth. Holding it up, he said, "You ready?" He feinted like he was going to throw it.

She feinted like she was going to run.

"Oh, aren't you tricky?"

He held the ball behind his back and then did a quick throw over the fence. "I can be tricky too."

The dog dashed after it and came back in a second.

"Pretty good."

She dropped the ball and he fished it from under the gate.

"Long one, go deep for the touchdown," he told her and he reached back and threw it up towards the house. It flew over the bushes and it must have taken a couple of bounces because Finn heard it hit against the back of the door.

Finn slid behind the wooden fence, just in case the ball got the attention of Nagel.

=====

Nagel was standing at the kitchen sink when he heard something hit the back screen door. He glanced out of the window but didn't see anybody. Recalling that he hadn't seen the golden girl since early in the morning, he decided he'd better check on her. Opening the kitchen door, he found her on the porch holding a ball in her mouth.

"Was that you? Where'd you get that?" He reached down to take the ball.

Jauntily, she turned from him and pushed through the screen door. Remarkably, that was the first time he saw her actually use the door. He figured she did but he had never seen her.

Intrigued, he ambled to the door.

She scrambled down the steps and out into the yard.

"What are you doing?" He thought about following her but then said, "Wait there." He returned with his cane and managed to work his way down the porch steps and out into the yard. He hadn't been out in the back yard since, well, he couldn't remember when. It was a total disaster.

She ran up to him and dropped the ball at his feet.

He smiled. He realized he smiled and realized it didn't hurt. It felt good. He bent over to pick it up. That hurt but he straightened up and held the ball out for her to see.

"How about this?"

He tossed it out in the yard for a few yards, not even to the brush. It only took her a couple of bounds to get it and bring it back.

"You want another, huh?" He bent over and grabbed it. It didn't hurt as much to bend over the second time. He turned his arm in a circle a couple of times, just to get warmed up, and then he threw it over the bushes.

She flew into the bushes after it. He watched her with a chortle and waited.

=====

Finn waited on the dog from behind the fence and saw the ball bounce about thirty yards from him. And then he saw her burst out of the bushes after it. She scooped it up and raced towards him. She held it in her teeth with her mouth right at the gap in the gate.

"You're playing, aren't you? You playing by yourself? How are you doing that?" Finn plucked the ball from her and threw it back over the bushes and she dashed after it.

=====

The ball took a big bounce when it hit on Nagel's side of the bushes and it rolled towards him. Astonished, he bent down to catch it since it seemed like it would bounce all the way to him. But the dog broke through the bushes and caught it in her mouth before it reached him.

"How did you do that?" Nagel asked. He squinted at her and then up and over her. "Did you do that?" He took a few teetering steps out into the yard. With each step, she backed closer to the bushes but held on tight to the ball with her teeth.

"You want me to follow you, huh?" He asked and chuckled. "You think a major in the Special Forces is just a mutton head, huh? Well, we'll see about that. Even a retired one can figure some things out." He reached the bushes and tried to look through them. He knew he could see the gate from the porch but the plants were too high and thick for him at that point to see past them and he really didn't want to bulldoze his way through them. Nobody liked to get scratched up. Not even a Green Beret. However, the brush thinned on one side of the yard, the side that was nearest to the driveway. He walked over there and maneuvered through the shrubbery. How many times did he do that on a mission, he asked himself. He managed to wriggle through and he scanned the yard all the way to the gate.

There was a flash of a face back there, behind the fence. He knew it! A boy's face. He caught a glimpse of a boy and then the face disappeared.

=====

Old man Nagel!

Oh my god, that was old man Nagel! And he saw me, Finn thought as he ducked out of sight back behind the wooden fence. He thought about running but then thought, why? He didn't do anything and, besides, Nagel couldn't possibly catch him. The most he could do was yell at him, and for what? Playing with a dog that wasn't his? That's not a crime. Finn held his ground, but he didn't show his face.

=====

Nagel watched the dog drop the ball right at the base of the gate, right where the gap was the greatest between the gate post and the gate.

"Go away," he heard a young voice hiss. "No, I can't play, go away. That's old man Nagel." The voice was young and while the words were raspy, probably to lessen the sound, they were distinctive.

Nagel grinned and then crossed the yard to the other side so he could remain out of sight. He crouched along the wooden fence, silently creeping, using the skills he learned during his years in the service.

"You want to get me in trouble." The boy whispered.

The dog wagged its tail.

Nagel almost laughed right there. He held his hand up to his mouth and pinched the tip of his nose so he wouldn't laugh out loud. The dog's tail swished back and forth as she watched him approach without a sound. He was right next to the gate but out of sight.

And then, he hopped out in front of the gate and growled, "Old man Nagel, huh?"

The boy screamed and jumped back. "What! What! I didn't mean nothing," he stammered.

Nagel chuckled and picked up the ball. "Perhaps you two were playing with this?"

The boy was too afraid to say anything but, Nagel noticed, he didn't run away.

Nagel held the ball out for the dog and she took it. She dropped it again and looked at the boy. The boy looked at her and then at Nagel.

"I think she wants you to play," Nagel said calmly.

The kid had a puzzled look all over his face. "You mean, it's alright?"

"Alright to play with the dog?"

"Yeah."

"It seems to be okay with her so I guess it's okay with me."

Nagel watched as the kid took the ball from the dog and flung into the bushes time and time again, and she dove into them and bounded on back. Sometimes she gave it to the boy and sometimes she gave it to Nagel.

They took turns throwing it to her.

After an hour or so, the boy said to the dog. "I've got to go."

"Already?" Nagel heard himself asking.

The boy looked over at him.

The dog stopped and dropped the ball in front of the kid.

The boy shook his head. "No, really, I've got to go. My mom's expecting me."

The boy turned to Nagel. "She does this all the time. She always wants one more throw."

"Well, why not give it to her?"

The boy looked at him with his head turned to the side.

"Give her one more throw."

"I would but I'm already late. Been up here for almost two hours."

Nagel nodded. "Ah, just one more."

The boy smiled. "I guess it won't hurt." He picked it up and threw it over the bushes. Nagel heard it hit the house. The boy got a sheepish look on his face.

"Pretty good throw," Nagel said.

The boy grinned.

"You like playing with her?"

"Sure I do."

Nagel thought of his kids. Did they play with a dog? In this yard? He couldn't help but think that they did. Kids and dogs. There's a special bond there. What better way could he remember them?

The last Thanksgiving dinner. Everybody was all smiles. The kids and their friends. Who were their friends? He didn't know any of them.

All of those thoughts led him to a question he should have already asked.

"What's your name?"

The kid hesitated. He wasn't sure why he hesitated. Kids have a sixth sense. He knew, once he gave Nagel his name, he would no longer be anonymous. And that was scary. He didn't like to stand out. He wouldn't be able to walk on the street out front without a name attached to him. If somebody caused some trouble for the old man, he'd probably get blamed. But, on the other hand, he did like the dog. And Nagel didn't seem to be half as bad as he had thought.

"Shy, huh? I get it." Nagel said. "I'll tell you what. I'll get this gate unlocked and you can come in and play with her. I don't need to be here." Nagel fiddled with the chain. "Retrievers need to run. You can tell that they like to fetch things." He looked at the boy. "That okay with you?"

"Sure mister, that would be fun."

Nagel smiled at him. "Yeah, that would be fun." He bobbed his head and grinned again. "My name's Mister Nagel."

"Thanks, Mister Nagel." Finn said it without missing a beat. "See you tomorrow, girl." The kid bent down and rubbed her head, and then backed away. He waved at them as he headed home.

=====

Surprising himself, Nagel could hardly wait for the kid to show up the next morning. He had removed the chain from the lock and let it hang from the middle of the gate like a limp snake.

He set her water bowl outside and then brought out a cup of coffee.

He and the golden girl played catch near the house while they waited. Not wanting to get too involved in the games, he sat on the steps and tossed it softly from side to side and the dog faithfully chased it down and brought it back to him.

Nagel glanced at his watch. "Where is he? It's almost lunch time" he said to the dog as she dropped the ball at his feet. He dropped his head for a second. "Maybe he's not coming."

He made another toss that rolled into the brush.

"Oh, Mister Nagel," a faint voice trailed over the bushes in a sing song tone.

The dog dashed into the shrubs.

Nagel jumped up and hurried as best as he could to where he could cut through the greenery and into the other half of the back yard.

"Coming," Nagel called as he passed to the other side.

"Is it alright?"

"Sure it is. That's what I said yesterday." Nagel snickered.

"I just wanted to be sure. I didn't want to trespass."

Nagel shook his head. "No, you can go ahead and come in to play with her anytime. Like I said, she needs it."

The kid lifted the latch and entered. "Got the chain off, huh?"

"Yeah."

The kid looked at the dog. "She's a beauty." The dog walked up to him and he petted her. "Has she got a name?"

"No."

"You should call her something."

Nagel laughed. "I should but I don't know what. At first, I would have called her, Trouble."

The boy knelt on one knee and half hugged her and roughed her fur. "Why's that? Did she chew something up in the house?"

Nagel was a little surprised at his question. He thought the boy would just accept what he said. "No. No she didn't. No reason, I guess." But he thought some more about it. "I think that's what I was feeling at the time. She was trouble."

The boy looked at him funny and then said to her, "Where's your ball?" But he turned to Nagel and said, "You should call her something."

Nagel said, "Alright, then." He got a twinkle in his eye. "Let's call her something."

"What?"

"Something."

"What?" The kid frowned, a little frustrated, and tilted his head like he didn't understand.

"That's her name, Something."

The kid shrugged and then he got a little smile. "Well, I guess it's better than Nothing."

"There you go. That's funny."

"Okay, Sumpin," the boy said, already mispronouncing her name. "Go get your ball." He lifted his arm up and pointed towards the front of the yard.

Something ran towards the bushes.

"I'm going up front and sit on my steps." Nagel rubbed at his back. "Old war wounds." He headed towards the side of the brush using his cane.

"You were in the military?" The boy asked.

"Yeah."

"Really?" The boy's voice lit up. "Army?"

"Yeah, Special Forces."

"You were in the Green Beret?" The kid blurted.

"Yeah, how do you know so much?" Nagel looked back at him.

The kid didn't say anything, just lifted his shoulders.

Nagel added, "It was the love of my life." He regretted saying it as soon as he said it. The service, he found, wasn't the love of his life. He bit his lip. He hated that he said that.

The kid watched his face.

"I had to get out. Got torn up by a bomb."

"Oh," the kid looked at him, gravely.

Nagel wormed his way through the bushes using the cane to push back the branches. "It's not that bad."  
He lied.

The kid followed him.

Nagel sat on the steps.

"What happened?"

"It's a long story. Maybe not so appropriate." Nagel gazed out into the bushes.

"Did you have to kill somebody?"

Nagel blew out a breath. "Where's that dog?"

"Don't know." The kid turned towards the trees. "Here, Sumpin."

They both could hear some rustling.

"I'll go look."

The boy dove into the bushes and a second later, the dog came out with the ball. The boy crawled out backwards pulling on a dark object.

Something dropped the ball by the steps.

"Whatcha got?" Nagel asked the boy.

The kid stood and brought it, holding it with both hands. It looked like an old truck.

"A Tonka Toy dump truck," he said, proudly.

"Let me see that." Nagel held out his hands. "Can you go get me the hose? It's over there, on the back of the house." He pointed.

The kid ran over and pulled it to him.

"Turn it on, would you?"

He did.

"Open it up, make it as hard as you can."

The water gushed and Nagel sprayed the truck, washing away all of the grime. He rubbed at it with his fingers. He stuck the nozzle into the cab and blew out the buildup of crud.

"Okay, you can shut it off."

Nagel turned the truck over and over, letting the water drip out.

"Well, I'll be. You know what this is?"

The boy had walked back over, near him. He didn't say anything because he told Nagel what it was a few minutes ago.

"It's my son's truck," Nagel's eyes suddenly filled with tears. He was as surprised as the boy. They just burst right out. He rubbed at his eyes and nose, knowing he was confusing the kid. "No, no. Don't worry. It's okay." He set the truck on the ground and pushed it into the sunlight with his cane.

"I had a boy, a son, a long time ago. He was about your age."

The kid looked back into the yard.

Nagel knew he was upsetting him.

"Hey, why don't you throw that to Something?"

The kid picked up the ball and turned it around in his hand. "What happened?"

"He died," Nagel said and breathed deep. "They died." He took another deep breath. "While I was away in the Army, my wife and kids died in a car accident." Nagel looked sad.

"I didn't know that," Finn said.

"No reason that you should," Nagel replied.

They both remained quiet.

A couple of minutes later, the kid threw the ball over the bushes and they watched the dog run after it.

"The truck just reminded me of him, that's all."

The boy nodded lightly, "Yeah." He took the ball from Something. "My mom and I live alone."

"You do? That's tough." Nagel commiserated. "Where's your dad?"

"Don't know."

"That's a shame," Nagel said. He wondered what Finn said about his father to his friends. If Finn was anything like him, probably not much.

The boy threw the ball back to the wooden fence.

"You're going to give her some exercise. She'll be tired tonight," Nagel said and he looked over all of the leaves and dead tree limbs. "I wonder what else is hidden out in this yard?"

"Don't know."

Nagel glanced at him. "Know any kids that might want to earn some money raking up leaves?"

Something trotted up to them and sat at Nagel's side.

"I don't know." Finn thought about Buzz and JB and shrugged. "Not sure about anybody else, but I'd do it. How much?"

"I don't know. What's the minimum wage these days?"

"What do you mean?"

Nagel suddenly realized that eleven year olds didn't keep up with the minimum wage laws.

"I'll tell you what. I'll find out and I'll pay you a dollar over minimum wage if you rake the leaves and pick up the branches."

"Sure. When?"

"I don't know. I guess whenever you can."

"Not sure I can stay today. Been here for a while already. How about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow would be fine."

=====

Nagel picked up the toy truck and let himself and Something inside after Finn left. Clearing a place on the buffet, he set the toy down on the board and took a couple of steps away. He walked up to it and adjusted its position.

"Not enough," he said to the dog. She bent her head.

He climbed the stairs to Jimmy's room and dug through his toys and pulled out a set of blocks. He went to June's room and was able to find a couple of small male figurines. The dog followed him from room to room.

Back down in the dining room, he arranged the blocks and figurines into a small construction scene and stood back, satisfied.

He brought some photo albums to the dining room table and flipped through the old pictures. Some of them were with Jenny and the kids.

Something flopped on the floor and watched him.

He dug through his father's satchel and looked at some of the pictures taken when he was a kid. And some that had been taken when Tom was an adult and he was a teenager. There was a photo of him and Jenny and then, a framed picture of Tom and a woman he didn't know. Holding it up, he noted that his brother didn't look half bad and certainly didn't look like the druggie he had been told. He set it to the side.

He searched through the papers in the satchel and set aside the old statements concerning Tom's share of the inheritance. He'd send those to his lawyer.

He picked up Tom's picture again and stared at it. What happened? Whoever the lady was, she was a beauty, and Tom looked content. If he slipped into drugs and bad deals, when did it happen?

He folded out the stand up frame and brought it in with him to the kitchen. He set it up on the small table. He filled the dog's bowls. Fixing a sandwich, he settled in front of the TV. Something slept at his feet.

=====

They spent the weekend raking and building great big piles of leaves and branches, and playing with the dog.

"She doesn't want us to work all day," Nagel said. Something buried herself in one of the piles and popped up with a grin. She did it several times. Jumping in and out of the heaps as they threw more on top. "She won't quit playing."

"I guess not," Finn picked up a stick and threw it. The lab ran after it.

"Would be nice to run like that again." Nagel muttered as he watched her. "She just loves being outside and free."

Finn heard him but looked after the dog.

Nagel sat down on a rusty lawn chair. "Not sure how I feel about dogs now."

Finn turned his head around and asked, "What do you mean?"

"For years, I blamed a dog for this," he slapped on his legs, "but, now, I'm not so sure I was right."

"How did a dog do that?" Finn bundled up some leaves and tossed them in a smoldering fire. The smoke tickled their noses and caused Nagel's eyes to tear up.

The dog came back with the stick in her mouth and she brought it to Nagel. He patted her head. "Good girl."

"Here throw this for her, will you?" Nagel asked.

Finn heaved it over the bushes. "What happened with you and the dog?"

"Not going to give up, are you?" Nagel shifted in his chair. "It happened a long time ago." Finn sat on the ground next to him and Something stuck her nose under his arm until his arm was wrapped around her neck.

"We were out on a rescue in Afghanistan. You know where that is, don't you?"

Finn shook his head yes, but he only knew it was vaguely somewhere 'over there' and he didn't want Mr. Nagel to stop.

"We were dropped in by an Apache, you know what those are, right? The helicopters?"

Finn nodded. He did know those.

"We didn't rate it but we had an A-10 Warthog, on call, out ten miles. You know what those are?"

"Yes."

"Death and destruction on wings."

"They sure are." Finn warmed up.

"A thirty millimeter autocannon that fires like a giant Gatling gun and it's mounted in the nose of the plane. Just in case we needed it."

"Did you need it?" Finn asked, eagerly.

"Not that night. There were civilians to worry about and the woman we were sent to rescue."

"You rescued a lady?"

"Yeah, a scientist."

"What'd she look like?"

Nagel chuckled, "What did she look like? Well, to tell you the truth, I don't remember. We had to get in. Get her and get out. So I don't really remember even looking at her. Lots of danger. Lots of bad guys."

Finn leaned in to listen more closely. "Was there shooting?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Where was the dog? Did he bark and give you away?"

"No. He was on our side. Just like this one, here." He petted Something's head, who was still buried under Finn's arm. "They train them to be quiet. We had the dog so he could find the scientist with his nose."

Finn looked at him, quizzically.

"We thought we knew the building, but not the room."

"Oh, okay, so he had to sniff her out."

“Right.”

“And did he?”

“I’m getting there.”

Finn waited.

“He did find her, just by her scent, mind you, and we were able to rescue her and get her out of the building but —“

“Was she guarded?”

“Yeah, but,” Nagel started.

“But you killed them.”

“We were able to get her out,” Nagel said, without answering him.

“Were they shooting at you?”

“Not yet.”

“So they’re going to shoot at you.” Finn stated.

“Getting there.” Nagel took in a chest full of air. “When we got outside, we ran into the shooting, and there was a family caught outside.”

“What were they doing outside?”

“That’s right, I forgot to tell you. The other part of our job was to blow up a factory.”

“I saw movies like that. Did you set explosives?”

Nagel nodded. “Our group did. Lots of them. All over the place. As soon as we got the scientist outside, the bombs blew. And the family got scared by the bombs and went running and they got trapped by the shooting.”

“Did they get killed?”

“The father did. But the kids didn’t. Not yet. And I didn’t want them killed either.” Nagel wrung his hands. “I would have felt responsible. I knew if I just left them that they would be killed because they were in the middle of a mine field.”

“How’d you know that?”

“Some of the shooting set off some of the mines.”

“But they weren’t killed.”

“Not by the mines.”

“Wow. How’d you get them out?”

“I stopped for them and went back to help them.”

“That was brave.”

“Maybe, but I guess I shouldn’t have done it.” Nagel paused and looked away.

“Why not? Cause you got hurt?”

Nagel didn’t answer.

Finn waited.

“No, not because I got hurt but because I broke our timeline. We were under orders to get in and get out. Nothing gets in the way of that. I shouldn’t have stopped.”

“But the kids.”

“Yeah, the kids,” Nagel rubbed his chin and thought back to his part and how he had been thinking of Jimmy and June. “We were supposed to get in and get out and I got us in trouble.”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand. You got the kids.” Finn emphasized.

Nagel gave him a little smile. “There will be a lot of things you don’t understand.” He bit his lower lip but it trembled anyway.

Something slipped out from under Finn and got her head under Nagel’s hand. He scratched her behind the ears without thinking.

“We did get the kids safe, but we were running late.” He breathed in and sobbed just for a second.

“Darn smoke.” He looked around and then continued. “I hurried too darn fast. You know what I mean?”

But Nagel didn't look at Finn. He cupped Something's head with his hands and rubbed her ears with his thumbs.

Finn watched him.

"I got us in trouble. Got behind in time." Nagel stopped talking. "Somehow that darn dog knew it and he jumped out in front and," Nagel's voice dropped very low, "and he took the bomb that was meant for me." He dropped his face and kissed the dog's head.

Finn sat on his heels. He waited.

Nagel straightened up and wiped his nose with his shoulder while keeping his hands on the dog. "You don't want to hear this."

"I do. What happened?"

Nagel shook his head. "We were surrounded by land mines and I was trying to get us through, but I wasn't paying attention as much as I should have." He looked sidewise at Finn.

Finn nodded.

"And the dog ran out in front and one of the kids ran after him. I grabbed the kid right before a bomb exploded and killed the dog."

"Wow. Poor dog." Finn stared at him. "But you were a hero."

Creases lined Nagel's forehead. "Not me, kid. The dog." He brushed the top of Something's head.

"But you saved the kid," Finn insisted.

"The dog saved me."

Finn paused and thought. "Maybe."

"No, no maybes about it. My friend tried to tell me years ago and I just wouldn't listen. I don't know why." He stopped. "Well, I know why. Cause I didn't want to blame myself."

Nagel wrapped his arms around the dog and hug her. "I didn't mean to. I didn't mean for things to happen like that." He whispered to her. "I just tried to get everybody out, safe and sound." He scratched at her ears and down her neck, digging his fingers into her fur. The side of his cheek lay across the top of her head. A tear drop ran down the side of face.

Suddenly Nagel jerked up. "Hey, what's this?" His two index fingers arced deeper into the fur of her neck. "Feels like she has something here. Whatever it is, it's tight." He tried to push back the hairs as both he and Finn stared at it.

"A shiny string or something," Finn said. He bowed his head closer.

Nagel carefully moved his two fingers all around her neck. "Must be a chain or a necklace." His fingers retraced their movement. "Hang on, there must be a catch. Yeah, maybe, what do you think?"

Finn bent over and used his fingers to push away more of her fur. "Yeah, I think so."

"Can you unhook it? My fingers are too darn big."

"Let's see."

Finn worked at the latch. "Ah, there. Got it," he said.

Nagel pinched both ends.

"Oh my gosh." Using both of his hands, he gently pulled a gold chain under and away from Something's head. "How in the world did you get this?" He asked the dog. His face was all on fire, all red but beaming. He held the necklace up. "I don't believe it. I just don't believe it." A smile as wide as the river crossed his face.

"What is it?" Finn asked as he smiled, too.

"Looks like my girl's necklace. My little girl's necklace," Nagel emphasized, "if I'm not mistaken." He pulled his reading glasses out of his front pocket. "It says, Hope. That's it. That's the word. Hope. Yep, that's the necklace. Hope." He repeated. "That's Juney's necklace." He held it up. "I got a picture of her wearing it, somewhere. Let me think." He stood up. "I know. Come on." He led the way to the house.

=====

Nagel held open the screen door to the porch. "Come on in." The dog trotted after him.

Finn frowned a little but followed them. He never imagined in a million years that he'd be invited into old man Nagel's house.

They crossed into the kitchen and Nagel pushed through to the dining room. Finn hung back and looked around the room. The retriever stood at his side.

He noticed the oversized kitchen cabinets, the potatoes, bananas and apples in their own wirebaskets, the old fashioned sink, the fridge and stove and then he saw an empty glass and a framed photo on the table. Finn turned the photo so he could see it better, thinking it might be Nagel in his younger days. It wasn't but it was. No, it couldn't be, he thought, but it looks like her.

"Well, here it is." Nagel popped back through the dining room door. "See? There's the necklace." He held it out for Finn.

Finn took it, carefully, and looked it over. The girl wore a white and yellow dress. She was younger than him. She looked like a first grader.

"That's it, right?" Nagel asked.

Finn stared at the necklace. "Yes, sir, it sure looks like it."

"I knew it." Nagel turned to the dog. "How did she get it?"

"Don't know. She was jumping in the leaves."

Nagel laughed. "Oh, she didn't get it from the leaves. For it to be so tight, she's been wearing that for a long time." He thought back to the dog in the house years ago but, then, realized that it had been too many years. He raised his eyebrows. "But I must admit. I just don't know." He took the photo from Finn, looked at it again and smiled. "She was my joy. A real daddy's girl."

Finn picked up Nagel's picture of his brother and stared at it.

"What?" Nagel asked.

"I don't know, Mister Nagel."

"You don't know what?"

"She looks familiar."

"Who?"

"She does."

"She looks familiar?" Nagel stressed the word 'she'.

"Well, my mom has a picture of her, too." Finn held it out so they could both see it. "You won't believe it. I don't believe it. But it looks like her mom."

"What?" Nagel took the photo from him. "She looks like your mom's mom? Your grandma?"

Finn blinked. "Maybe."

"That's your grandma?"

"I think so."

"How's that possible?" Nagel said. He sat down, stunned. He tried to think back to what his father had told him. Did Tom marry the girl? Did he marry that girl? He didn't have to marry the girl for her to be the same one. It was too much.

"I could go get a picture and bring it back."

"Huh?" Nagel looked up.

"I could go get the pictures."

"You've got a picture of her."

"Yeah."

"Wait." Nagel thought for a moment. "I could give you a ride. That would be faster, wouldn't it?"

"I guess so."

Nagel pushed up from the chair. "Let's go." He picked his keys and the photo up from the counter. He slipped Juney's necklace into his pants pocket. "Come on, girl," he added as he led them out of the house and to his Range Rover.

After opening the back door for the dog, Nagel stepped up into the driver's seat. Finn took his place on the passenger side and gave directions to his home.

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Pulling up to the house, Finn told Nagel he could park in the drive. He was pretty sure his mom would be gone.

"That's alright. I'll just park in the street."

Closing the car door, Finn said, "Alright," and ran to the back of his house.

Nagel got out of the Rover but didn't follow him. He held his brother's picture in his hand and leaned against the hood of his car.

Finn came out front with a photo album. He opened it up and laid it on the hood. "I got it." He flipped a couple of pages and then said, "See?"

Nagel held the picture of his brother's girlfriend next to the picture in the book. They were the same. The girl was the same girl.

"And that isn't all." Finn said excitedly. He turned another page.

Nagel's jaw dropped.

There was a picture of Nagel's brother, Tom, with the same woman.

"Same guy with my grandma," Finn said.

"That's impossible." Nagel put both hands on the hood. "How can this be?" He glanced into the car and the dog was sitting up front in the passenger seat. "I don't know what this means." He looked away - at the small house, down the street, across the street.

"Can I take this?" Nagel asked, reaching for the album. "No, I can't do that. Wait." He dropped his hand and pulled out his cell phone. Focusing on the photo with his brother and the woman, he clicked and then he took a picture of the woman alone. "Got it. I don't know what it all means, but thank you."

Finn nodded.

Nagel stared at the picture a little longer and then asked, "Do you see her much?"

"My grandmother? No. She died when I was a baby."

A shadow passed over Nagel's face. "I'm so sorry." He waited and then asked, "What happened?"

"My mom says she died of cancer."

Nagel nodded. "I'm sorry. Do you have any pictures of your grandfather?"

"No," Finn said quickly. "My mom won't talk about him. I tried. Either she won't or she doesn't know much."

"That's a shame."

Finn rolled his eyes and shrugged a shoulder in agreement.

They both looked at the photos and then Finn knocked on the window to get the dog's attention.

Smiling, Nagel said, "Well, I better get going." He put his picture of Tom back in the car. "Wait there for a second," he said to Finn. Turning to the dog he said, "Go on, get in back, and be good."

"Here, I need to pay you." Nagel said as he pulled several twenties from his wallet and handed them to Finn.

"Wow, this is too much," Finn said with his eyes as big as stars.

"Ah, it's nothing. You gave me more than you know. Thank you." Nagel started to climb into the SUV but leaned over the door. "Rake some leaves again, tomorrow?"

"Sure."

"Ask your mom to come, too."

"My mom?"

"Yeah, I'll need to talk to her. I think I've got some things that belong to her." Nagel gave another smile, lifted his hand, and gave him a wave. Down the block, he maneuvered around an oncoming grey Civic, and they passed each other on the narrow street. The young woman driving the car didn't even look at him.

He continued on to the freeway and then hit the highway a few minutes later.

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Nagel entered the cemetery gates and drove slowly through the grounds. He placed his hand on June's and Tom's pictures. "Here we are, girl," he said over his shoulder to the dog. "Just a quick visit to tell them that I found her necklace. You stay here." He gazed at the plots and counted twelve deep from the road. He opened the door and reached for the photos. June's picture fell to the floor. Nagel squeezed underneath the steering wheel and reached for it. The dog jumped up front in flash and then outside before Nagel could get a hand up.

"Hey, you!" Nagel grabbed the photo and picked his way out of the Ranger. The dog had bounded across the gravesites. "Where do you think you're going? Come here." He watched her. "My gosh. I don't believe it."

He carried both of the pictures to the gravesite. The dog sat next to the gravestone, wagging her tail. The sun shone on her in a brilliant white that lifted a halo around her.

Awestruck, Nagel asked, "How did you know?" He stared at her and then leaned the photos up against the granite marker and pulled June's necklace out of his pocket.

He held it up. Rays of sunshine hit the scrolled letters that made up the pendant. Hope. He read it again. And then he understood.

He thought back to the pearls on the stairs and how he thought a dog had been in the house.

How bitter he became over the years. And how the dog showed up.

How they listed a dog at the accident but never found it.

He held his hand out and the dog slipped under. He scratched behind her ears.

How Finn wanted to play with the dog and how they connected. And now how they might be connected.

His chest heaved. He sobbed. It was impossible. Just impossible.

"Hope," he said. He dropped to his knees and placed his hand on the granite and ran his fingers across his wife's name. "I'm so sorry, Jenny. I didn't believe you. I didn't believe in me like you've always believed in me." He stopped and let the tears fall on the grass. "I asked for a sign and you sent me hope." He pulled the dog to his chest. "You sent me Hope."

He thought of Finn and Finn's mother. And looked forward to the next day.

==The End==