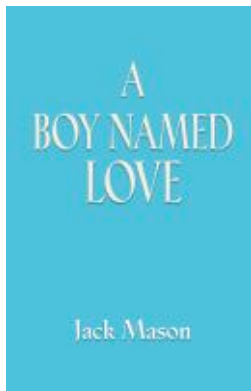


A
BOY NAMED
LOVE

Jack Mason



Tyler Love is the bastard son of college dropout Mollie Reeves, who did drugs and men, and ended up kept in a dingy shack. After age four, Tyler sold produce, did odd jobs, found a mentor, and determined to be educated. He got athletic and academic scholarships. He and a college girl find Mollie's family and everything changes. Tyler then pitches professional baseball, but he also faces murder, kidnapping and more.

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ISBN 978-1-61434-895-5

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Published in the United States by Booklocker.com, Inc., Bangor, Maine.

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2011

First Edition

CHAPTER ONE

He had absolutely no idea why his mother had chosen to hang the name Tyler Love on him and he had no clue who or what it was supposed to represent. When he reached the age to wonder he remained determined never to ask her why she saddled him with a name that seemed to have no meaning to her and seemed to bear a stigma for him. If she did it just to make him feel different, it worked.

For years longer than he desired, other people simply called him Boy or some equally smart word play on his last name. When the midwife delivered him in that filthy bedroom of the four-room poorly framed shanty house beyond the edge of Lefferts Township, Molly Reeves had looked at her bastard child for a long time before finally calling him by that name. It wasn't any part of her name, and she hadn't the vaguest idea which of the multitude of men who had poked around in her garden might have been the Letcher who planted the aggressive seed that bloomed inside her belly and presented her with the obligation of motherhood on this particular day.

At the present moment Molly lived in a rented shack with Francisco Simone, a man of Hispanic birth who was a truck driver for a local lumber mill, carrying their rough product to wherever it was needed. They met when Francisco paid Molly's bar bill at the Oriental Gardens one night and took her home for what he intended to be a single evening of sex – neither knew she was pregnant at the time – and when it became obvious that Molly was going to have a baby, the two had gotten somewhat used to each other. Francisco was exceptional in the love-making department, and Molly could give as good or better than she got when it came to sex. She had no lack of experience in this department, and her ability to demonstrate the ways she

could satisfy a man were one of the things that held Francisco. There were times when Francisco had too much to drink and felt the need to demonstrate his masculinity to his friends. He could brutalize her, and this was the painful side of the relationship. In addition to her long established sexual prowess, Molly was a hell of a great cook. She could prepare extraordinary meals with nothing but the most ordinary of ingredients.

Tyler was simply the third resident of the shack, and he never knew any other world for the longest period of time. Francisco never called him anything but 'the bastard', and when he thought Tyler was old enough to understand he explained in the most vulgar way possible what a bastard was. Tyler didn't know half of what Francisco was telling him, and he didn't care, but he listened to the detailed explanation in rapt attention, and when Francisco finally finished he told the man that he understood. This pleased Francisco and he left the boy alone.

So there they were, Francisco Simone, who was a citizen of this country because his migrant family had given birth to him while working as farm laborers in America. However, when they were later deported back to Central or South America, they had no intention of taking him back with them. He was raised in orphanages and foster homes from which he ran away on a regular basis. Once when he ran away he lived with a gang, but he was smart enough to see that jail and or drug addiction was going to be the end result of the requirements of that arrangement because theft was their primary means of support, so he hopped a train and had many homes and jobs before he ended up in Virginia. He had a birth certificate, a social security number and because of the government's wage withholding laws he was a semi-middleclass tax payer as well as the tenant of a dump of a house.

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Molly had been ejected from the Red Star Bus at Lefferts Township because that was as far as her money and her bus ticket took her. She made the driver some exceptionally generous and interesting offers in an attempt to convince him to let her continue the ride, and he probably would have accepted them, but a half-full bus was no place to deal with matters that were of such a personal nature. Thus, Molly Reeves arrived on The Eastern Shore of Virginia about forty miles after crossing the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, and during the early days of her stay on this narrow peninsula she accepted numerous so-called sleeping accommodations with a wide variety of gentlemen to avoid crashing in a cardboard box. Thus, she was glad to settle for lodgings with Francisco under any conditions.

She had been someone of consequence at some point in her young life, but she brought the out-of-control Sixties, which she missed because of her youth, right on through the Seventies and part of the Eighties, and every form of drug ever used had abused her mind and her body to the point where family, college and friends held no meaning or only a vague memory for her. If it could be swallowed, sniffed, taken by injection or placed in any orifice of the body, and if it brought only a hint or pleasure or in some way blocked out her past, Molly had participated in its usage with unbridled delight. Sex, booze, food and a warm bed were all she required, and there was nothing she wouldn't do to satisfy any provider of these needs.

Molly Reeves was one of probably thousands of girls, who were now women and who had thrown their past away with reckless abandon and had given absolutely no thought to the future. Death in some unseemly form would most probably be her future, and the final indignity would be that of ending up in a pauper's grave with no marker. But that would be down the line a bit, because Molly Reeves lived her life as a 'now girl'.

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Molly did love her son and she provided for him as best someone in her situation could, but she couldn't shield him from her weaknesses or her shames - character traits she still had and would probably carry to an early grave. During those first years after his birth on March 9, 1982 his mother did obscene things out of necessity, but they didn't register in the mind of a toddler. She kept him clean and reasonably clothed, and she tried to be a mother to her son, but how much could she really do for him when she had so few choices in her life and so little resolve to make anything better. Keeping him out of sight and harm's way was about the best she could offer, and that's what Tyler got.

Both Molly and the boy acquired their wardrobes from The FoodBank or one of the many other used clothing stores run by charities or by churches that strived to aid the poor. Sometimes they were fortunate enough to get brand new items from a chain store's overstock. They were frequent customers, and some times the clerks or volunteers would save special items for the little boy with the brown wavy hair, eyes so deeply brown they were almost black, the ready smile and the polite thank you.

Unless it was cold or rainy, Tyler spent most of his time outside where he learned to play alone. He was an open and friendly boy but seldom had friends, and he got a quick lesson about who not to bring home when he showed up for lunch one day with a black boy named Moses Waters who Francisco promptly escorted from the house and then proceeded to give Molly's boy a lecture and a whipping that he never forgot.

At the age of four Tyler found a hoe with a broken handle, and with that shortened hoe he spent days preparing the ground in part of the back yard for a garden. A lady at The FoodBank heard Molly talking about it, and she gave Tyler packets of tomato seed and watermelon seed. She also told him how to make rows and to keep the seeds from the two packets separate

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so that the taste of one crop didn't mix with the taste of the other. From this small beginning a mobile vegetable enterprise grew.

Tyler did as he was told, and he watched long day after long day as his crops broke through the soil and finally added some fruit to the green shoots. This gave Tyler hope that there would be a result for his efforts. All the while he removed every weed, including the wiregrass that went so deep into the soil that the roots were white. When his first tomatoes ripened, he took a bag of his first produce to the ladies at The FoodBank. They gave him an old wooden wagon with a piece of rope that had been substituted for a handle and suggested he fill it with his tomato crop and try to sell them in Lefferts Township.

Two days later Tyler loaded twenty tomatoes in his wagon and made his way to town. It wasn't easy. The rope handle made the wagon wobble, and it was difficult for someone of his small size to control the vehicle, but he made it without having it fall off the sidewalk even once, and before he got as far as the Post Office, he began attracting customers. He knew nothing of money, other than the fact that having it was important, so he priced his tomatoes at a nickel each. Soon he had an empty wagon and a pocket with a dollar in change.

Creston Powell ran a small garage and gas station across from the Post Office, and he witnessed the transactions of the boy selling tomatoes. He also realized that the boy probably had more problems than just a rope that made his transport wobble, so he told Tyler to watch out for the traffic and come across the street to his place. Mr. Powell was a lean and muscular man of average height who spoke slowly and thoughtfully. He introduced himself to Tyler, and while he was doing this and chatting idly he converted an old push style grass cutter handle and a sturdy bolt into a workable wagon handle. Tyler was

grateful, and he reached into his pocket to pay for this transformation of his unwieldy vehicle.

“I don’t want your money, son,” said Mr. Powell. “That handle was just taking up space in my shop, and now it will be making your travels easier. It was my pleasure to help you. Did all that pulling make you thirsty?”

“Yes, sir,” said Tyler, and Mr. Powell went to the drink machine in the store and brought the boy a TruAde Orange, which he opened at the contraption attached to the end of the drink cooler, then both man and boy sat on a crude wooden bench and quenched a well earned thirst. Tyler was putting the change back in his pocket.

“What do you plan to do with all that money,” Mr. Powell asked?

“Give it to my Mama.”

“Do you think Francisco is gonna let her keep it?”

Tyler thought about this long and hard before he said, “He don’t usually let Mama keep nothing.”

“Do you think he’ll let you keep it?”

“No.” Tyler didn’t have to think twice about that question.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes sir.”

“Can you keep a secret?”

“Yes sir.”

“Let’s you and me open a secret savings account at the brand new Creston Powell Savings Bank. Won’t anybody know anything about it but just the two of us - not Francisco and not even your Mama.” He reached under the counter and pulled out a cigar box. He knocked the dust and crud out of it and handed it to Tyler. “Put ten of those nickels in there, and I’ll keep them for you. Each time you sell something put half of it in here. Whenever you want any of it, all you have to do is ask me, because everything in this box will be your money, and I’ll

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protect it for you. Any time you want to see it, just ask me. When we get enough to start a serious saving account, we'll take this box and its contents down the street and put it in The Lefferts Savings Bank, and it can earn some extra money for you. But you mustn't forget this is our secret."

Tyler nodded solemnly, gave him half the money, thanked Mr. Powell again and crossed the street pulling his wagon behind him. Each lady who had purchased tomatoes from him said they hoped to see him soon. One lady suggested that when his tomato crop was harvested that he ask Mr. Lewis, who had a stable nearby if he could get some of his well-rotted horse manure and hoe that into the ground to enrich the soil. She also suggested that he pull up the old tomato plants and start a compost pile with some of that horse manure on it.

This was a lot for a four-year-old to remember, but since most of his time was spent in thought, rather than conversation, he was pretty good at holding on to suggestions and thoughts. When he got home, which was an easier trip without the rope, he put his wagon by his garden and covered it with a dry cleaning plastic bag retrieved from a ditch then he went into the house and proudly gave his mother the ten nickels he brought home. It didn't surprise him when Francisco rudely demanded the money from her saying that the produce came from stuff grown on his land, and that it belonged to him. Molly took the ten nickels to Francisco. She wanted to throw them in his face, but she didn't want her son to see her whipped to within an inch of her life.

Tyler went into the kitchen to avoid seeing the pride of his gift turned into something else. He told himself he would change all of that one day – one day when he was much bigger and had money.

Two days later he loaded two dozen beautiful red tomatoes on his wagon, and it was the same as before except three ladies

took four each and gave him a quarter. Another lady took two larger ones and gave him fifteen cents. Again, he was sold out before he got beyond the Post Office. He was again at Creston Powell's garage, where he sat on the bench while the cigar box was retrieved. He kept ten nickels and put the three quarters, the dime and the other nickel in the box and watched it disappear under the counter.

"Did Francisco take the money from your mother," Mr. Powell asked? Tyler nodded. "And this fifty cents, is he gonna take this, too?" He started to say something else but he stopped short.

"Just giving it to her and seeing the look in her eyes..."

Mr. Powell opened another TruAde Orange for the boy and sat beside him. "Do you know Judge Longwood's widow who lives in the big house at the end of the street?" Tyler nodded that he did. "She doesn't have much money, but she has a yard full of pecan trees and a great many small dead limbs that have blown out of those pecan and other trees. A smart boy would go see Mrs. Longwood, introduce himself and offer to pick up and pile those limbs in the back of her yard for nothing more than the privilege of being allowed to harvest the pecans that he could find on the ground. The pecans might earn you a pretty penny. Think about it. If you strike a deal, you can probably clean up the limbs today and have all day tomorrow to look for nuts. You can store 'em in that bushel basket over there in the corner so it won't cause any problems at home."

Tyler was grinning from ear to ear as he ran up the sidewalk to Mrs. Longwood's, pulling his wagon behind him. Back at the garage an older man was laughing out loud while he emptied the junk out of his bushel basket in anticipation of an incoming crop of nuts.

When Mrs. Longwood opened her front door, she was startled to see such a small boy asking for such a big job. When

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he introduced himself, she had heard of the family and had immediate reservations about becoming involved with people like them. After Tyler explained that Mr. Creston Powell had sent him, she said she was about to have lunch and asked if he had eaten anything yet. He was ready to start work, but she insisted that he would work better on a full stomach. Tyler Love tasted his first cream cheese and grape jelly sandwich, and it melted in his young mouth like nothing he had ever put in his mouth before. It took all of his willpower not to gobble it down, but he watched her, and he took slow bites like his hostess. Mrs. Longwood had hot tea, and she made him fresh squeezed lemonade – something else which he had never had before. The dessert was homemade oatmeal cookies, and Mrs. Longwood insisted he put a few in his pocket to munch on while he worked.

Tyler studied Mrs. Longwood as he was around her. She was fragile in appearance, and her grey hair was piled atop her head and held in place with brightly hand-painted combs, but she moved quite spritely, and she was so slight that it seemed a good wind would carry her away. Her dress was from several past generations and it flowed gracefully as she walked through the house. One specific room in her house had very high ceilings. Mrs. Longwood called it her Library, and it had shelves holding hundreds of books from floor to ceiling, and Tyler for the first time in his life wished he was old enough to read. He figured that just about all the learning that was necessary to survive in this world was on those dusty shelves in that room.

He thanked her for the absolutely delicious lunch and excused himself to go to work picking up the fallen limbs. These he piled in his wagon and pulled to the back of the yard and unloaded them behind a deserted barn. This took about fifteen trips and created a good sized pile of debris.

When he started to gather the nuts, he realized that most were hidden by the leaves, so he looked in the old barn and found a bamboo rake he could use to gather up the leaves and make finding the nuts much easier. This took the rest of the day, but the yard looked spectacular and a treasure trove of nuts was exposed for the picking. He knocked on the door again to tell Mrs. Longwood that he would be back to get the nuts tomorrow, but she was overcome with how fine her yard looked, and she invited him back into the house where she gave him a small bag of oatmeal cookies, then she asked him if he was too young to read.

“I’ve never had a book,” he replied.

She went to a shelf and looked diligently until she found a child’s book with few words and mostly pictures. “This is for you to keep,” she said. “Ask your mother to read the words to you, and I’ll bet in no time you’ll be able to read them yourself.”

Tyler wasn’t sure how to handle the situation at home, but he thought about nothing else as he returned home, and when he arrived there he left his new book in the plastic covered wagon. When he entered the house he gave his mother the bag of cookies. Francisco watched the transfer of the bag from son to mother.

“I told you boy that anything earned on my land belonged to me,” he said. “Get the bag from your mother and bring it here. Always bring it here. Are you stupid or something?” Tyler got the bag from his mother and handed it to Francisco. “What’s in the bag?” The boy said nothing.

Molly stood up and looked hard at Francisco. “It’s cookies. He brought me some cookies.”

“I asked the boy,” he growled and slapped Tyler so hard it moved him several feet across the floor. Tears welled up in the boy’s eyes, but he didn’t let any roll down his cheeks. He didn’t

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expect his mother to take his side, and he didn't say a word. He waited for his eyes to dry, and he walked to his single bunk bed. "Come here!" shouted Francisco. The boy turned slowly and walked to the man, who surprised him by handing him the bag of cookies. He nodded acceptance then took them back to his mother. "You two are a goddamned pair." He got up walked out the door and shouted over his shoulder, "I'll be back for supper."

Molly hugged her son, but when he heard the truck leave Tyler ran outside and retrieved his book. He sat on his bunk where there was a small light. "Would you read some of this to me, Mama?"

"Where did you get this?"

"From the lady who gave me the cookies, I raked her yard."

Molly read a few pages then she put the book down and said she had to start supper. While she cooked, Tyler went through the book page by page until he heard the truck return, then he hid the book under his bunk. There was still a sting in his cheek, but he wouldn't rub it.

When Molly put supper on the table, the three of them sat around and quietly ate the stew. The prime ingredient was venison which Molly didn't know if it was road kill or shot. She was glad to receive the slab that Francisco brought home. Meat wasn't often on the menu. Francisco pushed back in his chair and through a half-smile said, "Why don't we have a cookie for dessert?"

"Good idea," said Tyler as his mother passed them around. Had he been twenty years older, he might have added to his response, but that could have gotten him another smack across the face.

CHAPTER TWO

First thing after Francisco left for work Tyler was on his way to Mrs. Longwood's house, and in less than two hours he had stripped the yard of a full wagon load of pecans. She brought him a glass of lemonade and two oatmeal cookies, and she sat on the front steps with a look of admiration while he enjoyed the treats she brought him.

"Did your mother read to you," she asked?

"Some before supper, but when Francisco came home I hid it under my bunk. I never know what he'll do. Would you like a bag of your pecans? They look like really fat ones," he asked?

"Thank you, but I think not."

"Any time I can do anything for you, just let me know. You've been good to me, and I think you're a very nice lady."

"Well, thank you. Any time you'd like to have me read to you from some of my books, I'd be happy to do so. I've never seen such a little boy work so hard or seem to want to read so fiercely."

Tyler smiled, thanked her kindly and headed for Creston Powell's garage to empty his wagon. Several ladies stopped him on his way and asked when he'd be back with tomatoes. He told them he would have more ripe tomatoes tomorrow and crossed the road to visit his banker.

Mr. Powell was prepared for him. He had a nutcracker, a paper bag for the nuts and a trash can for the shells. Tyler went straight to work being careful not to press too hard to break the halves, and Mr. Powell chatted about odds and ends with the boy as he worked, stopping only to wait on a customer. "I took a look at Mrs. Longwood's yard on my way home yesterday. You really did a first class job. You made that old place shine. I hope she appreciates the job you did."

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“She gave me lemonade and cookies before I left, and she said she’d read me some of them books in her library. Maybe even teach me to read when I was ready.”

“You must have made a good impression on her. Oh, my wife was talking about you having pecans for sale, and we have a lady on our street that makes and sells fruitcakes and she said she’d buy all the nuts you can provide her. She said she preferred fresh pecans to those in cellophane bags in the store. I’ll get Myra to check the price next time she goes in the store.

Tyler cracked and shelled pecans until every part of both hands hurt, but he didn’t stop until the bushel basket was empty and the big paper bag was almost full. Creston Powell had never seen anyone so determined to finish a job. He told Tyler that he’d call the store to ask the price of shelled pecans and take the bag to his fruitcake making neighbor that night.

The boy was extremely grateful, and he said he thought of another place where he might get some more pecans. There was a retired dentist who lived on the street and had a huge yard full of pecan trees. He decided to see if he could make a deal similar to the one made with Mrs. Longwood.

His eyes glistened as he could feel the nuts on his bare feet when he walked deliberately across the yard. He had hardly knocked on the door when the old man with a very sour look on his face jerked the door open and glared down on the boy.

“What do you want,” he growled in a gruff and hostile voice. Tyler took a step back, and he was almost too frightened to speak.

“I was wondering if I could make a deal with you about gathering the pecans in your yard? I’ll rake the leaves and clean up the yard for the pecans I can pick up out of the grass?”

“You want my pecans?”

“But I’ll clean up your yard for free. You can look up the street and see what a good job I did for Mrs. Longwood.”

“Mrs. Longwood’s a foolish old woman. Aren’t you that boy who lives on the edge of town?”

“Yes sir.”

“I don’t want trash like you around my place. When people like you are around, things seem to be missing.” With that he ended the encounter by slamming the door. Although the old man had acted much the same as Francisco, Tyler turned and left. His expression never changed. He seemed determined never to let anyone know they had hurt him. He knew the old man was watching him from a front window, and he wouldn’t have stooped to pick up a quarter if he had seen one.

He stopped at Mr. Powell’s to get his wagon, and he watched as the mechanic rotated the tires on a car.

“You didn’t meet a very nice man, did you,” said Mr. Powell? “I doubt he has a friend in this town, including members of his own family. What did he say to you?”

“He called me trash, and he said things were missing when people like me were around your house.”

“He’s not only mean,” he said, tightening a wheel, “he’s so ignorant he doesn’t know how to tell a fine young boy trying to accomplish something from trash. It’s a sad situation when people make up their minds before they bother to have any knowledge.” Tyler smiled at his banker friend and headed for home pulling his wagon behind him.

After covering up his wagon, Tyler pulled the new growth of weeds from his garden and checked his crop. The watermelons were starting to get some size to them. Two of them had jumped out in front of the others and might be ready to sell soon. The tomato crop was exceptionally productive, and it looked like he’d have a wagon load tomorrow.

He didn’t say much as he washed up for supper. His mother asked what he’d been doing all day, and he told her he had been in town looking for odd jobs.

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“Not too many people are looking for four year old kids to do much of anything,” said Francisco. Tyler nodded in agreement. “Still you got your tomatoes to sell, and you do a good job at that.”

After supper Tyler was tired, and he crawled up on his bunk and fell asleep quickly. He slept so hard that Francisco was long gone when he awoke, and he and Molly had breakfast together and she read him a story from his book. He paid special attention to the sound of each written word.

Finally, he loaded his wagon with twenty-seven beautiful tomatoes, and all but three were gone before he reached the Post Office. He went across the street and gave all but fifty cents to his banker, who pulled out the cigar box, which displayed three crisp one dollar bills on the top. Tyler was astounded to know how valuable pecans were. The cigar box was looking good, and Mr. Powell said he had more buyers for pecans if Tyler could find some more. Tyler couldn't stop staring at all the money in the box, and his banker roared with laughter.

When he had stared long enough at the money box he thanked Mr. Powell and went up the street with his wagon and his three tomatoes. He stopped at the driveway of the nasty dentist's house, picked out the biggest tomato and knocked on the front door. The old man opened the door and scowled down on the small boy who was handing him a beautiful red tomato like it was some kind of offering. The old dentist stared at the youth in amazement.

“My mother raised me to be nice to older people, even if they had called me bad names, so I brought you a present.” He handed him the tomato, and the old dentist was speechless. Tyler started to leave.

“Wait,” said the old man. “Wait a minute, and I'll make you a deal.” Tyler stopped dead in his tracks. “You get the rake out of the shed in the back yard and rake the front yard leaves and

I'll split the pecans with you." The boy looked at him a long time and then the old man changed the deal. "You get two pecans for every one I get."

"It's a deal," said Tyler. "I'll be back later this afternoon to start." He waved goodbye and took his wagon to Mrs. Longwood's house. She arrived at her door to receive his last two big red tomatoes for which she was warmly grateful.

"I was just going to read one of my books before lunch. Won't you join me, and later we can have lunch. I have a craving for a bacon-lettuce-and-tomato sandwich. What about you?"

"I like those cream cheese and jelly sandwiches that you make," he replied with a smile, and Mrs. Longwood couldn't help but smile with him.

Mrs. Longwood took her tomatoes to the kitchen, then the two of them disappeared into the library where she pulled down a book written by Hans Christian Anderson with lots of pictures and short stories, and she read three stories very slowly, because she noticed that he silently mouthed each word as she read it.

Following a delicious lunch, Tyler said he had a job, and he had to leave but he hoped he could come back again and listen to her read. She assured him nothing would please her more.

Tyler raked one side of the old dentist's yard, hauled the leaves into a compost pile in the back and filled his wagon with the pecans from that side of the yard then he pulled the wagon up to the porch. He had been aware that the dentist had been sitting in front of the window, and he only came out when the boy pulled the wagon to the house.

"Why did you only do half the yard," the dentist asked?

"Because people like to steal your pecans, and two of every three of those in the grass belong to me. I'll do the other side tomorrow."

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This made sense to the old man who laughed heartily as he went back into the house, brought out two metal trash cans and the division of the pecans began – two for Tyler and one for the dentist. When they finally finished, Tyler poured his pecans back into the wagon, and he said he'd see the dentist tomorrow.

"I want to apologize to you for calling you trash yesterday. I was wrong to say something so mean to an exceptional young man like you. Will you forgive me for being a nasty old man?"

"Yes, sir," said Tyler. "You didn't know me. You just thought you did." He waved goodbye and pulled his wagon down to the garage and dumped the nuts into the bushel basket. When Mr. Powell heard the story of what had happened so far, he laughed till he cried. He couldn't believe a little boy with a tomato could crack the shell of a man that hard.

When Tyler finished protecting his wagon with the plastic, he went into the house and handed his mother two quarters. Francisco was at the supper table drinking a beer. No words were spoken. Molly took the money and gave her son a smile of appreciation, then she put them back in his hand, and Tyler took them over to Francisco and put them on the table before walking to his bunk and stretching out to get the kinks out of his back from raking leaves and stooping to pick up nuts most of the day.

Next day he raked the other side of the yard and picked up all the pecans. When he went to the porch for the ritual of division, he was flabbergasted when the dentist said that he had enough pecans, but if Tyler ever had an extra pair of those tasty tomatoes, he would love them.

Tyler thanked him for the nuts, left his full wagon at the garage and ran home to see if he had two more ripe tomatoes. He did, and he carried them straight away to the dentist, then he returned to the business of shelling pecans at the garage.

It took all the rest of that day and all of the rest of the next day to shell what he'd harvested from the dentist's yard, and his hands were beyond sore, but he had two big bags piled high for his banker, who was more and more impressed with his young friend.

"I think this will be the last of the pecans," Tyler said. "I don't think I can crack another nut."

"I have ladies who want to buy these, so I'll take 'em home and sell 'em for you tonight."

"Thank you, Mr. Powell," said Tyler, and he pulled his wagon home. He gave his tomato crop a thorough going over, and it looked as though he had one more good haul left, and that would be Friday, the day after tomorrow.

He spent Thursday doing errands, odd jobs and repairing things for his mother around the house. On Friday he loaded his last crop onto his wagon, and when they were all gone, he had two dollars and a half. He tucked the fifty cents in his back pocket and hurried to the garage. He showed Mr. Powell the two dollars, but he was stunned when the cigar box was opened and it held so many dollar bills. The pecans that he last cracked had earned him another seven dollars. Tyler had never seen so much money in his entire life.

"I think it's time we put this money in the bank. It'll certainly be safer there than in this old cigar box," said Mr. Powell, and he put a BE RIGHT BACK sign on his door and they walked about fifty yards to The Lefferts Savings Bank where an account was opened in the name of Tyler Love with Creston Powell being the Trustee and with all the paperwork being sent to Creston so Tyler's people would never know about it. The total amount came to twenty-one dollars and twenty cents. This amount and the date were entered in an account book with Tyler's name on it along with that of Creston

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Powell, Trustee. They put the savings book in the cigar box, and Tyler carried it back to the garage.

Tyler pulled his wagon past his house to Mr. Lewis' stables and asked if he could get a big load of his well-rotted horse manure to work into his garden for next year. Mr. Lewis was more than willing to shovel the wagon to the top with manure, and Tyler was glad he didn't have to pull it very far to get to his garden. He pulled up all but three of his tomato plants and put them into the beginning of his compost pile. He used the hoe to add the manure to the now empty soil. He tried to cover the manure with soil so that Francisco wouldn't complain about the smell. He took that manure which he planned to use on the rest of the garden and put it on the compost pile.

His watermelon crop was looking good. He had two really big ones that when he thumped them sounded really ripe. There were maybe twenty more that looked and sounded ready, but they were a little bit smaller. He had no idea what to charge for them, so he thought he'd ask around.

The next morning he picked five nice tomatoes off his last plants then he pulled up the plants and put them on the compost pile and worked the manure into the spot where they had been. He took his five tomatoes in his arms and walked to the garage and presented them to Mr. Powell as a gift. The older man was very pleased and said his wife would probably make stewed tomatoes, which was one of his favorite dishes.

Later he walked up to Mrs. Longwood's house, and she read him some more stories and they had lunch together. He was beginning to feel guilty about the lunches, and he asked if she'd like to have one of his watermelons. She readily accepted, saying that if it had a thick rind she's probably make watermelon pickle – a delicacy to her but one more thing that was alien to Tyler.

After a pleasant afternoon reading and lunching, he started back home. There were several cars parked in front of the house and loud music and laughter coming from the inside. Rather than go right inside, he walked around the back of the house, and the first thing he saw was that his two biggest watermelons were gone.

With great reservation he went inside. Francisco had picked his melons, plugged them and poured vodka into each. He and his friends and his mother were wolfing down vodka-soaked watermelon and having a party at his expense.

“I’d offer you some watermelon you little bastard, but it has alcohol in it and your mother might get upset with me,” said Francisco. Tyler’s eyes burned into the drunken man. “Don’t cut your eyes at me! I’ll do what I damned well want to do with things grown on my land.” Tyler never moved, and Francisco almost knocked him over with the back of his hand. Molly was so caught up in the party that she didn’t even notice what Francisco had done to her son. Tyler gathered his wits and went back outside, taking his time because he didn’t want Francisco to think he was afraid. He picked the best four of his watermelons and took two to Mr. Powell and two to Mrs. Longwood. He wasn’t sure that if he didn’t do this now, Francisco and his friends might steal the rest of his melons.

CHAPTER FIVE

Suddenly, the life of a seventeen year old young man whose every important move had been wrapped around someone else's rules from the day he first recalled becoming a working part of this rigid and often insane world changed rapidly. From the time he finished enrolling in Westminster University until he settled into his single dormitory room, he found a world with a much smaller and simpler basic set of rules – don't lie, cheat or steal, or you're out of here. If you work hard and make the Dean's List, the world becomes your oyster. How did it get any better than this? But he was determined to make life better than that!

He had spent his life being a loner. The only truly intimate moments of his life had been spent with a kind and gentle widow who had taken him under her wing and taught him the proper and smart things of life. The other intimate moments were carnal and spent of the back seats of parked cars. That was okay back home where he preferred to hide from the world. Now, he was in a new world. His past was south of here. No one knew Tyler Love at Westminster. He had a new life if he wanted it. Those first seventeen years, though he would never be able to turn his back and walk away from them because he felt them like a ball and chain, were behind him, and he needed to cut himself loose and walk free.

The dormitories were co-educational, which he learned was getting to be usual just about everywhere, but bedrooms and bathrooms were separate. Doors, however, were mostly open, and that was how he inadvertently met the droll, dynamic and blond curly-headed Diana Bartolli.

Diana was typing frantically on her laptop computer as she sat cross-legged on her bed facing her open door Tyler had never seen a laptop computer and her working at it both

fascinated and brought him to a full stop at her door. He learned to type at Lefferts High, and they had computers with black boxes on the floor and wires that ran to a separate screen and a separate keyboard on the desk. This girl had a whole different animal, and it sat on her lap. It wasn't plugged into a damned thing, and there were no wires anywhere. He was more aware of what she was doing than of her.

Diana was startled to suddenly look up and see a young man staring at her, and she gave herself a quick once over to make sure she was fully dressed.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," said Tyler. "It's just that I've never seen one of those machines before, and I couldn't stop staring at you. I'm sorry if I startled you."

"You've never seen a laptop computer before?"

"In the country school where I came from our computers came in three pieces and had wires and a mouse. This thing that you're using is really something else."

"Oh, I'm Diana Bartolli," she said. "You must live down the hall."

"Tyler Love," he answered. "I'm in 308."

"Plop yourself down here, and I'll show you how this little beauty works. I was just writing my folks. This thing does have a plug, and I have to recharge it about every three hours or so if it's not plugged in, but it lets me know when the battery is getting low so you don't lose any work. You don't need a modem to get on the internet or send e-mails. Most of the buildings are wired for that. If you prefer, you can get one with a mouse until you get used to using a keypad. You're going to need one of these. Would you like for me to help you get one?" He nodded yes.

"Let me put on a skirt over these shorts, put my shoes on, and we'll go shopping."

"I'll treat you to lunch."

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“Thanks. Everything’s in the CoOp Building – books, supplies, electronics and even a small lunch counter.” They took the stairs and Tyler followed her across that part of the campus that led to The CoOp. She gave him a full tour of the computer department, and he wound up picking one like hers, but with a mouse, which was twelve hundred dollars, and which he didn’t have.

“Do you have your Student ID Card,” asked the lady in that department. Tyler fished a red-white-and-blue card with his picture on it from his wallet. The lady filled out a voucher. He signed it and she handed him the computer and started to move away.

“But I don’t have twelve hundred dollars,” Tyler said.

“Your scholarship includes everything,” she replied and left.

Tyler stood there holding his computer and looking confused. Diana smiled and led him to the lunch counter. “Jock or academic scholarship,” she asked?

“Both, I guess. I graduated first in my class and I play a pretty fair game of baseball.”

“Are you smart and athletic,” she asked? He nodded yes. “Then I’d pay your way to come to my University. Two barbeque sandwiches with french fries and two ice teas,” she said to the waitress without looking at the menu. They made small talk while they ate lunch, and Tyler paid the bill in cash. Diana laughed and said, “I thought you were going to treat me with that patriotic ID Card again.”

When they got back to her room, they were laughing about something. She opened the door then she grinned and asked if he wanted to remove her shoes and skirt.

“Only if I get to remove everything else,” he replied.

“Dream on,” she said. “Read the instruction booklet while you charge the battery. Don’t worry about mistakes.”

“And when I come back, what?”

She grinned again, "I'll teach you how to use the damned thing. Oh, and thanks for lunch. By the way aren't you a freshman?"

"Yes. Aren't you?"

"I'm a sophomore."

"Am I allowed to ask how old you are?"

"I'm almost eighteen. Am I allowed to ask you the same question?"

"I was seventeen in March. I skipped a grade in grammar school. Does that make you a cradle robber?"

She laughed and closed her door to Room 302, and Tyler went to read about laptop computers.

By six o'clock he was knocking on 302. Diana opened the door barefoot and without her skirt. "Get dressed and I'll walk you to the cafeteria," he said.

"Give me a minute," she replied and closed the door. She emerged moments later looking much more feminine. "I'm not going to have to take you to raise, am I?"

"Absolutely not, you have my word on it, but since we're only doors away from being roommates we can be friends, I hope?"

"How friendly do you want to get?"

"I hadn't given that much thought. Why don't we just do whatever comes naturally and see what happens." He embarrassed himself, so he quickly added, "Within the bounds of what you consider proper." Diana couldn't hold back the smile, but nothing more was said and they walked down the stairs and over to the cafeteria where each showed their ID to the cashier and pushed a tray until they filled it with their choices for dinner.

"Don't you have to eat a special diet," she asked?

"Do you mean either an athletic diet or an academic one?"

"God, you're going to be difficult."

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Tyler laughed. “I had a choice of The University of Virginia or The University of Maryland. Suddenly, I decided I didn’t want to be surrounded by thousands of students, stuffed into big classes or be bothered with fraternities. I wanted small, and I wanted to learn about people as well as books. I grew up in a hick town on the wrong side of the tracks, and I was born on the wrong side of the blanket. I think my mother came from good stock and went to college, but she blew out her memory in The Seventies and Eighties, and all she knows is that her name is Molly Reeves.” He heard himself telling his life story to this strange girl like it was a compulsion with him, and he brought the conversation to an abrupt halt.

“How come your last name is Love?”

“How come your last name is Bartolli? Is your family in the spaghetti sauce business?”

“That’s Bertolli. My folks have a book store in a shopping center they own just outside of Canton, Ohio.”

“I don’t know why I have either of my two names. My mother has no idea who sired me. Maybe Love was just a cruel joke that seemed funny to her at the time. With this new computer, I’m gonna start at about 1975 and begin with schools starting with “A” and see if anyone had a Molly Reeves. There’s a family out there somewhere with a grandson named Tyler Love. They may or may not want to know this earth-shattering fact, and they probably gave up on their daughter Molly years ago.” He left the table and came back with two rice puddings. “I’ve busted my butt to get out of the gutter and stay alive. Don’t I have a right to try and find out who half of me came from? Can I ask a favor of you?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t tell anyone those things about me that I just told you. I don’t know why I told you, except you looked like a friend, and I’m not used to being able or knowing what to say to

friends. In your particular case, I'm really at a loss. You're both beautiful and exceptionally well put together, and here I am asking you to be my friend and not trying to hit on you. "

"Your compliments are accepted and your secret is safe with me, and we can be friends, especially if you don't try hitting on me. Also, you absolutely have that right to find you mother's family, but you have no idea where to start looking or even if the date is the right one. God, Tyler you've got a long road ahead of you and no idea how it will end. Let's get a book of all the colleges and universities. You start with 'A' and check each class from 1974. I'll take those that start with 'Z' and we'll work towards the middle. You know there ought to be a prize."

"If you find her, you get to be my agent when we deal with The Baltimore Orioles on salary. An agent gets ten percent."

"You've got yourself a deal. What makes you think The Orioles will want you?"

"They made me a minor league offer in high school, and I understand they keep a sharp eye on players at Westminster. We start practice next week. Why don't you stop by the field and check out your investment?"

Tyler was in left field warming up and stretching by throwing long ball with the center fielder when Diana appeared on the scene. He tossed another dozen balls then he walked over beside her. She wanted to know the purpose of what he had been doing, and he was about to explain when the Manager spied him with a girl.

"Love, bunt and run out a dozen," blurted out the Manager. "And I expect you to give me your best."

"God, I hate bunting," he mumbled to Diana, but he grabbed a bat, a pine tar bag and a helmet. He rubbed some tar on the bat and tossed the bag from one hand to the other before discarding it.

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The first pitch was inside, and he stepped back and placed it about ten feet down the third base line and was safe at first. The next two he placed between the pitcher and first baseman. He was safe and then out. He bunted successfully each time, and anyone on first base would have made it to second easily, but Tyler was thrown out eight of twelve times. Diana was going to offer some solace for his failures, but the Manager was congratulating him for successfully moving the imaginary runners and getting four infield hits.

“You practice a lot, kid,” the Manager asked?

“I hate bunting, but yes, I practice doing it right.”

“Is this your young lady?”

“No, this is my agent, Diana Bartolli. When The Orioles come knocking at the door, she’s the one who demands and gets me the big bucks.” Diana nodded politely.

The Manager had a blank look on his face then he told Tyler to warm up and pitch the next two innings. He and Diana walked over to a makeshift pitcher’s mound and a catcher got into place. Diana moved out of the way.

“Now, you get to see where all your earnings are going to come from.” He started off slow, picking up speed as he threw each pitch. He did this until he heard his name called to take the game mound. He walked across the diamond, and she found a seat among the players.

One of the players asked if she was Love’s girl.

“No.” she replied with a completely straight face. “It’s strictly a sexual thing.” That ended the conversation, and she got to watch Tyler pitch two innings of outstanding ball in which he struck out five and one grounded out to first. He put some ice in a towel, wrapped it over his right shoulder, and they walked off to a grassy spot and sat down to chat.

“What did you think of your investment,” he asked.

“You think a lot of yourself.”

“I do. I work hard at being the best I can be. That and a little luck can make us a fair amount of money.”

“You don’t really want a girl representing you with General Managers and club owners, do you?”

“If we ever get to that stage, I’ll tell you what I want, and I don’t have any doubt that you can get it for me. You aren’t in the old boy network. You owe nothing to nobody. You get what we want, or you walk away. “

“You’re pretty sure of yourself.”

“Did you like what you saw?”

“I don’t know all that much about baseball, but you did what they asked of you about as well as it could’ve been done.”

Tyler left the ball field and walked Diana back to her room. When he got to his room he had a note to call home. He went to the phone booth on his floor, dialed the number, and Creston Powell answered.

“Is everything okay,” he asked?

“No. Mrs. Longwood died yesterday.”

“How did it happen?”

“It was a pretty day, and she was working in the herb garden you made for her. She was a frail lady, and she just died while she was gathering herbs. A neighbor saw her.”

“She was good to me from the first day we met. I’ll miss her. When’s the funeral?”

“The day after tomorrow at St. Luke’s, but she wanted to be cremated and her ashes scattered in the ocean. Will you be coming home?”

“I’ll be home on the next bus.” Tyler returned to his room, threw a few things in a small bag and started down the hall.

“Running away,” Diana asked?

“My old teacher – the judge’s widow – who taught me most of what I know just died, and I should be there for the funeral. She was very old, so I doubt there’ll be much of a crowd.” Tyler

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smiled at the girl and said, “She introduced me to cream cheese and jelly sandwiches and watermelon pickle. She taught me to read and write and do math. When I became older, she showed me how silverware was placed and which piece to use and when to use it. She died harvesting herbs in a garden I made for her. Mrs. Longwood was probably the most important person in my life, thus far. She was so proud when I was made Valedictorian at Lefferts High School.”

Diana was so moved by his reference to the old lady that she hugged him and wished him a safe journey home.

Memories of Mrs. Longwood flooded his mind as the bus plodded south until it finally reached Lefferts Township. When he stepped off near Creston Powell’s garage, Moses Waters was there to meet him. He grabbed his friend’s hand and asked how his automotive work was coming along.

“Mr. Powell’s been a big help to me,” said Moses. “He even found a beat-up used car that I can work on to use the things I learn at The Community College. Things are working out real good for me.” He hesitated. “I guess you home for Mrs. Longwood’s funeral. Remember when you painted her house and I helped you with the shutters?” Tyler shook his head and smiled. “Mr. Powell says he needs to talk with you.” They ambled to the garage where Creston Powell came out and gave him a bear hug.

“It’s a bad way to have to come home, son, but she died peacefully in that garden you made for her. How’s college life?”

“It’s different, but it’s good. Mr. Powell, Mrs. Longwood gave me her library. Where am I gonna put all those books?”

“You don’t have to move anything. She got the judge to draw a new will, and she left you everything but the family Bible and those few books she had about her husband’s family. Her husband’s family was so shocked by the will that they got what was theirs and I doubt they even show up at the funeral.

Her only request of you was to sprinkle her ashes in the ocean and see to it that her old clothing was burned. Molly can help you with that.”

“I own the property?”

“You own the property.”

“Does Mom know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“She’s lived in that little shack with Francisco all my life. She’ll be lost in that big house.”

“You gonna let her take Francisco with her?”

“After all these years, they’re probably Common Law man and wife. Besides, it’s not my place to tell my mother how to live her life.” Tyler paused for a moment and smiled. “I’d be a damned poor home owner if I didn’t give Francisco a few pointers on what I expected about behavior and occupancy.” He whacked both Mr. Powell and Moses on the shoulders and took off towards the shack. The recent news seemed to have put an extra stride in his step.

Molly gave him a hug and a kiss, and Francisco shook his hand and asked about school and baseball. Neither had heard about Mrs. Longwood’s will and Tyler inheriting the house and neither knew what to say after he told them until Tyler brought the conversation down to reality and said they’d better check the heating, the chimneys and a number of other things before moving in. Once they knew they were included in the good fortune, all kinds of ideas about what needed to be done began to spring forth.

Tyler asked his mother if she would help him gather Mrs. Longwood’s personal clothing so that it could be burned.

“There are poor people who could use them,” said Francisco.

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“I know, but she specifically asked that they be burned, and burned they will be,” said Tyler with an air of finality. “Everything else will remain as it is, and nothing will be sold.”

After the funeral, Tyler got Terry Malloy to put his outboard motor boat in the creek, and the two young men left from Folly Creek, entered the ocean through the most recent inlet cut between Cedar and Metompkin Islands and after running about a mile, Tyler said his goodbyes and spread Mrs. Longwood’s ashes into the water, as Terry turned the outboard in a semi-circle so that the wind assisted their spreading the ashes.

As they came back Terry recalled the hurricane that created two inlets between the two islands and thus created a separate island that was probably made partly of the north end Cedar Island and partly of the south end of Metompkin Island. Of course The Nature Conservancy claimed all the islands in that area, but the Rew brothers named this particular small spot Taint Island. They said it taint Cedar and it taint Metompkin. They laughed because there would likely be more Taint Islands created by future hurricanes, and anything that could be used to irritate The Nature Conservancy suited most natives who loved and appreciated the barrier islands to a tee. Besides, many considered The Nature Conservancy a huge real estate company – not the self-proclaimed savior of The Shore and the protector of all the wild species, especially the piping plover, as they claimed to be.

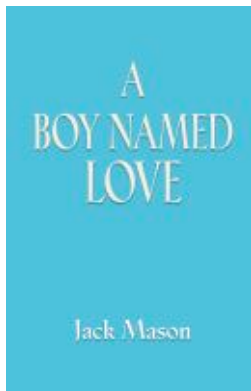
As she also requested, Tyler and his Mom burned Mrs. Longwood’s clothing, and Francisco checked the furnace, the bathrooms, kitchen appliances and anything else he could think of. When it was time for the north bound bus, Tyler gave his Mom a big hug and shook Francisco’s hand. “Call the insurance company and tell them to change the name of the home owner from her to me and explain you’ll be living here and I’m in school. It won’t be vacant. Call me if you need me.” He was

Jack Mason

gone, but leaving this house that had occupied so much of his time and that had been the inspiration for his education put a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach.

It was great that his mother and Francisco had made such a long leap forward from that shack at the wrong end of town, but nothing socially would change for them. They were who they were, and the community would offer them no inclusiveness. Lefferts Township was a hard and unforgiving place, and although he didn't know why it was affecting him at this point in time. It tore a hole in his stomach. It wasn't that an illegitimate boy had conquered Lefferts School and won scholarships to the best of Universities and colleges, only to be ignored. It was that the mother of that boy had made it to The House on the Hill, and there wouldn't be a shred of recognition or acknowledgement.

This feeling of sadness had settled over him quickly, and he wasn't sure why, but it rode with him all the way to Westminster, and he held it at bay until Diana took one look at him and asked what was wrong. Suddenly, she found herself holding a determined four year old, a frustrated teenager and a young man whose feelings had simply overwhelmed him, and all three of them were crying on her shoulder without saying a word.



Tyler Love is the bastard son of college dropout Mollie Reeves, who did drugs and men, and ended up kept in a dingy shack. After age four, Tyler sold produce, did odd jobs, found a mentor, and determined to be educated. He got athletic and academic scholarships. He and a college girl find Mollie's family and everything changes. Tyler then pitches professional baseball, but he also faces murder, kidnapping and more.

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