

A single dad; a rich bachelor: both discover issues hindering their peace of mind. Life's difficulties force them to see beyond their circumstances, bringing about change, and fill their lives with compassion and generosity.

The Money

By DB Curing

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THE MONEY

HOW ONE SHOCKING EVENT CHANGED TWO FAMILY'S LIVES.



DB CURING

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1

A Day In The Life Of A Single Dad

Life has a way of raking us over the coals sometimes. Cliff, a single dad, along with his daughter Jaime, had seen their share of heartache. No matter how hard he worked there was never enough money. To Jaime though, they had plenty. All they needed was each other—and no more surprises.

"Bye, Daddy," Jaime said, sliding the large backpack over her slender shoulders. "Don't forget, tonight's the parent teacher Open House."

Cliff was standing at the kitchen table staring down at the stack of bills which needed paying, barely aware his daughter had spoken to him.

"And don't forget you promised you'd bring cupcakes," she continued. "You can pick them up at the bakery on your way home."

"Okay," her dad responded without thinking. Suddenly, he noticed Jaime was standing next to him, tugging on his jacket.

"Daddy, are you listening to me?"

"What is it Punkin, I'm sorry," Cliff finally responded, frowning, and shaking his head to clear it. He turned to her, showing his undivided attention, and reached over to push a curl out of her face.

"You promised you'd bring cupcakes to the Open House," she repeated.

"Is that tonight?" he asked, scratching his chin. He must have looked confused, for indeed her expression was one of frustration and worry.

Ever since her mother died, Jaime had taken on a new role in their little family. Not of an 8-year-old, missing her mom, although she missed her greatly, even more than she let on, but of the woman of the house. Some days her dad was so lost he could barely function. Despite knowing ahead of time his wife's death was approaching, September 19th, 2003 hit him hard just the same. One can never really prepare for that. Jaime's whole world changed, along with her childhood the day her mother died. Now that the three-year anniversary was approaching, Cliff was more distracted than ever. He got that way every year at this time.

Anniversary. Who ever said that's what it was supposed to be called? Like a celebration or something!

"Da-aad, you promised!" she said, emphasizing his name in her usual 'sing-song way'.

It always brought him back to reality when she did that. "I won't forget, Punkin. Three dozen cupcakes. 5 o'clock, right?" he queried to verify his recollection.

"That's right, and don't be late. You *know* how Miss Gardner is. Bye, Daddy."

With that she was out the door, bouncing down the front steps of their little house on Birch street. She hummed as she walked toward the school.

Cliff stood at the window and watched his daughter until she was out of sight. Looking at his wristwatch, he gulped the

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last swallow of coffee, then walked back into the kitchen to place the cup in the sink. Grabbing his lunch, Cliff started to head out the door himself when a picture of their family of three caught his attention. It was taken on their final vacation together. A quick, weekend getaway really, for his wife had been much too weak to go very far. They had driven to her favorite spot at the beach so she could have one last adventure with her family before she got too sick to leave the house. Standing in the entryway, he looked at his beloved's face while fingering the frame Callie had so painstakingly selected.

His late wife looked beautifully happy, but Cliff always grimaced at himself in this photo—his curly hair more unruly than usual because of the saltwater air. He started going grey the year Callie was diagnosed with cancer. Now there was so much grey hair he thought he looked older than his nearly 42 years. Jaime said it was called Salt and Pepper and made him look distinguished.

Somehow his little girl always knew the right things to say. Still, Cliff thought it made him look more like her grandfather than her father. Mostly, his thoughts were consumed with his job, the mounting bills and making a good home for his daughter. It was getting more difficult as the years wore on since Callie died, and there seemed to be no fewer medical bills than when they first started coming.

Callie... His thoughts drifted toward her so frequently, Cliff was beginning to wonder if he was losing his mind. She'd been gone three years after all and wasn't it about time he began to let go a little? Maybe he was going crazy. Cliff only knew his heart was still breaking. Clearing his thoughts again, he turned toward the door and left for work.

Removing the keys from his belt loop, he walked to his Chevy pickup, unlocked the door, tossed his lunchbox onto the passenger seat, then paused. Again, memories came flooding back to Callie. She had purchased the belt loop carabiner for his keys because he was always misplacing

them—and his wallet. He'd come home from work and drop the keys here, wallet there, never paying attention to where he'd laid them or even what room he was in!

On a day like many others shortly after he and Callie were married, as he was scrambling to put his uniform on for work, Cliff realized he didn't have his wallet. They stayed up way too late the night before talking about their future and snuggling with her that morning was just too difficult to pull himself away, so he lingered longer than he should've. Now, Callie watched him hop around on one foot trying to put a sock on while grabbing a tee shirt out of the drawer, all with a toothbrush hanging out of his mouth. Callie lay on her side, propped up on an elbow and resting her head in one hand, her long, blonde hair spilling onto the pillow.

Her eyes twinkled as she watched him dance around the room, smiling in amusement. That day, after finally getting himself put together and nearly out the door, he realized once again his keys were missing. He discovered his wallet under the bed, so he ran back into the bedroom hoping they were on the dresser. No such luck. Racing around the tiny apartment, Cliff couldn't find them anywhere. He called out to Callie, but by then she was in the shower. Something prompted him to open the refrigerator door, and there, next to the milk he'd brought home the night before, were his keys.

When Cliff came home that evening, he told Callie where he found his keys and she laughed so hard she nearly fell off the kitchen chair!

"I'm glad you find my hardships so amusing, Callie," Cliff grumbled, either irritated or embarrassed, he wasn't sure which.

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"Absentmindedness isn't a hardship honey, just a lack of organization. Besides," she said, throwing her arms around his neck, "isn't that why you married me?"

She kissed him sweetly, then led him by the hand down the hall. Dinner was going to be late.

Suddenly aware he was still standing in the driveway, Cliff shook his head to clear the vivid memories, got in the truck and turned the key. The little, four-cylinder engine sputtered, then started. Backing out of the driveway he realized something—without his wife's forethought, he would probably still be searching for his keys. He was thankful for her sense of organization—he needed that in his life, much more than he acknowledged at the time.

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Cliff started working for the Transit System seven years ago. His best friend, Blake, heard at the club where he worked, that the city was lifting the hiring freeze for bus drivers. Blake knew Cliff hated working at the Public Works Department. The work wasn't so bad, it was his supervisor, Dave Reedy who made the job so difficult. Dave made it his life's mission to torment Cliff, who could do nothing right in the man's eyes. Cliff was always on time and did exemplary work, but Dave's jealousy always turned into a contest to see how long Cliff could take the harassment before quitting.

Cliff couldn't afford to quit, nor was it in his nature. It turned his stomach even, thanks to one man. Growing up, his father instilled in him a work ethic which is sometimes lacking in the working class today. When Cliff heard about the opening, he rushed right down to the city employment building to apply. He already had his license and passenger endorsement from a short stint as a cabbie. Cliff worked this second job after Jaime was born while Callie stayed home on maternity leave—without pay.

No matter the hours he spent away from home, or his fatigue when he came dragging in, seeing his two best girls gave him renewed energy. They would sit at their small kitchen table every morning, just staring at their little girl in her bouncy seat while she kicked her feet, chewing her fingers. As the baby got older, they'd marvel and laugh when Jaime discovered bugs and giggled as they crawled over her hand while sitting in the grass, or when she picked up her first fall leaf then crunch it in her fist. No one could have explained to him how he would feel the day he became a husband or a father, nor put a price on those early memories. He thought about those days often.

Blake once tried to warn Cliff not to get involved with anyone he'd met on a blind date. If it hadn't been for the blind date however, Cliff never would've met Callie. Blake Cassidy, a staunch bachelor, and womanizer, living by the rule that women were only tools to use for his satisfaction and amusement. He had fashion-model good looks, making it easy for him to hook up with a new hottie regularly. His dark, wavy hair parted on the side to reveal piercing blue eyes behind dark lashes women just melted over. His 6' 2", 205-pound frame of mostly muscle, square jaw line which rarely saw a razor made him an Adonis in his own eyes, and a conquest in theirs.

At 39 years old, he still tended bar at the city's most trendy night club and Cliff believed growing up just never occurred to Blake. He was satisfied with his life of going to the bar, night after night to check out the pickings. He would scan the room and take his choice. The best women were out as a group together for a *girl's night out*. Whether they had boyfriends or not was of no consequence to him, because they'd be gone in the morning. Blake didn't want them sticking around anyway. He loved his life, and his women, a different one as often as possible.

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As Cliff drove to work, the further he got away from the quiet suburb traffic started to increase. Four stop signs and three traffic lights to the highway, 7 minutes if he hit the lights just right. Then another 12 minutes to the turn off into the yard, dubbed *The Bus Barns*. The large parking lot held 122 full size busses, all lined up, side by side, diagonally in four rows, one behind another. In front of them were two large, covered parking garages for the smaller busses, usually handicap access and other specialty busses. In the very back was the driver and employee parking. Behind the covered garages was the maintenance line.

At the end of each shift, the drivers would park in the maintenance line in front of the garage. Each bus would be checked for problems—low tires and oil, loose mirrors, broken lights, etc. Afterwards the yard driver would park the bus in its designated spot. Each driver was assigned a bus which was their responsibility during their shift. Cleanliness was mandatory, as was turning the buses in for repairs.

Each morning, when Cliff first got in his regularly assigned bus, #546, he would walk the aisle looking for trash which the previous driver might've missed, or open windows, used gum, melted chocolate and other such things no one wants to find by accident. He liked his job and the routine it provided and didn't much care for surprises. Most days he had enough of them in the mail in the form of medical bills. Cliff found comfort driving the same bus along the same route. Some days, however, the routine gave way to wandering thoughts and memories leaving him uneasy.

After he checked his bus for cleanliness and did a once around on the outside to ensure nothing had happened to her since being parked, he jumped in and fired her up. *Gladys* as he affectionately called her, was an older bus but reliable. The 9.3L Detroit Diesel roared and belched bluish gray smoke when he first cranked her up but settled down to a growling purr once the engine was warm. He'd given his bus that name as a joke.

Growing up he lived next door to an older couple and Mrs. (Gladys) Mayfield had an indigestion problem after dinner. She would sit out on the front porch until her stomach settled. Mr. Mayfield said they came to an agreement several years previous. If she sat outside after dinner, he'd quit going to the bar. She agreed, so he quit drinking and she fumigated the front porch. Poor thing, she never could understand why most of the neighborhood kids walked past her house on Halloween.

Pulling out of the lot Cliff turned left onto McKenzie Boulevard and drove the three miles to start the route. It was 9:00 am when he reached the starting point on Avis St. The first stop had its usual six passengers. As he wrote in the log, they filed in one by one, dropping their tokens in the box, asking for transfers then taking their seats. Once everyone was seated, Cliff checked the side view mirror—signaled—took his foot off the brake and pressed the accelerator. He sighed in satisfaction—Cliff loved the routine.

Few people spoke to him more than saying *Good morning* which was fine with him. Cliff supposed he was a bit standoffish, but the solitude was nice. He could escape most of life's problems by the distraction of work. Mind you he never disappeared into himself, that would be unsafe. Cliff was proud of his safety record and no matter how bad things got he always had that—and Jaime.

As he drove from stop to stop, his thoughts returned to his friend, especially when he drove past the small baseball stadium where the two spent many summer nights watching a game when they were younger. Cliff had never met Blake's family nor did Blake ever speak about them. Living with his parents, in their house, was something Blake endured until he graduated high school. It was there the two boys met each other. Blake was the star quarterback and Cliff was the student roped into helping him get his grades up so he could continue playing football and possibly win the state

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championship. Their school's team won that year, yet even after the season ended the boys remained friends.

In high school, Blake was one year behind Cliff, but always managed to have a woman on one arm, while setting his sights on another for the near future. Plus, he ALWAYS had a young lady lined up for his best buddy. Keggers, hotrods, parties, loud concerts and girls, girls, GIRLS! Those things were all that mattered to Blake—that and football. The following year he nearly got kicked off the team when he was busted for racing down Main Street in his dad's old 1966 Plymouth Barracuda.

Since he'd been drinking, and he was always drinking, the cops said they had to take him in, but decided to be lenient since he was the star quarterback and the team was on a winning streak. The next morning when Blake's parents came down to the police station, his father took one look at him and turned around to leave. His mother begged her husband to bail the boy out, since he was their only child. The man reluctantly complied. Later that night, Blake called Cliff telling him to come and get him.

As Cliff rolled up to the house Blake exploded out the screen door running toward Cliff's car, his father yelling after him to come back. That was the only time he ever saw either of Blake's parents. Blake opened the passenger side door, jumped in then slammed it closed. Cliff looked at him, mouth open about to say something.

"Drive!" was all Blake could muster.

After about 15 minutes of silently traveling down a favorite stretch of highway, Cliff nervously asked, "How'd it go?"

Blake just stared out the window. "Can't wait to get out of this chicken town," he finally responded. "The ole man took the belt to me."

Cliff looked at his best friend and thought he saw a glimmer of a tear in his eye. The two never spoke of that incident again.

Afterwards, there wasn't anything Blake wouldn't do for Cliff—except one thing. On an afternoon much like many others, the pair met each other at the local drive-in burger joint. They stood outside, leaning against Cliff's car while Blake flirted with the girls walking by as Cliff fruitlessly tried getting his friend's attention to ask him to be best man at his wedding.

"What in blazes do you want to go and do a stupid thing like get married for? Yeah, Callie's nice and all, but are you for real? Do you really want to spend the rest of your life with one woman?"

"YES, Blake, I DO want to spend the rest of my life with her. She's the best thing that's ever happened to me! Can't you see that? Can't you see beyond your own life, your own needs and beyond who you'll go home with tonight?"

"Oh, that's rich! And how long ago was it that you were with Melissa? Or was it Cherry?" Blake was on a roll. "I remember when we used to go up and down the strip in that beat-up Camaro of yours, cruising for hours. I had a different girl every weekend, and don't forget I threw you a bone occasionally. Man, Friday, and Saturday nights just ain't the same since you got hooked up with Callie. Why don't you just forget all this marriage stuff and let's go out tonight, huh?"

"You know I don't do that anymore," Cliff reminded him.

"You mean you CAN'T!" Blake argued.

"Whatever man, I just want you to be at my wedding. We've been friends for so long, I can't think of anyone I'd

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rather have standing next to me on the day I say goodbye to all that other stuff."

"No way!" Blake said flatly. "I told you I'll never set foot in a church! Any church! EVER! Especially to no wedding!" With that he turned on his heel, got in his car and drove away.

Cliff's memories of that argument always caught him by surprise. He figured it was because he missed his old friend—the way they used to hang out. There was only one thing Blake and Cliff truly had in common: sports. Their favorite, of course, was football. However, they were relegated to watching it on TV as there were no professional teams close enough to enjoy in person. Their town did have a minor league baseball team which wasn't half bad, and the little stadium was near downtown.

Blake always said the River Rats was a stupid name for a baseball team, unless it's a little league team. There were three major rivers within 100 miles of their town. Canoeing, white water rafting, fly fishing, campgrounds galore, you name it. River tourism was what kept the town alive, even when the rest of the country was shutting everything down. Businesses appeared to spring up overnight 10 years or so ago. Whether it was handmade tents and boats or river front Bed-and-Breakfasts, business was booming almost overnight. Cliff didn't quite understand how that worked. How could so many people go on vacation while the rest of the country was being laid off didn't make sense to him, but that's the way it was none the less.

As long as the rivers flowed, there would be a tourist industry or as Callie had called it, *job security*. She understood things like that. Blake thought the name should be changed regardless.

"How about the Pirates?" he'd ask, forgetting the team in the next state over had already taken that one. "Okay then, the Ranch Hands."

Cliff would look at him like he was nuts. "But we don't have any ranches around here!"

"SO!" Blake would shoot back.

That was always his token answer. He had an argument for everything. Most of his arguments were pointless. Cliff believed he just liked to hear himself talk, and talk he did.

In high school his nickname in class was Motor Mouth. Its amazing Cliff managed to teach him anything! Blake would ramble on and on about cars and girls, movies and girls, last weekend's game, and the girls he'd hooked up with at the party afterwards. He was a real player all right, never taking anything seriously except football. Had he applied himself to academics, Blake would have earned a college scholarship. Instead it went to Joey DeCarlo—The Punk, Blake nicknamed him.

Joey was a decent enough quarter back, and only ever played second string, but his grade point average was 4.0 all day long.

"He stole MY slot!" Blake screamed when he heard about Joey getting the scholarship.

"No man, you GAVE it away. Haven't you heard anything I've said to you all year? If you'd just put some effort into..."

Blake wouldn't hear it, interrupting Cliff with the same tired arguments as if the world owed him something. It probably related to his terrible home life. He was desperate to get out of town. He even thought about joining the Army, but Cliff knew that wouldn't fly—Blake liked to argue too much!

There was another reason why the stadium held a special memory for Cliff. It was the location of his second date with Callie. The night he met Callie was his first blind date. His friend Robert and his wife Nora who both worked

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with Cliff at the Public Works plant, had invited him to dinner. This was not uncommon since he went to their home frequently for a meal or to watch a game on TV. This night was no different, at least not that they'd let on. He was late getting there because, naturally, he couldn't find his keys, although it was only a six-minute drive.

As he stepped around the corner from the entry hall to the living room, he saw her. Sitting at the far end of the sofa holding a slice of pizza in one hand and pumping her fist in the air with the other, yelling at the TV, or rather the running back on the TV to score a touchdown. Whether that player scored or not was a mystery to Cliff, as well as who was playing. He was totally mesmerized by this blonde beauty. A rather thin figure but well framed by a pair of jeans and an athletic jersey. Her long hair was in a ponytail and pulled through the hole in the back of a ball cap.

Pink, he thought it was a pink ball cap. She barely noticed him—he couldn't take his eyes off her. When the network went to a commercial break someone hit the mute button on the remote and made the introductions. She stood up and held out her hand to shake his and smiled, exposing the most beautiful set of pearly whites he'd ever seen. Callie wore very little make up, though he thought none was needed. She stood there confidently, as if she already knew something he didn't—they were going to be very special to each other.

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Jaime's days were filled with classes, homework assignments, and friends in the lunchroom, yet her dad's wellbeing was always in the back of her mind. School work came easier to her than the other girls in her class. Cliff was frequently surprised by his daughter's steadfast ability to look at a situation and do what needed to be done, as if she were 20 years older—quite mature for the tender age of 11. He worried that she was missing her childhood, opting to come

straight home after school instead of joining the Girl Scouts like her friends. Most weekends were spent helping her dad clean and other chores that, though needed to be done, shouldn't be done by a child in grade school. Jaime should be out riding her bike, climbing trees, and having sleep overs. Instead, she worried about her dad, like he worried about her.

When Callie got sick, they decided to hide it from Jaime for as long as possible. Being a sensitive girl, she knew something was wrong and became very restless, frequently waking in the middle of the night crying or she'd go to her parents' room and crawl in bed with them. After several months of this they knew their little girl was in distress and owed it to her to explain what was happening. All the tests confirmed the inoperable cancer with a name Cliff could neither spell nor pronounce at first.

How do you tell a small child their mother is dying? What does an 8-year-old even know of death? Can they fathom a beginning and an ending of this thing called life? Cliff and Callie were desperate for answers. In the end they knew it was best to tell her now while Callie was still strong and healthy enough to live life as normally as possible, to give Jaime wonderful memories. They agreed to tell her on a Friday night and took her out to Pietro's pizza, a family favorite, even allowing her to have a Coke. Later they took a walk along the river where there were street vendors selling hot dogs, cold drinks, and souvenirs. The ice cream vendor was there too.

"Mommy, Mommy, can I get an ice cream?" They looked at each other and knew they couldn't say no on this day.

"Yes, honey, you may have ice cream, but only one scoop!" her mom replied, handing her some money.

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She ran ahead as they continued to walk slowly, arm in arm, smiling at the small girl who was about to get a big blow.

~~

Jaime was born right on schedule. It was an easy pregnancy and equally easy birth. At 6 pounds, 2 ounces, she was the most beautiful thing either of them had ever seen. Bald, pink, and screaming, she was the icing on the cake of their fairy tale life. When Cliff called the families to announce the good news, Callie's mother asked all the usual questions about labor difficulties, size and weight, then exclaimed, "Well, no wonder she had an easy delivery, Callie gave birth to a lima bean!" Cliff liked his mother-in-law—she had a great sense of humor.

They knew raising her in their old apartment would be impossible because of its size, and walking up three flights of stairs carrying baby, stroller, purse, diaper bag and groceries would be ridiculous. So, before Jaime was born, they started to hunt for a larger, more suitable place to live, searching the newspaper open house ads and driving through neighborhoods. With no clue where they wanted to live or what style home they wanted to live in, every weekend was spent driving around and around.

When they found the baby would be arriving sooner than previously anticipated, they realized it was time to stop looking and start buying, so Callie called her best friend from high school who was a realtor. Within three weeks they narrowed the choices down to two homes. One, in a perfect neighborhood, but it was a duplex, so decided it was not right for them. The home they purchased was one mile further away from the highway, but the location was serene.

Birch Street was in a quiet little neighborhood with sidewalks on both sides of the street, which was lined with shade trees. Built in 1985, the home wasn't so old it needed a lot of repairs, making it perfect for them financially. Cliff and

Callie's parents had pooled their money to give the newlyweds \$15,000 to help with the down payment. Sure, it needed a little paint, new carpet, and some built-in shelves in the living room, but the happy couple couldn't think of anything they'd rather do to occupy their time until the baby came.

The house was the Craftsman style they preferred. A small, two story with red brick around the foundation and lower half of the porch columns. The siding was painted a light olive green with maroon shutters and trim. It had a shallow front porch but measured the width of the house. A wide dormer on the second floor overlooked the front porch roof, the perfect location for a nursery. There was a mature, Oregon Ash tree in the front yard, and a huge back yard. Minimal landscaping meant there was plenty of room for expansion and flowers.

After they moved in and most of the boxes were unpacked, it rained an entire weekend. Since Callie couldn't stand the kitchen wallpaper any longer, she and Cliff spent both days taking off the peeling and faded paper, then painting the walls. She chose a soft Butter Cream which accented the flooring much better than "That hideous wallpaper," as she called it, replete with its country ducks and food stains. Most weekends though, while Cliff built shelves in the living room with his dad, Callie spent on her knees planting flowers. Though her back ached from the weight of the baby, she was happy to do it.

Now that Jaime was older, she loved everything about the house, because in each nook and corner there was something her mother had touched. Colors, textures, decorations, fragrances, and memories. She was thankful her parents told her about the cancer on the Riverwalk, rather than at home, forever connecting it to such a bad memory, pushing out the love and laughter. She tried not to think about the awkward conversation which preceded her

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being told her mother was dying, even less often the one when she was told her mother was gone.

Sometimes her dreams wouldn't let her forget. Waking up in the night, for an instant she was 8 years old again. Jaime would feel prompted to go into her parent's bedroom, climb into their bed so her mother could stroke her hair until the scary images faded like she always had. The more she awoke, the more she realized it was not possible. Her mother was gone. Her father did the best he could, but she was 11 now and too old to be getting into bed with him like a frightened little girl. *Daddy could comfort me and soothe away my tears, but I need to act my age now.* Instead, she would roll over and bury her face into the pillow and cry herself back to sleep. Many nights before her mom died, Jaime would lie awake at night and hear her mother sobbing while her father's muffled voice spoke softly to her until they were quiet again. However, there was no one to comfort her father when he would go out on the front porch and cry by himself, trying not to wake anyone.

Jaime's bedroom window was upstairs, overlooking the front porch. Some nights when she couldn't sleep or was in bed reading, she would hear the screen door creek open then close. The first few times Jaime heard this, she threw off the covers and crept down the stairs to see what was happening. She'd hear some strange noise coming from outside near the front door, pull back the curtains which covered the glass panel next to the door and see her dad sitting on the top step talking to the sky, or hunched over with his head down. His back was to her, but she still recognized the body language from his shoulders, which were making the rhythmic, thrusting movement as he sobbed in utter despair. Now, nearly three years after her mother's death, though she still hears him go out onto the porch late at night, she knows he's only staring at the stars through the big tree in the front yard and talking to his wife. She no longer goes

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down when she hears the screen door, she knows that sound by heart.

2

The Branch Family Legacy

Some of the most breathtaking scenery is in the Pacific Northwest. Quaint little towns dot the landscape between the farms, ranches, and larger cities. In one of the largest counties in the state of Oregon, Emerson House, a sprawling 120-acre estate, sat atop a butte overlooking forests and hills at the south end of town. Building Emerson House began in 1887, the same year as the city's establishment. Emerson Theodore Branch found the choicest piece of land in all the county on which to build his family home. Despite the thickly forested country and few passable roads, Emerson wanted everyone to know his name and his legacy.

After having made considerable money in his father's textile mill back east, Emerson and his lovely bride, Lily, chose to move to the Pacific Northwest and try their hand in the lumber industry. The stark little cabin they rented for the first year was only temporary, while eking out their livelihood, saving all they could, to buy the small lumber mill where Emerson worked. Once he became owner, Emerson knew his dear wife would not have to work in the dry goods store any longer, and they would once again live a life of wealth and luxury. Emerson's father, the proprietor of The Greyson County Textile Mill & Co. of Virginia, taught him how to run his mill years before. Supervising the managers, monitoring the bookkeeping, dealing with the lawyers, had become second nature to Emerson. Now, learning to work the machines and handle the lumber without getting killed or injured was difficult at the very least.

Emerson never worked so hard in his life. His father taught him nothing worth having comes easy—one of the most valuable lessons he'd learned, would eventually make

him rich. His father was not a kind or encouraging man, often belittling his wife and children for the slightest of infractions.

The day Emerson announced he wanted to leave the textile mill, his father was outraged, and a heated argument ensued. Naturally, being the eldest of six children and the only male, his father expected him to stay on and run the family business. However, Emerson was weary of textiles and his father's sharp tongue.

Following Emerson's announcement, when his father returned from his daily trek to the bank, he handed his son a bank note stamped, '*Account Closed*,' in big, red letters. The look he gave his father must have appeared ignorant.

"Father, I don't understand. What is this?"

His father replied rather curtly, "Figure it out, boy. You want to leave, then leave. But don't think you'll be taking my blessing with you, or my money!"

"*Your* money? I've worked night and day for nearly 20 years hardly spending a cent. How am I and Lily going to make a new life with empty pockets?"

"By staying here like a son should, that's how!" his father bellowed, pounding his huge fist on the desk. "Money was placed in that account for you to build your life here, as a reward for taking over the family business, not to go traipsing off on some Wild West adventure. I won't have my money spent on such foolish things. But if you're determined to run off to who-knows-where, then you'll do it the hard way, just like I did. Now get out, I have work to do!"

With that, his father sat down and buried his face in the ever-present ledger. As Emerson left the room, he closed the door behind him. Hearing his father's fist hit the desk gave him a feeling of shame for disappointing him. Yet to stay

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would have meant living a defeated life, a death sentence, destined to do his father's bidding until the day the old man died. And so, it was to be, with no money of their own, Emerson would take his young bride and leave his father's textile mill with little more than his name.

"Now what?" he asked his wife. "How can we possibly make it to Oregon?"

"We'll make do here." Lily told him.

"No! I can't live under his rule anymore! He treats his managers better than he treats me and I can't tolerate it any longer. I have to leave."

Emerson's dear, sweet mother had been walking down the hall and, overhearing the argument between her husband and their son knew what she had to do. She'd secretly kept every penny of her small inheritance for this very occasion, knowing her strong minded son couldn't stay under his father's thumb forever. After her husband retired for the evening, she slipped into Emerson and Lily's bedroom and handed her son the small velvet bag of gold coins.

"This is all I have, son, but it's yours now."

"No, Mother, you can't..."

"Now you go on and do as I say," she interrupted. "You take your wife and leave here before you become like your father—old and bitter."

"But this is your money, Mother." She spread her arms out, palms up and looked around the elegant room.

"Look where I live. For what do I need more money? These coins are yours now. You just have to promise me one thing," she said with tears in her eyes.

"Anything, Mother."

"Go out, find a fortune of your own and be happy."

Composing herself once again as propriety dictated, she lifted the hooped skirt of her floor length dress, slightly exposing the crinoline underneath, turned, and slipped out of the room.

Early the next morning as Emerson and Lily were climbing into the carriage, everyone was there to see them off except his father, not surprisingly, because he usually left for the mill before dawn. As the buggy was starting down the street, he turned to wave at his family one last time. Movement from his parent's upstairs bedroom window caught his attention and he instinctively looked up. His father was standing there watching them leave. Emerson tentatively waved to him, but his father just stood there, smoking his pipe.

Emerson and Lily made their way to the Pacific Northwest via the newly completed Intercontinental Railway system, and began to build their dreams, their fortune in lumber milling and forestry, giving birth to the Branch family legacy.

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Four generations later, the city council voted to add Emerson House to the Historical Registry, along with the old town hall and one room schoolhouse, now both museums. The lone occupant of the grand estate loved the property, left to him by his father, who inherited it from his, and so forth, and never living anywhere else. James Emerson Branch, III was born into wealth, raised by nannies, educated by retired

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college professors who tutored him. These days it's called homeschooling, but one wouldn't dare call it that at Emerson House! It sounded too ordinary for anyone with the last name of Branch.

The land upon which the estate was built was slightly over 150 acres. Most of the original trees still stood surrounding the grounds. The long, winding, landscaped drive which led to Emerson House from the highway was a thing of beauty. If a visitor hadn't gone through a gate at the bottom of the hill, one might think they were driving through a botanical garden. The huge, iron gate was located 50 feet from the highway. It's Gothic scrollwork, designed by a famous artist from San Francisco, was frequently featured in architecture magazines. Many people came just to look at the Emerson House entrance gate and imagined what grand estate lay beyond its border.

The double gate measured 24' wide—12' on each side, which swung open in the center. It was 8' high at the hinges and 9' at an arched center. Beautiful, light Amber colored sandstone pillars anchored the gate halves, with a sandstone wall stretching out on either side of the pillars and disappearing into the trees. Wrought iron fleurs-de-lis lined the top of the wall and gates, to detour intruders. At the center of the gate, when closed was a large, gold circle. The initials EH, also in gold were inside the circle and contrasted nicely against the black gate. When the gates swung open, the circle split, and the letters E and H separated as well.

When the property was cleared to begin construction a hundred years or so before, his great-grandfather, Emerson Branch wanted to leave as many of the beautiful fir trees as possible, except where necessary for the house, stable, outbuildings and picturesque driveway. Once through the gate, the drive to the mansion was nothing less than breathtaking. Flower beds edged the driveway followed by manicured shrubbery behind them. Behind the shrubbery,

the grass was nearly always bright green. The lawns reached 100' on either side of the driveway.

Flowering plum and cherry trees, plus pink and white dogwood trees dotted the lush grounds. They were planted in an alternating pattern so at least every third tree was in bloom throughout the spring. On the outskirts of the lawns, the trees remained as nature intended. Oregon Ash, maple, and alder mostly, as well as an assortment of conifers. However, a favorite tree which Branch shared with his great-grandfather was the Douglas fir, the most beautiful tree either of them had ever seen. When Emerson House was built, a specific location of

The home was chosen based on how best to view one specific tree from the upper balcony of the library. It was right in the middle of the back yard, causing an argument with his wife Lily because it obscured the view of the small lake and mountains beyond. Branch's great-grandfather Emerson didn't care how his wife felt about it. This tree brought him serenity after each day's business tried his patience.

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James Branch, III or JE Branch, as he was known to most of his associates, was a much softer man than his ancestors of Virginia. His great-grandfather Emerson eventually made a vast fortune after settling here but vowed not to make it on the backs of his employees, like his father before him, who was harsh and critical. Branch's grandfather, JE, Sr., grew up in the lumber mill, learning the machines, how to grade the timber and the lumber, how to manage the different departments, and eventually how to run the lumber mill.

By the time JE, Sr. took over the family business, he'd made a few changes here and there so the whole operation was running more efficiently and making more money. He also learned to lead by example versus barking out orders—never afraid to pitch in and get his hands dirty. Eventually,

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Emerson Pacific Mill & Lumber Company became the most sought-after place to work in the entire state. Then JE, Sr. started to add land purchases to the company's portfolio so they could make a greater profit margin by cutting down their own trees, instead of buying from another landowner. JE, Sr. would also plant seedlings, replacing the harvested trees. This way he could grow exactly what he wanted, minimizing the need to drive all over creation looking for choice wood or go through a broker, again, increasing profits as well as quality.

By the time Branch's grandfather JE, Sr. retired, the lumber mill was gaining a profit margin in the tens of millions every year. His grandfather also passed down an ethic of helping his fellow man to his son as well. During the Great Depression, he created programs to help the impoverished people in the county which were very successful. Ministers and politicians wrote to him from all around the country to get information about his programs so they could help those in need in their own areas.

Branch's father, JE, Jr., regularly donated lumber, and crews to rebuild homes or businesses which were destroyed by fire or flooding. Periodically a winter storm would dump so much snow in the more mountainous regions where logs were purchased for the mill, a school or town hall became improvised shelters or supply depots. Branch's father always made sure there were ample quantities of emergency equipment, blankets, cots, medical supplies, water, and food for such times. He also learned the same lessons from his father about the lumber mill and continued to build and grow the mill until it was the most successful lumber company in all the Pacific Northwest. The bond these lessons created made Branch feel closest to his father when he was in the lumber mill.

The long history of good deeds, the family business along with the piles of money it earned weighed on Branch considerably. He lived in this beautiful home all his life, built

by his great-grandfather. Some family members were born in Emerson House. Others died there. This was home, like a well-worn shoe or warm, comfortable sweater. Emerson House was where he found peace, discovered his passion, and formed his best ideas. In the solitude of these walls, Branch was most comfortable. Among the thousands of books in the library with the dark oak woodwork and fireplaces, from the earth-toned colors of the walls to the wool Persian or Oriental rugs in each room, he was in the company of friends.

Yet, Branch was restless. At 56 years old he was still unmarried. It wasn't as if he didn't like women, on the contrary! He dated plenty and was once quite smitten with the daughter of his family's attorney, Barbara Payne, a curvaceous yet opinionated brunette whose blue blood ran for many generations. By the time Branch was 32, he'd been seeing Barbara for three years when Branch decided it was time to settle down and purchased a diamond ring. On the night he was going to propose, he got so wrapped up in his work at the mill he lost all track of time and left her waiting for him all night. When he finally came to see her, the next morning, she was waiting for him on the porch.

Branch got out of his sports car apologizing as he walked toward the steps, unaware of the look of anger on his beloved's face.

"James Emerson Branch! WHERE have you been? Don't you know what time it is? Do you know what time you were SUPPOSED to come pick me up? Do you know what DAY you promised to pick me up?"

Before he could answer she continued, "Friday at 8:00 pm, THAT'S what time! It is now Saturday at 9:30 am. Do you know how embarrassed and humiliated I am?"

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By now Barbara was shrieking at him. "WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE STANDING ME UP LIKE THAT? WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO TELL MY FRIENDS? HOW ARE YOU GOING TO EXPLAIN THIS TO MY PARENTS?"

It was more than he could take. Branch turned and walked back to the car. "James! James where do you think you're going? JAMES! JAMES BRANCH, DON'T YOU DARE WALK AWAY FROM ME!"

As Branch drove away, he thought to himself, *how could I have not seen it before? Was she always so critical?* He arrived late to pick her up in the past a time or two, granted not a whole day, but she knew his work sometimes consumed him, prone to be so focused on a task it gave him tunnel vision. Barbara frequently said when he was late, "Well, you're here now." However, he seemed to miss her tone of contempt regarding his tardiness.

Driving west out of town, Branch turned north onto the coastal route high above the ocean. The road, with its many hairpin turns, required his full attention, which was a welcome distraction. He drove until he came to a scenic lookout. Pulling into a parking space, Branch turned off the engine and sat there with his hands still on the wheel, deep in thought. *What am I doing? Am I overreacting? Should I go back and apologize?* Getting out of his car, he stepped into the wooded area which separated the parking lot from the beach access trail.

Branch walked through the gnarled trees which hugged the path. Their draping, twisted branches blocked the light and reminded him of a scene from a horror movie. The end of the little patch of forest opened at the edge of a cliff, and the trail continued to the left and down a long, steep set of steps to the beach. At the top of the cliff there was a stone and steel railing and several benches, plus a coin operated binocular on a pedestal—great for whale watching and worth

the 25 cents. He sat for a moment on a bench behind the railing and reconsidered his reaction to Barbara's tirade.

After playing her words over and over in his mind, he began to remember other little things she said over the years he hadn't paid attention to, but now seemed to glare at him like a neon sign. Standing then, Branch turned toward the trail and walked down the steps to the beach. The wind was brisk, but the sun was warm. Sand Pipers dashed around, looking for tiny crustaceans and insects at the water's edge while the Seagulls flew overhead. The waves pulsed in the background as he walked along the shoreline. Families sat on blankets having a picnic, while children were building sandcastles and playing frisbee. Several people walked their dogs, jogged, or rode bicycles, yet he remained unaware of them.

Branch was in his own little world and kept walking until realizing the sun was going down. He needed to turn around or he'd have trouble finding the trail back to his car. Besides, it was getting cold, so he turned and picked up the pace. As he found the sign which marked the trail to the parking area, he put his hand in the pocket which held the small, velvet box intended for Barbara. He pulled it out and looked at the 3 carat, pale blue, teardrop cut diamond surrounded by 22 white diamonds in a white gold setting. It was breathtaking and appeared magical in the light of the setting sun, picking up the orange and pink of the painted sky.

He walked to the edge of the water and looked toward the horizon. The silhouette of a fishing boat could barely be made out. He thought about what the fishermen must be doing right now—if they had families at home waiting for them. The face of Barbara flashed in his mind and Branch suddenly felt angry at himself for letting someone make him feel so foolish. He looked at the ring one final time before snapping the box closed then placing it back in his pocket. Though he felt he'd narrowly escaped a lifetime of grief, he couldn't help but feel disappointed and hurt. "Good riddance,

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Barbara Payne,” he said out loud, walked up the steps, through the woods, back to his car and drove home with confidence he’d made the right decision. Three months later, Branch read in the paper an announcement of Barbara’s engagement to the Mayor’s son. Poor guy.

Because Branch remained unmarried, many a politician attempted to set him up with a daughter or sister in hopes of a union, however, only to curry favors or financial backing in an upcoming political campaign. Wealth and status made it hard to find a woman in which he could say, beyond a shadow of a doubt, they were not after his money or using him in some way. *No, I am better off alone. I know nothing of love anyway, except from my mother and sisters*, he told himself whenever his heart felt melancholy. Instead, he stayed occupied, nose buried in the mill, or traveling the countryside looking for the best trees to cut, ensuring the new seedlings were growing well and so forth.

When Branch wasn’t working, he loved tending to the garden or taking the small 12’ boat out onto the lake to fish. Everything he needed was at Emerson House: his butler, John, and his chauffeur, Gerald, various house staff and groundskeepers, six rescue dogs of all varieties, a plethora of books and space, insulating him from the world.

He also had something he didn’t need or want. Something lodged so deeply in his brain he couldn’t feel it. It was there—it was growing—and it was killing him. The doctors spoke of a cure, but Branch wasn’t fond of the options, all of which meant cutting into his head, debilitating chemotherapy, and radiation, followed by violent bouts of digestive ills. Other than his doctors, attorney, and house staff, no one knew Branch was sick. He had to keep it to himself. If anyone knew he was dying, the vultures would swarm relentlessly.

Days were spent walking the grounds with his dogs for exercise when he wasn’t at the office. Branch continued to

DB Curing

work at the lumber mill, and periodically traveled to the countryside to view the new saplings or making sure the timber cut and hauled away was not scarring the earth more than necessary. He appreciated the land because it grew the trees which made him rich. The land took care of him, so he must take care of it. His father and grandfather ensured he understood that before passing the mantle.

It was a heavy burden, but Branch loved it. The scent of the forest, the fresh cut timber, and the sawdust in the mill. It made no difference to him; he loved it all. The sounds of the saws, the horns, trucks, and loaders, as well as the aroma of the wood stirred his blood. Many people voiced their annoyance with all this noise—and so much sawdust, it was everywhere! It floated in the air and landed on their clothes and cars, and even Branch's desk. Though it was a mess, it made *him* smile. The risk of fire is great due to all the highly flammable wood fibers constantly blowing through the air. Thankfully the frequent rains kept the dust down to a safe and tolerable level, but the sprinklers still needed to run several hours each day. It was imperative the giant stacks of pre-milled timber stay consistently wet. The machinery required frequent maintenance to ensure spark-free operation. Still, fires did occur.

The mill itself is a giant, rectangular building, like a semi-open pole barn. All of the equipment and machines are set up so that when a log is delivered from the yard to have the bark removed, it then travels through and around the mill in an assembly line fashion until the lumber comes out of the dryer several hours later and stacked. There's also a two story, interior building which is in the center of the mill. The lower level contains restrooms, safety equipment and storage. The upper level, which used to be the main offices has an open floor plan and is now used for the employee areas. (When computers were brought in, too delicate for all

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the dust, the offices were moved into another, smaller building away from the sawmill.)

On one side of the employee area there is a bank of lockers and more restrooms. On the other side are several picnic tables, two refrigerators and an old leather sofa someone donated years before. The elevated room is surrounded by windows so one could see the entire mill, watch for fires or problems with personnel. Laziness, fighting or lack of attention is not tolerated for safety reasons.

Branch's grandfather began a tradition of giving everyone two weeks off in December. The men worked hard, and he felt time with their families was a priority. One year, right after Branch began managing the operation, the mill was shut down as usual when the unthinkable happened. During the holidays no one was allowed on the premises—not even management—to do so was strongly discouraged. Only the guards and a skeleton crew who volunteered to take their vacations either before or after the rest of the employees could work, and only to perform safety checks and ensure the sprinklers remained running for fire prevention.

On that fateful day, Dave Barnes was on safety duty and came in for his second of three daily inspections. The guard, Hal, who should have been at his post was nowhere in sight. Dave surmised Hal was late finishing up his last round or making a pit stop. He was to walk with Hal so they could search for potential hazards. Though the guards knew the mill as well as the safety crew did, it was company policy to inspect the grounds together. About the time Dave heard a siren in the distance he smelled smoke. He frantically looked around to see if he could pinpoint from where the smoke was coming. Dave ran into the mill after a quick glance told him it would not be outside since all the sprinklers were running. Dave ran past the dryers, the planers and around the corner toward the center of the mill. As he got closer to the old offices and employee lounge, it was apparent the fire was upstairs.

When Dave saw where the fire was coming from, he relaxed a little because the location was farther away from the saws and other expensive equipment, but also because the fire would be smaller and less likely to spread quickly, as it would have out in the mill.

"Hal! HAL!" Dave called the guard, but Hal didn't answer.

The orange glow of the fire was getting brighter and more intense. Dave was starting to get worried about Hal. *Where is he?* Dave couldn't understand why the fire was getting hotter when there were automatic sprinklers in the lounge. Just as he got to the foot of the stairs, Hal burst out the door and started running down them.

"Dave, get out of here!" Hal screamed.

Suddenly, the upstairs exploded sending Hal flying, landing on Dave. The two men fell in a heap near the bottom of the steps. Seconds later several firefighters came up behind them and turned on their hoses while another helped the two men to their feet and out of the sawmill.

Dave wasn't concerned about the scratch on his head, but Hal needed attention at the hospital for smoke inhalation and a broken arm. It could have been much worse for them, but the real damage was to the sawmill. Almost a million dollars in damage to the building, equipment, and lost lumber. It was discovered a machine operator who'd been terminated several weeks prior, managed to cut the fence and get in undetected, render the sprinkler system inoperable and set up a fire starter in the locker of the lead man who turned the former employee in for drinking on the job.

Hal's official report stated he'd discovered the bank of employee lockers billowing smoke and ran to grab the fire extinguisher. On his way he noticed piles of wood chips and

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saw dust scattered all over the floor, which wasn't there during the previous hour's security sweep and against company policy besides. With the bottle ready to shoot its chemical blast, he noticed a red container on the floor below the lunch table with more saw dust surrounding it. It looked like a jug of...GASOLINE! Dropping the extinguisher, Hal bolted for the door only to get blown off his feet, immediately followed by a series of loud bangs and something hitting him in the back of the head. Scrambling back to his feet, he made it out the door, hollered at Dave to run but halfway down the stairs the employee's lounge exploded, sending the guard flying. It was later discovered a well-placed blow torch started the fire, destroying the upper building.

Thankfully it was the last fire. The company increased security during Christmas breaks from that year on. Also, they purchased state of the art fire suppression and alarm systems and moved all the offices and employee areas away from the sawmill. Hal recovered from his injuries and was given a commendation from the security company for acting so quickly in calling 911, but Dave resigned. If he'd arrived any earlier—well, he just couldn't think about it. His new baby needed Daddy alive.

At least Dave *had* a family. Branch had few regrets. Not pursuing a family was one, well, the only one really. He just didn't know what he was going to do, who the money would be left to, as well as the entire lumber operation. Branch always gave to charity and recently funded a significant portion of the money needed to remodel the hospital, donated the funds for two new schools and various other philanthropic endeavors. Yet the bank accounts continued to increase. One of the company attorneys, having learned of his client's illness and sworn to secrecy, advised him to consider selling before getting too sick but he wasn't ready to think about that yet. Branch heaved a sigh every time he thought about it and occasionally felt that being so successful had a price higher than the reward.

The mill could be sold, even though it killed him just thinking about it. It had been in the family for four generations and the thought of it going to someone else, someone whose main agenda was the bottom line, who didn't care about the trees or the land, left a knot in his stomach and a sour taste in his mouth. None of his sisters were interested; it was too *smelly and dirty*. Their husbands had their careers, none of which were in business or lumber. Branch might talk to them. Maybe they would be willing to oversee the operation while the current managers ran the mill. These dedicated men all loved it like Branch did, having worked there all their adult lives as if it was their own.

Branch's employees were loyal people, both in the lumber mill and the forestry division. He had a deep respect for most of them as well. Some began working at the mill right out of high school. Others were hired because their fathers and grandfathers worked there. What would happen to them if he sold out? And the town? Branch began to get overwhelmed thinking about it. He simply needed a miracle. Looking at his watch, it was time to leave for the next appointment with the oncologist. Branch wondered if the doctor's research uncovered any new treatments or if he would have to sit through yet another meeting, hearing statements like, "Inoperable" and "Little hope." Yes, what Branch needed was a miracle.

3

Daddy's Little Girl

Jaime's grandmother always said the girl was very mature for her age. Her mother never talked baby talk to Jaime and read to her often. She learned to speak clearly and to read much younger than her peers. In fact, Jaime had more adult friends than those her same age. Those she considered friends from school and church could be counted on one hand. The people she most enjoyed spending time with was her dad's friends and coworkers, especially his best friend, Jaime's Uncle Blake. He wasn't really her uncle, but she had practically grown up with him in her life.

When her mom was still alive, Blake visited often. Sometime after she died, Blake moved in and lived at their house for a while, so he was like family. Except he and her dad fought a lot. Usually it was while Jaime was upstairs getting ready for school or after going to bed and her dad thought she was asleep. She could only make out a few muffled words from time to time, not enough really to figure out what they were saying, but she could tell they were angry words.

One morning after a particularly loud fight which resulted in someone slamming the front door, Jaime asked, "Dad, why do you and Uncle Blake fight all the time?"

"We don't fight ALL the time," he responded. "It's just what grown-ups sometimes do."

"Dad, please," Jaime said, tilting her head with a look on her face to remind him she was no longer a little kid.

"It's nothing you need to get your curlers in a twist about," Cliff said, grinning.

"Da-aad," Jaime said in her sing-song way.

Finishing their breakfasts, Jaime went upstairs to get some stretch bands so Cliff could braid her hair. Callie used to fix her hair every morning. The first day Jaime went back to school after the funeral, she came downstairs with a comb, brush, ties, and ribbon, then handed them to her dad expectantly. Cliff looked at the items in his daughters' hand perplexed. He used to see Callie fix their daughter's hair in the mornings but never thought he would have to do it. It was not something that ever crossed either of their minds, even when they knew Callie had precious little time left.

That first attempt was a mess, and so frustrating to Cliff. All those curls just went everywhere except where he wanted them to go. It took him almost a year before he mastered a ponytail. Now, she did it herself most of the time, but periodically Jaime wanted a braid, and Cliff had managed a decent one by the second year. This year she wanted him to learn a French-style braid. He watched several online How-To videos but drew the line after several attempts. His fingers just weren't nimble enough. He was proud none the less for having accomplished a regular braid, as well as two side braids merging into one behind her head. Who ever said a dad couldn't learn to braid his daughter's hair?

Blake always ribbed Cliff about doing Jaime's hair, but it was all in fun. They had a lot of laughs most of the time, and he did appreciate Blake being there for him.

The last few days of Callie's life, the house had been full of family, and friends stopped by frequently to see if there was anything they could do. Callie's parents stayed in the guest room. George, Callie's dad, mowed the lawn, cleaned the gutters, found some old paint cans which needed

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disposing of, and other various jobs to keep himself occupied.

Her mom, Gloria, cooked, cleaned, and did all the shopping. Once, she took Jaime to the mall to get her some new shoes, but her granddaughter was so distraught for fear that her mother would pass while they were out, they left before their purchase and came right home. The days dragged on despite a house full of people. After the funeral, friends and neighbors still stopped by but didn't stay. Mostly they dropped off casseroles or pots of spaghetti. Blake, however, was there almost every day.

Though they had a falling out in the past, the two men renewed their friendship shortly after Jaime was born. When the baby was just a few weeks old, Blake came by to congratulate the new parents and see their precious bundle but ended up staying three hours. He apologized for staying so long, explaining it was because he was such a lady's man.

"What are you talking about?" Cliff asked regarding his comment.

"Can't you see?" Blake gestured, pointing to baby Jaime. "It's love at first sight!"

Eventually, Blake became a regular guest at the dinner table on Sunday's. Thanksgiving, football, and baseball games, even Christmas would not have been the same without him. Later, when Blake noticed his best friend was still taking his wife's death rather hard after nearly a year, he got concerned and decided to move in. The previous owner of the house had added a family room off the kitchen which could be used as a guest room. It was larger than the one upstairs so it wouldn't cramp his style too much. On the other side of the kitchen and across the hall was a full bathroom. Blake had it all figured out, put the things he was not going to

use at Cliff's into storage and just showed up. Because to ask would have invited an argument, and he didn't want to give Cliff a choice. Besides, it was only temporary, three to six months maybe. Couldn't they all cope with that?

That was nearly two years ago. Cliff was ready for him to move out but thought Jaime might not want him to. She had grown so close to her uncle. Blake was using the time away from financial obligations to bankroll as much of his earnings as possible, because it was his dream to one day own a bar himself, or maybe even a high-class night club. That was Blake for you, love you like a brother, but use you for all he can get away with, and subconsciously, he was using Cliff. Usually, that's what started the arguments between them.

First, it began with a discussion about how it was time for Blake to move out.

"But you need me, buddy," Blake would say.

Cliff would counter with, "I'm doing fine now. It's been practically two years, and I've been coping quite well. I don't space off anymore, I can't remember the last time I burned dinner, and I no longer forget to pay the bills."

Cliff would stand there determined to get his point across to his friend, but then he'd get sucker punched with, "Yeah well, Jaime needs me." Blake knew how to push Cliff's buttons, and the discussion would end.

Cliff loved Blake like a brother, but the man was a slob. Dishes were left in the sink overnight, and food spilled on the floor for someone else to clean up. Blake also left his beer cans in the living room, and clothes left in the washer and dryer for days. You would think he'd be more courteous, living in someone else's house. Yet Blake considered it to be his house as well since he was paying rent, minimal and sporadic though it was.

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However, what totally set Cliff off was Blake's numerous indiscretions with women. Even though Blake's room was downstairs and at the opposite end of the house from Jaime's upstairs bedroom, his lady friends still needed to cross the kitchen to use the restroom. Cliff did not want Jaime exposed to Blake's lifestyle. The arguments started six months or so after Blake moved in when he tried to sneak a woman into the house in the middle of the night. The two men had a real blowout, but then that was the end of it. Sometime later, however, Cliff caught him again. This time they were just coming in as Jaime was leaving for school.

Blake claimed he was merely stopping by to pick something up, but Cliff knew better. They wreaked of alcohol, and the woman's makeup looked like she'd applied it with her foot. Jaime looked back and forth between Blake and the stranger.

"Hi, Uncle Blake...", she said apprehensively.

Jaime didn't know what to make of this situation or what to think of this strange looking woman staggering next to him.

"Hi, Kitten," Blake said and ruffled her hair which irritated Jaime. She'd just spent 30 minutes smoothing it out.

"Aw, aren't you a sweet little thing," the woman said bending over and squeezing Jaime's cheek.

She pulled away thinking the woman must be ill or something. She smelled awful and slurred her words.

"I gotta go to school now. Bye, Uncle Blake." She hurried past them and turned onto the sidewalk towards school.

"What are you doing here?" Cliff hollered. "You know what I've said about exposing Jaime to your... your love life."

"Well, I do live here, and besides, lighten up man, everything's cool. Jaime don't know nothin'." Blake tried to sound smooth, but it was coming out, well, drunk.

"I'm warning you," Cliff vowed. "This is the last time."

He turned back into the house, finished his coffee, and made a lunch while Blake and his Prima Donna slipped in behind him to Blake's room. Cliff could hear giggling behind the door which made his blood boil. They weren't in high school anymore, but it seemed Blake was refusing to grow up. Cliff checked his pocket for his wallet, his hip for the key ring, then left without a word.

Cliff enjoyed his vocation. He met a lot of people he otherwise wouldn't meet. Many of the people who rode the bus didn't say much if anything. Several didn't even look up from their electronic devices or book. Those who did speak to him simply gave a general greeting, asking how he was, but only a few wanted conversations. Those passengers made the dull routine more tolerable. The only time Cliff disliked driving a bus was when it was snowing or raining hard, or on the rare occasion some unfortunate soul threw up. That required a whole lot of cleaning, because one never knew if a person was sick, had a case of nerves or what the situation was. Company policy dictated everyone exit the bus, board its replacement while Cliff drove back to the Bus Barns to thoroughly clean and disinfect the bus before resuming the route. That only happened one time, when a child and his mother were on their way to the doctor when the boy lost his breakfast. Poor little guy.

When Cliff got home that evening, he told Jaime about the young man at dinner. Her eyes suddenly got very big. She sat up straight and bolted from the table. Cliff thought she was afraid of getting sick herself, so he called after her.

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"Jaime, you won't get sick! You know I take every precaution," Cliff assured her, but Jaime kept running up the stairs.

She came back to the dinner table with something in her hand. Jaime knew her dad always tried to connect with his passengers and figured he would see the boy again. She sat down and gave her dad a little brown bear she'd gotten from someone when her mother died.

"Here Dad, give this to him next time you see him. This bear made me feel a little better once. Maybe it'll work for him too."

It was such a tender gesture, touching Cliff's heart and made him proud of his little girl who was so selfless at times. Yet the thing which made Cliff appreciate his job the most was the distraction. Distraction from Blake, his late wife's medical bills, his broken heart. Every day at work, every minute of every hour spent behind the wheel, Cliff didn't have to deal with life. Just traffic, weather, passengers, handing out transfers and the cleanliness of the bus.

Several months after Callie died and Cliff had been back to work for quite a while, he found a notice on his locker inviting him to the manager's office. He stepped into the restroom for a moment to clean up a bit and comb his hair. The rumor mill had been churning out stories of layoffs all year, and Cliff hoped they were just that, rumors. Now he was feeling the pressure of an uncertain future, one which was almost equal to the news of his wife's demise. Thankfully he didn't have to wait long before the manager called him into his office.

Homer Rutledge was one of the nicest men Cliff ever worked for, but understood his boss had to do what he had to do. Cliff walked into the office toward the man behind the

desk. As Homer stood up from his chair, Cliff noticed how he towered over the office furniture.

"How are you doing, Cliff?" he asked, extending out a massive hand.

Taking his hand, Cliff answered, "Not bad I guess."

"Have a seat, Cliff. I have something to discuss with you."

Cliff looked at the chair in front of the large desk, grabbed the back and pulled it out a little before sitting down on the front edge. Licking his lips, he looked nervously at his manager who once again seated himself behind the imposing piece of furniture. Homer looked up at Cliff and noticed his uneasy posture.

"Relax Cliff, the rumor is not true about layoffs, not this year anyway," he said with a Cheshire grin.

Cliff smiled then, relaxed a little, slid back in the chair and lifted his leg, resting his ankle above the opposite knee.

"Cliff, I know you've had it rough this past year. We were all so sorry to hear about your wife."

"Thank you, sir," Cliff said, then looked down at his lap.

"But we're very proud of how you've bounced back. I know we told you before, Cliff but I want to remind you that if there's anything we can do for you, all you need to do is name it."

"Thank you, sir." Cliff was wondering if he was about to get to the point soon.

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Homer cleared his throat. "As you know, we require our drivers to keep their buses clean and road worthy before and after each shift. We are launching a new program this year where we recognize those drivers who go above and beyond in various aspects of their job, not only as a reward but also as an example to all drivers. Tomorrow morning during our monthly safety meeting, we are honoring you, Cliff, with a Safety Award and a Road Worthy award for 'Cleanest Bus.'"

Cliff exhaled, not realizing he'd been holding his breath and smiled. Homer laughed. "Did you think that I was about to lay off one of my best drivers?" he asked Cliff.

"Well, I didn't know what..."

Interrupting, his boss stood up, stepped around his desk with an outstretched hand and said, "That's okay, I probably would have thought the same thing." They shook hands. His boss continued, "I understand tomorrow is a teacher's workday."

"That's right," Cliff answered.

"Well, why don't you bring your little girl... what's her name?"

"Jaime."

"Jaime, that's right. Why don't you bring her down to the meeting? We'll be having donuts and the like as usual. I'll make sure we have some hot chocolate or something for her."

"But..." Cliff started to protest, yet Homer continued.

"During the meeting, if she gets bored, I'll have my secretary take her up to my office, and she can play one of my daughter's games on the computer."

"Thank you, sir, but..." Cliff didn't know how he could get her back home to the neighbors for the day then make it back in time to start his route. Homer was on a roll.

"Then after the meeting she can ride with you. Don't worry about a thing, I've already secured permission from the corporate office and the insurance company, we'll just need your signature on a form, and you're all set. Was there something you wanted to say, Cliff?"

"No sir, Mr. Rutledge, I think you pretty much covered it."

"Well then, I'll see you tomorrow morning and don't forget to bring that precious little girl of yours."

"I won't, sir," they exchanged as they walked to the door. Cliff reached for the doorknob when suddenly Homer put his hand on Cliff's shoulder.

"Cliff, I meant what I said about anything you might need. You just name it. We were so sorry for your loss."

"Thank you again, sir. When the company matched the donation you collected, it helped pay some medical bills. You all don't know how much I appreciated it." With that, Cliff had to leave the office before his boss saw the tears in his eyes.

The announcement of an award surprised and thrilled him. Jaime was especially excited. He told her about it that night before dinner after he'd called Mrs. Nelson next door to let her know Jaime wouldn't be coming over. Jaime

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overheard the phone conversation as she was coming downstairs to help with dinner.

"Dad, what did you mean when you told Mrs. Nelson we didn't need her tomorrow?"

She was hoping the answer was because her dad decided she was finally old enough to stay home alone. She wasn't a baby after all. She was almost a teenager!

"The transit company is giving your old man an award tomorrow, and they want you there. Plus, they have made special arrangements for you to accompany me on my route. We get to spend all day together riding around the city."

"Really?" she asked. "Oh, that's awesome, Dad! What's the award for?"

"Math and spelling," he teased.

"Da-aad," she said seriously.

"Safety, and the cleanest bus in town!"

She gave her dad a wide grin, showing those same straight, pearl white teeth inherited from Callie and threw her arms around his neck. She laid her head on his shoulder and held it there for a bit. She still missed her mom a lot, but he helped her feel like life was not so horrible when good things like this happened.

"I love you, Dad," she said into his collar.

"I love you too, Punkin. Wanna help me make dinner?"

They let go of their embrace and walked over to the fridge. Cliff grabbed the handle, opened the door, and stared into the refrigerator. He'd been so excited about the award Cliff forgot to go shopping. Jaime looked over at him with this puzzled look on her face.

He felt her gaze, turned to her, and said, "I think I forgot something."

"What are we going to do for dinner, Dad?"

Cliff opened the freezer and Jaime joined him to look inside the nearly empty compartment. She only saw a pack of frozen hamburger and some chicken nuggets which were so ancient, the buildup of frost made them look bigger than they were—like little icy footballs! Though they never ate them, her dad HATED throwing away food—and they wouldn't be eaten again tonight.

He closed the refrigerator and freezer doors, turned toward her and, in his best Humphrey Bogart impression said, "Put your dancin' shoes on schweethaat, we're goin' to Pietro's Pizza." She squealed at his playfulness and bounced with delight, then ran upstairs to grab her coat.

The next day at the meeting, everyone was surprised to see Jaime there. They all greeted her politely as they drank their coffee, ate donuts, and waited for the meeting to begin. Mr. Rutledge asked his secretary to take Jaime over to the refreshment table to get her some goodies and hot chocolate. She sat quietly on the side of the room next to a small table with her refreshments as the drivers, mechanics and other people sat in rows in the center. Mr. Rutledge and another man Jaime didn't know, stood up and gave a greeting, then started addressing the various safety topics for

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that month. The other man started reading statistics about accidents, falling asleep at the wheel and so on.

Jaime yawned owing to the early hour then shortly tuned them out as she looked around the room, observing the drivers in their uniforms and the rest as they tried their best to look interested. She noticed several people rolling their eyes and chuckled to herself. *They don't have it so bad*, she thought. *I must sit through lessons for hours every day!* Suddenly someone called her dad's name, and Jaime sat up straight. Cliff got up from his seat near the front row and walked up to the podium.

A man with a camera appeared beside them ready to take some photos. As Mr. Rutledge praised Cliff for a job well done, she noticed he looked, well, embarrassed. Why would her dad be embarrassed when she was so proud of him? Mr. Rutledge handed him an award for Safety, and the room erupted in applause while the man with the camera started snapping away and moved around them to get different angles. Jaime looked around the room and everyone was clapping and smiling, many making comments to each other.

Mr. Rutledge then handed him the award for Cleanest Bus in the Fleet and the crowd jumped to their feet and started cheering. There wasn't a man or woman present, Jaime knew, who didn't like her dad. Most of them visited at least once after her mom died. They brought flowers or food. Some stayed awhile. Others stayed long enough to pay their respects then left. Today, they were showing how much they still cared about him! The awards were nice too. Each a dark, wood plaque with the name of the award carved into it, and her dad's name stamped on a gold name plate below. The cameraman continued to take pictures, even after the men started lining up to shake Cliff's hand. Cliff motioned for his daughter to join him and they greeted her as well, asking how she was. Some of them she recognized, many shook her hand.

Once the meeting concluded, Jaime and her dad walked out toward the bus parking lot and maintenance office to sign out his vehicle.

"Would you like to do the safety walk-around with me Punkin?"

"Sure, Dad, under one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you stop calling me that."

"Calling you what?" he teased.

"Punkin. Stop calling me Punkin," Jaime said. "Please, Dad? I'm getting too old."

"Yeah, I suppose you are. So, what do you prefer I call you?"

"How about..." She stood there, looking up at the sky, trying to think of a more suitable pet name.

Cliff interrupted. Snickerdoodle? "Honey Bun? Pooney Pie?" He loved teasing her.

"How about Jaime, Dad, just plain Jaime," she stated with her hands on her hips.

"You got it, Just Plain Jaime."

"Da-aad!"

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There it was again—the sing-song way she used to express herself when she wanted him to take her seriously. Then they had a good laugh.

After signing the log to check out the bus and getting the keys from the maintenance manager, Cliff and Jaime walked across the lot to Section C, Row 1 where the log said their assigned bus was parked. It was a chilly day, but the sun was out so walking the large lot was not uncomfortable. Jaime waited at the bottom of the stairs just inside the door after her dad climbed in and turned on the flashers. Jaime knew not to walk in front of or behind the bus without looking for other buses which might be driving through the lot. Even though the drivers are trained to look out for people darting out in front of them, usually it's after they get into the street and not in the lot.

While walking around, they looked for fresh puddles of oil or other fluids on the ground. Though the bus just got out of the maintenance bay since the end of the previous driver's shift, things still happened on occasion. Cliff used a big stick with a metal rod in it to thump the rear tires to ensure inflation. With "dualies", an inflated tire right beside a flat one will hold the flat tire up. "Looks can be deceiving," he'd once told her. "You can hear when it's flat." They checked the flashers too and other lights to make sure none of the bulbs were burned out and the lenses weren't broken or loose.

When they completed their walk around inspection, they climbed into the bus and walked up and down the aisle looking for any trash or items a passenger may have left behind which the second shift driver missed. Jaime found an empty water bottle against the wall under the rear seat and a paperback novel shoved between two seats near the front. It wasn't often Dan Wolfe, who'd driven this bus the night before, missed trash or a lost item. Most of the drivers were pretty good about keeping their busses clean because they were assigned the same bus. Only the fill-in drivers hopped from one bus to another. Those were called floaters. If a

driver was on vacation or called in sick, a floater would drive the bus on its route until the regular driver returned. They usually didn't do as well keeping the buses clean. Sure, they would pick up trash or turn in lost items, but they didn't sweep out the bus. Not unless there was dried mud or something very noticeable on the floor. Otherwise, they just didn't bother.

Items which were left behind got turned into the Lost Items locker, also known as *The Abyss*. These belongings were kept under lock and key for six months when left unclaimed. The collection of items was so vast and varied the piles were categorized. Glasses, books, phones, and hats were the most common. Backpacks and suitcases were less so. Umbrellas, canes, a walker, coats and jackets, gloves and scarves, an endless array of things which needed to be logged in, then logged out if someone came to retrieve them. Anything specific could be returned to the owner by the bus driver once it had been turned in. Like the book Jaime found, which could be identified by title, etc. Most likely the passenger who lost the book would talk to Dave, and he'd go pick it up and give it back to its rightful owner in a day or two.

Once the inspection was complete and no maintenance issues were discovered, there was only one more thing to do, check the horn. Blowing the horn was Jaime's job. She'd been honking the horn for her dad ever since she could remember. Even though she was much older now, the little girl inside peeked out now and then. This was one of those times.

"Okay, Just Plain Jaime, time to let the world know we're coming!"

Her eyes twinkled as she grinned at her dad, jumped in the seat, and pressed the big button. She gave it an extra-long push, then got out of the seat and took up residence on

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the front bench behind the door. He wanted to be able to see her, even though he doubted anyone would mess with her.

She brought her school backpack with a book, a drawing pad, and a box of colored pencils. She also had some snacks and a small bottle of water but had to be careful not to spill, which at age 11, wouldn't be a problem. Cliff steered the big bus out of the parking space, through the lot and up to the stop sign at the street. Traffic was still a bit congested, but when the cross street light changed, it created a break in the traffic pattern, allowing him to pull out onto McKenzie Blvd. Cliff arrived at the beginning of the route five minutes early, so he pulled to the curb, turned on the flashers and swiveled around in the seat to ask Jaime a question.

"Hey kiddo, next month has a three-day weekend. What's about we head to the beach and stay at Grandpa's cabin."

"Really? Do you think Grandma and Grandpa will come too?" She loved going to the beach and seeing her grandparents.

"If you like. I'll call them tomorrow morning."

Cliff enjoyed the beach also and hadn't seen his in-laws in quite some time. As the months passed after Callie's death, they came around less and less, though they called Jaime often. It seemed as if most conversations caused a flood of memories which were just too painful for them. Cliff understood that and envied them in a way. They could distance themselves somewhat from the memories. The house, even the town they lived in wasn't where Callie grew up, so coming to the city to see Cliff and Jaime were difficult. The house on Birch Street was full of Callie, which is probably why Cliff stayed there and why he hadn't moved on to start dating again.

Cliff looked at his watch, it was 9:00 sharp, time to get rolling. Checking the mirror, he turned off the flashers and signaled to pull out into the street. The first stop was two blocks away. When Cliff rolled to a stop, two passengers got on. One was a businessman with a briefcase, the other a student. They both greeted Cliff, dropped their tokens into the box and walked back to take their seats. The student then turned around and asked for a transfer ticket. Cliff ripped one out of the book and handed it to her. She thanked him and took a seat behind Jaime. Once Cliff was sure all passengers were safely seated, he signaled, checked the left-hand mirror then pulled out onto the street once again. Stop after stop passengers got on and off. Some spoke to Cliff like they were friends, although Jaime had never seen any of them before. Three people, all older women, noticed Jaime sitting there. One of them was very nice, and Jaime knew she liked her right away.

"Cliff, is this Jaime?" the woman queried.

"Sure is," Cliff beamed.

"Why, I'd recognize you anywhere," the woman told Jaime. "Your dad talks about you so much, and shows me all your latest school pictures, but I must say, you're prettier in person."

"Thank you, ma'am," Jaime said shyly.

"And so polite too. Oh, my goodness, where are my manners? My name is Cathryn Powell. I've been riding your daddy's bus to work for years!"

"Oh," was all Jaime could say.

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The woman then asked permission to sit next to Jaime and to see what she was drawing. Jaime and her new friend chatted until the bus rolled to a stop and Cliff interrupted them to tell Mrs. Powell they were at her destination.

"Oh, my goodness!" she almost hollered. "Nice finally meeting you, my dear," she said, patting Jaime's hand.

"Me too. Bye," Jaime said, waving.

As the bus pulled away, Jaime smiled and marveled at the bond they'd so quickly formed. One by one, stop by stop, people came and went like waves on the shore. At one point, the bus was so full, passengers had to stand!

There was a bar up high which they could hold onto so no one would fall. She was amazed at how many people didn't offer their seats to the elderly. One old woman who was bent over and used a cane struggled to get on the bus then looked like she might turn around and exit when she saw there were not any seats. Jaime turned to see if anyone was motioning for her to come sit down in their place, but no one did. Most didn't even notice her. Jaime thought this lack of empathy was not polite.

"Here ma'am, you can take my seat." Jaime grabbed her backpack and slid out into the aisle.

The girl who had been sitting with her next to the aisle slid over so the old woman could sit right down.

"Why thank you," she said appreciatively. "This isn't my regular bus, but I have to see a new doctor whose office is in a different part of town."

"I see," said Jaime, standing there and holding onto one of the vertical bars. "I usually don't take this bus either. You see, my dad is the driver, and..."

"Oh?" The woman chimed in, looking over at Cliff.

"Yes, and they gave special permission for me to ride along because he received a safety award today!"

"Oh, how nice," the lady said.

However, by now the woman was paying more attention to their location so she would know when to pull the cord which sounds the buzzer, telling the driver she needs to get off.

"Do you think you could help me look for the Parker Medical Center? I've never been there before."

"Oh, yes ma'am, but I bet my dad knows right where it is. Dad, could you stop at the Parker Medical Center please?"

"Sure thing, Punk, I mean Just Plain Jaime," Cliff replied with a wide grin.

"Da-aad."

The woman looked at one then the other not knowing what was happening, but then realized they were teasing each other.

Then she took Jaime by the hand and said, "You're a good girl. I know your parents must be quite proud of you."

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Jaime just looked at her and smiled, wondering if she would inquire about her mom. "Is your mother working today?"

"No, ma'am. My mom died about three years ago."

"Oh!"

The woman had a stricken look on her face that a person Jaime's age should have to endure such heartache. She knew well that kind of grief too. Her husband of 45 years died many years before. A sigh suddenly escaped her lips as she thought of him—which she often did.

About that time, the bus came to a stop and Cliff announced the Parker Medical Center. The woman struggled to get up, thanked Jaime and Cliff then started down the stairs.

Before removing her hand from the railing, she turned and said to Cliff, "You have a very pleasant daughter. You two take care of each other now."

"Thank you," Cliff responded.

He smiled then looked at Jaime who'd returned to her seat and was just staring at the floor. Cliff knew she was thinking about her mother.

Jaime was thinking about the date coming up in a few months. September 19th. She once heard it called an anniversary, but wasn't that supposed to be for happy occasions? She guessed when you're going to a better place it's something to be celebrated, but not to the people left behind, and they were both feeling out of sorts ever since, most of the time.

Jaime's bench mate pulled the chord for the dingy, then exited at the next stop. Jaime slid over and leaned against

the outside wall of the bus and looked out the window. She worried about her dad every day. Sometimes it was hard for her to concentrate at school or on her homework. Jaime knew his mind drifted at home a lot and wondered if it drifted at work just as often, affecting the safety of himself and his passengers.

Stop thinking such morbid thoughts, shaking her head as she scolded herself. As Jaime looked out the window, she noticed they were almost at the end of the line, where they turn and go back the way they came. There was a little cafe at the end of the route, and she hoped they would stop. She needed a restroom break and was hungry besides.

At the cafe, they ordered a couple cokes, then sat down to eat their sandwiches from home—ham and cheese on rye for Cliff, and a good, old fashioned PB & J for Jaime. She loved peanut butter. Jaime took a sandwich with her on the days the school was serving something disgusting for lunch. Like fish sticks—every Friday. "Gross!" she always said. Then there was this weird stuff they called goulash which looked and smelled more like vomit to her, so she always had plan B.

Weekends were a no brainier, PB & J. Cliff no longer asked because the answer was always the same. One Saturday he asked her what she wanted for lunch after a hard day of cleaning up the yard.

"Dad, why do you even ask? You know I always eat peanut butter."

"Well, I thought you might want something different for a change," he replied. "Just giving you a choice is all."

"Okay Dad, but just so you know, I'll always choose peanut butter." She was so easy to please. It made the adjustment from married to single dad less difficult.

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The rest of their day was the same as the first half. After the 30 minutes allowed for lunch break, they continued the route. Passengers were light that afternoon, so Jaime took the notebook and pencil box out of her backpack and resumed drawing. She tried to draw the faces of some of the people she met throughout day, but Jaime didn't think her attempts were very good. When Cliff was stopped at a red light, he looked over at Jaime who now was in her own little world. Though his daughter's hair was curly like his, it was the same color as Callie's. The shape of her face and the way she tilted her head while drawing or writing took Cliff's breath away—how his daughter resembled her mother.

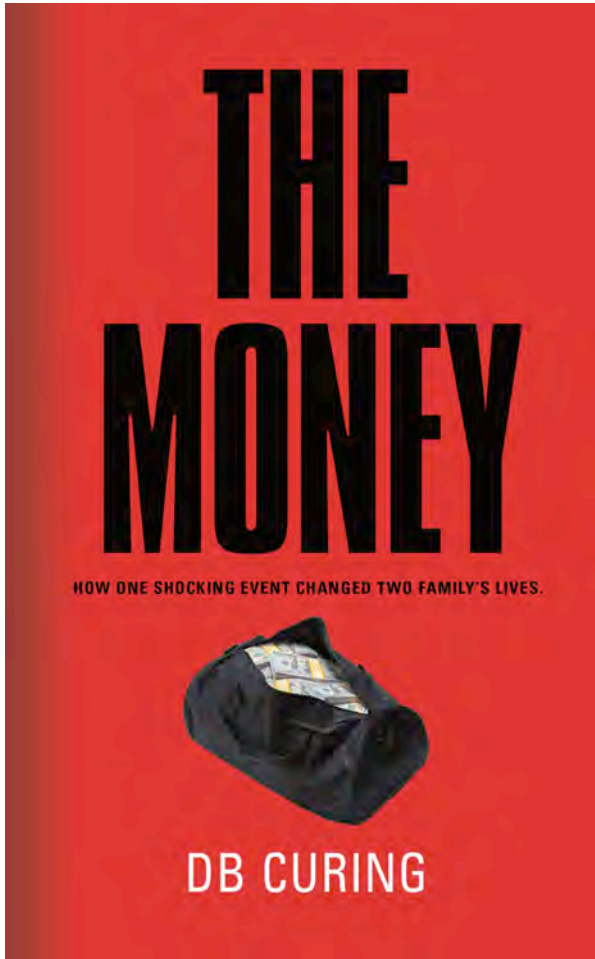
When the number of passengers started to rise, Jaime put the notebook away so she could keep the seat next to her free. She loved to watch the people anyway. It was amazing how many ways people could look. Of course, they all dressed differently, but she loved to study the shapes of their faces. This guy over here had a crooked nose, a woman over there had high cheek bones, etc. She was watching these two children sitting with their mother. They were clearly brother and sister because their features were like each other, yet Jaime marveled at how their skin tone was not as identical as the rest of their facial features were. Those things fascinated her. Cliff thought she should become a doctor so she could find out why those things were. However, her desire was to be an artist of some kind. Jaime loved the color and the shape and texture of things. There was plenty of time to figure out what she wanted to do when she grew up.

At 3:00, they arrived at the end of the route where Del Robinson was already waiting for him. Cliff changed the Name of Route sign to read Out of Service, then jumped out for a minute, shook Del's hand and told him about any problem or road hazards he'd encountered. They parted ways and climbed on their respective buses and pulled back out onto Avis St. Del's bus roared towards the first passenger

pick-up point and Cliff headed to the streets where he made three left-hand turns back onto Avis St., then on to the bus barns.

Jaime was glad they were heading back to the yard. She was tired and a little bored, but loved to spend time with her dad, even though their conversations were limited. She was happy just to share his world. The lot was a bit crowded with buses moving in and out of their parking spaces. Another inspection was required, as well as cleaning and looking for lost items. This day the bus only needed sweeping and a couple of windows closed. Dan would be arriving in a while to take bus #546 out on his assigned route. This was the end of the line for Cliff this week. Tomorrow was Saturday, and they would be doing the usual chores, homework, and those ever-present bills. Cliff wished he knew how to pay them off faster. Between Blake and the bills, everyday felt as if all energy was draining out of him. Without Jaime, life would feel like an endless, dark hallway leading nowhere.

Blake. Cliff hadn't thought of him all day. The bills either. That's what he loved about this job. It was a major distraction from his real life—like he was someone else for a while. Cliff didn't know it yet, but he was about to get an even bigger distraction.



A single dad; a rich bachelor: both discover issues hindering their peace of mind. Life's difficulties force them to see beyond their circumstances, bringing about change, and fill their lives with compassion and generosity.

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