



That
Hoosiers
Cap

Dave King

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That Hoosiers Cap

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One

The weather in February in western Nebraska is problematic to say the least. The first week of the month can be haunted by snow storms and below-zero temperatures while the balance may deliver temperatures into the 70's. And the February that Stan Leidel abandoned his boys was no exception.

The National Weather Service predicted at least 12" for this particular February's first Wednesday, so the storm didn't catch the fine people of Beatty by surprise. Down the highway west of town, Smithton and Juliet were inundated by the blizzard which took its sweet time to travel east to Beatty, taking nearly three hours to go just 30 miles. Once the low-pressure leviathan had lumbered its way to Beatty, the street crews were more than ready for it.

The snow-movers stalked the town's main streets and thoroughfares like famished vultures awaiting the flakes that would soon fall to earth. Pete McGuiley, one of Stan's step-nephews, was the famished bird that was poised to attack near the intersection of state highway 30 and Cullen Avenue. Jenny Blake's pitch-black coffee caused his palms to sweat profusely even though the cab of the '68 Ford F250 was unheated. "I bet we'll get 20 inches or more this time the way the radio news guy in Juliet has been talkin' '... even sayin' that the stuff was comin' down like snowballs over

there,” he mumbled to himself.

But Pete wasn't too disappointed when Beatty only received 8”.

“If there was a half-inch more, I'd give up this \$5.50/hr job in a minute. I'm so tired that if I don't see any more of it this winter, I'd be as happy as a sheared sheep in July,” he said to Jenny, the head waitress of the Pick-You-Up Diner, after blading snow nearly the entire night. About half an hour later, as he was leaving the diner, he was stopped in his tracks by Jenny yelling for him from the greasy spoon's front door:

“Pete! Phone! It's your mom! She's on the phone!”

“How did you know I was here, Mom?” Pete asked once he was back inside.

“I called your house and got no answer. Then I called dispatch and they said that you were still clearing the streets. I knew that if you weren't at the diner flirting with Jenny then you would stop in there sometime before going home,” Mrs. McGuiley said.

“You really are amazing, but sometimes – “

“Now hush, son, I need you to do something for me.”

“Ah, Mom, I'm plum pooped out. Can't I just go back to the apartment and hit the sack?”

“Don't use that tone of voice with me, young man! It really isn't that much. I need you to take something to Tim and Mark. Surely you can do that for me?” Pete reluctantly

agreed to drive over to his parents' homestead and pick up a cherry pie and a pan of fudge brownies that he would then deliver to his step-uncle's house. The pie and the brownies rode precariously on the passenger side of the bench seat of the F250; that is, until Pete, only two blocks from his destination, turned onto Paramour Avenue. He took the corner too quickly, causing the cardboard box that contained the desserts to land hard on the floorboard. Fortuitously for Pete, neither the pie nor the brownies suffered any apparent damage.

That evening, nearly 24 hours after the late-winter storm lumbered through Beatty, Greg McGuiley and his best friends, Tim Leidel and Jay Pielter, left Mack's dry-cleaning plant and headed for McDonald's. Greg thought it would be cool to "borrow" the plant's delivery truck and use it to tool around in the snow a bit. And so they did. After an hour of hot-rodding in the dual-axle panel truck, Greg realized that he hadn't eaten anything since early that morning. And he also remembered that it just happened to be Jay's turn to chip in for burgers and fries at Mickie D's. Tim said he had enough green for the sodas, and Greg asserted that he'd take care of filling up the delivery truck's gas tank.

"Greg! You are such a loser!" Tim shouted. "The gauge is barely below the F!"

"Whoa! Calm down there, Jack! I am the one with the keys," Greg responded. "And it is my Dad's truck, after all. If you don't like it, you can always get out and walk," was his concluding argument.

Jay led his friends to his favorite booth that was across from the women's restroom; that table was the perfect location for comparing the "before and after" appearances of all the girls who took advantage of the facilities. The three high school juniors then gorged themselves on mushy cheeseburgers and greasy, over-cooked, "possibly double-dipped" French fries.

"Heck fire! Almost forgot!" Greg yelled as they were leaving the burger joint and were about to hop back into the truck. "I gotta call Mom and tell her when Dad might be heading that way. The old man made me promise to call and tell her." Greg dashed back into the home of the golden arches to use the pay phone. Christy Pollack was already parked at the phone; she finally hung up after the faces Greg was making at her caused her to laugh so much that she could not continue with her conversation.

"McGuiley, you can be such a jerk sometimes," she said as she handed him the handset.

"What? You talkin' to me?" he replied with a squint and a smirk. After three rings, his mother finally answered.

"Is that you, Greg? Honey sweetums! I haven't talked to you all day!" Mrs. McGuiley said. "Yes, yes, I understand. So you're sure that your father won't be home until late? But what about you? And your dinner? I bet you're simply famished after basketball practice."

"Me and the guys ... we stopped at McDougle's. Don't worry, Mom. Johnson blessed me with a pretty light prac-

tice today. I am his favorite player, don't ya know?" This was a tiny white lie. Because of him complaining that his stomach hurt during the morning practice, Coach Johnson made him work double-time that afternoon.

"That's not what I've heard!" Greg's mother quipped. "According to my very reliable source in the school cafeteria, your coach has threatened to bench you for the next two games if you don't take your role on the team more seriously!"

"Oh Mom!" Greg whined. "How's anybody who works there gonna know what's happening during basketball practice?"

"Son, you'd be surprised at the things I've learned about Beatty High ... very surprised," Greg's mom replied.

Before climbing back into the driver's seat of the dry-cleaning delivery truck, Greg announced to the other miscreants that his legs and lower back hurt more now than they did right after practice.

"Watch out for that VW bus when you back out, you wiener! You almost creamed it when you pulled in," Jay offered. "Oh, and I suppose you're gonna blame your pathetic driving skills on your legs and lower back painin' you so much?"

"Huh? Who said anything about my legs and back keepin' me from drivin'? Better yet, you dork! Who made you the Mr. El Perfecto driver?" Greg replied. "Boys, it's time to take this old jalopy back to the plant," he then added to change

the subject. “Don’t want Smitty to get all worried about it.”

“Why? We’ve only had the beast for about an hour. And look! It’s only 7:30! What are we gonna do the rest of the night?” Jay grinned: this is what he usually said when the trio was about to disband for the evening.

“Let me see ... there’s Biology and Calc sittin’ on my bed ... one of the Halloween movies is supposed to be on the box later. And I haven’t talked to Jill since ... since I don’t know when. There’s lots that I need to do! And I refuse to entertain you duds anymore tonight.” Greg then thought out loud as he continued to guide the delivery truck back to its stable. “Jill ... yeah. The first thing I’ll do is give her a call and remind her how much she loves me.” Jay then pretended that he was choking. But Tim didn’t say a thing; he was deep in thought about hopefully getting home before his father did. The day before, he was supposed to visit Mr. Brown’s hardware store and pick up a new doorknob for the front door of the house. But because of the snowstorm, that just did not happen.

Two

Gerald Brown, the hardware store owner, was Tim's uncle on his mother's side, and the two of them suffered from a peculiar relationship. Whenever they were together, they were like Captain Ahab and Ishmael. Everything that Mr. Brown said and did in Tim's presence, the teenager immediately committed to memory. It was like it was his duty to study the man to somehow ascertain the "method behind the madness." The hardware store owner was like Ahab in the sense that the only time he ever wanted to have anything to do with the boy was when he had a job for him to do. If there was nothing to be fetched or repaired, it seemed that Uncle Gerald preferred that the boy stay as far removed from him as possible; but it was never an overt implication. Tim, however, was not fully cognizant of his role as his uncle's official observer. But while in Junior Lit, he had read *Moby Dick* and because of reading that wonderful sea-faring tome, he just knew that whenever possible, it behooved him to stay as far away as possible from his uncle Gerald.

At 7:45, Greg dropped Tim off at the house on Paramour Avenue. When Tim opened the front door, his brother Mark, seated at the dining room table working on his math homework, quickly turned around but said nothing. Mark, a 6th grader, detested math but hated missing

Saturday morning cartoons more. Tim, saying nothing as well, opened the refrigerator door, latched onto a half-eaten cherry pie, then scooped out a piece for himself. He then nonchalantly plopped down at the opposite end of the table. And there they were: a piece a cherry pie on one end and a half-completed worksheet of fractions on the other. “Dad isn’t home yet,” Mark said to break the silence.

“Not that unusual,” Tim mumbled, chewing away on a rubbery piece of cherry-flavored crust. Their father’s current routine was to come home anywhere between midnight and 4:00 AM no matter the day, no matter the workload that awaited him come sunrise.

Greg McGuiley’s step-uncle, Stan Leidel, worked odd jobs around town. It hadn’t always been that way. Before his wife died – leaving him the sole custodian of two boys ages 13 and 7 at the time of her parting – he worked for Harold Timmison, the owner of the town’s lumberyard. Cleo died in a single-vehicle accident one warm, moonlight-drenched summer night while driving across the state to visit her folks in Lincoln. She left the boys under Stan’s care the morning of that tragic day; he told her that Timmison wouldn’t let him take off work to accompany her. Some folks said that she had merely fallen asleep at the wheel, others swore to the fact that she had always been a terrible driver. But Stan claimed he knew the truth and pledged that he would forever hide it from the boys.

”Ain’t nobody gonna tell my boys that their momma was foolin’ around ... that she wasn’t faithful to her loved ones.

I swore on the Bible that I'd have to be on my deathbed with my life leakin' outta my veins before I'd ever give them boys even a hint that their mother wasn't the best wife a man could ever have. Maybe ... maybe then I'd tell 'em the truth ... maybe then ... when the truth is supposed to be told. I'd have to be dyin' of terminal cancer ... with the doctors about to pull the plug on me ... before I'd give them boys even a hair of a suspicion that she was unfaithful to me."

Mark sighed with the spastic force of a suppressed sneeze as he struggled with his denominators; Tim munched methodically on the last bit of pie crust. Maybe Dad would just walk in the front door any minute, Tim thought.

"Who brought the pie over? Wait ... don't tell me. Lemme guess. Was it old lady Grundig?" Tim mumbled.

"Naw, it's Aunt Sally's cherry pie, and she made some brownies, too. Pete brought them this morning before you came downstairs. Want one?" Mark was glad to share the treats with his brother just so he could take a break from the fractions.

"Are you kidding? This pie's about done me in! Anything good on the tube tonight? Maybe something bloody and scary?"

"Remember what Dad said about them scary movies? We can only watch the ones he approves." Tim grunted as he picked up a dog-eared TV Guide that was by the microwave.

"Okay, so forget the monster movie. Hey, here's a good one.

Murder on 32nd Street. How's that sound?"

"Sounds too bloody. Anyway, I think we saw it last month. And wasn't it on the box?" Tim flipped the pages, ignoring his little brother. He then walked over to the TV and switched it on. Staring at him was the visage of J.R. Ewing. "Okay then. Here's *Dallas*."

"Re-run." Still perusing the guide, he sat down in the easy chair close to the kitchen door. Mark folded up the math worksheet and filed it away.

"Did you get the whole thing done? That worksheet?" Tim asked gruffly. Mark shook his head.

"I'll finish it after *Dallas*. Dumb fractions. I can do those anytime."

"Well, little man, you better get 'em done before Dad gets home," Tim replied. Mark plopped down on the dark-blue couch to the left of the easy chair and latched onto one of the dusty-orange pillows. "But I'm not going to argue with you about it. That's between you and Dad. Just keep quiet." They sat for 20 minutes without saying a word. J.R., in the meantime, boasted to one of his underlings of how he planned to sell Ewing Oil stock for an awful lot more than its face value.

"That J.R. Ewing thinks he's so smart. Bet if somebody in real life acted like that ... and did what he did, he'd end up in an alley some day with a knife stickin' outta his back," Tim offered.

“Hardly. What do even you know about real life?” Mark quipped. “When do you think Dad will be comin’ home?”

“Since it’s Friday, not ‘til 2 ... maybe even 3. He didn’t get home until almost 1:30 last night. Woke me up when he came in.”

“Me, too. I think he tripped over the coffee table.” A commercial for Downy Fabric Softener momentarily interrupted J.R.’s illicit stock dealings. “Do you think he was plastered again?” Mark asked.

“More than likely,” Tim said. “During Western Civ today, Frank told me he drove by Nellie’s at about 10:30 last night, and he was pretty sure that he saw the Impala parked in front. If Dad is startin’ to hang out at that pit again, he’ll be going there every night for a month ... at least.” After the commercial break, J.R. reappeared to argue with Sue Ellen about who she supposedly had had lunch with that afternoon. “Who’s gonna bring dinner tomorrow?” Tim asked.

“Pete didn’t say. You sure you don’t want one of those brownies? I’m gonna grab one.”

“Pass. Grab me a bottle of soda pop while you’re in there.” When the refrigerator door opened, the glass bottles on the door shelves rattled like a home-made wind-chime.

“What do you want?” Mark said as he stared inside the nearly-empty fridge.

“I don’t care. Anything but Coke. Root beer?” The door slammed shut. Then, from down the street, the raspy roar of

a car's backfire invaded the living room. Both boys turned towards the front door.

"Think it's Dad?" Mark asked.

"Sure sounded like the Impala." A car door slammed shut. Tim shivered as the front door to the house opened sooner than he expected. A man wearing an oily, tattered jean jacket and a baseball cap that said "Hoosiers" above the brim then walked into the house. His boots were decorated with briny slush and oozy mud. Before the boys could say anything, the man spoke.

"Not a word, you two! Your dad's got somethin' to tell ya. Tim, now don't you look at me like that! Don't say nothin', Mark! The both of ya have a sit and just listen." Through the smudgy, fogged-up picture glass window, Stan Leidel then peered out onto the street; he looked up it and then down it, and then slammed the front door. The melting slush began to leave a murky sludge wherever the boots hit the desert-yellow carpet.

"Your dad's gotta go on a little trip. Mack and Sally will watch out for ya while I'm gone. I don't know when I'll be back. Anything you need, Mack and Sally ... they will get it for ya." He looked at his feet, mumbled some profanity, then stomped off the remainder of the slush on the diamond-shaped red carpet rug by the front door.

"Dad, what's goin' on?" Tim stood up and asked. His father brusquely pushed him back into the easy chair.

"I didn't say that you could get outta that chair, boy!

And there ain't nothin' going on! Nothin'!" He hesitated and lowered his head again. Tim scowled at the stench of cheap bourbon that had just invaded the house. "There ain't nothin' wrong ... nothin'. Your dad's gotta go outta town for a few days. I might be back in a week ... it might take a coupla weeks. I can't say for sure." Mark began to cry softly.

"Can't ... can't you just stay home?" Mark asked. "Pete brought over some brownies and ... and Aunt Sally - "

"Why can't you get this into your thick skull, boy? I don't even have time to sit down! I gotta leave right now!" He then whispered and pointed a finger at Tim. "Tell whoever comes to the house that you ain't seen me all day ... and that you ain't expecting to see me for a long while. Tell 'em I'm gone for a few weeks ... maybe more. Promise me you'll tell 'em that!"

"Who's gonna be comin' to the house? *What* did you do now?" Stan grabbed Tim by the nape of his neck, pulled him out of the easy chair and shook him so vigorously that the Hoosiers cap fell off the man's head; it landed on the floor behind him.

"I ain't in no trouble! Remember that, both of ya! Your dad ain't done nothin' wrong, got it? And don't tell nobody that you seen me today." He then relaxed his grip on his elder son and placed him back into the chair. "I gotta go now. I'll be sendin' some money once I get to where I need to be. Don't worry about how it will be arriving. Ain't nobody gonna say that Stan Leidel don't take care of his boys!" He opened the front door and uttered another

expletive as he tried to pull his keys out of the lock, and they wouldn't cooperate. "Mark, you gotta promise me you won't tell anybody that you saw me. Say it, boy! Say it!" Stan grimaced as he continued to fight with the keys; the lock finally let go of them.

"I ... I promise, Dad, I promise!" Mark finally replied.

Without uttering another word, their father left the house, ran to the car, and pulled away from the curb. The rear of the emerald-green Chevy fishtailed as the tires struggled to get traction on the hard-packed snow. Stan Leidel had once again left his two sons, this time with them both standing in the doorway of their three-bedroom rancher, Mark clutching a half-eaten fudge brownie and Tim muttering something about the Impala barely missing the Mustang parked across the street. Then something hit the floor behind them; it was the door's interior handle.

"You shoulda put in that new doorknob when Dad told you to," Mark said.

Tim picked up the handle, Mark came back inside as well, and the door was shut once again. Tim looked down at the Hoosiers baseball cap, picked it by its brim and then threw it onto the coffee table. "I bet he wishes he didn't leave his hat," he then commented as he headed upstairs. On the portable 18" color TV, J.R. had just pulled Sue Ellen into his arms.

Mark went back to the couch and proceeded to finish off the brownie, chewing each bite slowly, each bite chewed

more laboriously than the one before. Once the brownie was polished off, he picked the Hoosiers cap off the coffee table and tried it on. It was much too large for his head, so he unsnapped the plastic band. The tab broke off in his hand. He then walked into the kitchen, found a stapler and used it to attach the remains of the tab to the other side of the back of the cap. He put it back on his head; now it didn't feel too large.

Three

That next morning, more than an hour before dawn, Tim oozed out of bed, stumbled to his feet and quickly sucked in some air. “Boy, do I really stink that bad? Guess I forgot to shower last night,” he mumbled. With that said, he shuffled into the bathroom and turned on the water. As he stood there waiting for the water to heat up, Mark entered the steam-filled room.

“Shower-time? You don’t take showers in the morning,” he offered while rubbing his eyes.

“Well, I am today!” Tim replied. “Now, get out before I throw you out!”

“Whatever,” Mark mumbled as he went back to his room where he then climbed back into bed.

“Now don’t go fallin’ back to sleep! It’s just about time for you to get up anyway!” Tim hollered as he stripped, threw his pajama bottoms down the hallway where they hit the floor just outside Mark’s bedroom, and then stepped into the shower.

Just before Tim dropped his brother off at Oak Street Elementary School, he scowled at the Hoosiers cap that had been perched atop Mark’s head since he began to eat breakfast. “You can’t be serious about wearing dad’s cap into the building,” he groaned. “If you really want to wear

something, lemme give you one of mine,” he then added as he reached behind the seat and grabbed a hardly-worn dark-blue baseball cap that sported a white Nike slash. “Here, take this one instead. That way I won’t have to start calling you *Little Stan*.”

“No, I want Dad’s,” Mark whispered. “And did ya notice that I fixed it so it would fit even better?” Tim laughed.

“Yeah right,” he replied. “That piece of duct tape is gonna work so much better than staples!” He then grabbed for the cap, but Mark was too quick in opening the car door and jumping out.

“Ha! Too old, too slow!” Mark teased.

“Cya, pip-squeak! I hope you get beat up for wearing that stupid hat!” Tim yelled as Mark slammed the car door and started walking up the snow-covered sidewalk. Even before he reached the steps to the front door of the school, an observant classmate was already pointing at the red-and-white Hoosiers cap on Mark’s head. Once inside the building, Mark first started down the main hall but then quickly spun around and began to head in the opposite direction.

“Well, well, well, would you look at this!” someone yelled from behind him; the voice belonged to Calvin Jackson, the school’s chief fashion critic. “Markie’s sportin’ somethin’ different today, guys! And I have to say that it don’t look that bad on him!” The handful of sixth-graders accompanying him corporately smiled and nodded their heads.

“Markie, I never figured you to be much of a Hoosiers’ fan,” one of the entourage chipped in. “Cal, I just gotta know what you’re thinkin’ about Markie’s new cap!”

“Uhm, yeah, now lemme ponder this new addition for a sec,” Calvin replied.

“Wait a minute, guys! I knew I’d seen that cap before!” yet another sixth-grader interrupted. “That’s his step-dad’s hat! That’s Stan’s Hoosier’s cap!”

“Yup,” Calvin said as he then lurched for the item in question. Mark adroitly dodged the larger boy’s right hand and in the process bumped into Brittany Peebles, knocking her books out of her hands and sending them sprawling across the finely-buffed hallway floor. Mark muttered an apology as he knelt down to help her pick them up, and that gave Calvin another chance. “Ha! Now I got it!” he cheered. The pip-squeak mob cheered with him.

“Now would you look at this! It’s even got a piece of duct tape on it!” someone commented.

“Give it back to me!” Mark commanded as Miss Peebles shook her head and then disappeared into the mass of kids that had nearly filled the hallway.

“Calm down, Markie, just calm down,” Calvin replied. “We’re ... we’re just inspectin’ the thing, that’s all. Right, guys? Gotta make sure there ain’t no cooties on it!” Laughter again was the prevalent response.

“Cal, just gimme the hat, man,” Mark whispered. “I don’t want any trouble ... just give it back to me.” Calvin smiled,

ran his right hand through his dark brown hair, and placed the cap on his head. He then modeled it for all to see.

“Yeah, Calvin! It looks real good on you, man! Really good!” a red-haired, short and stocky sixth-grader commented.

“Sweet, Cal, very sweet! Too bad you can’t keep it!” another follower chirped. “Since you’re a die-hard Huskers fan!” Mark suddenly lunged at Calvin but was intercepted. The boy who grabbed him was rewarded with an elbow in the stomach; the boy responded with a howl and bent over in pain. Two other sixth-graders then latched onto Mark and attempted to drive him face-first into the floor until a man wearing a green and yellow sweat-suit reached into the fray and pulled Stan’s younger son to his feet.

“Alright, gentlemen, the first bell has already rung. Head to class! Now! Before I call for reinforcements!” Calvin looked at the man, then at Mark, took off the Hoosiers cap and threw it on the floor; it landed right-side up at Mark’s feet.

“There’s Sappy Stan’s hat, Markie,” he said as he turned and began to walk away. “It didn’t fit me anyway,” he added as he walked away, waving for his entourage to follow him.

“You mind telling me what’s going on here, Mark?” the man asked.

“Coach, there’s no problem ... really none at all. My hat ... this hat ... it just fell off my head. That’s all,” Mark replied.

“Why then were those two boys trying to tackle you in the middle of the hallway?” Coach Wills asked. “If there wasn’t any *problem*?”

“Well, you know how boys are, right, Coach?” Mark said as he quickly ducked behind one of the largest kids in the sixth grade, using the behemoth’s body as a shield, and then successfully scooted down the hallway.

“Sometimes I wonder about that kid,” Coach commented as he looked at his watch. “I really do.”

Later that same morning, while the class struggled with their weekly vocabulary/spelling test, a crudely-scrawled note made its way from the back of Room #47 to the front row where Mark was seated.

“Psst!” Mark looked up from his copy of the test.

“Psssst!” This time, Mark’s head popped up, and he then quickly turned around. What he saw was Calvin pointing at the note that had been placed on the floor behind Mark’s desk. He scowled at Calvin and then quietly grabbed the multi-folded piece of paper.

Hey Markie! The scuttle-butt is your dad is on the run. AGAIN! What a loser! And you’re wearing his favorite hat! That makes you just as much a loser as he is! Ha! Ha! Ha!

Mark crinkled up the note and attempted to throw it into the metal trash can that was next to the teacher’s desk. Mr. Roberson merely smiled and pointed at the paper wad that almost ended up at his feet. Mark got out of his desk, picked up the missed shot, and then dropped it into the metal bucket.

“Loser,” someone from the back of the room volunteered.

At lunch that day, Mark sat in his usual spot: one of the square tables just to the left of the door to the kitchen. Before he even had a chance to start eating, Calvin walked up to the table, put both hands on it, and leaned over. His face ended up being so close to Mark's that if he wanted to, Mark could have effortlessly counted the number of hairs on the knucklehead's chin.

"Markie, there's something else you need to know about your Daddy," he whispered, his breath peppered with the pungent remnants of chocolate milk and mozzarella cheese. "Leidel ... the Loser ... took off because he stole some money," Calvin said with a sassy smirk.

"I don't care," Mark replied. "Now please go away. Your breath is making me sick to my stomach."

"Oh, Markie, but you really should care," Calvin offered. "I heard from a very reliable source that he stole the cash from Old Man O' Reilly. And you know what that is gonna get your Daddy, now don't ya?" Mark picked a peanut-butter cookie from off his tray and took a bite.

"No, not really," he said as crumbs landed on Calvin's right hand. "And I'm sure you're just *dyin'* to tell me." Calvin then smacked the smaller boy on the back of the head, sending that Hoosiers cap sailing over the table.

"You punk!" he yelled. "You best learn to watch your lip! And your loser of a father best stay as far away from Beatty as possible!" The dozen or so kids seated at the tables closest to Mark and his tormentor began to pay attention to the

conversation, a few of them even pointing at Calvin or at the red-and-white baseball cap that was now in the middle of the lunchroom floor. "All you Leidels better be on the lookout, that's what!" Calvin added as he then strutted away. Mark shook his head, shoved the last bit of the institutionalized confection into his mouth and then picked up the hat. He glanced around the lunchroom, presented a huge smile to the entire lunchroom, and then put the cap back on his head. Only a few kids giggled. But in less time than it takes for a sixth-grader to polish off a half-pint carton of milk, the lunch room had returned to its normal, near-chaotic state.

That same afternoon, during the class' weekly geography test. Mark expelled a somber sigh, chanced a glance at Mr. Roberson who responded with a scowl, then looked up at the clock. The time was almost 3:15.

"Fifteen minutes," he whispered.

"Mr. Leidel," Mr. Roberson then offered from behind his desk. "Are you finished with your test?" Mark shook his head. "Fine. No more talking until you have finished. Understand?" Mark nodded his head.

The clock said it was 3:40, and while the rest of Mr. Roberson's class had already finished the exam and had exited the room, Mark remained. "Mark, are you finished yet?" He shook his head. "How close?" Mark held up three fingers. "I'll allow you five more minutes. Then I'm sorry, but I will have to collect it." Mark nodded.

At 3:45, Mark, without looking at the clock, got up from his desk, picked up the test, and handed it to the youngest sixth-grade teacher in Beatty, Nebraska. “All done?”

“You said I had five more minutes,” Mark whispered. He then turned around, walked slowly to the back of the room, and picked up his backpack before exiting the room. Mr. Roberson perused Mark’s test; a grin of satisfaction then appeared on his face. “A perfect score,” he said. “Just like usual.”

Mark was close to being the last kid to leave the building that day. However, three other sixth-graders followed him out the main door. One, of course, was his good friend Calvin.

“Hey! Markie!” Calvin called out from the top of the school’s massive but cracked and crumbling concrete steps. “You just gotta hear what I overheard in the library this afternoon!”

“Go away, Calvin. Just make like a leaf: dry up and blow away,” Mark replied.

“Seriously, Leidel, you really need to listen this! I found out what your loser-of-a-dad actually did to force him to skip out of town.” Mark readjusted his backpack, sighed and leaned up against the “No Parking” sign at the end of the long sidewalk that ran from the school’s front steps to the street.

“Fine,” Mark said. “I don’t seem to be going anywhere at the moment.” Calvin and the same two boys who Mark

wrestled with that morning then encircled him by that faded, rusty and peeling municipal symbol.

“Johnny here,” Calvin said as he pointed at the shorter his two playmates. “John told me he heard your Daddy didn’t take O ‘Reilly’s money at all. Ain’t that right, Johnny?” The boy nodded. “It seems that he *borrowed* nearly 200 bucks from Tiger Dawson and was supposed to pay it back last week ... with interest. And guess what?” Mark switched his pack from the right to the left shoulder and shook his head.

“Haven’t a clue, Calvin. Not a single clue,” Mark muttered.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought you were going to say but – “

“Dawson, the bookie, he hired a hit man, Mark!” John Grangerford interrupted. “Dawson’s sic’ed a hit man on your father!”

“Now that’s just plain stupid, Johnny!” Mark replied, throwing his hands up into the air.

“And why is it so stupid?” Calvin interrupted. “Tiger Dawson is only the biggest crook in Beatty! Why, he was even tried for attempted murder last year and I just bet – “

“Victor Tiger Dawson is a bookie of the lowest class,” Mark interrupted as he pointed his right index finger at Oak Street School’s eldest sixth-grader. “And he was charged with vehicular homicide, not murder, and was found not guilty in a trial that lasted a whole two hours.” Mark glared first at John, then at the other boy, and finally

at Calvin. "Dawson doesn't have the resources to hire anybody, nonetheless hire a hit man!" he then added. "But I have to hand it to you numb-skulls. This story is much more interesting than the first one you just *had* to tell me." Before Calvin or the others could say anything, Tim's Dodge Dart pulled up to the curb. "Good! My ride is finally here," Mark said. "Hope the tale you create tomorrow is even better than the two you concocted today!" he then added as he climbed into his brother's black two-door.

"What was that all about?" Tim asked as he gunned the car and pulled it away from the curb, spinning its tires on the street's snow-slogged bricks.

"What?" Mark replied.

"Calvin and his sidekicks! That's what!"

"Rumors, I guess," Mark said. "Rumors ... stories about why Dad took off." Tim laughed.

"Yeah, I heard one today," Tim said. "It was quite a doozy! Dad supposedly robbed Belmont's Liquor Emporium. That's why he had to leave town. At least that's what the story was. What did you hear?"

"Tiger Dawson has hired a hit man to kill Dad," Mark replied.

"Ha! Now that's funny! Way too funny."

"Funny?" Mark replied. "Why is it so funny? I think it's just plain stupid! Dawson is nothing but an idiot! And everybody in Beatty knows it!"

“No, no,” Tim said. “You misunderstand. The rumor about him getting someone to kill Dad isn’t what’s funny,” Tim explained. “Carol Shumate in Physics told me the exact same thing ... that Dawson hired someone to get Dad. That is what’s so ... funny.”

Four

It might be valuable to digress for a moment to offer a bit more background information about Stan Leidel. While a student at Beatty High, Stan was one of its better basketball players. He was even made team captain the year the boys' team won the state championship. Because of his above-average basketball skills, he earned a full ride to a small college in South Dakota. But once he left the pastoral confines of west Nebraska, he soon got into trouble with the law, mostly for gambling and juvenile moments of public intoxication. He started for that small state college in South Dakota for one season before finally flunking out, losing his scholarship, and ending up back in Beatty.

After returning to town, he floated from job to job for nearly 10 years before he began dating Mack McGuiley's little sister, Cleo, whose husband was reported as being MIA in Vietnam. More than a few people in town believed that Cleo's first husband somehow managed to get out of Vietnam alive, but then ended up going AWOL in Canada. When Stan and Cleo began dating, Tim had just turned 6 while Mark was barely 2. Tim definitely remembered his birth father, but Mark had no memories of the serviceman. The day Stan and Cleo were married, Stan promised his new bride that he would be the father for those two boys that their MIA/AWOL birth-father could never be. So, by

the end of their first year of marital bliss, he was given approval to start the process for adopting the boys. And so he did.

One morning a week or so after the first day Mark wore that Hoosiers cap to school, the duct-tape repair job on cap failed. So Mark ventured into the basement, dug through three toolboxes of various shapes and sizes before finally locating a carpet stapler that was loaded with just enough heavy-duty staples to do the job. "There!" he announced triumphantly. "It won't be coming apart now!"

Later that same day, while Mark was again enjoying his habitual moment of privacy at his usual lunchroom table, Miss Kathy Federline walked up to the table and asked if she could join him.

"I ... I'd rather you not sit with me here right now, Miss Federline," Mark whispered as he looked up directly into her dark-green eyes. "We don't want to start any rumors, now do we?"

"Mark Leidel," she replied. "I'm so glad that you haven't lost that wonderful sense of humor that I am so fond of." Mark continued to make eye-contact with his former fourth-grade teacher and continued to smile. "Then ... how about meeting me in my classroom after school? It's been way too long since you and I have visited. Think you can do that? As a favor to me?" Mark nodded his head and returned to his bowl of crackers and watered-down chili.

After talking for a few minutes with Mr. Roberson about

the up-coming American History report, with the clock saying it was almost 3:45, Mark left Room #47 and walked down the hall and then up one flight of stairs. Kathy Federline's room used to be #112 but she was told that she had to trade with another teacher during Christmas vacation. Mark didn't know about the move and when he walked into Room #112, he was momentarily shocked to see old lady Phillips seated behind what he thought would be Miss Federline's desk.

"Miss Federline is now in Room #126," Mrs. Phillips said without looking up from whatever she was engrossed in. "By the way, I hope your father comes home soon," she said just as Mark reached the doorway. "And in his right mind as well."

Everybody in Beatty knew that the red-and-white baseball cap that had been on Mark's head nearly every waking minute of the past week belonged to Stan Leidel. He started wearing the hat the year he and Cleo were married. He proudly explained to anyone willing to listen that he got the cap because he was expecting, at any moment, to be offered a basketball coaching job at a prestigious high school in Indiana. Even though he had not earned anywhere near enough college credits to qualify for a teaching certificate, he stated that the school wanted him bad enough that they were not going to make him teach: they wanted him just to be their varsity coach.

"Mark! You remembered!" Miss Federline exclaimed as her favorite fourth-grader from the class of 1972 entered the

room.

“I don’t think I can stay very long,” Mark said. “Tim will be pulling up to the curb any minute.”

“Not to worry, my man!” she replied. “We can watch for him right through these windows! And don’t you just love my new room! It’s even got its own sink!” she squealed as she pointed at the source of her jubilation. “Now, I bet you’re just dying to know why I wanted to talk with you!” Mark smiled as he sat down in a desk that was close to hers; he grimaced when as he realized it was too small. She noticed his predicament and motioned that he relocate to her chair behind the desk. She then sat on the edge of the desk and placed her arms across her chest.

“I guess you wanted to talk to me ... because you missed me?” Mark asked as he again gazed into those emerald eyes.

“Why of course I do, you silly boy!” she replied, allowing her sweet Louisiana drawl to take precedence over her manufactured Midwestern accent. “I mean, you haven’t come by my room to pay a visit but once or twice since you promised me nearly two years ago that you’d come up to see me at least once a week!” Mark smiled meekly and shrugged his shoulders.

“I ... I’m sorry, Miss Federline, I really am,” he said. “But I’ve been real busy and – “

“Oh, there’s no need to apologize, Mark,” she interrupted. “I was just kidding anyway. And here’s the reason I wanted to talk with you.” Mark continued to look into her eyes;

she took in a deep breath and continued. "I've heard that your dad has run off again." Mark nodded. "And that he may have gotten himself into an awful lot of trouble this time." More nods. "And you've been getting a lot of guff from some other kids because you have been wearing your dad's baseball cap."

"Oh, it's not been bad ... not that big of a deal," Mark whispered as he finally broke eye contact.

"Mark, I believe you know my feelings about bullying," the middle-aged teacher with the Deep South drawl said. "Don't you think you should go talk to Mr. Martini about this?" Stephen Martini was Oak Street School's head principal and, from her first day on the job, had been Kathy Federline's strongest supporter.

"It's really not that big of a problem," Mark replied.

"Mark, even Coach Wills has talked to me about this! Wasn't it him who broke up a fight between you and that nasty boy Calvin Jackson and a bunch of his friends?"

"I wouldn't say that it was a *bunch* of his friends," Mark whispered.

"Mark, you must take this more seriously!" she demanded. "Calvin is the biggest bully in the whole school! And if you don't talk to Mr. Martini, then I surely will." Mark got out of the chair and walked over to the windows. "Remember when you were in my class? When you would let me pray with you about the things that were going on in your life? The things that were bothering you? If you want, I can pray

with you about your problem with Calvin right now? Even pray with you for your dad. I mean, if you want me to.” The only vehicles parked at the curb in front of the school were a white Ford pickup and a Yellow cab. She looked down at the floor, folded her hands, then placed them in her lap as she waited for a response.

“That would be fine,” Mark said as he continued to look out the window. “If you really want – “

“Mark, that Hoosiers cap ... what is on the back of it?” Miss Federline interrupted.

“The cap? On the back of it?” Mark asked as he turned back around. “Oh,” he said as he removed the cap and pointed at the large staple. “I used a carpet stapler to put the strap back together. The duct tape ... it didn’t work so good.”

“I see,” Miss Federline replied. “May I take a look at that hat?”

“You want to take a look at it? Why, it’s just a smelly ol’ baseball cap,” Mark whispered.

“Can I see it or not?” He walked back over to her and handed his father’s cap to her. “Thank you,” she said. Miss Federline turned the baseball cap around, looked closely at the worn edges of its brim, then even held it up to the light as if to inspect its skeletal features. Lastly, she smiled at Mark and tried it on. “Too small,” she said as she then removed it. With the cap in her left hand, she made a feeble attempt to readjust the strap but, of course, the carpet staple had made the current sizing nearly permanent.

“Wait a second ... what have we here?” she pondered as she then pulled out a small piece of whitish paper that had been tucked in behind the cap’s sweatband. “Now just what was this doing in there? Mark, do you have any idea what this is?” He shook his head.

“I don’t have a clue, Miss Federline,” he then replied.

“And look! There’s a bunch of numbers on it! And someone’s name!”

“Whose name? What numbers?” Mark asked as he tried to see what was written on the 2” X 3” piece of paper.

“There’s a 7-digit number along with the name *Butch* after the numbers. Does that mean anything to you?” Mark shook his head.

“Nope. I don’t know anyone that goes by the name of Butch.” She looked at him, presented another of her wonderful Southern-charm full-face grins, and handed the Hoosiers cap back to him. Before putting it back on, Mark pulled down its sweatband as if he hoped to find another note. “Phone numbers are usually 7-digits long, aren’t they?” he asked.

“Yes, Mark! Why, yes they are,” she replied. “I bet that’s what this is! A phone number! I bet that this is Butch’s phone number!”

“But why would Dad put a guy’s phone number inside his hat?” Mark asked.

“It is strange, but as I think about it, if this hat was so

important to him, as I've heard it was, putting an important number inside the sweatband is really quite logical," she surmised. As she looked at the note again, Mark returned to the windows.

"Tim's here! I gotta go!" he said. "Thanks for talking to me this afternoon, Miss Federline! I appreciate it! I really do! But I gotta go now! Can't keep Tim waiting!" And before she could say anything, Mark had picked up his backpack and dashed out of Room #126. Miss Federline walked over to the windows and watched as Mark ran down the sidewalk and into the black Dodge Dart.

"I know what I'm going to do with this!" she then said, looking at the small piece of paper in her right hand. "If there's anybody who would know what to do in a situation like this, it would be Mrs. Phillips!" She then picked up a set of keys that were on her desk, used one of them to lock her classroom door, and then walked to Room #112.

Even though Kathy Federline had the greatest respect for both Miss Phillips' reputation for basic common sense as well as teaching strategies and philosophy, she could not keep herself from being angry with the teacher of nearly 40 years.

"But of course I think it behooves me to take some action in this matter, Charlene!" Miss Federline replied. "Mark Leidel is one of the Oak Street's finest students! And he always has been! And now that his father has fled the coop – again! – I hold myself responsible to help him and his brother as much as I can. This information might be what we need to

get Mr. Leidel to come back to Beatty and begin to face his problems!”

“Kathleen,” Miss Phillips said softly but sternly. “You are a very good teacher ... one of the best in all of Beatty. But you’re not a psychologist. And that is what that family needs ... and has needed for many years. Even when Mark’s brother Tim was in my class, I, like you, was very concerned about their home life. I knew Cleo, the boys’ mother ... God rest her poor, tormented soul ... knew her quite well ... and at the time of her passing I believed that Stan was not going to be able to take care of those two boys on his own. People in this town, many people, have reached out to Stan Leidel ... even before the tragedy ... but the man simply refused our help. There’s really nothing – “

“But I can’t just stand here and do *nothing*, Charlene!” Miss Federline interrupted as she wiped tears from her eyes. “You seriously believe that I should not even call the number that’s on this piece of paper? Aren’t you even just a little bit curious to find out who this Butch person is?”

“Kathleen,” Miss Phillips replied as she handed her associate a pink handkerchief that she had pulled out of her desk’s top drawer. “You’ve told me umpteen times that when you’re challenged to reach a decision about some weighty issue, that it’s vital to pray about it first.” Kathy nodded her head, softly blew her nose with the dainty cloth, and handed it back to her superior. “So why don’t you ask God what you should do? This is certainly something that has been weighing heavily on your heart, has it not?” Miss

Federline smiled.

“Of course, of course. You’re totally right,” she said. “I’ll stick this note in my pocket right here, and that is where it will stay until I have asked the Lord what I should do with it.” Miss Phillips then smiled, picked a black-ink pen from out of a coffee-cup full of pens, and returned to grading the stack of student papers that was on the side of her desk.

“Perfect,” she then said. “We will talk again about this matter tomorrow then?” Miss Federline in silence nodded her head and then walked out of the room.

Five

That night, right after cleaning up the dinner dishes, the phone in Miss Federline's apartment rang. Kathy looked at the clock and sighed. "It's almost 9. I wonder who's calling this late on a school night?" she pondered as she picked up the phone on the third ring. "Hello? This is Kathy. Can I help you?"

"Well, Sugarplum, you most certainly can!"

"Pete? Is that you?"

"Why, certainly it is, my sweet Southern belle! Who did you think it was?"

"Pete, I am so glad you called! I talked to your nephew Mark today at school and, Pete, I'm really concerned about him!" There was a short moment of uncomfortable silence. "Pete? You still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here. So ... you talked to Markie today. What did he say to you?"

"To tell the truth, Pete, I approached him at lunch and basically demanded that he come see me after school today."

"So, what ... what did Mark ... what did he tell you?"

"Pete, I do not appreciate this line of questioning! Your voice sounds like you're irritated with me!"

“Irritated? No, I’m not irritated. I ... I’m just concerned, that’s all. Remember how you just about made yourself sick worrying about Mark that year he was in your class? I really don’t want to see you end up again like that. I mean, you said you were almost too sick to continue teaching!”

“Pete McGuilley! I have no idea what you are talking about! I suffered from no physical nor mental stresses when Mark was my student!”

“Ha! Now that’s interesting. Didn’t you call me nearly every night for an entire month begging me to help you figure out what to do about that *dysfunctional* family? Yes, and I believe that was the word you used: *_dysfunctional_*. *_Or did I just dream the whole thing up?*”

“Oh, never mind! Pete, I’m so glad you called tonight! I have to tell you what I discovered when I talked with Mark today.”

“OK, but can you wait just one second so I can tell you why I called?”

“I’m sorry ... my fault. Sorry ... I’ve been so rude. Go head, Pete. I’m listening.”

“Excellent! Now, are you sittin’ down? Because if you’re not, you better be ‘cause what I’m gonna tell you is gonna knock your socks right off!”

“Tell me! Tell me!”

“I got two tickets to the Wally Nielson concert! Can you believe it? And the concert is just two weeks away!”

“Who’s Wally Nielson?”

“What? You gotta be – “

“I’m kidding, Pete, just kidding. So, where’s the concert?”

“The party’s happenin’ in Grand Island and all you gotta do is agree to let me pick you up straight from school the day of the concert, and then we’ll be heading to the big GI for the best musical event of the year!”

“Yes, Pete, yes. I’ll go with you. Yes, I most-certainly want to go! That is, as long as it’s not a school night.”

“The concert happens Friday after next. And you have just made my day for sayin’ that you’ll go with me!”

“Fine, Pete, fine. Now that you got that off your chest, can you please listen to what I have to say?”

“What? Oh yeah, that’s right ... almost forgot. Markie.”

“That’s right! And here’s what I discovered! Inside your uncle’s Hoosiers cap, the one that Mark has been wearing every day since Stan left town, we found this note. And on the note is what I believe to be a phone number as well as the name *Butch*.”

”*Butch*? Uhm ... the only person that that name could be applied to is an ex-con that Uncle Stan used to work for. I think his real name is Nick Underwood. Did you call this Butch guy using that number?”

“No, I haven’t. Should I? I mean, Stan must have thought that stashing that note inside his favorite cap was the best

place to keep it. He certainly didn't plan for anyone to find it, right?"

"But someone did find it, Kathy. Quit keeping me in suspense! Are you gonna call the number or not?"

"Pete, I'm scared. If I read the number to you ... could you call it for me? I mean, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Not a problem! Gimme that number, and we'll solve this mystery lickety-split!" Kathy hung up the phone and waited. It wasn't more than a minute later when it rang again.

"Kathy? It's Pete."

"Did it work? Did you talk to that Butch guy?"

"Either it's a wrong number or it's not a phone number at all. All I got when I dialed it was the computer voice telling me that the number either is incorrect or it is no longer in service."

"Well, maybe it's a long-distance number then?"

"If so, how are we ever going to find out the correct area code? Unless, of course Uncle Stan himself tells us."

"Oh no! And I thought calling that number was going to solve this mystery. Now it is even more-complex than before!"

Six

Mark continued wearing that Hoosiers cap to school for another week. Even though the taunts and chides continued, neither Calvin nor any of his cohorts said a thing to him about it. Late that Friday night, during the second snowfall of that fateful February, Stan Leidel returned to the house on Paramour Avenue. The man reeked once again of cheap whiskey and looked like he hadn't shaved nor showered since leaving Beatty. His boys were already upstairs and fast asleep when he burst into the house.

"Tim! Mark! Get yourselves outta bed and come down here! Right now!" His 6' 3" frame swayed back and forth like a sapling being blown by a soft, summer breeze. "Boys! I said come downstairs right now!" Mark was the first one to stumble down the stairs with Tim following not too far behind. "Look at me! I'm back! Alive and well! Aren't you happy to see me?" Neither boy would look at their father, but both nodded.

"We're glad you're home, Dad," Tim said under his breath. "Now can we go back to bed?"

"What? Go back to bed? Now don't ya wanna ask me where I've been? What I've been doin'?"

"In the morning, Dad, in the morning. Can we please go back to bed now?" Mark pleaded. Stan put his hands on his

hips, staggered backwards about 3 feet, and then put his right hand on the wall.

“No, no! Not quite yet, boys!” he replied. “I won’t let you go back to bed until ... until you gimme back my cap!” Mark suddenly looked straight into his father’s droopy and bloodshot eyes.

“Yes sir! I will go get it right now, sir!” he nearly yelled as he dashed back up the stairs, nearly knocking over his brother in the process. In about the time it takes to butter a piece of toast, Mark came back down with that Hoosiers cap in his left hand. “Here it is, Dad! Just like you left it!” Suddenly, Mark was accosted by the urge to ask his father about the little piece of paper; he had not even told Tim about it and as far as he knew, he and Miss Federline were the only people in Beatty who knew about it – that is, besides Stan Leidel himself.

Stan closed his swollen eyes, offered a huge grin, took in a deep breath, and returned the cap to its traditional spot. “Hey! Now wait just a dog-gone minute!” he bellowed. “This thing don’t fit no more! What did you boys do to my hat?”

“The strap broke ... so we had to fix it,” Mark quickly responded. Stan then removed the cap and began to inspect it.

“Staples? That’s goofy. You actually used a carpet staple to fix it?”

“Duct tape didn’t work,” Tim replied.

“Well! Of course duct tape ain’t gonna work on plastic!” Stan chided. “Don’t you boys remember nothin’ I’ve taught you?” And with that he broke off the staple and staggered over to the stairs that led to the basement. “You didn’t wear my cap, did ya?” he asked as he perched precariously at the top of the basement stairs. “Well, did ya?”

“Just a little, Dad. Just a little,” Tim replied as he stared at Mark, his eyes the size of a silver dollar.

“Yeah, I wore it just a few times,” Mark added. “That’s why it didn’t fit ya when you put it back on.” Stan grunted a profanity and then inhaled deeply.

“In the morning I’m gonna have to come up with a punishment for you, Mark ... for messin’ with my hat,” he said as he then stomped down the bare-wood stairs.

“Thanks, Tim,” Mark said.

”*Thanks?* For what?” Tim asked.

“Thanks for standing up for me. I mean, for not telling Dad that I wore the hat everyday.”

“Let’s just say you owe me one, short-stuff,” Tim replied as he walked back up the stairs.

The following morning, a Saturday, the boys knew that they had better stay quiet. So Mark decided right after breakfast to grab a snow-shovel and try to make a few bucks shoveling the neighbor’s sidewalks. Tim, doing his brother one better, called Greg McGuiley who said that if Tim wanted to, he could meet him at the dry-cleaning plant

where both of them could get some quick cash by shoveling off the dock and blading the parking lot. By 9, Stan was alone in the house, in his bed – still apparently dressed in the same clothes that he had on when he left Beatty nearly two weeks before.

A little after 1 that afternoon, Mark turned the corner to make his way back down Paramour Avenue, glad that he had gained over 20 bucks in little over 3 hours of shoveling sidewalks. When he got close enough to the house, he noticed that the green Impala was not parked in front. He shrugged his shoulders, put the shovel back into the detached one-car garage, and went inside through the back door. He was certain that Tim would probably not be coming home anytime soon, so he helped himself, feeling no guilt nor remorse, to what remained of the cheeseburger casserole his Aunt Sally had delivered the day before. He took off the dark-blue baseball cap with the Nike stripe and smiled. “This cap fits much better than that ol’ Hoosiers cap ever would,” he whispered. “But it don’t look as good on me.”

Around 4, the phone rang. Tim was still not home, so Mark thought about answering it or letting the machine get it. It rang 3, 4, 5 times before he finally expelled a grunt of irritation and grabbed it.

“Hello?”

“Mark, is that you?” The voice sounded like his uncle Mack’s.

“Uncle Mack, is that you?”

“Yes, Mark, it’s me. Why didn’t you pick up the phone sooner?”

“I ... my mouth ... it was full of cheeseburger casserole.”

“Ah, makes sense. Is Tim there?”

“Nope, just me. Oh! And Dad came home last night. Man, was he ever a mess!”

“I bet. Mark, it’s your dad that I want to talk to you boys about. He ... he’s been arrested.”

“Arrested? Why? What did he do?”

“He hasn’t been charged with anything ... not yet, anyway. But the story that I’m getting from a reliable source is that he supposedly was part of a plan to steal some money from Nick Underwood.”

“Nick Underwood? Who is that?”

“Oh, he’s just another one of those numb-skulls that your dad hangs out with.”

“But if he’s one of Dad’s buddies, why would Dad steal from him?”

“Good question, Mark, very good question. And I don’t have an answer as of yet. Just relay this information to Tim once he gets there, would you? And by the way, I don’t anticipate your father coming home this evening.”

“OK, Uncle Mack, I’ll tell him.”

It was nearly 8 when Tim's car pulled up to the curb. Mark met him at the front door and told him what Mack McGuiley had said. Tim chuckled, shook his head and then sauntered into the kitchen and opened the fridge.

"What? Where's the casserole that was in here?" he hollered.

"Oh, I ate it for lunch," Mark replied. "Sorry, but I was really hungry after shoveling all those sidewalks today."

"Yeah, I bet," Tim said under his breath. "Now what am I supposed to eat since you've cleaned out the fridge?"

"Well," Mark said as he thought of a way to curb both his brother's appetite and sudden irritation. "I got nearly 25 bucks here. I could treat you to a burger ... or even some pizza? If you wouldn't mind driving us both there?" Tim shook his head.

"But what if Dad comes home and we're not here? He's gonna be pretty wild if he shows up and we're gone!" Tim replied.

"Weren't you listening? Uncle Mack said he won't be comin' home anytime soon."

"Wrong, half-pint," Tim replied as he smacked his brother on the side of the head. "You said that he *might not* be coming home anytime soon."

"Whatever," Mark whispered. "You wanna get some pizza ... or somethin' ... or not?" he asked with a bit more volume.

A little after 11, Tim gunned the Dart's engine as he turned the corner but quickly jammed his foot on the brakes when

he saw the emerald-green Impala parked in front of the house.

“No! Dad’s home!” Mark nearly screamed. “Oh man, oh man, he’s gonna be so pissed! He’s gonna kill us, Tim! He’s gonna kill us both!”

“Calm down, just calm down,” Tim said, trying to remain calm himself. “Gimme a second to figure this out.” He turned off the Dart’s engine and let it coast up to the curb across the street from the house. He gripped the steering wheel so tightly that it appeared his knuckles could pop out of the skin at any second.

“What are we gonna do?” Mark asked, nearly in tears.

“Wait here,” Tim replied. “Just wait here.” He opened the door, pointed a finger at his little brother, and then quietly closed the door.

“Dear Lord,” Mark began to whisper as his body shook from fear. “You know that I don’t ask you for much ... seeing that you must be awfully busy taking care of all the problems in the world. But if you can, would you ... could you ... keep Dad from killing Tim?” His eyes were closed and his voice was gravely serious. “That’s all. That’s all I’m asking. It would be so great if you could do that,” he then added, eyes still shut.

Just when Mark began to feel more than uncomfortable from the cold, he saw the front door open, and Tim walk out of it. He was so excited to see him walk out and not being thrown out that he leaped out of the passenger seat. His

head hit the inside of the roof, and he yelped in response. The dark-blue Nike cap then came off and landed in his lap.

“You can come inside now,” Tim said quietly as he opened the driver’s side door.

“What? What did you just say? What about Dad? Is he dead? Did you kill him instead of him killing you?”

“Ha, ha, very funny,” Tim replied.

“Seriously, what happened in there? I mean, Dad had to be fit to be tied when he came home and we weren’t in there!”

“Obviously you aren’t going to get out of the car until I’ve explained what happened.” So, Tim climbed back into the Dart and began to relay to his little brother the story of what transpired that day at the Beatty police station.

“No! You can’t be serious!” Mark exclaimed. “That little piece of paper! Those numbers! They weren’t just a phone number?”

“Nope,” Tim replied. “When the detective asked Dad to give him that Hoosiers cap, there was nothing inside of it, not a thing! And because the note wasn’t there, there was nothing to tie Dad to Vic Strand trying to steal that thousand bucks from Nick Underwood.”

“But I still don’t get it,” Mark said. “I know who Vic Strand is ... actually I wish I *didn’t* know. But anyway, who is this Nick Underwood guy?”

“Nick Underwood’s nickname is Butch. And those numbers on that piece of paper that were supposed to be in Dad’s

baseball cap was the combination to Butch's safe! Somehow Vic got a hold of that Hoosiers cap and stuck the note in the brim to somehow frame Dad as his accomplice if he, Vic, was ever arrested for the crime. So, this morning the detectives picked up Vic at his shop. And not much later, Vic squealed on Dad."

"But the note wasn't there!" Mark exclaimed.

"Exactly," Tim said. "And that's why Dad is inside, cleaned up, sober and one pretty darn good mood!"

Excerpt from Betrovia

The Land of Betrovia Book One

“Good morning, beautiful Tamara! Did you bless us with this royal feast of a breakfast?” Kristof asked as he came into the dining room from the kitchen. Tamara didn’t even look up.

“Did you close the back door?” The other way to enter the inn was through the south door that led into the kitchen. Kristof, nineteen years old, a few inches shorter than Patrik but taller than both girls, slipped off his coat, draped it over the back of his chair, and sat down next to Galena. “Well, did you close it?”

“Why yes, dear Tamara, the door is effectively shut. No bears, wolves or other wild creatures will be invading this domicile from that access point. However, Galena – from the look on her face – doesn’t appear to believe me.”

“Don’t get me involved in this! I have to work with her all day. You can rile her up and then saunter outside to escape her wrath.” The grin on her face revealed sarcasm. But Tamara still had not made eye contact with the young man. “Do you want me to get you anything from the kitchen? There’s a bit more potatoes.”

“No, no... unless Tamara wouldn’t mind frying a few eggs for me?”

“Stop it! Just stop it. What are you so glib about today? Can’t you see that breakfast has been prepared and served already. Stop being so rude and eat what’s on the table!” The elder daughter looked up at him, her dark brown eyes framed by her glistening black eyebrows. She pointed at the half-full plate of food and motioned for him to help himself. Franck chuckled with amusement.

“Oh, what a riot, what a wonderful scene! Kristof, it never ceases to amaze me how quickly you can get her dander up. Do you practice this between my visits?” The purveyor of both common household wares and antiques divine, pushed himself away from the table, signaling that he had finally reached his limit. “Oh,” he continued. “Did you remember to brush down Fairchild this morning? Or at least last night? Like I asked you?”

“Of course, Uncle Franck, and your steed is much more attractive because of it. You know, I don’t understand why that old horse hasn’t bolted out from under your portly frame and taken refuge somewhere in the forest.” Franck immediately roared with joy.

“Ho, ha, ha! You are quite the jester, you son of a Haarigoian! I never do tire of coming to this wonderful hovel of tasty delectables and sly humor! Yes, this is one of my favorite places between the Plains and Lycentia!” He laughed, standing in the process, and belched one more time. “Oh, ladies, please excuse the rudeness of a fat old man. But I’m sure you understand. Unlike Kristof, I have no one in the world to impress, to appear suave and sophisticated in front

of. Oh yes, Kristof, you have the whole world before you, you do!”

“Uncle Franck, might it be advantageous for me to join you on your journeys someday? I’m sure that I’d be able to gather more material just by being with you!” Patrik shook his head and smiled.

“Uncle Franck and Kristof... now that would be quite a pair. Yes, indeed... quite a pair,” Tamara mumbled. Since Franck had already moved away from the table and waddled over to the east side of the room to chat with the other guest, Tamara and Galena began to clean off the table.

“Now wait just a minute! I’m not done with that!” Kristof said, grabbing the bowl of cobbler back from Tamara.

“Stop, boy-hired-to-work-outside! Breakfast is over and it’s time to go back to work. Go outside!”

“Can’t I have just one more spoonful?” Both young people held tightly onto the bowl.

“Let go of the bowl so I can clean up this mess!” She successfully yanked it away from the scruffy young man. “Good. Now go outside and do whatever you were supposed to do before disturbing our breakfast.” Kristof leaned back in the chair, putting his hands behind his head and stretched.

“Why are you always so mean to me? When are you going to realize that you’re seriously in love with me and are just upset that I haven’t asked your father for your hand yet?” He successfully ducked the spoon that had been in

the cobbler bowl; it landed at Franck's feet. Tamara's spare hand immediately covered her mouth, and she rushed into the kitchen.

"Here's the spoon," Franck said. "Suppose you won't be taking this to her directly, eh?"

"Is that a challenge? You don't think I'll walk right in there and demand an apology?" Kristof cajoled.

"No, I am thinking just the opposite. I envision that you're considering sauntering in there, picking up something left over from our meal and dumping it on directly on her head!"

"No, that wouldn't work... too forceful. I would need something more subtle..."

"I'm kidding," Franck said. "Listen a moment... before she comes back out." Franck then proceeded to summarize how he had successfully convinced his wife to marry him. Patrick had heard the story too many times before, and – staying out of the tussle between the two young people – felt impelled to interject in the middle of the summary.

"Kristof, this conversation has to conclude. You need to head back out to the barn. Did you forget that we are scheduled to go to Noran today? Even though it's not snowing or raining now, I think it might be later. We need to get started very soon."

"Patrik, give me a few more minutes with the boy. If he's going to be your son-in-law someday..."

“What? Uncle Franck! He has work to do! And I’m sure you do, too!” Tamara picked up the last of the breakfast dishes. “Kristof *works* for us. And that’s it! The sooner he wakes up to that reality, the better!” Franck scratched his nearly-bald head.

“Tamara, sweet Tamara. I can retire tomorrow if I so desired. However, I enjoy traveling too much – visiting wonderful friends like you – to hang up my leather overcoat quite yet. Whatever *work* you believe I have to do can wait.” Tamara didn’t hear him since she had already scurried back to the kitchen.

“Kristof, give the horses a larger portion of oats today. We will leave for town within the hour.”

“An hour? And more oats? Yes sir! I got it!” With that, he put on his coat. “Should I use the kitchen or the front door?”

“Front door, please. Leave the girls alone. They have things to finish in there and don’t need any more distractions. Now go on outside. I’ll bid Uncle Franck goodbye for all of us.”

“Goodbye? That sounds so definite... so final.” Franck headed for the front door, following Patrik’s lead. He left the warm confines of the dining room so Tamara and Galena could finish without any more interruptions. Once outside, Patrik stopped at the top of the porch steps. “So, tell me again where you’re heading? East? Back to Lycentia?”

“No, no. I left the capital city a few days ago. I’m heading for Dreut.”

“What? I thought you’d given up going that far west? Too dangerous for an old merchant like you... isn’t that what you’ve said? What are you planning to buy or sell there that you can’t proffer in a safer environment?”

“Oh, don’t misunderstand, good friend. I’m not going to the front to make any gold. My motives are much more juvenile than that!” he said, laughing. “I heard that there’s this Haarigoian named Ulek... quite huge and quite ugly... with a temperament akin to a wounded wolverine... only twice as mean. He’s challenged the commander there to a duel of some kind and...”

“A duel?” Patrik asked, looking up at the clouds. Small patches of blue stood out behind much larger areas of gray and white. “What kind of duel? That doesn’t sound like something any Haarigoian could conceive on his own.”

“Ha! I can’t agree more,” Franck continued. “Since I was headed for a Rigarian village but a few miles from the border...”

“Eh? Rigarians? What has gotten into your head lately? Haven’t you been warned to stay away from those traitors?”

“Yes. And then again... no. Why do you keep interrupting?” By the time Kristof had led Fairchild to the porch – to be burdened once again with the weight of the rotund businessman and his belongings – Franck had summarized all he knew about the most recent skirmishes between the Lycentians and the Haarigoians. While the two friends finished their conversation, Kristof brushed the horse one

more time. “Kristof, you pamper that horse like he’s your own. If I only had a few gold coins, I’d give one to you.”

“Oh, not to worry. My wages here more than compensate me for my efforts,” he said, his words ending on a higher pitch.

“Ha! That is highly unlikely! If I were to ask Tamara, I’m sure she’d say that you’re grossly overpaid!” Even with that taunt, he reached into a pouch hanging from his right side. “Here... add this to your bank account.” Franck said and winked. It was a silver coin. Kristof nodded his head.

“Thank you, fine sir. You are *always* welcome at The Lonely Fox,” he said, bowing much too deeply for the occasion.

“Kristof! Come back to the barn! Hurry! I need your help with something!” Galena yelled as she headed for the modest structure the family courteously referred to as “the barn.” The hireling, leaving the two men to see what Galena was so emphatic about, waved good-bye but said nothing more.

“I suppose it’s time for me to go, my white-haired friend. Please express my sincere gratitude to your lovely daughters for another fine stay.”

“I will do that. When do you think you’ll be heading home to Lycentia?”

“Can’t say for sure. You know the life I lead now – with Sereal wishing I were dead! Ha!” Patrik thought about the last time he had seen Franck’s red-haired Knaesin wife.

“Can’t say I regret her temper, though, knowing that I’d probably behave much the same way if there was any Knaesin blood flowing through my veins.” And with those being the last words that the innkeeper thought he would hear from the portly traveler for many months, Patrik stepped back onto the porch, smiling as he looked up at what had turned into a nearly blue sky. A solitary cloud caught his attention for a moment, then he opened the door of the inn.

“Innkeeper, may I have a word with you?” Patrik was startled and looked for the source of the voice. It was the other guest.

“Yes sir, what may I help you with?”

“Before arriving here last night, I met two trappers on the road west of here who said they knew you.” Patrik’s eyes became large and lively as he talked to the man. In the course of that short conversation, Patrik learned that the traveler had sold a trap to the trappers. He, then, sensing that this was an opportunity to illicit some comments about his inventions, asked the guest to look at a trap that he’d been designing. The merchant politely declined, emphasizing that he, like Franck, needed to be going. Patrik thanked him for the information about the trappers, and the conversation ended as abruptly as it began.