

Act of Kindness

By
GERALD L. GUY

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Palm Coast, FL

Copyright

Act of Kindness

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Dedication

To the three members of my family who have been touched most by Alzheimer's disease. First and foremost my father, Ralph G. Guy, 92, who still shows glimmers of that bubbly personality we all love and cherish. And to my brother Rick Guy and sister Sandi Bates who oversee his care at Lake Vista in northeast Ohio. I wish there was more I could do to help out.

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CHAPTER 1

It was the first week in August and there was joy in every step 92-year-old Jerome Browning took. He walked from his apartment at the far end of Crater Lake Retirement Center in record time. He arrived at the office of Director Beth Sawyer, better known as “Bull,” precisely at 8:15 a.m., making the trek in less than sixty seconds for the third day in a row.

As usual, Harry Cunningham, an 80-year-old former insurance salesman who was confined to a wheelchair, had beaten him to the lobby. Like Jerome, Harry was an early riser. He liked to read the morning newspaper while the sun peeked over Crater Lake, the nearby body of water that gave the retirement home its name. The two had been friends for a long time and their repertoire was sharp and sometimes salty.

“How’s it hanging, Jerome,” Harry said as he peeked over the top of the Palm Coast News, a complimentary subscription that was delivered daily to the lobby thanks to Browning’s tenure as editor of the twice-a-week publication.

“It’s hanging slightly to the left this morning, but it’s still hanging like a champion,” Jerome replied without stopping to chat. Regardless, he noticed the mirth flash in the blue eyes of the news addict and felt good about striking a humorous chord with his old friend.

“I hope that doesn’t mean you’re voting Democrat this year, pal,” Harry replied, trying to conceal his laughter.

“If I told you, I’d have to kill you, Harry. Although the female residents might welcome the respite provided by your untimely demise, I like you far too much to commit such an evil act.”

“You’re a piece of work, Browning! Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“I’ve got to see the boss lady about my one-day sabbatical,” Jerome replied.

“You’re a brave sort! You know she doesn’t like to be interrupted during the first hour of her day.”

“She doesn’t scare me,” Jerome said.

“Well, she scares me. So, be careful what you say or do. If you get her too angry, she’ll take it out on all of us.”

Jerome winked at his friend before he presented himself at the door of Director Sawyer. Her office was surrounded in glass and the door stood open. Sawyer was drinking coffee and shuffling papers when Jerome’s shadow darkened the entryway. He didn’t say a word; he just stood there and waited for her to look up from what she was doing. Seconds ticked by like minutes but Jerome’s patience never waned. Finally she said, “What is it you want, Mr. Browning?”

“Is that any way to greet a resident of this fine facility, Ms. Sawyer? Am I not worthy of a good morning or how are you this beautiful day? Or is your day getting off to a bad start again?”

Sawyer slammed her pen down on her desk and scowled at Browning. It was a look that sent tremors down the spine of most of her visitors, but not Browning. In his nine decades of life, he had faced off with meaner and more

formidable opponents than Beth Sawyer. Her bark did not scare him in the least.

“Do you really want me to answer that question, Mr. Browning?” she snarled. “This is the third day in a row you have arrived at my door before nine o’clock. You, along with everyone else in this facility, know I do not like to conduct business in this office before nine o’clock. Why do you persist in breaking my rules?”

“Oh! This one-hour escape is a rule now. I didn’t know that. Is this self-imposed or has it been approved by the board of directors?” Browning said without cracking a smile.

“Are you questioning my authority, Mr. Browning? Why I...”

“Don’t say something you will be sorry about later, director,” Browning interrupted. “You know my intentions generally are to irritate or inform. In your case, I can take great joy in doing both before the clock strikes 9 a.m.

“As you know, the first Wednesday of August is only a few hours away. Tomorrow I make my annual trip to the beach. It also means the annual donation to the Browning Recreational Fund will be delivered sometime in the afternoon. Being I will not return until dusk, and you will be gone, I wanted to remind you we will meet at 9 a.m. Thursday to discuss its distribution.”

For the past twenty years, an anonymous donation of \$10,000 or more was made to the Browning Recreation Fund on the first Wednesday of August. On the same day, a limo driver takes Jerome to the beach for an afternoon of recreation. It is generally up to Browning and Sawyer to determine how the donation is spent. The director, of course, didn’t like surrendering an ounce of the authority over such a large sum, but she had no choice in the matter.

“This is the third day you have stopped to tell me the very same thing!” she bawled. “Why you persist in pestering me, I do not know? Do I look like an idiot to you, Jerome?”

“I’ll have to plead the Fifth Amendment on that, Bull,” he said with a smirk.

“What did you call me?”

“I called you Bull, just as every resident and employee of this facility does when your back is turned,” Browning revealed. “Your personality demands it, even though I could think of another nickname that starts with a ‘B’ that might also be suitable. I would have used it but I didn’t want to get your day off to a bad start.”

Sawyer pushed her desk chair back with such force it banged against the window sill. Her complexion turned strawberry red as she raised her 225-pound frame to a standing position. Her forehead protruded as she glowered at the man at her threshold. Angry flames shot from her eyes as she said, “I will not...”

Browning interrupted her again. “I know! I know! You demand respect. Let me remind you of the words of one far more intelligent than I. He said, ‘One of the most sincere forms of respect is listening to what another has to say.’ I’m quoting Bryant H. McGill, entrepreneur and author. You should read him sometime; it might give you a new perspective on a career you obviously despise.”

Before Sawyer could respond, Browning turned and walked away, while calling out, “I’ll be gone most of the day tomorrow, Ms. Sawyer. But I will see you Thursday at 9 a.m., not a minute before and not a minute after.”

“We’ll see about that!”

Phil Carter, a 75-year-old retired teacher, had joined Harry Cunningham in the lobby and spotted Browning as

he left Sawyer's office. Both men had heard his exchange with the director. Cunningham shot a thumbs-up signal and a big smile Jerome's way as he walked by.

"That went real well," Carter added.

"I know," Browning replied. "Our Ms. Sawyer is such a breath of fresh air."

"You best be careful, Jerome. An angry Bull is nothing to trifle with; you could get badly hurt," Cunningham chipped in.

"She can huff and puff all she wants," he replied. "I'll still be smiling when the day begins and ends. I'm off to the beach tomorrow. You guys take care of things while I'm gone."

"Don't rub it in, you lucky bastard," Harry said.

"You are welcome to come along, my friend."

"You know I'd love to but this chair doesn't get along too well in the sand, but do me a favor."

"What's that?"

"If you cross paths with one of those bathing beauties in a string bikini, invite her back here for dinner. The change of scenery would do us all good."

"I second that suggestion," Phillip said.

"Your wish is my command," Jerome said. "See you later, guys! I've got to go get ready. My ride will be here in 24 hours."

JEROME CLIFFORD BROWNING had more energy in his 92-year-old body than men half his age. He was what his friend Harry called a "whirling dervish," although he had never performed any kind of Turkish dance. However, he did make more daily rounds at Crater Lake Retirement Center than and nurses and doctors put together. Newcomers mistook him as the center's activity director.

To everyone's surprise he was only one of the 114 residents who called the center home.

Jerome had lived longer than anyone expected. If lifespan could be measured in miles, he was working on his second trip around the world. Long ago, he had traded a lifestyle of excess for one of moderation, and he stayed fit through exercise. At six feet tall he was still a lean 185 pounds. He liked to brag it was the same weight he carried when he played football in high school.

Residents marveled when they learned he was ninety-two years old; he looked at least twenty-five years younger and had a full head of hair that was strawberry-blonde with just a hint of gray. Additionally, Jerome couldn't remember the last time he had suffered the effects of a cold or flu. Other than his knees aching after his daily one-mile walk, there was nothing about his physical condition to complain about.

Well, that's not completely true. He grumbled about his lack of visual acuity on occasion, but he reasoned his shortcomings paled in comparison to his friend Harry, for instance. Jerome didn't mind the fact retinitis pigmentosa had robbed him of his peripheral vision, it was the fact he no longer could drive an automobile that irritated him most. Rationalizing, he admitted, "I could drive if I wanted; I just can't afford the insurance."

That's how it was for most residents who shared living space at the corner of Belle Terre Boulevard and Laguna Forest Trail. Life had overwhelmed them to the point where independent living was impossible. Some had lost their life savings in the crash of 2010 and become homeless in their golden years; others simply could not fend for themselves any longer after being forgotten or outliving their families. The state subsidized housing for the residents who also

contributed all or most of their meager Social Security earnings in order to call Crater Lake home. Those SS payments allowed them to live comfortably, a class above the Floridians who were housed in prisons and homeless shelters.

Jerome's big heart had cost him several marriages and his comfortable retirement. He gave way too much to Habitat for Humanity, an organization he believed in when he lived and worked in Wisconsin. He even participated in a blitz build with former President Jimmy Carter during an eight-year stint in the Badger State. That's where he learned people did best when they were offered a hand up instead of a handout. The problem was Browning's helping hands generally were generally filled with cash he could ill afford to give away. His "easy come, easy go" attitude cost him a couple marriages and brought him to Crater Lake in the end.

His donations always were put to good use. In Georgia, he gave his heart and several thousands of dollars to a young African-American boy who needed a bone marrow transplant. He organized the largest bone marrow transplant registry of African-Americans in state history, all at a time when the chance of a minority finding a match was miniscule. The boy found a match, and two days later Jerome was served divorce papers by his second wife.

Browning remarried and came to Florida hoping to cut down on his work schedule so he could spend more time with his third wife, Rita. He took an editorship of a twice-weekly newspaper with plans of easing toward retirement. But things didn't work out as he planned. Rita got sick and died shortly after they arrived.

Then a computer scammer hacked his bank account and left him with \$55.56, not-so-surprisingly the last four digits

that made up his home phone number. As a result, Jerome lost everything – home, pick-up truck, family heirlooms and the coin collection he had saved since his childhood. For a while he had a girlfriend, a widow with a nice nest egg, but she walked away when she realized Jerome expected her to pay her own way whenever they went out on a date.

He moved into Crater Lake twenty years ago, donating a large portion of his monthly Social Security check in exchange for room and board. Jerome didn't mind. He adapted wherever he lived. He had always been that way. Florida was his tenth state of residence and as close to paradise as he had hoped. Once he got acclimated to the center's surroundings, life raced along at its usual pace.

Jerome's stride was just a little faster than everyone else's. He was nicknamed "Eveready" because his batteries never seemed to run down. Despite being the center's oldest resident, employees loved him because he required little or no attention. His love of life was infectious and residents enjoyed his frequent visits. He always was willing to play a game of checkers or backgammon, share a funny story or push wheelchair-bound patients from their rooms to the library or wherever they needed to go.

Employees marveled at his spirit, because conditions at the county home were not the best. Budget cuts over the years had eliminated some of the amenities that made life enjoyable. No longer were beds stripped on Wednesdays and Saturdays, food was bland and tasteless and the air conditioning was operated just enough to ward off Florida's stifling heat.

Like Browning, most residents had no family or their families had forgotten about them. They were at Crater Lake because they had nowhere else to go. The rooms were

filled with seniors just like Jerome. Most had invested poorly or lost the nest egg that was supposed to take care of them throughout their “golden years.” Very often it was the rising cost of health care or a spouse’s illness that stripped away their independence.



CHAPTER 2

Long before Director Sawyer arrived on the scene, Browning started making his rounds at Crater Lake. He knew every resident and most employees by their first name and his cheerfulness was intoxicating and contagious. The assisted-living staff loved when he visited because he lifted everyone's spirits.

The assisted-living residents of Crater Lake received special care from the medical staff. Visitors were few and patients rarely left the wing that was secured with electronic keypads at each entrance and exit. Patient-residents were there for one of two reasons – Alzheimer's disease or post-surgical rehabilitation.

Once assigned to the assisted-living wing, relocation was almost impossible. It didn't matter how much a patient-resident complained or fought for independence; the roadblocks simply were too many for someone who was incapacitated. Part of that problem was the red tape created by a government subsidized health care system that rewarded centers such as Crater Lake for indigent caregiving. Directors were obliged to keep their medical wings filled because Medicare and Medicaid payments were a substantial source of income. They kept the bookkeeper's ink black.

Gary Lee Harris, 67, was the only patient within recent memory who was able to escape the rehab facility, but he needed some help to do it and it didn't come entirely from

the medical staff. To this day, his metamorphosis is known as the Crater Lake Miracle.

An ex-Marine, Harris had spent his life as a construction foreman for one of the largest home builders in Central Florida. He had assembled houses from Jacksonville to Miami. He was well-known, loved by the crews who worked for him and a stickler for detail. The homes he built were among the best money could buy.

At age sixty and in the twilight of his career, Harris took a leave of absence from work when his wife of forty years was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease). Also known as ALS, the disease causes rapid progressive muscle weakness. Specifically, the disease affects nerve cells (motor neurons) that control the muscles that enable a person to move, speak, breathe and swallow. There is no cure. The diagnosis devastated the couple, and Harris spent a fortune searching for a cure for Olivia. They had traveled to Europe and Mexico in pursuit of holistic treatments, none of which worked. Her condition continued to deteriorate at a rapid pace no matter what he did or where he sought answers.

Harris transformed the guest room of his four-bedroom home in Flagler Beach into a veritable medical tech center. He cashed in life insurance policies to ensure Olivia was comfortable in her final months. The place was outfitted with closed circuit cameras, heart monitors, IV pumps, blood pressure stations and oxygen. He hired nurses around the clock to oversee his wife's care, and their dedication to her comfort was remarkable.

That was until Hurricane Fay began churning up the Atlantic in late August. All of Flagler Beach was ordered to evacuate as it appeared a direct hit was inevitable. Gary and

Olivia could not leave. Her condition was too fragile. He hunkered down as he had so many times before, made sure his whole-house generator was operational and took full responsibility for the care of his beloved Olivia whose struggle was in its final stages.

Harris breathed a sigh of relief when Fay blew itself out over the Caribbean and was downgraded to tropical storm status.

When a weakened Fay came ashore on Aug. 21, it stalled over northern Volusia and southern Flagler Counties. The winds never reached the velocity predicted but the rain came in torrents and it was nonstop. In thirty-six hours, thirty inches of rain fell on the small seaside community the Harrises called home. Gary remembered hearing a roar just before a wall of water collapsed the exterior wall of Olivia's sanctuary. She was buried under a mountain of water, cement block and lumber when Gary reached her lifeless body. That's when the roof caved in and pinned his legs to a portion of the collapsed wall.

When rescue crews found he and his dead wife thirty-six hours later, his legs were beyond saving. Both were amputated at the knees. Harris robust lifestyle, as well as his life's savings, was washed away. He was still recovering in the hospital when his wife was cremated and her ashes brought to his bedside.

Failure didn't sit well with the ex-Marine whose life would never be the same. Medical experts fought hard to stave off multiple infections caused by his injuries but Gary battled just as hard against their intervention. He wanted to die. Harris hated the world and he loathed his own helpless existence.

When money and patience ran out, he was sent to Crater Lake to regain some mobility. It was the job of the staff psychologist to get him out of his bed and into a wheelchair. Harris refused and made Dr. James Kennedy's job hell. He cursed, spit, hit and badgered the young doctor until he threw in the towel.

"When you're ready to get out of that bed, let me know!" Kennedy said and marched from his room.

After six months, almost everyone at Crater Lake had given up on the grieving husband. He was the nastiest patient on the wing. He complained constantly, argued with everyone and treated the technicians in charge of his care as if they were kin to Satan. He cursed a blue streak and his rants could be heard from one end of the floor to the other.

Nothing seemed to lift his spirits. Browning happened to be walking outside Harris' room when the patient erupted into one of his rages about the lunch menu. The curses were still flowing at a rapid pace when a bedpan flew out of the patient's door and landed at Browning's feet.

Not one to shy away from any kind of entanglement, Jerome stuck his head inside the door and asked, "Anybody need a hand in here?" He ducked as a food tray sailed over his head and out the door. As a nurse's aide fled the room, Browning stood at the door shaking his head from left to right.

"Who the f--- are you and what the f--- do you want?" Harris bellowed.

"The name's Browning and I stopped in when it sounded like WrestleMania XII was taking place in this room," he replied. "What the f--- makes you think that young girl deserves to be treated like that?"

“Oh, you’re another ass hole with an opinion. Well keep it to yourself and get the f--- out of my room.”

“I will when I’ve had my say!” Jerome replied sternly.

“I don’t want to hear it, old-timer!”

“Well, I reckon you don’t have a choice, Mr. Harris. I’m here and you’re there. There’s not much you can do about it.”

Harris began looking around for something to throw at the intruder, but nothing was within his reach. So he began pushing the bedside button for help from the nurse’s station. When nobody came running, he began calling out for assistance. Jerome laughed at him and it made Harris angrier.

“Nobody is coming to help you, Harris, because you are a bull-headed, vile-mouthed, inconsiderate, intolerable pain in the backside. Why would anyone help you when you throw things like this at them?”

Jerome held the bedpan at arm’s length and let it drop to the floor. The clang of the metal against the hard floor was heard at the service desk. Still, nobody came running.

“You smart ass! If I was able to get out of this bed, I’d kick your ass and never think twice about it,” Harris snarled.

“You don’t scare me, Mr. Harris. See, I know you can’t get out of that bed and kick my ass. Let me rephrase that. You won’t get out of bed. It’s easier to lay there and feel sorry for yourself and make everyone else miserable. Do you know something? It’s not your mobility you’ve lost; you’ve abandoned your manhood!”

“God damn it! Nurse, get this son of a bitch out of my room!”

“Nobody is coming, Gary. You’ve chased them all away. How does it feel to be mistreated?”

“I do not know who you think you are but...”

“I’m going to stop you right there, Harris. I’m most likely old enough to be your father and, like you, I’ve lost everything that ever meant anything to me. When this cruel world took all my money, I thought I would die. When it took the woman I loved more than that money, I was like you. I didn’t care whether I lived or died.

“One day I decided to end it all at Flagler Beach, down where you used to live. I was going to let one of those rip tides carry my sorry carcass all the way out to one of those shipping lanes and let the sharks do what they wanted with my weary body.

“I was a good way off shore when I heard my wife call out for me and say ‘Jerome, the man I love would never let this happen. Be a man. Swim back to shore. There’s work there you’ve left undone.’ That’s when I decided to let the world do whatever it wanted to me, but I’d never let it strip me of my manhood. Hell, my wife wouldn’t stand for it. I don’t think your wife would either. Olivia would not approve of the harm you’re doing here.”

“Don’t you dare mention her beautiful name in this horrible place? You know nothing about my wife or about me. Get out and don’t come back!”

“I’m sure as hell going to leave you to your thoughts, Gary. But I’ll be back. Think about Olivia and that manhood you’ve let slip away. You were once a pretty swell guy, I’ve been told.”

Harris flipped Jerome the bird and ordered him one last time to leave his room. Jerome smiled and walked away. When he walking past the nurse’s station, he broke into

song: “Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay; my, oh, my, what a wonderful day.”

“You seem awfully chipper for someone who just flew over the cuckoo’s nest,” the head nurse said with a smile.

“Well, the experience was enlightening,” Jerome said with a smile. “I don’t know if he heard a word I said, but he’s quit screaming. See y’all tomorrow.”

Jerome stopped back the next day, and Harris was still as angry as before, but the cursing wasn’t as bad. So, Browning became a regular visitor to Harris’ bedside and a friendship took root between two men who had lost everything. Before long, Harris stopped rejecting rehabilitation. After months in bed, he had seen the light and he knew full well he needed to strengthen his upper body so that a wheelchair could take over for his legs.

ONE AFTERNOON, AS Jerome was leaving the wing he stopped to chat with Lynn Burns, another down-on-her-luck resident who called Crater Lake home.

“I want to thank you for what you have done for the man in Room 232,” she said. “He has been such a hard case for the nursing staff and you’ve seemed to break through that nasty disposition of his. I’ve never heard a man curse and carry on like he does.”

“I don’t know if I’ve had anything to do with the taming of Gary Lee Harris, but he has made some progress. He’s not so angry anymore and he has decided he’s ready to hop into a wheelchair and become active again. They just wheeled him over to the exercise room a few minutes ago.

“He was grieving, you know. He blamed himself for all of his losses, including the death of his wife. You and I

both know that grieving alone can corrupt the strongest of minds. There's plenty of help, even in a place like this."

Lynn Burns, 66, was the direct opposite of Gary Lee Harris. She was well-educated and worked at home as a medical transcriptionist. She was quiet and kind. Like Harris, she had been spent a good part of her "golden years" caring for an ailing spouse who eventually succumbed to Alzheimer's disease. The cost of health care was monumental and Burns joined her husband at the center when their home was repossessed and their assets liquidated. For thirteen months, they were the only married couple living at Crater Lake Retirement Center.

They shared a single hospital bed for many months until Robert's delusions made it too difficult for them to sleep side-by-side. Each night for four months, Lynn slept in a chair with her feet propped on a stool so she could be close to Robert if he needed her.

Gretchen Prichard, the director who preceded Sawyer had a big heart. She bent the rules to allow the couple's co-habitation because it was the humane thing to do. It wasn't a comfortable living arrangement but Prichard didn't have the heart to separate them. Robert's medical expenses had left them destitute and Lynn would have had to seek refuge at a homeless shelter while her husband was cared for at Crater Lake. Removing Lynn completely as a caregiver also would have had a devastating effect on Robert's delusional mind. Co-habitation was best for everyone involved.

When Burns' husband passed, there wasn't an opening in regular housing for Lynn to transfer, creating a major dilemma for the director but she refused to abandon the

woman to the street. Both eagerly awaited an opening so Mrs. Burns could move into regular housing.

Burns was no different than any other resident at Crater Lake, she had become friends with Browning when she was going through here darkest hours. Hardship created a natural bond, and Jerome made his shoulder available for her comfort whenever needed.

“What did you say that horrible man’s name was?” Lynn asked as Browning was about to leave.

“Gary Harris,” he said.

“No, what was his full name?”

“Gary Lee Harris. In the business world he’s known simply as G.L. Harris. Why?”

“I used to know a Gary Lee Harris years ago. I was just a teenager back then,” she said.

“Really?”

“Yes, we were high school sweethearts, in fact. But this Gary Lee Harris and my Gary Lee Harris can’t be the same person. The Gary I knew would never act as this man has. He’s despicable. I don’t know if you’ve heard some of the names he has called the nurses and people who are trying to help him. It made my ears burn.”

“Where did you go to high school?” Jerome asked.

“We went to Western Reserve High School in a tiny place called Berlin Center, Ohio. There were only 43 students in our graduating class?”

“And you sweetheart, Gary Harris, graduated with you?”

“Yes, he was an All-Ohio superstar in three or four sports but not much on academics. Times were different back then. Star athletes didn’t have to crack the books like the rest of us. Looking back, it is kind of sad. Gary got

good grades throughout high school, but when it came to the ACT he failed miserably. I went off to college and I don't really know what happened to him. I think he went into construction or something to do with the trades.

"Robert and I met at Kent State University. I was a science major and he was in School of Engineering. We started dating in our sophomore year and married six months after graduation. Gosh, those were wonderful times," Lynn said.

"I'm glad you have such wonderful memories, but I believe you are in for the shock of your life. I think your high school sweetheart has been living down the hall from you for almost a year and neither of you were aware of it," Jerome said.

"No! That can't be true!"

"My sixth sense tells me otherwise, Lynn. The patient in Room 232 is your Gary Lee Harris. I'm sure of it."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I know he is a native of Ohio, because I had one of my newspaper buddies find me a Buckeye pennant to put up in his room. Football season is about ready to begin. Additionally, the word around Central Florida is if you buy a Harris house you'll never be disappointed. He was in construction before his wife got terminally sick."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"My Gary cannot be the man in Room 232."

"Odds are ten-to-one he is."

"No!"

"Yes! But he's no longer the madman everyone on this wing despised. He's changed. He went through a horrific loss but is finding himself again."

“Really?”

“Yes! Really! And there is only one way to know for sure,” Jerome finally said. He grabbed Lynn by the hand and pulled her to her feet. “Come with me. Gary is doing rehab this very moment. You can probably get a glimpse of him through the door. Do you think you would be able to recognize him?”

“I have no idea. It’s been fifty years almost. I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

“Trust me, Lynn. If he is who you think he might be, this is going to be a landslide moment for you both. Fate brought you here for some reason. You do believe in fate, don’t you?”

“I don’t know what I believe anymore, Jerome.”

When the two reached the exercise room where most of the rehab activity took place, Harris’ back was to them. He was pulling down on an overhead bar that was connected to a pulley and some iron weights. Sweat was rolling down the back of his neck.

“Oh my!” Lynn said and she tried to look away.

“Look how good he is doing,” Jerome said. “A month ago he refused to get out of bed. It won’t be long before he’s chasing you down the hall in a wheelchair.”

“Don’t be silly!”

As they watched the double-amputee strain with the weights, the rehab nurse smiled at Jerome and gave him a thumbs-up signal. Harris turned to see who was watching and immediately let go of the bar.

Lynn’s mouth dropped open and again she said, “Oh my!”

She opened the door, walked across the floor and threw her arms around the shoulders of a man she had not seen in

forty-eight years. They held on to each other for a long time. When tears began to flood Jerome's eyes and he made a quick exit, hoping the two would get reacquainted without interference from him.

A few days later, Jerome again was making his rounds through the medical wing and offering cheery greetings to anyone within earshot. He stuck his head into the open door at Room 232 and was surprised to see Lynn Burns sitting on the bed next to Harris.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," Jerome said. "I wanted to stop in and see how the rehab is going. Instead, I find two old friends enjoying each other's company. Isn't fate wonderful?"

"Please come in," Lynn said.

"Yeah, you crusty old bastard, get in here before I make a scene," Harris shouted.

"Gary, you promised to curb your language," Lynn said with a smile.

"That's man talk, babe. I used the 'B-word' out of affection, not anger," Harris said. "Thanks to Jerome, I've not only rediscovered life but I've found you. Or you found me. Or something like that."

"It's nice to see you both smiling. You've made my day, maybe my year," Jerome said.

"It's all because of you, buddy," Harris said. "I can't thank you enough,"

"I feel the same way, Jerome. You've always been a friend but who would ever imagine you could pull off a reunion like this? I start to cry every time I think about it. You've made us both very happy."

"On top of that, we're going to blow this pop stand," Harris blurted out.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Lynn said.

“Sounds like you’ve got your confidence back, Harris,” Jerome said.

“That’s not what you called it a few months ago, my friend,” Harris retorted.

“Really! What did I call it?”

“I think you called it manhood, and you were right. It was the kick in the ass I needed. Nobody else in this place had the balls to stand up to me; you did. Thank you.”

“Gary! Stop!”

“It’s the truth, baby.”

“Yes, but you could express it differently.”

“It’s okay by me as long as you keep progressing. I’ll be the happiest guy at this facility if you walk out together.”

“I have a lot more work to do before I can return to life outside of a hospital bed, but Lynn promises to stand by my side the whole way and I’m determined to make it happen. We were just talking about returning to Flagler Beach and sort of starting over,” Harris said.

“So the Builder’s Association did contact you? That’s great!” Jerome said.

“How did you know about that?” Gary asked.

“A birdie told me.”

“Nothing happens at Crater Lake that Jerome doesn’t know about, Gary,” Lynn said. “That’s why he is everybody’s friend.”

“I’m glad he’s mine, and I’m indebted to you for life. Don’t you forget it, my friend!”

Browning was all smiles again when he left Room 232. He was whistling when he walked past the nurse’s station. “All is well in the cuckoo’s nest,” he said with a big smile.

“I don’t know how you do it Jerome Browning. You truly are a miracle worker,” the head nurse said, smiling from ear to ear.

“I don’t know about that,” he replied. “Good things sometimes happen when ingenuity and courage collide. Those two have a lot of both and fate is on their side. I saw it in them when nobody else did. They are going to be just fine from here on out.”

Six months later, Lynn pushed Gary’s wheelchair out of Crater Lake’s rehab facility. They were destined for Harris’ rebuilt home in Flagler Beach. Labor and supplies were all donated friends and business associates. With Lynn at his side, Gary was a new man. He planned to go back to work part-time in an effort repay everyone for their generosity. The two of them never returned to Crater Lake except for occasional visits to see old friend Jerome Browning.