

TORN –

**FROM MY
COLD YOUNG
FINGERS**

by Tim Greaton

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AN UNDER-HEAVEN NOVEL

TIM GREATON

Focus House Publishing

Wilton, Maine

To Joan my beautiful wife and to my three amazing children who were all so patient during my thousands of writing hours – I can barely find words to express my love and thanks.

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And to you my readers – It's impossible to describe how much I appreciate your continued support. Please know that I strive every day to tell better stories...all for you, dear readers, all for you.

CHAPTER ONE

“I TOLD YOU, I’ll handle your mother!” Jesse’s father smashed his McDonald’s shake down on the table. Pink liquid exploded everywhere.

Jesse froze as a thick drops oozed from the table edge onto his sneakers. Swallowing hard, he felt dread clamp around his chest. He knew his father was only seconds away from what his mother called a “hellva bad scene”.

Jesse’s eyes darted around the room. No one was nearby, though a woman with a baby stroller and another family with two boys a year or two older than him sat on the far side of the restaurant. On the one hand, he hoped they were all far enough away to avoid what was about to happen, but on the other he prayed he wouldn’t be his father’s only target. His ‘rememory’ wasn’t very good yet, but it seemed to him that his father got meaner with each passing day. Try as he might, Jesse could never understand where his father’s outbursts came from, and whenever he asked his mother she would only say, “Just be glad you’re still a little boy.”

Seeing his father’s cheek muscles tighten his face into the shape of a bare skull, Jesse stared down at the floor and held back the tears. Pressing his lips together, he tried to ignore the hot feeling in his eyes. At the edge of his vision he could see his father’s fists clenching and unclenching. Jesse’s little body started to quake.

Suddenly, a trickle of pee came out from down there.

Doubly terrified at what might happen if his father found out, he tried to keep his five-year-old body under control. But when his father’s hand smacked loudly into the pink mess on the table, a tiny bit more pee trickled out.

“That bitch never controlled me, and I’ll be damned if she’ll start now!” his father exclaimed.

Not daring to move, Jesse kept his eyes on his goop spattered fries. At the top of his vision, he saw his father shake off his hand before wiping it on his already filthy green jacket.

Glancing up, he could see anger still scribbled like red crayon across his father's face, and for some reason he was glaring in the direction of the two families across the room.

Taking a chance, Jesse felt his crotch. It was dry. Maybe he hadn't peed that much, at least he hoped not. He yanked his hand back up and waited for his father's unshaven jaw to stop grinding back and forth. Sitting there, Jesse regretted begging his mother to let him go out to eat with his dad. It was weird because when they weren't together, he missed his dad so much it hurt. But lately it seemed that when they were together it was worse than missing him. Maybe he was beginning to understand why his mother wouldn't let his dad live with them anymore.

Jesse tried not to wince when his father's angry eyes swung back his way. Too scared to say anything, he averted his eyes again and wondered, not for the first time, if he might somehow have been to blame for the way his dad was acting. His mother insisted he had nothing to do with it, but how could she be so sure? Jesse tried to remember if he had said or done anything that morning or any morning to get his father so upset. As usual, his memory wasn't up to the task. He couldn't remember doing anything wrong.

Fighting back tears, Jesse wished that things could go back to the way they used to be, the times when his father was still his best friend. Yes, his mom loved him and always kept him fed and warm, but it was his dad who used to romp and play with him, who used to wake him up early Saturday mornings so they could watch cartoons and play video games together. And it was his dad who always used to rush into their apartment after work, ready for a wrestling match before he even changed out of his work clothes. The memories almost brought a smile to little Jesse's face. But then something had happened: just like that, their wrestling matches, cartoon mornings, and video games had all just ended. It was almost as if some invisible hand had reached inside his father's chest and pulled all the fun right out of him. He started to get angry a lot and started coming home later and later from work. It finally got so bad that Jesse would already be in bed by the time his

dad came through the door. That's when the arguing between his parents had started.

Now, sitting at the milkshake-covered table, Jesse feared his dad had almost disappeared, to somehow have been replaced with a dirty, angry man who just plain scared him. His father gestured at the tray in front of him.

"We came here to eat, so eat."

Hesitantly, Jesse picked up one of his French fries, one with a lot of pink goo on it. At another time it might have been good, but he took only one small bite and was too frightened to enjoy it. He poked it into his half-eaten cheeseburger and could feel his dad looking at him. Fear traced chills up and down his neck. Maybe he should have offered his money sooner.

"I'm sorry, Jesse. I'm not mad at you."

Relieved, Jesse raised his head to find the relaxed expression had returned to his dad's face.

"I remembered, Dad!" he blurted out, desperate to avert the return of his father's angry mood. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a crumpled plastic sandwich bag. "It's my piggybank money, just like you wanted." Jesse studied his father's face as he handed the bag across the table. His father took it, but instead of the happy expression Jesse had hoped for, his father's lips thinned.

"I thought you –"

Jesse was going to add, "...wanted me to bring my money," but his father waved him silent. Dark eyes stared at him for a moment before examining the little bag of bills.

"You did good, Jess," he said. He wiped at his eyes with the back of one hand.

Jesse didn't understand. Why was his dad crying?

His dad took all but one of the bills and handed the bag back to Jesse with one dollar left inside. Just then, a fast food worker approached.

"Is everything alright?"

"We had an accident," his dad said in a gruff voice.

"I can see that," the older boy said cheerfully. "But don't worry –"

"Just clean the fucking mess up!" Jesse's dad snapped.

The boy's pudgy face turned red. His arm rose up, and for a tiny moment it looked like he was going to stick up his mean finger, but instead he gave a weak smile and moved away.

Jesse didn't dare say a word.

"Useless little prick," his father said. "Someone ought to fire his ass." His head snapped toward the service window where two other workers, an older man with glasses and a young woman, were talking quietly.

"D'you hear that! You should fire his pimply ass!"

The woman's head snapped up and her mouth opened as if to say something, but the man with glasses put his hand on her shoulder and whispered something. She gave Jesse's dad one final angry stare and then disappeared into the cooking area. The older man didn't look their way again as he sprayed the front counter with cleaner and began wiping it with a cloth.

"Just a bunch of friggin' losers," Jesse's father said. He was looking at Jesse again. "Don't quit school, sport, or you'll wind up working here with these retards!" The last word was said loudly enough that anyone in the restaurant could have heard. The older man in the service window, however, continued washing his counter as though he hadn't heard anything at all.

His dad reached across the table and put his hand on Jesse's.

Jesse tried to hand the bag back to him.

"No, Jess," his dad said in his friendly voice. "Put that back in your piggybank when you get home." He paused, then added, "and don't tell your mom. I don't want her to be mad at you."

Jesse nodded. Of course he wouldn't tell her. She was already mad enough at his father.

"Excuse me," the older boy said, having returned with a washcloth in hand.

Jesse's father stood and moved out of the way so he could wash the table.

Jesse started to get up, but the boy said, "No, you're okay. Just move your food for a minute.

Jesse pulled his tray out of the way and in moments the boy had washed everything clean.

“I’ll be back with a mop in a minute.” His voice cracked so that ‘minute’ sounded like a girl had said it.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Jesse’s dad said.

“I need to go, too,” Jesse said.

“Goddamn it then!” his father spat. “You go!”

Jesse hesitated, both from fear of his father’s anger and because his accident might be visible from behind. Not daring to get up, Jesse stared at his food.

“Well, do you have to go or not?” his father asked. Jesse’s eyes lifted and settled on several beads of sweat that were forming at his father’s hairline. Dumbly, he shook his head ‘no’.

“You’re as bad as your friggin’ mother,” his father grumbled as he slid off his chair and stomped toward the bathroom. “She can never make up her goddamned mind either.”

Jesse sat silently and wiped at a stray tear as his father disappeared into the bathroom. As soon as the door closed, he quickly slid his hands under the sides of his legs and then under his crotch. Thankfully, the backside of his pants didn’t feel any wetter than the front. It appeared that his underwear had absorbed most or all of the ‘scared pee’.

Glancing toward the service window, Jesse could see the girl was back. She and the older man were whispering back and forth. He tried not to stare, but they kept gesturing toward him and then toward the bathroom. Jesse had seen his father thrown out of enough places to know what that meant. He hurried over to the rest room door.

“Hey,” his father said swaying to a stop as he came out a couple of minutes later. He had a goofy grin on his face and his eyes rolled weirdly back and forth, seeming to have a hard time focusing on Jesse. If it weren’t for the way he held onto the half-open bathroom door, it seemed to Jesse that he might have fallen.

“So you do need to go,” his father said.

“No, I’m okay. I’m done eating if you want to leave, Dad.” Jesse didn’t dare to look back at the workers, but he felt certain they were watching.

“Sure, Jess.” His anger somehow having melted away in the bathroom, his father reached down to tousle his hair and

missed. He grinned and tried again, this time managing to run his fingers across the top of Jesse's head. "Whatever you want, Jess. You know you're my little sport."

Though Jesse didn't think he'd ever get used to his father's drastic mood changes, this one couldn't have come at a better time. He pulled on his father's hand, led him to the door, and was relieved when they stepped out into the cool air. They hurried along for over a block before he felt safe.

"So'd'ya have a good time, Jess?" his father asked, his words slurred. He tripped on a crack in the sidewalk and yanked on Jesse's arm as he stumbled. Fortunately, he caught himself before knocking them both down. He laughed.

"Yeah, it was fun, Dad." Jesse looked up and could see drool hanging from one corner of his father's mouth. Wasn't he feeling well?

"Me and mom's getting back together, you know. She's gonna let me come –"

His father stumbled again but this time let go of Jesse's hand before he staggered off the sidewalk. Laughing, he struggled back up and attempted to walk along the edge of the curb like a little kid. He wasn't able to go more than a step or two without losing his balance and staggering back down to the street. "It won't be long before I move back to—to the apartment."

Jesse nodded.

"No, serious," his dad said, swinging his arms wildly as he tried to stay on the curbing. "I'm coming back. Your mom loves me, you know. We're family, and families live under the same...same house."

Jesse gave his best fake smile and was thankful when his father dropped the subject and started walking on the sidewalk again. He still seemed to have trouble keeping his balance, but at least they were moving faster. Jesse and his mom lived in an apartment up over a laundry mat, and if Jesse stood on the edge of his bed and peeked over the two-story building across the street, he could make out the very tip of McDonald's yellow arches, so it didn't take them long to cover the short distance. But Jesse's father was breathing hard by the time they reached

the front door. It seemed to Jesse that not long ago his father could easily have run the same distance. Something was definitely wrong.

“Sally,” his father said too-loudly into the intercom. He waited only a second before pounding the button again. “Sally, we’re back. Open the fucking door!”

“Okay, okay,” Jesse’s mother’s voice came through the speaker.

The door buzzed, and Jesse’s father shoved it open.

“Bye, Dad,” Jesse said, pushing past his father and bolting up the stairs. He was already in his bedroom by the time his parents started fighting through the already closed apartment door. His father, like always, wanted to come in, have a coffee, and talk. His mother didn’t.

Jesse pulled his blanket over his head and started to cry.

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CHAPTER TWO

Under-heaven, sometime in 1945...

AT FIRST, she didn't tell me I was dead. Instead, she said, "You've moved on."

I had no recollection of anything before that moment. It was as though I had just woken in an upright position before her. She was a heavysset woman in her fifties, I guessed, with a cheerful smile and a graying stack of brunette hair that was tied in a bun at the top of her head. Her loose, white dress had a high, open collar, and it hung below her calves. She wore white stockings that were barely higher than the ankle of her white shoes. Her outfit reminded me of a nurse. We were standing on the grass in front of a small, white home. A large bay window protruded from a wall to the left of a good-sized porch. A single, unadorned, white door opened out onto the porch, and a set of five white steps dropped down onto an immaculately cut, green lawn.

I wondered how I had gotten here and who this woman was, but the internal questions made me uneasy. I felt as though a part of me didn't want to know.

"Can you talk?" she asked.

I nodded, but my thoughts were too jumbled to formulate a verbal response.

"Take your time, Nathaniel," she said. "There's a lot to get used to. For now, let me show you around your new home."

Numbly, I nodded and took her offered hand. Her grip was warm and gentle. I knew it was odd for a boy, even one almost ten years old, to be left alone with a stranger, but she seemed safe to me. The surface of my mind was littered with questions, but my instincts told me to leave them alone. I sensed that to succeed with even the tiniest of inquiries would be to touch a scalding pot: with answers there would be pain. Forcing my mind to be silent, I followed the woman up the stairs, past the two-person porch swing and into the house.

“I’m your grandmother,” she said to me as we walked through a small entry room and into a small but serviceable living room. Two over-stuffed chairs and a couch sat snugly against the walls. They were covered in a cream material that matched the carpet. The ceiling was white, as were the walls, which were also noticeably devoid of pictures. The only end table in the room had a single brass lamp.

“You can call me Grandma Clara if you like,” she continued. “You have quite a slew of relatives looking forward to seeing you, Nathaniel, but we’ll probably wait a little while for you to get used to things first, okay?”

“I guess,” I said, finding my voice.

Would I recognize any of my other relatives, I wondered? It seemed odd that I hadn’t even known my own grandmother, but a growing queasiness in my stomach kept me from pursuing the thought. One part of my brain knew I should have been trying harder to understand all of this, like why there was no radio in the living room, but another part of me begged to just accept things as they were. I couldn’t have explained how, but I knew there were many things I did not want to know; so, I didn’t question the woman as we moved into the kitchen.

I didn’t know it then, but I had actually met my Grandmother Clara almost ten years before when I was just two weeks old. She had visited my parents at their apartment in Rhode Island. Three weeks later, she died of a heart attack at her home in Boston. Soon I would learn much more, but I’m thankful she never said any of this to me that first day.

My new kitchen was as unadorned as the living room. After checking the cabinets to discover no food, I realized that the room also lacked a refrigerator, stove, or sink. There was a small round table with four chairs. Across the small hall was my bedroom; it held only a bed and a rocking chair. I stood in the doorway and smiled. Though oddly austere, the house had a warm, comfortable feel. I liked it.

“It’s usually quite peaceful here,” Grandma Clara said as I followed her back onto the porch.

I sensed that something I’d seen was even more out of place than the missing kitchen appliances and sink, but I

couldn't say exactly what. As I stood at the railing, she settled onto the porch swing. To either side of my house sat other white homes, and beyond those were yet others. I let my eyes follow the string of buildings until I realized that they formed a circle, like the white pearls of a huge necklace. The necklace of white buildings surrounded a circular, cobblestone road. I would later learn that similar roads on Earth were called cul-de-sacs, but this one was completely self-contained with no entry or exit roads. The round park-like median at the center of the road was covered by more meticulously maintained grass and a large pond, and at the center of the pond arose a dozen tall sculpted angel and cherub statues that spouted water in various directions. Breathtakingly beautiful, I thought.

My house seemed to be exactly the same as the other thirty or forty homes that surrounded the circular street. They were all white, all one-storied, and all had porches. Surrounding each home grew beautiful flowers of every color and shape. Below my own railing were at least twenty varieties of blossoms. I couldn't resist and leaned down to breathe in their aroma. Something about the sweet fragrance caused my uneasy stomach to twitch again.

I quickly stood upright.

I could see no fences or walkways, but the neatly mowed grass didn't look matted down anywhere, as though no one ever walked on the deep green surface, which obviously couldn't be true because there were people at the edges of the pond. Maybe it was just hard to see the walking paths from my vantage on my porch? As I looked out over the small neighborhood, it seemed too perfect. Even the white cobblestones of the circular street were too white. I couldn't see a single smudge of dirt or mud on the road's surface. Oddly, there were also no cars.

I turned my attention to the dozen or so people at the pond's edge and realized that all but two were dressed completely in white. Of the last two, one man had black shoes and bizarrely colored slacks that were black up to his knees but then white from that point upward. He also wore a white shirt. The last man stood out because his clothes were colorful to the point of being garish. Wearing green plaid pants, a yellow

striped shirt, and a green hat, he looked as though he had just stepped off from a fairway at Staber's Golf Course—

My breath caught at the thought of my hometown, and any further reflection scurried to the furthest reaches of my mind. I wasn't sure where those thoughts would have taken me, but it seemed certain to be no place good.

All the people standing and kneeling near the edge of the pond were leaning out so they could stare down into the water. The man with the golfing outfit was leaning so far out that it seemed he would fall in at any moment. Something in that water must have been very interesting. I had no way to know it then, but that pool was my neighborhood's sole connection to a very important—

Suddenly, I snapped around to look at my grandmother.

"I know what's wrong with my house."

"It seems nice to me." She smiled

"Maybe I missed it," I said, striding back inside. I looked again through each of the three rooms and the entryway. I didn't see it. "There's no bathroom."

"You won't need that anymore?" Grandma Clara offered, having followed behind me.

"You mean I'm supposed to use an outhouse?" I'm sure my face scrunched with disgust at the thought of it. Billy Ganglin's family still used an outhouse, and after my one visit to the 'hole from hell', I swore I'd never go into such a place again.

"Nate—I hope it's okay to call you Nate?"

I shrugged then nodded.

"Nate," she continued, "you don't need to go to the bathroom anymore."

I didn't want to be rude, but said, "I'm supposed to hold it?"

"Nate, nobody here goes to the bathroom. We just don't need to anymore."

"Oh." I nodded with feigned understanding. Though I knew her statement was ridiculous, I also knew it would have been improper to point that out. For the time being, I would sneak out back when I had to go. I didn't allow myself to stop and consider any of this too deeply. At the back of my mind, I knew it was preposterous for a nine- (almost

ten-) year-old child to get his own house, and it was equally crazy for that house to have no radio, appliances, sink or bathroom. Of course, it all made about as much sense as the perfect circular neighborhood populated by people dressed mostly in white, which come to think of it, included me.

Ever since I could remember, my stomach acted up whenever I got upset, and it had now begun to roil with an undefined fear. I wanted to understand what was going on, but at the same time I lacked the courage to find out. At that moment, staring at the strange woman who called herself Grandma Clara, I realized that a secret was locked inside my head, and I knew it wasn't just something bad; it was quite possibly the most horrible and terrifying secret there had ever been. I imagined a steel-reinforced prison inside my mind, and I further imagined a fang-filled creature locked just behind that prison door. In my hand I held a key, a key that someday I knew I would have to insert into the lock and turn—

I threw the imaginary key and raced as quickly as possible out onto the neatly mowed grass of my new neighborhood. As I ran, my feet left no imprints in the perfect grass.

Only a young mind could have ignored all the facts for as long as I did. It must have been two weeks before I finally began to allow myself to understand, but even then I kept most of my questions tightly locked behind my imaginary prison door. It was the beginning of my third week in that strange new place when I asked Grandma Clara, "Is this Heaven?"

"No, Nate."

"Then where?"

"There are many names, but I like the term Under-heaven."

"How did I die?"

"I don't think that's for me to say." Her eyes were squinted with sympathy.

"Why?"

"Because you already know."

The creature locked behind the door in my mind rocked viciously back and forth. It wanted out. The key was in my hand again. I dropped it and let the vision fade.

“We all have to choose our own timing, Nate. That’s part of growing as a soul.”

Fight or flight is the survival instinct, and once again I chose flight. I raced out of my house, across the road, skirted the fountain and continued to the other side of the circle and out between two houses. Like my own backyard, the area behind those two homes was beautifully manicured and bordered with every manner of lovely blossom. And, like my own back yard, beyond the grass and flowers rose billowing white clouds. I wanted to run into those clouds, to lose myself from all the whispering memories and new revelations that threatened whatever young sanity I retained, but I sensed that to enter that border of whiteness would make everything about my new life horrifyingly clear. Questions loomed around me like succulent but poisonous fruits; though I desperately wanted answers, I was simultaneously terrified by them.

Why couldn’t this all be a dream? Why couldn’t things return to the way they were?

Were?

I hardly knew anything about my past. How could I crave a time I couldn’t even remember? I was too frightened to face those memories, but I longed for the answers. No matter how deep I searched inside myself, however, I couldn’t find the strength to overcome my fear. The monster’s claws raked across my imaginary prison door. I winced. I tried to concentrate on the grass, the flowers, but I couldn’t get the vision of that prison door out of my mind. Huge claws were now scraping loudly across the narrow barred window in the steel door. I shook my head and clamped my eyes shut. I willed myself to see only darkness, but that prison door shone like a beacon in my thoughts. It was shaking now. Violent thumps were followed by large dents in the door. I yanked my eyes open and screamed, but the piercing howl of my imaginary prisoner overwhelmed my own strangled cries. Every mind has its limits, and I knew

my own had just been reached. As my mind collapsed, so too did my muscles.

I fell limp to the grass and wept.

I wept for everything that had been lost and forgotten, and I wept for the fear that enveloped me every day. Mostly, though, I think I wept from frustration at my own cowardice. Tears came from a very deep well and ran for a long time. A part of me knew that only by facing my fears would I be able to find peace, but I was no more capable of facing that monster in my mind than I was of throwing myself into the misty barrier that brushed against my back.

Sometime during my breakdown, I sensed a hand reaching out from the clouds and stroking gently across my hair, but when I looked there was nothing but swirling whiteness. It seemed an eternity later when I returned to my prim little home.

Grandma Clara was already gone.

CHAPTER THREE

I HAD BEEN in Under-heaven for over a month when my terror got its first claw through the prison door. The day had been much like every other day since I had arrived. I woke in the morning, thankful that I didn't dream in this place, and got out of bed. Within a few moments, almost as though she had a way to tell when I woke, my grandmother arrived. But when we sat down at the table for my typical lesson, she surprised me with a deck of cards, which I soon learned was just the means to a different kind of lesson. After we played several kinds of card games, she asked me to explain why I thought it was okay to keep secrets playing rummy but not fish. I couldn't tell if she already understood, but either way I tried diligently to explain that in rummy the rules allowed you to keep your hand a secret, but that when someone asked you for a card in fish, you had no choice but to give it up.

"So not all secrets are bad?" she asked.

"I knew this was another lesson," I said.

"But you didn't answer the question."

"A secret is okay if the rules allow it, I guess."

"What about if a person is keeping secrets from themselves?" she asked.

I briefly imagined the monster inside my head. It banged on the door but I ignored it.

"I make those rules," I told her.

"Maybe," she said.

"So this is a lesson after all."

Grandma Clara smiled warmly. "No, I think I'm just going to win a lot of card games today."

I had come to enjoy my time with Grandma Clara, maybe as much for her company as for the distraction that it offered. Though the lessons each day would often change, the subjects of our conversations always seemed to surround theories about right and wrong, events in history, points of understanding for my Under-heaven neighborhood, and sometimes even my

grandmother's past. But at no time did she ever inquire about my past. She obviously knew I wasn't ready.

At the end of our card playing day, a day where she did win most of the games, I followed my grandmother out into the backyard to wish her goodbye. I smiled as she strolled toward the misty barrier at the edge of my new world. At the last moment, we both waved before she was swallowed up by the swirling whiteness. On the way back up the stairs, I tripped and fell face first onto my back porch.

Though bones don't break in Under-heaven, mental doors can crack...

I'd been a pretty typical kid, I think. I hadn't liked fourth grade very much and was happy when on that last day of school I was able to run home. I remember running nonstop all the way back to my house, which was tucked up a woodsy, dirt road that ran off from Burgess Street. It was a long run and my feet were flying so fast that I imagined I was The Flash and that the neighbors never even saw me pass. Okay, so old Mr. Kipswitch did wave at me from his porch rocker, but everyone knew he had supernaturally sharp eyes. I think I could have outrun my dog Whiskey that day as I soared into my own yard. Of course, I hadn't had the chance to prove it because my mother always kept the energetic hairball fenced out back until I got home.

Whiskey and I were nearly inseparable, and if it weren't for my parents, we would never have been apart. He was a golden retriever and my best friend. My parents used to say we grew up together, but I knew the truth: I grew up with Whiskey's help. He had always been the wiser of the two of us. I couldn't even count the times that he had stepped between me and some trouble I had been about to get into, and it turned out that he'd have his paws full that summer as well. I raced past my father's old, red 1928 Ford pickup, leapt over one of my mother's flower patches, and careened up the stairs and into the house. I stopped short.

Unusual for this time of day, my father was propped at the edge of the couch. His fingers were weaving strands of heavy

twine into a dilapidated old lobster trap that sat like broken furniture in the middle of the room. I wondered why he wasn't still out to sea. That morning, like every morning, Whiskey and I had stood on the hill above our house and had watched the Miss Kane sail out of the harbor. The Miss Kane was my father's boat which he had named after his third grade teacher. My mother said it was because he'd always had a crush on the woman, but my father insisted it was only because she had inspired him to work hard in school.

"Something wrong with the Miss Kane?" I asked.

"No, son, I just had something to take care of."

My father was dressed in a blue button-up shirt, which seemed odd for him on such a warm day. Normally, around the house, and even out on his boat, he wore tee shirts. As always, he had the three-foot-high radio on. He reached over and "The Shadow Knows" went silent as he clicked the knob on the big cabinet off.

"Whiskey's out back," I said, hoping to be excused.

My father said nothing at first as his practiced fingers returned to weaving the new twine into the vandal-ravaged netting. I knew it could take him up to two hours to mend a single trap, and I also knew that even then it would be one of the saddest-looking lobster pots in use off the coast of Maine. His mishmashes of wood and netting patches, though effective, didn't look especially nice. Most of my father's traps had been salvaged from the dump or purchased from the wives of unsuspecting lobstermen. Due to the stiff competition that already existed for the shrinking lobster populations, most lobstermen would never have knowingly allowed a single trap to pass onto a competitor, especially not one from out-of-state.

My father worked hard at his new career as a lobster-man, but making a living was never easy, and that combined with what my father called "competition with all the kids coming back from the war" made things especially tough. Though my mother said President Roosevelt, whom she adored, had instituted many changes in the social laws to help poor people, I couldn't see that he had helped my parents very much. Two months before, President Roosevelt had died, and my mother

had cried for an entire afternoon. She cried again, just a month later, when the war with Hitler ended; she said it was because President Roosevelt died too soon to see Germany surrender.

I desperately wanted to get into the back yard—after all, my dog was waiting – but I knew my father would just call me back. Respect for your elders came first in my family. I tried to calm my hound-wrestling instincts. Whiskey would just have to wait for another minute or two. My father pulled two pieces of new twine into a knot. Finally, sparing attention for me, he looked up and said, “How was the last day of school?”

“Okay, I guess,” I shrugged, “but Tommy Edds spit on my seat again.”

“Why?”

“Like always, he said I was a ‘flatlander’ and that I should go back to ‘flatness’ where I belonged.” By Maine standards, flatlanders were just about anybody that came from outside of the state of Maine, though people from New Hampshire fared better in Mainer’s minds than flatlanders from other places. We, unfortunately, had come from Rhode Island where my father had lost his job at a bank over three years before. We may as well have been from the East Indies, though. Most Mainer’s joked about flatlanders and didn’t mean anything by it, but fishermen were a different breed. To them, flatlanders were invaders – and my father was the worst invader of all, because he was out on “their sea” taking “their lobsters”.

My father’s lips thinned, but he did his best to hide his own anger. “Kids say some mean things sometimes, Nate. They’ll get used to us in another year or two.”

I didn’t bother to mention the obvious: that we had already been in Coldwell for three years and still weren’t welcome. I knew my father was having the same trouble on the docks. Though he and Mom never talked about it in front of Vicky or I, someone had been cutting my father’s traps loose at sea, and last week a dozen of his traps behind our house had been torn up. One thing was for sure, the Maine lobstermen hadn’t welcomed my father to their shore any more than their kids had welcomed me to their classroom.

“It’s okay, Dad,” I said. “Most of the kids are nice any-way.”

The truth was that only two of the kids at school were nice to me, and they were both girls. One was Gracey Vachon, and though her parents had been in Coldwell for over twenty years, she also got called flatlander a lot; it apparently didn't matter that she had been born in Maine. The other girl was Trudy Jackson. Her father was a fisherman, but she had liked me ever since Whiskey and I chased a skunk out of her yard a few months ago. It had probably crawled back under her barn later that night, but our friendship held. Most of the other kids either ignored me or picked on me.

"Did you see a sheriff's car on your way home?" my father asked.

"Nope." I said, perking up, knowing immediately that something was up, probably something to do with the other lobstermen. My father wasn't the type to come home from work early unless it was serious. And to call the police was about as serious as things could get in a small, shoreline town. I'd only seen a sheriff in Coldwell three times since we had moved here, twice because people died of old age, and once when a bear got stuck in the Gradys' basement window the previous spring.

"It's nothing, son, but when you see the sheriff pull in the yard, why don't you take Whiskey out for a run? I'd like some privacy when I talk to him, okay?"

"Okay," I said. I was curious, but being a kid sometimes meant you just had to wait for information. Besides, I had a dog to see. My father returned to his trap repair while I rushed into the kitchen. I pecked my mother on the cheek, something I would have been embarrassed to do in front of the kids from school, but a chore I secretly enjoyed when there was no shame to be found.

"Hi, Mom; Bye, Mom," I said as I bolted out into the backyard.

"Nice to see you, too, son," she yelled after me. I could hear the laughter in her voice.

Like a reddish-blond cyclone, Whiskey hit me chest high and sent me sprawling on my back. I rolled to catch him in a chokehold, but he was too smart for that. By the time I swung my arm around for my famous dog-wrestling move, he had

jumped back, out of arms' reach. There we were, two adversaries eyeing each other, each trying to guess the other's next move. It occurred to me that a certain ball of fur had already bested me; after all, I was lying incapacitated on my side in the grass, and he was standing comfortably on all fours just a few feet away. He'd been planning this, I thought, and I knew my only chance of winning would be to trick him.

"Okay, you win," I said, rolling to my feet and brushing grass from my blue jeans and button-up plaid, school shirt. "You're too smart for me."

Whiskey let out a little yelp and pawed the ground. He swayed his neck back and forth and stared at me. His hind legs were slightly crouched. He was ready to pounce.

"No, Whiskey, you win," I said, shaking my head. "I'm not going to fight you anymore."

His head stopped swaying, but his rear legs were still in a crouch. He wasn't buying it. I knew this was going to call for drastic measures, so I turned and took two steps back toward the kitchen door.

"Whulp, whulp?" came the question.

I glanced back just long enough to say, "I told you, it's over. You win."

I was another step and a half toward the door when a familiar flank appeared beside me. With a shameless lack of honor, I dove on his back and snaked my arm around his neck in my famous dog-wrestling move. We fell to the ground in a heap with me on top.

He gave only one final "whulp" before licking my cheek.

Once again, boy had proven victorious over dog.

In retrospect, I think Whiskey was smarter than I gave him credit for that day. I think he was just letting me win, one of his many ways of showing me how much he loved me. At the time, neither of us knew how little time we had left.