



State of
Redemption

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Excerpt

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BY RICHARD MCKEOWN

Chapter One – Chapter Six

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Chapter One

Gusts of cold air chilled Matt Matheny every time a patron came in or went out of Checkers. He needed his parka after all. Sitting alone and looking out the diner's wide window, Matt read the digital clock and thermometer on the Vermont Bank & Trust building across Main.
33° / 9:43

Matt was skeptical. Back in South Carolina, such thermometers exaggerated temps by five to ten degrees. Matt assumed the same was true in Milford judging by the chill he could not shake. Exaggerated or not, he needed his parka.

Puffy white clouds were rising beyond the bank building. Vermont was in the middle of its sugaring season when sap from maple trees is boiled into sweet syrup. The process that begins in late February and continues into April fills the crisp air with a distinct sweet-smelling aroma. It signals that winter's end is approaching and spring will arrive after all. Maybe not on the calendar's schedule, but within weeks thereafter. Some years three to four weeks. Other years, six or seven.

Matt felt old. He didn't recall being so mesmerized by sweet-smelling tree sap as a ten-year-old living just a few blocks away. Then sap, buckets of it, were poured into a large plastic tank fastened to a crude wood wagon he and his friends toted from tree to tree. Fifteen cents a gallon was the going rate for sap paid by a handful of neighborhood syrup makers. Which amounted to a nickel a gallon split among the three boys it would take to haul a full tank. Plus, a gallon of syrup for the boys' families at the end of the season. Ben Harmon added that perk one year, much to the consternation of his competitors who nonetheless matched it.

The rising wisps of sap steam and their aroma were not the only thing Matt found familiar all these years later. Green Mountain Lanes was still tucked into the south end of the North Main Shopping Center across the way. The Grand Union, then the centerpiece of the line of stores, was now a flea market. And what was Newsome's Shoes, half of it anyway, now housed a tattoo parlor, a development Matt noted with irritation. The other half was vacant. That the shopping center was still there indicated Milford had changed surprisingly little since his family moved South when he was ten. Things looked smaller now, but familiar.

The Grand Union and Newsome's Shoes had long since closed, but not Checkers. The place seemed to be in a time warp. Its silver airstream design looked the same now as it had when the pull-behind trailers were in vogue. And still a gravel parking lot. Better traction than pavement in the winter.

On each table next to the napkin dispensers were black and red wooden checkers pieces chipped and faded by age and use. From the looks of them, they could well be the same pieces Matt used when playing a game of checkers with his sister at the tables. Then as now, they were painted black and white in the fashion of checkerboards. Checkers, the game and the diner, had not and would not change much any time soon. Which Matt found gratifying. Driving around the small railroad town Matt found most old landmarks, Townley Park at the center of town, the train depot, the Courthouse, and aptly named Church Street intact. Matt found the sameness comforting. After the changes he'd been through, sameness was a good thing.

"How 'bout a warm-up?" "Uh, yes. Sure. Thanks."

Matt's nostalgic trip back in time was interrupted by a matronly, plumpish waitress.

"I'll drink it as long as you keep bringing it, ma'am," he said. The waitress smiled as she poured.

"Ma'am'. Don't hear *that* very often," she said, filling Matt's mug to a precise half-inch from the top. "Where are you from?"

“Where am I from or where have I been?”

She furrowed her brow, unsure of Matt’s meaning.

“I guess you could say I’m *from* here. But I’ve been gone a while,” he said. “Why?”

“Not too many people around here that talk like that. Ma’am, I mean,” she said. “With that accent, you must be from Mississippi or Alabama or somewhere down there,” she said.

“South Carolina,” Matt said. “Anderson, South Carolina,” he said, as though a career waitress at a Vermont diner would know, much less care where Anderson, South Carolina was. “My name is Matt Matheny, by the way,” he said, his hands wrapped around the warm coffee mug.

“My name’s Paulette.”

“I see that,” said Matt with a nod at her nametag. “Do you have a last name?”

“Bouchard. Paulette Bouchard,” she said. Sitting down across from Matt in the nearly empty diner, she kept an eye on its lone remaining customer in addition to Matt. Checkers cleared out by nine most mornings during the week.

“That sounds familiar,” he said. “Bouchard, I mean,” he quickly added, afraid Paulette might think he was being a bit too familiar.

“It should,” Paulette said. “It’s like Smith or Jones up here.”

“I went to grade school with a Peter Bouchard. Over on Franklin Street,” he said. “First, second, third and fourth grades. Reddish hair and Coke bottle glasses.”

“He’s my nephew. Or was,” Paulette said. “Drowned out on the lake about twenty years ago. Ice fishing, the idiot. Drove his car too far out onto the ice too late in the season and it fell in,” Paulette said, pouring herself a cup of coffee. “Ought not slander the dead, I suppose. Especially a relative. But too much beer and too little sense don’t mix well. Not only killed him. Killed my brother-in-law, his father. Shot himself a year to the day later.”

Matt watched as Paulette poured a package of creamer into the other mug on the table and stirred. Her hair had once been reddish, too, he guessed. Now it was mostly gray and pulled up in a bun. Matt correctly guessed she’d worn it the same way thirty years ago. Or longer.

“Wow. That’s...terrible,” he said, somewhat awkwardly. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, you can’t save people from themselves,” Paulette said with a long sigh. “So, what brings you back to this little old outpost?”



Matt’s return to Milford was not so much a step back in time as it was an attempt to restart what had been a good life. Albeit one set adrift and languishing at its midpoint. The sale of Matt’s tech start-up had turned a handsome profit that allowed him and Liz to live comfortably. Extravagance was neither’s style even if a measure of it was affordable. The only extravagance they planned to allow themselves was travel. Which they were making plans to do when they learned Liz was, finally, expecting. Travel was put on hold, then abandoned altogether when their first child was stillborn. Eight months later they learned Liz’s lingering cough was more than an irritation. It was terminal.

Liz's death was painfully cruel but mercifully quick. Barely four months after their grim sit down with her doctor, Matt received visitors, picked out a casket, selected hymns and listened numbly to a preacher without really hearing a word. People marveled at his strength in the face of such tragic loss. Inspirational they called it. Less charitable souls whispered about his lack of emotion and what it surely meant about his feelings toward his Liz, God rest her soul.

At his sister's insistence, Matt went to see a psychiatric therapist. Sis had been seeing her for eight years and told Matt, "*She's done wonders for me!*" Knowing his sister, Matt wondered about that claim. Yet he went to see the lady out of courtesy to his only sibling more than anything else.

The therapist warned of the sure-to-come post-traumatic-stress- syndrome. Matt promised to call the lady once trauma came calling. Along with a prescription for antidepressants, she gave him a slick business card, the first one he'd ever seen with a photo of its bearer and three cats. He never did fill the prescription. He did tack the business card to the fridge to amuse himself more than anything else. Matt was not one to put much stock in anyone based on a business card, impressive though this one was with a color picture and cats.

Nor had Matt ever put much stock in the therapy profession. His opinion was more than a few therapists had a more compelling business interest in treating than curing. Just once he wanted to hear one say, "*It's time to quit making progress and get better!*" It was an opinion Matt kept to himself lest he be accused of insensitivity. And if one wanted a quick trip to social purgatory in the current age, insensitivity was the fastest way to get there.

Matt hoped his return to Milford would help him escape the unpleasantness of the loss of his wife and child. Maybe being back where he started life would help him sort through where he was and where to take it from here. "*What you have experienced is tragic, Matt. But it is not an ending unless you let it become one.*"

Matt thought the words of the therapist sounded like the old saw, "*Today is the first day of the rest of your life.*" But the part about "*unless you let it become one*" stuck with him. If the longevity of his grandparents and parents were any indication, Matt had as many years ahead of him as the forty behind him.

Sight unseen, he leased one of the old houses on Sunset, a steep east-west street in Milford. More than a few homes were over a hundred years old, Matt's dark brick rental among them. Houses lined both sides of Sunset, shaded by Vermont's maples tapped for sap in spring and photographed by tourists in fall.

It was while relaxing on the front porch the week he moved in that Matt had the nagging feeling he'd been in the old house before. Its wide porch had a familiar look and feel. The view across the front lawn took him back in time like a vaguely familiar scene, song or scent will. The sidewalk was relatively new, but the large maples were decidedly not. The sidewalk took a slight diversion toward the street to avoid exposed roots of the trees. Matt supposed the same roots had been the demise of the original sidewalk.

Gently rocking in the cool of the evening, Matt caught a glimpse of a bagged, dirty rolled-up newspaper in the bushes. Then it struck him. He had been on this porch before. And on the porch of the house to his left, and the house to his right. Several times. Not in the quiet of the evening, but in the still of the predawn. His house was on a morning paper route he covered for a couple of weeks when he was a boy. Matt had his own route back then but covered this neighborhood a time or two when its regular carrier went on family vacations. Times change, he thought with some melancholy. Back then there was no tossing a rolled up, bagged newspaper from a passing car. It was a time when paperboys walked the neighborhood, bright yellow

canvas bags full of newspapers hanging from a shoulder strap. Newspapers went inside porch mailboxes. Or placed inside screen doors. Certainly not tossed on lawns. Or in bushes.

Matt looked over his shoulder to see if his porch still had a mailbox. It did. He noted with relief that Sunset Street was not yet littered with street-side newspaper boxes. Matt's relief was tempered by the realization there wasn't much need for paperboys since newspapers themselves were fast becoming extinct. To say nothing of paperboys.



Four days after his return to Milford Matt found himself shivering across from Paulette Bouchard. In fifteen minutes, he pretty much told the waitress his life story up to that point.

"And that's about all there is to me," Matt said.

"I doubt that," said Paulette as she slid out of the booth. "And let me warn you about your neighbor across the street. Flo Carpenter. That woman will know everything you do, everything you say, and everywhere you go. She'll probably know everything you think, too. And she won't hesitate to let everyone else know everything you do, everything you say, everywhere you go and everything you think," she warned. "You may not much care, but you need to know. Most people know when someone moves into town. Especially someone with an accent and who is easy on the eyes."

Matt blushed at Paulette's observation.

"Thanks for the warning. And for the compliment," he said. "At least I'll take it as a compliment."

"I'm just telling you, so you'll know," Paulette said. "You don't strike me as the sort who burns the candle at both ends. You do strike me as someone who values your privacy."

"That's fair. And accurate. And based on just a fifteen-minute conversation," Matt said. "You ought to be a therapist."

They both laughed. Standing up, Matt downed what was left in his mug and slipped a twenty-dollar bill under the edge of his saucer.

"I enjoyed the conversation. Very much."

Paulette's eyes widened as she looked down at the twenty.

"Our coffee is good but it's not *that* good," she said. "Let me get your change. At least *some* change."

Matt waved her off.

"Hush. Just mark it up as your counseling fee," he said. "A dollar a minute sounds reasonable to me. The advice about my neighbor alone is worth more than that," said Matt.

"Well, I hope. And you let me know if there is anything you need," said Paulette, before quickly adding "And I mean that in a proper way."

Matt looked at her and grinned.

"I know you do. I'll be back. Probably about the same time tomorrow.

"I'll be here," said Paulette.

Chapter Two

Michael Hewes was ten minutes late and didn't apologize, even insincerely, as he barged into the jury deliberation room, serving as a conference room on this occasion. Michael shook rain residue off his umbrella before slinging his backpack onto the polished cherry table. He didn't even have the grace to shake hands with the trio seated at the table before plopping down in a well-padded chair. Michael rummaged through the backpack for a legal pad as Tommy Branscum attempted to introduce Michael to his father and namesake T. Bentley Branscum, III, and Tommy's legal assistant, Ryan Bond. Michael emptied the contents of his backpack onto the table in search of a working pen. An Advil caplet. Paper clips. Bic lighter. Loose change. No pen. Not until he reached over and snatched a pen on the table next to old Bentley Branscum's legal pad did he acknowledge anyone.

"Hope you don't mind if I borrow this, Pops," Michael said, briefly admiring the hand-crafted wood-grained pen, which he guessed to also be cherry. "I'm going to cut to the quick right up front," Michael said as he scribbled on a pad with the old man's pen. "It'll save you money and save me time. And at my rate, saving a little bit of my time will save you a lot of money."

Now he looked up and directly at Tommy Branscum. Michael Hewes' reputation for being brusque preceded him. Still, his directness caught the others off guard.

"If I'm going to be your campaign consultant, rule number one is that I know everything. And by that, I mean *everything* about you," Michael said, pointing his finger in the style of Uncle Sam directly across the table at Tommy casually leaning back in his chair.

"If you want me to put together a strategy to make sure you get elected Governor, I need to know what your opponent's strategy should be for making sure you don't. And to do that, I need to know it all. Every little piece of information that could be used against you. Truth, rumor, lies. Doesn't matter. I want it all. Every bad decision you've made. Every indiscretion, no matter how small. Every deep, dark secret dating back at least to the age of accountability. Which I figure to be about eight years old. If you ever stole so much as a piece of gum from the corner store, I want to know. If you cheated on a spelling test in fifth grade or snapped the bra of some girl in junior high study hall, tell me now. If you ever smoked a blunt, whether you inhaled or not. Women. Boys. And if there are boys, I'll be happy to recommend a new campaign consultant. I need to know the stuff nobody knows, the stuff you think nobody knows, and the stuff you think everyone has forgotten. Not what's on the record. I can get that. I have already started to. By the way, do you ever take a case to trial? Seems to me you cut deals a lot. A whole lot. That might work up here amongst your friends and neighbors, but statewide it will be a hobbyhorse your opponent could ride all the way to Montpelier. And if they're smart, they will," Michael said.

It was true. As the district attorney for four counties in Vermont's northwest corner, Tommy Branscum did tend to swap negotiated pleas for reduced or suspended sentences.

"But we can talk about that later. For now, I want to know the names of the skeletons and whose closet they're in," Michael said. "Lay it all out there. I don't want any surprises. And neither do you."

Michael Hewes may have been from just across Lake Champlain, but he might as well have landed from an alien planet as far as the others were concerned. His rumpled appearance, blunt manner and frenetic energy were foreign to the trio he was meeting with. At the head of the table was Tommy's father, the Branscum family patriarch, who instinctively sat at the head of any table he graced. As a retired justice of the Vermont Supreme Court,

Bentley Branscum was accustomed to holding court wherever he was. What he was not accustomed to was being railed at by the likes of Michael Hewes.

Tommy knew his father was irritated by the way he tugged at the sleeves of his French cuffed, hand-tailored monogrammed white shirt. White. Always white. The nervous tugging didn't mean anything to Michael, but Tommy had seen it throughout his life. It was a sure sign his old man wasn't happy. Had Michael been paying the slightest bit of attention, he might have noticed the scowl that turned the seventy- seven-year-old judge's ruddy complexion an even deeper shade of red. It stood in stark contrast to the full shock of white hair he brushed straight back, and which curled at the neck. If he wore an ascot, Bentley Branscum would appear more like a 19th-century Dickens character than a retired chief justice.

If old Bentley looked irritated, Tommy's legal assistant appeared stricken. Ryan Bond was just a year out of law school and had never witnessed a performance quite like Michael Hewes'. Ryan was accustomed to watching Tommy aggressively prosecute and harangue defendants in a courtroom. But usually with a rhetorical scalpel. He wasn't accustomed to watching someone demand Tommy account for himself. Much less with a rhetorical meat cleaver.

Looking at Bentley, Ryan thought the vein in the old man's left temple might explode at any minute. Only Tommy didn't seem too out of sorts by Michael's tirade. More than irritated or stricken,

Tommy was somewhat amused. Leaning back in his chair and swiveling slowly from side to side, Tommy held Michael's stare while chewing on his bifocals. The resulting silence filled the room every bit as much as Michael's rapid-fire delivery had.

After a moment, Tommy pulled up to the table, downed the last of his water and, with a perfect bank shot, tossed the empty bottle into a corner trashcan. Then he turned his attention to Michael.

"I'm not sure if I should hire you because I want you working for me or because I don't want you working against me," Tommy said with a light chuckle.

Michael smiled and shrugged. Ryan laughed nervously, relieved that the tension had been broken. Bentley wasn't at all relieved, much less amused.

"Since you seem to appreciate direct talk, let me say this," Tommy said. "If I hire you, you damn sure better be all you make yourself out to be. Because I can't afford to pay you what you think you're worth only to find out you're not," he said.

Michael stiffened at the implication.

"Look, candidates don't lose because of their campaign consultants," Michael said. "They win because of them. My job is to win the election for you. And to do that I need to know everything you know. As for cost, I never told you I'm the cheapest. I told you I'm the best. "One more thing," Michael added. "Lose the 'Tommy'. From this point forward, it's just 'Tom'. Tommy makes you sound more like a boy preacher with a bad haircut than a serious candidate for Governor of The Great State of Vermont."



At 47, Tommy Branscum could hardly be confused with a boy preacher, much less one with a bad haircut. Scion of a family with deep roots in Vermont's judicial system dating to the turn of the 19th century, Tommy was in his fifth four-year term as District Attorney for the Fourth Judicial District. In each of his elections, Tommy was nominated and reelected without

opposition. As a Republican no less, owing more to family heritage than party affiliation. The Branscum family was every bit as much Vermont's First Family as was the family of the sitting Governor. Now, as the Republican nominee in the gubernatorial election six months away, Tommy aimed to make that standing official.

Trim and fit at six-foot-one, one hundred ninety pounds with salt and pepper hair perpetually in place, Tommy took pride in his appearance. His suits were tailored in Montreal and his ever-present suspenders were somewhat of a legend in his hometown. Yet neither Tommy, nor his attire, was thought pretentious.

If Bentley the father was stern and revered, Tommy the son was approachable and well-liked. His electoral success stood witness to that. Locals had long expected Tommy to run for Governor someday. Poles and pundits across the state, however, wondered if Tommy could weather the rigors of a competitive campaign. He'd never had an opponent after all. That could be a blessing or a curse in a statewide race. Especially this one. Democrats seethed and national pundits marveled that the Republicans had occupied the Governor's office for the previous eight years. With the announced retirement of the GOP incumbent, Democrats across the state resolved to reclaim what they considered rightfully theirs.

Tommy's reputation as district attorney was that of an aggressive prosecutor, as was his father's, who preceded him in the office. In reality, Tommy was a pragmatic and selective one. Any case that made it to trial was likely to result in a conviction, else Tommy would negotiate a plea and sentence before a judge's gavel called a trial to order. While some questioned his legal reasoning, they couldn't question his political reasoning. In the Fourth Judicial District, crime pretty much fell into one of three categories: burglaries, domestics and drugs. Those Tommy typically settled, making perps and their families grateful in the process.

And the community, too. Negotiated sentences routinely included participation in some sort of beautification process and as a result, public areas and intersections in Milford were brightly and meticulously landscaped, streets and curbs were regularly striped, and roadside trash was hard to find. All of which built on the city's appeal as a year-round tourist attraction. Maple syrup in spring, Lake Champlain in summer, foliage in fall and nearby skiing in winter.

If incarceration was imposed, Tommy saw to it time was served at the new state lock-up on the outskirts of Swifton some ten miles away, not downstate. Cutting deals not only created a reputation for Tommy as a tough prosecutor but also endeared him to the accused and their families. He knew mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, cousins and friends voted. Being able to remind them of his charitable spirit came in handy during election cycles.

There was one unsolved violent crime on the books in the Fourth District, that being a mysterious death in Milford the summer before Tommy's senior year. A fifteen-year-old girl assaulted on an August night had died. It happened in the parking lot behind the Randolph County Courthouse of all places. The location was made even stranger and bolder by the fact that the Milford Police Department was housed in the courthouse building smack in the middle of downtown.

Caroline Dawson was from what locals called The Grid, an eight-block configuration of streets home to the economic underclass. It was a brakeman on a train rolling into the depot across the street who first noticed her. Drawn to a curious form lying in the middle of the courthouse's parking lot, he found Caroline's lifeless body, blood pooled around and beneath her.

The medical examiner's report said Caroline suffered a seizure during the assault and listed blunt force trauma as the cause of death and seizure as a contributing factor. Detectives

from the Milford Police Department mounted an investigation, but no one on the force had much experience in murder investigations. None, in fact. Which prompted the city's police chief to seek the help of the Vermont State Police. Even so, the case fizzled within a few weeks due as much to Caroline Dawson's lack of social standing as to lack of leads. By Christmas, the murder investigation was placed on *Inactive* status and never reactivated. Soon, like Caroline Dawson, the case was forgotten, cold and dead.

"Be careful, Dad," Tommy cautioned his father.

Bentley Branscum had a firm grip on the black iron railing with his left hand. In his right hand, he clutched a cane as he gingerly descended the wet steps of the courthouse. Ryan Bond was at Bentley's side, ready to catch him if he stumbled and to help him into Tommy's silver Mercedes SL parked at the curb.

As Tommy and Michael Hewes stood at the top of the steps, the contrast could not have been starker. The urbane and the profane. An odd couple to be sure, personifying the cliché politics makes for strange bedfellows.

The rain had stopped but the air was still damp, and a stiff wind was opening the western sky to a setting sun. Michael turned away and cupped his hands around his lighter and lit up yet another cigarette. Camel unfiltered.

"You're killing yourself with those, you know," Tommy said as he watched his father settle into the front seat. Michael ignored the comment.

"Nine hundred grand, all told. A million to be safe. That's what it's going to take by my reckoning, Michael said. "Do you have it?"

Tommy thought Michael's figure exaggerated.

"Don't worry about the money. It'll be there, whatever it is," Tommy said. "I'm more concerned about making sure it's well spent. That was quite an audition in there," said Tommy as he waved to a passing motorist. "I'd suggest you tone it down from here on out. I'd prefer it and Dad will demand it."

Michael scoffed audibly, prompting a coughing fit as he scanned Main Street, quieting now as evening approached. But he inferred from the comment Tommy had decided to hire him. Tommy's next comment confirmed that decision.

"I'll have a contract ready for you to sign next week. You'll need to sign it and the usual NDA," said Tommy.

"I'm glad to see you can make a good decision," Michael said. "So, I have until next week to decide if I hire you?"

Tommy cocked his head toward Michael, and they fixed each other with steady stares. Tommy realized he'd been one-upped, something he wasn't accustomed to.

After a long moment, Tommy grinned and said "Fair enough. Thursday. You'll have a contract by then. And it will be signed by Tommy, not Tom."

Michael took a long and final drag on his spent Camel, before dropping it and squishing it with his boot.

"Suit yourself, preacher boy," he said. Then he turned and headed down the steps, leaving Tommy to watch him as he headed south on Main Street.

Chapter Three

Marianne Carpenter pulled the old Volvo up to the detached garage and killed the engine. The car spit and sputtered for a few seconds before shutting down completely with a relieved sigh. Or that's how Marianne described it to the mechanic in South Burlington. He laughed at her description.

"If you had bad gas you'd sigh when it passed, too," he teased. "She probably just needs premium. That and the fact the old gal isn't exactly a spring chicken anymore."

Marianne was relieved the problem was more an irritation than a major expense. She figured she could live with some knocking and sputtering if the alternative was spending a king's ransom for a gallon of premium. Plus, the car *was* old. It was her father's last car and she'd kept it after he died eight years ago. She vowed to keep it until it too died, believing getting rid of it would betray Daddy in some way. Marianne still kept the far-left preset set on an AM station in Burlington. It was the only station Daddy listened to, whether in the car or in his basement workshop. Marianne didn't have much use for the station since it was reformatted into a talk station, a rather nutty one at that. But it was nostalgic to keep the preset where Daddy left it. She knew he wouldn't have switched to premium either.

"Gas is gas," he would say.

Gathering up her purse and a bag of groceries, Marianne stepped out of the car and headed across the drive to the side door of the house she grew up in. Mother still lived here although Marianne knew Mom's days of independent living were numbered. Already she pretty much confined herself to the first floor. The staircase had come to be too much for her. There wasn't much reason for her to be upstairs anyway. To say nothing of the attic or the basement. It wouldn't be long before a visiting nurse would be needed. Then would come the move to a care center of some sort, something Mom refused to discuss. Her idea was that Marianne could move back in. It wasn't an idea Marianne thought much of.

The home had the traditional look builders tried to emulate in the sprawling outskirts of Burlington. But worn front steps, handprints in the driveway concrete (*Marianne's Hands 1989*) and climbing ivy on the dark red brick outer walls weren't so easily replicated.

Fumbling with her keys, Marianne caught a glimpse of a man cleaning the flower beds of the house across the street. He saw her, too, and offered a wave. Marianne didn't recognize him. Hired help or a new tenant, she supposed. Guy Menard rented out his parents' house after they passed away. Guy was in Montreal now, teaching law at McGill. It was a shame he moved out of the house. Thankfully, he chose his renters with care.

Marianne waved back, nearly dropping the sack of groceries in the process. She managed to catch the bag with her thigh and pressed it between her and the door as she turned the key in the lock.

"Let me help you!" the man called out. Marianne shook her head.

"No, it's fine. I got it. Thanks," she said, disappearing inside, the wooden screen door smacking loudly as it closed behind her.

"Mom?" Marianne called out, setting the groceries on the kitchen counter. She could hear the sound of the television coming from the living room through the parlor to where she stood in the kitchen. She recognized the deep, overly dramatic voice of the narrator on Mom's favorite true crime show.

"I'm in here," Florence Carpenter said. As if she would be anywhere else but in front of the television. The living room faced Sunset Street. A flat screen television sat atop an old console one in the corner that stopped working years before.

“I got your groceries,” said Marianne as she leaned down to kiss her mother the cheek. “How are you feeling today?”

Marianne knew what the answer would be.

“I’ve been tired the past few days,” Flo said with a sigh.

For the past few years! Marianne thought it but didn’t say it. Mom’s life had become a predictable routine of rousing, fixing a bowl of cereal, downing a tall glass of prune juice, watching television, fixing a sandwich – always a sandwich – for lunch, and napping off and on until dinner time. Marianne was thankful for the television since it kept her mother occupied.

As her closest friends passed away or were packed off to nursing homes, Flo Carpenter became more and more dependent on television for human interaction. Which was one reason Marianne wished she could coax her into a care center of some kind. But that was a bridge Marianne wasn’t ready to cross just yet. Besides, Mom wouldn’t be able to take Snowball with her. The old tomcat was on his usual perch sprawled on the sill of the big window, taking in the warmth of the afternoon sun. Marianne decided as long as Snowball was around, moving Mom was a battle she wasn’t inclined to fight, much less win.

“Did you have a good lunch?” Marianne asked, tidying up the newspapers and magazines on the coffee table. Flo answered, but Marianne wasn’t paying a lot of attention. She was watching the man across the street.

“Mom, who’s that?” Marianne asked as she watched him pruning shrubs. The tone in her voice reflected not just curiosity, but a little interest, too.

“Who?” her mother asked.

“Him,” said Marianne, nodding toward the street.

“Guy Menard’s new tenant,” Mrs. Carpenter asked. “Moved in last Sunday.” Then she added, snidely, “I don’t think he’s got a job.”

“What makes you think that?” Marianne asked, wishing she’d worn something besides the baggy sweats she’d thrown on for her grocery run.

“Because he doesn’t come and go much,” Flo answered.

“If he just moved here, maybe he hasn’t had time to look for a job yet,” said Marianne. “He seems friendly enough,” said Marianne. “He waved at me when I pulled in.”

“I saw that,” Flo snapped.

“Did you, now? You must be keeping a pretty close eye on him,” Marianne teased. The subtle ribbing went past her mother. “I’m sure he appreciates you spying on him.”

“I’m not spying. I just pay attention,” her mother said.

“And you do it very well,” Marianne said with a hint of sarcasm. Marianne tried to drive up from Burlington once during the week and again on weekends to check on her mother. As a single, thirty- seven-year-old without children, she had the time. Father Mitch dropped in on occasion and made sure someone from the parish did more often. And the neighbors kept an eye on the place. But Marianne knew the current arrangement wouldn’t do for much longer. Mom was going to need more regular attention whether she thought so or not.

What was becoming irritating was Mom’s incessant questioning about Marianne’s single status. Mostly by choice, Marianne had settled into her mid-thirties increasingly content with her life. She was tenured as a professor of history at the University of Vermont. She lived comfortably, due in some measure to Daddy’s life insurance policy. But her salary was certainly adequate for a household of one.

There was a time when Marianne’s unattached status bothered her more than she let on. She noted with a measure of resentment that being a single mother elicited praise, but being a

single woman prompted questions, mostly whispered but sometimes not. More and more as Flo Carpenter aged, whispering was something she did less and less.

Marianne came close to marrying a couple of times. One left her brokenhearted and in a depth of despair she never knew possible. It was during that time that Marianne earned her doctoral degree at Boston College, far enough from the heartache. The process was not only educational but cathartic, too. With her doctorate came a sense of accomplishment, validation and confidence she'd never felt. She wasn't sure if that was because of the doctorate or the maturing process. Either way, it was liberating. It liberated her from an engagement three years ago when she broke off a relationship with a Boston attorney. It might have been a good life by most appearances, but Marianne valued her independence. The idea of giving it up rattled her. Plus, too many of her friends were cycling through divorce court and second marriages. Third in a couple of cases. Throw in financial struggles with the stress of raising kids in broken homes and it was easy for Marianne to embrace, not resent, her lot in life.

So, she backed out, gave the Boston attorney the "*It's not you. It's me*" routine and took the professorship position in the Department of History at UVM with a focus on American Studies. Tall, fit, and engaging, Marianne was attractive and popular among students and colleagues, although a couple begrudged her popularity, marking it up to genetics. It was resentment borne out of jealousy and pettiness more than anything. The resentment was so deep among some that questions of Marianne's sexual preference were raised from time to time, although never to her face. UVM was hardly intolerant, but the questions still stung Marianne a little. What stung her a lot was Mother asking her the previous Christmas if she was a lesbian. Mom never was especially tactful and with age became less so. Marianne assured her she was not a lesbian, but even if she was, it shouldn't matter. On that point, mother and daughter agreed to disagree.

Marianne reclined against the near end of the couch facing the front window and let her shoulder-length dark hair down. The end table between her and Mom's chair was crowded with a box of tissue, a photo of her late father in his Navy blues and a small water pitcher.

"I'll fill your water in a minute," Marianne said, snapping her fingers in an attempt to attract Snowball. The cat casually lifted his head, flipped his tail, slowly blinked and resumed his watch on the front yard, and the man across the street.

"He's going to town on those shrubs. Maybe I can get him to come across and trim yours, too," she said, more to herself than to her mother. The idea didn't sit well with Mrs. Carpenter.

"Don't be silly. Peter Bondurant will do them," said Mom.

"Mother, Peter is in college now. I seriously doubt he is interested in taking care of the yard anymore," Marianne said.

"I don't know why not," Mom snapped. "He's been doing it for seven years."

"I know. I suspect he's been doing them the past couple of years out of courtesy more than for the money," Marianne said. "We can talk about it later. Let me slice up some apples for you."



Guilt nettled Marianne as she settled into the front seat. With every visit, she realized that her mother shouldn't be left alone as much as she was. Sitting in the driveway, Marianne recalled

the days when she and Mom challenged Daddy to two-on-one games of basketball on this same spot. The goal and backboard still hung over the double garage door. Looking up at it now, Marianne recalled how high it looked to her as an eleven-year-old and how Mom would make Daddy give Marianne a clean shot to the basket. He would, as long as she didn't double dribble.

Though the worn, chipped backboard and its rusty orange rim hadn't seen a net or basketball in years, they stood as a reminder of a simpler time. Of innocence, security and oneness found in the nurture and love of family. Now with Daddy long dead and Mother slipping ever closer to life's western horizon, Marianne was beginning to contemplate life alone. It was at moments like these that she wondered if the independence she valued so highly was an altogether good thing. More and more Marianne felt like a spectator of lives and loves going on around here, waving as they passed her by. The prospect of being alone at forty was making independence look more and more like loneliness.

As she sat in Daddy's Volvo in the driveway, Marianne was regretting how she'd snapped at her mother. Mom's moodiness and diminishing tact were not her fault. The doctor warned Marianne such behavior would come in greater doses as dementia pulled her mother further and further away. Marianne would need to learn to bite her tongue more and more.

"She's not the mother you knew," he told her. "But she's the mother you have. Be grateful."

And Marianne was grateful. But what lay ahead overwhelmed her from time to time. Like it was right now as she sat in Daddy's car, sobbing quietly, an emotion she rarely gave in to. But she was learning a good cry was therapeutic. A sign of humanity, not weakness. And she always felt better afterward.

As she dabbed her eyes, Marianne was startled by a tap on the passenger side window. She had not seen the man approaching and the surprise caused her to clutch her chest with a gasp. He was bent down and smiling at her through the window. Embarrassed, Marianne fumbled to roll the window down. "Either I'm one very scary guy or you are jumpy as a grasshopper!" he said.

Marianne smiled weakly and cleared her throat nervously, hoping he couldn't see the damp tissues clenched in her hand. She was grateful she'd gone light on make-up.

"I'm sorry," she stammered. "It's not you. I was just lost in my own little world. Guess I was daydreaming."

"Well, I just thought I would make sure you didn't need me to help you carry in more groceries," he said. "I would be glad to. I just moved in across the street."

"Yes, I know. Mother told me," Marianne said.

Matt raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Mother pays close attention to what goes on around here," said Marianne apologetically.

"Sometimes, too much."

"Sort of a neighborhood watch program," the man said with a wink.

"Yeah," Marianne said with a sheepish grin. "Something like that."

"My name's Matt Matheny."

Initially taken aback by Matt's boldness, Marianne found herself becoming charmed by his genial nature and accent. He was certainly drawing her out of the melancholy that had overwhelmed her just moments ago.

The light banter gave way to an awkward silence as Matt continued to look in at Marianne. Finally, he broke the silence.

“Generally speaking, when someone introduces themselves, one replies by introducing *themselves*,” Matt said with a smile.

“I’m sorry,” said Marianne. “Marianne Carpenter is my name,” she said, reaching across to extend her hand. “It is nice to meet you. Forgive my lack of manners.”

Matt gently took Marianne’s hand in his right hand and patted the top of it with his left, his custom when shaking hands with women.

“Pleased to meet you. And pleased to be your neighbor,” Matt said.

“Oh, I don’t live here. Not anymore,” Marianne said. “Just mother. I grew up in this house, but I don’t live here now. I live in Burlington.”

Matt’s disappointment must have been obvious on his face.

“But I come up at least once a week to check on Mom,” she said. “Sometimes more.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” said Matt. “And something to look forward to.”

Marianne thought the comment a bit forward, but charming. Rather than being put off, Marianne smiled sheepishly and averted her eyes. Matt stood and patted the hood of the car.

“Don’t let me hold you up,” he said, stepping back. “I just wanted to say hi.” Marianne turned the ignition, and the car came to life.

“I’m glad you did. You better get back to work on those flower beds,” she said. “There’s not much daylight left.”

Chapter Four

What a difference an hour makes. That was Matt's thought as he stood just inside the door to Checkers. It was seven-forty-five. The place was full and buzzing with activity. The sound of sausage sizzling on the open kitchen's griddle could be heard through the din of conversations, few of which were in hushed tones. He noted the "*We'll seat you when it suits us*" sign on the wooden stanchion in front of him. Paulette was moving quickly among the four-top tables, impressively balancing trays of food and beverages as she did.

"Hi, stranger!" she said over her shoulder as she passed Matt. "Grab the first place you see. I'll get you some coffee here in a minute. With cream."

Matt grinned, pleased that Paulette remembered him, even down to his coffee preference. Matt eyed an unoccupied corner booth. He thought it would be impolite to take a booth big enough for six. Paulette caught his eye from the table she was serving and nodded toward the booth. Matt shrugged and walked through the tightly packed tables and slid into the booth. No sooner was he seated when a young waitress started to pour him a glass of water. As she did, Paulette scurried past.

"He's mine," she said. "I'll be right back."

The waitress frowned over her shoulder in Paulette's direction and, without a word to Matt, walked away, leaving Matt with a half-full water glass. As he surveyed the scene, Matt was aware he was the only one sitting alone. And at the diner's most spacious accommodations, no less. But neither of the two parties in line behind him included more than two people. Some patrons were downing the last of their coffee. Others were digging into wallets and dropping tip money on their tables. Paulette paused long enough to drop off an urn of coffee at Matt's booth.

"Give me a couple of minutes and I'll be over."

"Sure," Matt said as he reached for the urn and poured coffee into a mug.

"Good mornin'," Matt said as two gents got up from a nearby table and glanced in his direction. One of them nodded, though not especially cordially. Paulette walked up behind them as they passed Matt's table.

"I'll see you boys tomorrow," she said. Matt noted they spoke to Paulette. As they moved toward the door, she turned her attention to Matt.

"Now," she sighed. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, I was going to have just coffee and a muffin. But I think I have to have some of that syrup and maybe a pancake, or six, to go with it."

Checkers was nearly empty now, Matt observed.

"Was it something I said?" he asked. "Didn't mean to chase everyone out."

"You didn't. They leave at the same time every morning, give or take five minutes. Most of them work within ten minutes of here. We fill up at seven and empty out right about now through the week," she said. "And Friday is the busiest day of the week."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Matt.

"So, what did you think about Marianne Carpenter?"

Matt glanced up over his coffee. The question caught him off guard.

"Uh, I thought she was...uh...nice," Matt said before taking a sip of coffee. "And just how would you know I even know her?"

"What did I tell you yesterday?" Paulette replied. "I told you Flo Carpenter would know everything about you, which means a good bit of this town knows about you. Or will by the end

of the week. Word is you made quite an impression on Marianne. Men in this town have been trying to do that for years.”

Matt rolled his eyes and unwrapped his utensils from inside his paper napkin.

“Yeah, I’m sure *that’s* true,” he said with an edge of sarcasm.

“Don’t worry about it,” Paulette said. “Flo’s a gossip, but she’s harmless enough as long as you keep your nose clean. Her main concern from what I hear, and this is only about third-hand, is that you don’t seem to have a job.”

“I don’t. But why that would concern her is beyond me,” Matt said with a hint of irritation.

“It concerns her because she thinks you’re sweet on Marianne,” said Paulette. “And who could blame you? She’s quite a catch. A hard catch, but a good one,” she said. Then she added, “Assuming you’re fishing, of course.”

Paulette handed Matt’s order to the young waitress passing by the booth.

“Turn this order in, would you, doll? He needs some melon, too.” Then she turned back to Matt. “So, how is it that you can afford to rent a house like that and not have a job?” asked Paulette. “I’m nosy,” she added more as an explanation than an apology. Matt shook his head.

“Nah, you’re not nosy,” he said. “Just curious.”

Matt told Paulette about having turned a handsome profit in the sale of his tech start-up. And about Liz’s life insurance policy. Paulette regretted asking the question and apologized. Matt dismissed her concern.

“No, no. It’s fine,” he assured Paulette. “I’d let you know if it wasn’t. I’m not too bashful. You can tell Mrs. Carpenter that I’m living off proceeds from my wife’s death.”

“Now that’s cold!” Paulette said. “You should be ashamed!” “Yeah, I probably should,” Matt said with a shrug.

“I’ll be right back,” said Paulette as the young waitress arrived with Matt’s breakfast.

Paulette walked over to the only other booth with diners, coffee urn and water pitcher in hand. The two patrons were an interesting pair. One did most of the talking. The other mostly picked at a plate of melon between sips of orange juice and water. Matt couldn’t make out particulars of their conversation other than bits and pieces. Not that he was much interested anyway.

The two paused their conversation as Paulette approached and topped off their water. They started back up again as she turned toward Matt’s booth.

“Who are they?” he asked, cutting his eyes toward the other booth. “They don’t exactly look like soul mates.”

Paulette saw Matt wasn’t much interested in his melon, so she slid the plate toward her and helped herself. Matt didn’t seem to notice, much less care.

“The natty one is Tommy Branscum,” she said. “I have no idea who the other one is. Never seen him before. “Tommy, now he’s in here at least twice a week. Sometimes more. A lot more in election years. He’s the district attorney. Around here the saying goes where two or more voters are gathered, so too is Tommy Branscum,” said Paulette.

The comment carried more derision than affection. When Paulette looked up from the melon plate, she saw Matt staring at Tommy and Michael as if transfixed.

“Knock, knock. Anybody home?” Paulette said to no response. Then she reached out and gently touched Matt’s wrist.

“Hello?” she said softly. Again, no response. “I *said* ‘hello’.” Paulette was tugging at Matt’s wrist now.

Matt’s head jerked slightly, and he blinked as he looked down at Paulette’s hand on his arm.

“Huh? I’m ... I’m sorry,” he stammered as Paulette looked at him quizzically. Matt was aware one of the occupants of the other booth, Tommy Branscum, was looking in his direction, too.

“What are you staring at?” Paulette asked.

Matt shook his head, as if to clear mental cobwebs and then laid his knife and fork across his plate. He glanced again toward the other booth. Tommy realized he was under Matt’s watchful eye. He marked it up to being somewhat of a local celebrity.

“Why are you staring at them?” Paulette asked again, under her breath.

Matt turned to Paulette with a furrowed brow and then relaxed a bit, forcing a smile.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “For some reason, he looks familiar.”

“Well, you’ll be seeing a lot more of him if the word on the street can be trusted. Which it usually can around here,” said Paulette. “People say he’s running for Governor. You didn’t ask me, but I’m not a fan,” she added. “I guess I better get to helping Nicole clean up,” she said. “I’m not running you off. Stay as long as you want.”

“Nope. I need to scoot,” said Matt as he slid out of the booth. “I’ll see you next week,” said Matt, patting Paulette’s arm as he turned toward the door. Before reaching to open the door, Matt paused and turned for another look at Tommy Branscum.

Tommy was eyeing Matt as intently as Matt was him.

Chapter Five

“I thought we agreed on eight o’clock,” Tommy said as he stood atop the steps of the Randolph County Courthouse. His comment was directed at Michael Hewes who was ascending the steps.

“We did. The ferry ran late. From what I could gather, the police in Plattsburgh got word a car onboard was stolen. They offloaded it and arrested the driver. I didn’t figure twenty minutes would matter much one way or the other.”

“Why did you take the ferry? And twenty minutes is one thing. Forty-five is another,” Tommy said.

“To avoid the checkpoint Homeland Security is running across from Alburg. You’d still be waiting if I went that way,” Michael explained.

“You could have called,” Tommy said. “And you need to get rid of that cigarette before you come in.”

“It’s not lit. I just like to have one in my mouth sometimes,” Michael replied, walking briskly past Tommy and through the building’s heavy wood doors.

Tommy followed him in, and the door shut slowly behind him, the sound of it latching in place reverberating throughout the wide hallway.

Michael Hewes headed in the direction of the conference room where six days prior he met Tommy, Bentley and Ryan Bond.

“Nope. Upstairs this time,” Tommy called out. Michael turned, shrugged and backtracked toward the stairwell. He paused to admire the high ceiling from which an impressive bronze chandelier hung over the landing. Michael ran a hand along the smooth, polished railing as he climbed the stairs with Tommy. A custodian ran a long-handled feather duster along the edges of framed portraits staring down from the walls. Michael made special note of the portrait of Bentley Branscum. He appeared in portraiture much as he did in person.

“Your Pop is one handsome chap,” Michael said. Tommy smiled.

“Yeah, I guess he is. He hasn’t changed much since I was a kid,” Tommy said. “Hair is whiter, but he’s pretty much the same in appearance. And temperament.”

“And this is one handsome building,” Michael said to Tommy as he nodded to the small-framed custodian. “I didn’t notice it quite so much the other day.”

“Good morning, Mr. Branscum,” said Henry Dawson, gently bowing his head. “And to you, too, sir,” he said to Michael.

“Good to see you, Henry. How are you, my friend?” Tommy said. “You’ve got this place in tip-top shape as usual.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” Henry said with a wide smile, revealing his eight remaining teeth.

“Henry’s been taking care of this place for as long as I can remember. He’s more popular around this place than any of us politicians,” Tommy told Michael as Henry beamed. “Ahead and to the right. My office is there in the corner,” Tommy directed Michael.

The *Office of District Attorney* had the same feel as the rest of the building. Original and thick mahogany walls. A recessed bookcase lined one wall of the expansive office. Tommy’s desk wasn’t a desk at all. It was a large oval, claw-footed table set in the center of the office. It was the same one his father used before Tommy succeeded him in office. That came about through a special election after Bentley Branscum was appointed to the state Supreme Court. Michael walked to the tall, double-paned windows that afforded a stunning view of Townley Park, the centerpiece of downtown Milford.

“Nice view,” he said.

As Michael stood at the window, Tommy walked to a long credenza and rifled through stacks piled on it. While he did, Michael studied a framed newspaper page on the wall.

“Bobcats Win!! State Champs!!”

The front page of the Milford *Sentinel* was dominated by a photograph of a player sitting in a basketball goal. His legs draped over its sides and his arms upraised. Net in one hand, scissors in the other. Michael squinted to read the caption.

Point guard Tommy Branscum celebrates the Bobcats’ 65-64 overtime win against White River Junction Friday night at Catamount Arena on the UVM campus. Branscum topped off a 26-point performance with a fadeaway jumper from the corner as time ran out in overtime. It is Milford’ first basketball state championship since 1969.

“Look at you!” Michael said. “Hometown sports hero. Game- winning overtime buzzer-beater. It doesn’t get any better than that.”

Tommy looked up from the credenza and over his shoulder, offering a sheepish smile. “Long ago and far away,” he said. “It’s been downhill ever since,” he laughed. “It’s hard to top something like that.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see about that,” Michael said, a reference to Tommy’s plan to run for Governor of Vermont in November. That plan was the subject of their meeting this morning.

Michael turned away from the framing and plopped down into a brown leather chair. A matching chair faced him, separated by a hand- carved coffee table with gold etchings. To his left was a loveseat. Tommy stood at the window, shading his eyes from the rising sun and watching downtown come alive as it eventually did on Saturdays.

“This is a beautiful little town,” he said, as much to himself as to Michael. “I used to stand right here in this very spot and watch parades when I was a kid. Dad would bring us up here on Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. Same spot. Same furniture,” he said. “Started bringing my kids when they came along. But we haven’t watched a parade from up here since Benjie died,” he said quietly.

The comment jolted Michael, but he didn’t respond, sensing it was more a private, painful reflection for Tommy than a point of information for Michael. Silently, he slipped his feet off the coffee table. Such casualness didn’t befit the moment. After a short while, Tommy adjusted the blinds to block the sun and walked around his desk. He sat across from Michael. “Sorry about that,” Tommy said as he plopped a legal pad on the table between them.

“No need to be,” Michael said. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” said Tommy as he took off his glasses and cleaned them with a sleeve of his sweater. Michael spied a five-by- seven school photo of what appeared to be a boy of about seven in the back corner of the bookshelf. It sat beneath one of the shelves’ recessed lights. Michael correctly assumed it was Benjie’s wide smile staring back at him.

“Drowned at Lookout Pointe,” Tommy said when he noticed Michael looking at Benjie’s picture. “Annual parish picnic eight years ago. No one saw him go in.” Michael was at a loss for words, not a normal situation for him.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” he stammered. Tommy smiled weakly.

“No way you could have. Hardest thing a parent can go through. How people do it without faith is a mystery to me. I know couldn’t have.”

Michael thought the reference to the Almighty was probably a coping mechanism. Personally, he had little faith in anything beyond the here and now. But it would serve no useful purpose to get into that at the moment. Instead, Michael made a mental note to probe into

Tommy's faith at some point. Properly packaged, it could be a valuable commodity on the campaign trail.

"We better get started," said Tommy. "It's going to be a full day with the parade and the announcement. I read your comments on my draft and included some of your recommendations.

Not all of them. Here's the latest," he said, handing Michael a copy of the speech Tommy would give at three o'clock. Michael leaned back and started reading the speech aloud.



"And where is this one from?"

Matt was looking over the paintings on display at one of the booths in Townley Park for Milford's annual Sugar Maple Festival.

"Over near Johnson," came the response. "I finished it last year. Are you interested?" Matt stood back and studied the painting resting in a large easel. It depicted a fly fisherman standing waist-deep in water, shrouded in fog, facing a covered bridge.

"I might be," he said. "Reminds me of my father. He used to fly fish over that way near some covered bridge."

"Then that just might be the place," said the artist, a plain woman Matt guessed to be in her sixties. "You can tell everyone it's him," she said, a none too subtle attempt at salesmanship. Subtle or not, it was working.

"Will you take two-sixty-three?" Matt asked after looking at its price of three-hundred-twenty-five dollars. Matt noted the artist's signature in the painting's lower-left corner. *Valencia*.

"Two-sixty-three? Why two-sixty-three?" Valencia asked, with a puzzled expression.

Matt shrugged and smiled. "It's a negotiating ploy. Catches people off guard."

"I'll take it. Cash only."

"Alright, Valencia. We have a deal," said Matt as he peeled off two hundreds and four twenties from his money clip. "Let's make it two-eighty and call it even. Fair?"

"Yes. Very. Thank you. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name," said Valencia, stuffing the cash into the front pocket of her long smock.

"I'm not so famous that I can go with one name like you. I go by Matt and Matheny," he said, extending a hand.

Valencia ignored his hand and reached behind her to tear white butcher paper off a roller cartridge. She wrapped it side-to-side and end-to-end before taping it securely before handing it over to Matt.

"Hope you enjoy it. Thank you." Then Valencia turned to greet other browsers.

Matt tried to slip the painting under one arm. He quickly realized it would take two hands to carry because of its size more than its weight. Matt thought he would have done well to wait until later in the day to buy it so he could wander the festival unencumbered. As it was, he was going to have to haul it home on foot since he walked to the park. Now he was going to have to haul it around the festival, too. He guessed it would be a short festival for him.

"That was a pretty slick little piece of negotiation, there."

Matt looked up to see Marianne Carpenter standing in front of him.

"Well, hi there," Matt said, smiling broadly. "Took me a minute. Without the ponytail and ballcap, I mean."

Marianne was embarrassed Matt recalled her casual get up from a few days ago in the driveway of her mother's home.

"I was hoping maybe you would forget that image," she said. "What did you buy?"

Matt started to unwrap the painting to show Marianne.

"No, no. Don't do that," she said, quickly. "Valencia is one of Vermont's real characters. And that's saying a lot," said Marianne. "But her work is very good. You made yourself a good deal."

"I need to get some things on the walls at the house," said Matt. "It's pretty barren right now. This will help some."

Townley Park was filling up for the festival parade.

"Looks like most of the town will be here," Matt said.

"Yeah, most people will stop by at some point during the day. Townies come for the parade and the visitors come later in the day," said Marianne. "Used to be it was the parade was pretty much all there was. Now it's a major event. There was a real battle when they wanted to bring in sponsors and live bands and all. One side wanted to keep them out, and the other wanted to bring them in and charge admission. Guess which side won out?" Marianne said. "They did put their foot down on having fireworks, thank God."

Matt fumbled with the painting, trying to get a fix on how to carry it gracefully. He wasn't having much success.

"What are you going to do with that? Carry it around all day?" asked Marianne.

"Either that or walk it home now," said Matt. "I'm leaning toward the latter."

"Don't do that. Please," Marianne said quickly. Too quickly, she thought. "I mean, you can put it in my car. It's right over there," she said, pointing to the old Volvo on the street between the park and the Methodist Church. "They let the handicapped park there during the festival. I have Mom with me. She's over there talking with her gossip group."

Flo Carpenter was sitting in a wheelchair amongst four older women on two park benches. Matt looked at the group with interest. He thought he ought to at least know who Flo was since she already knew so much about him.

"Hang on a minute," said Marianne. "Let me tell Mom I'm going to the car."

Marianne walked over and leaned next to her mother's ear. Flo snapped her head in Matt's direction. He smiled and nodded; a gesture met with a glower. Soon Marianne walked back to Matt.

"Come on. Let's put that in the car," said Marianne.

As they turned to walk toward Church Street, not only was Flo looking after them as they went, but her entire gossip group was, too. Matt's painting, *Solitude in Silhouette*, slid easily onto the backseat of the Volvo. Marianne gently closed the door.

"Thanks very much," Matt said. "I wouldn't have lasted very long totin' it around."

Marianne smiled.

"Is 'totin' like carrying?" she teased.

Matt grinned.

"Somewhat," he said.

"So, what now?" Marianne said after a pause.

Matt was well acquainted with the art of subtle suggestion and recognized Marianne's question as an invitation to spend time together.

“Want to join me and watch the parade?” he said, turning toward Main Street. Distant sounds of the parade began to fill the air as the procession started north out of the parking lot of Milford Academy two blocks away.

“I was about to ask you to join me,” Marianne said. “Guess that makes it a great idea.” As they ambled along one of the leafy paths that wound through Townley Park, a crowd gathered two-deep along Main Street. Marianne guided Matt toward a park bench.

“Let’s watch from here,” she said. “That way, I can keep an eye on Mom.”

“And she can keep an eye on us,” Matt replied, drawing a blushing grin from Marianne.

Chapter Six

The boy tightly squeezed the wrapper of yellow, red and brown in the sticky palm of his hand. This bag of Sugar Babies candies was not as satisfying as the first two were. Not in the least. The little brown pieces were viciously attacking his stomach. The ones not still lodged between his teeth, that is. His mother's admonition to not eat much candy rang in his ears. Earlier he couldn't wait to get to the movie after the cookout. Now he couldn't wait for it to end. His going-away party started at five o'clock with burgers and hot dogs in Daniel's backyard, which also served as the neighborhood baseball field.

At seven-thirty, the group of boys walked the six blocks to the Royale Theater for the movie. It would be his last night in the small town where he'd spent all ten years of his life. Tomorrow, he, his parents and sister would pull up stakes, pile into the family car and head south to start a new life. Dad's promotion and transfer just couldn't be turned down. Besides, Mom said, it would mean an end to the long, brutal winters, scenic though they were. It would be an exciting new adventure.

Adventure of any kind was the furthest thing from the boy's mind at the moment. Between two hot dogs, two pieces of cake, and now the three packages of Sugar Babies, this going away party was fast becoming a scary movie.

His friends were oblivious to his discomfort, mesmerized as they were by the action on the big screen that dwarfed them in their seats on the second row. He had long lost interest in the movie and desperately wished it would end. Waiting for its end was becoming less of an option as the Sugar Babies, cake and hot dogs drove a demolition course through his intestinal tract. He had to do something, and quick, or else there was going to be one messy crash. He glanced to his right and saw five or six occupied seats between him and the long aisle back up to the lobby. Looking to his left, he saw nearly that many seats, full of wide-eyed kids watching a car chase play out in front of them. It would be a difficult move to the aisle and an embarrassing dash to the lobby all the way from the second row. He was sure to be unmercifully teased once the movie was over. And at ten, teasing is torture. But that would pale in comparison to the terror about to lodge deep within the recesses of his mind for thirty years.

Planning his escape from where he sat in a padded seat to where he would kneel before a porcelain one, he decided to take the route to the aisle to his left. There was at least one empty seat in that direction. Maybe two. The left would be quicker and in his current distress, every second was precious.

He stood up and started to push his way between legs and chair backs. Howls of "Sit down!" "Hey Chubs, I can't see!" "Outta the way, Fatso!" filled his ears and the entire theater. Legs felt like resistant turnstiles as he pushed through them, nearly falling over and onto others.

As they pushed him off, they had no idea how close they were to being covered with an unpleasant spray. Had they known; they would have quickly cleared a path for him. The discomfort in his stomach was moving north. The unmistakable bitter taste was seeping into his throat. Time was running out. He wasn't sure he was going to make it. Pushing through the last two sets of legs he glimpsed an orange glow above him and in front of him. "Exit." A silver bar ran across the door under the sign. The idea of using the door as an escape hatch was forming in his mind when the occupant of the aisle seat lifted his left foot to trip him, causing him to stumble. Lurching forward, he reached out to brace his fall. As laughter filled his ears, he careened into the exit door. The door swung open, and he followed it into the narrow alley that ran between the Royale Theater and the Randolph County Courthouse. His momentum pitched

him against the old brick façade of the courthouse as he heard the door close, latch and lock behind him.

The late evening air felt cool against his sweating brow. He leaned against the brick wall of the courthouse, his stomach having given up the Sugar Babies, cake and a hot dog. The war that began within him in the theater was over in a few wretched seconds. Defeat never felt so good.

Spitting out the remnants of the final battle, he caught his breath and wiped his damp and clammy forehead with one hand. His other hand gripped what was left of the third package of Sugar Babies. As he took several deep breaths, relief and some sense of normalcy began to return. He crumpled up the wrapper in his hand and flung it to the ground, vowing to never hold one again. Ever.

It was dark now. Especially so in a dank, narrow alley, and especially to a boy of ten.

“What do I do now?” he thought to himself. He could go back up the alley to the entrance of the Royale and wait out the movie in the lobby. But he wasn’t sure he was up for the ribbing he would take on the walk home. Besides, it would be thirty minutes he would have to wait. And thirty minutes is an eternity for a kid.

He could walk home alone, he thought. Milford was practically crime-free in the day and time. But his parents, and those of his pals, demanded strict adherence to the “buddy system.” If the boys were going to walk downtown and back, they were to stick together, especially once it got dark. Maybe he could walk in the house without his folks knowing he’d walked home alone. They wouldn’t know what time the movie ended, he reasoned. But then again, his stumbling out the door of the theater was sure to be a topic of discussion between the other boys and their parents once they got home. It would only take one parent to call his parents before the evening was through.

“I knew you would want to know. I would if it was my boy...”

He considered whether the punishment would be worse than the humiliation he would suffer on the walk home if he waited for the others. He doubted punishment would involve a whipping. He had been sick after all. Mom would point that out and advocate for something less. Maybe pulling weeds for an hour or trimming the grass along the side of the house. By hand. Oh wait; they were moving first thing in the morning.

As he weighed his options and their likely outcomes, he heard a muffled commotion from his left in the distance.

“I said shut up! You’ll only make it worse!” a voice said in a rough whisper.

The boy squinted down the alley and saw nothing untoward. A streetlight illuminated the parking lot behind the courthouse. He heard muted sounds of a struggle. Grunts and intermittent cries of “No, no!”

Drawn to the ruckus like moths to flame the boy slowly and quietly edged along the courthouse side of the alley, his body pressed against its brick exterior as he moved. The struggle was becoming more intense from the sound of things, especially some of the language one of them was using. As he neared the end of the alley, he pushed his body more tightly against the wall and peered around the edge of the courthouse.

The boy of ten couldn’t know what he was about to see would lodge and lay within him for thirty years.