

## Chapter 20

I didn't have any problems finding the old caboose. When I got to the back of the orchard, I followed the sound of Angela's clarinet. I walked up to the caboose and climbed the steps up to the door. She was sitting on an old wooden bench and had begun reading her book. The clarinet case was on the floor of the old train car.

"Hey there," I said.

"Hey you. Are you alright?"

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "I suppose. I don't really know to tell you the truth. It's all too strange for me to think about." I looked around the train car and said, "Speaking of strange, I don't think I've ever seen anybody with their own life size train car to themselves."

"Been here for a hundred years," she said. "There was like a battle here during The Civil War. Paw-Paw told me the Yankees came down and blew up the train station and it was never rebuilt. All that was left was this caboose and the station. Vandals tore down the depot station way before Paw-Paw's time and the trees just grew up around it. Everybody forgot about it. I just come here when I want to hide away from everything. Sometimes in the winter, hunters use it to camp out in. Paw Paw doesn't mind."

She paused and smiled, flipped a few pages in her book and asked, "Did your great-great-greats fight for the Yankees or the Rebels?"

"I don't think either," I replied, "I don't think my grandparents or great grandparents were here then yet. I think they were still in Ireland or Scotland or someplace like that."

She put away the book, took the clarinet from the case, put it together and played a quick tune, "I've been in hand for a year now. Paw-Paw told me that my daddy played drums in the marching band."

She put the clarinet in her lap, "You know, David, my grandmother thinks my father. What do you think?"

"Don't think I am. But I can't be absolutely certain of anything these days."

"Seems strange to me," she said. "Why don't you want to go home to your own family?"

I shuffled my feet on the old wooden floor of the caboose, "Wasn't too happy of a place. They fight, they scream, up then they get back together again to try to work it out. They send me to stay with family Nd friends for days when it gets too bad. I feel like a ping pong ball rolling on thin ice"

"What do you think of it around here, then?"

"Feel like I'm supposed to be here. Your grandfather's is sure nice to me. There's no yelling and screaming around here. I don't feel like I'm just ignored like I do with my parents. I like playing with the dogs, picking the peaches and talking with you. Your grandfather sure does make a good breakfast.

"But what do you think your parents are thinking and feeling now?"

"I don't know. Maybe they are in a panic. Maybe they're good to finally be rid of me."

"But what do you want?"

I shrugged my shoulders, "Well, your grandfather says that I can stay here as long as I want to. I don't see how that's much different than all the time my mom and dad has shuffled me to other people's house while they try to work it out time after time."

"Yeah, but I'm wondering is he supposed to let you stay here. Shouldn't he take you to the sheriff or something like that so they can get you back to your folks?"

"I don't know. I just don't know. He's the adult. Shouldn't he know what's right? Maybe I was meant to go to that Church Camp and run

away. Maybe I was meant to wind up in your grandfather's barn. Maybe I was meant to be here to wake your grandmother up from her long-sleep. Should I just do what he tells me to do?

"Maybe that's the way it was supposed to be. Paw-Paw is pretty much right about most things. But some adults don't have any sense at all. Take my mother for instance. I don't think she's ever been right about anything in her life.

There was silence between us.

Then I asked, "Do you want me to stay, then?"

"Of course, I do, you silly boy! Nobody listens to me talk the way you do. Everybody else just says for me to hush or go away. I get awfully lonely around here sometimes. I sure want you to stay."

"Well then, I'll stay. I'll stay for at least today and I'll worry about tomorrow when tomorrow gets here. And then I'll worry about the day after that when it gets here."

She gently shook her head. "David, I just don't know what's right. Don't know if you really are somebody else. Are we in a dream and still sleeping? Most of all though, I just hope my Paw-Paw knows what he's doing. I don't want him to get in trouble and be taken away from him. He's all I've ever had in this life. I'd be just an orphan without him. She put her face in her hands and started to cry.

I moved closer to her and closely reached out my hand to her shoulder and touched it just briefly, but I jerked back my arm as if the touch was like a burning hot stove. I reached out again and made direct contact, "Angela, If I do stay, I leave as when it causes problems for him. I won't let that happen."

She sobbed just a bit more then looked up to me. "Come with me. I want to show you something." She took my hand and led me out of the old caboose.

We walked back through the gate, followed the fence and walked through the woods to a ravine. She led me down the slope and we walked at the bottom until we came upon a large rock formation. She then

walked up the ravine and on to a bridge. The bridge led down to a red dirt road. It was dry. Every now and again, a car would drive by and kick up a wall of dust down the road.

We finally arrived at a cemetery and stood outside the gate silently for a minute or two. She looked at me and said, "Here's where he's buried." Her eyes grew larger.

"Your Father?" I asked.

"Uh huh" she said nodding her head.

She walked in and I followed. It was a small cemetery-not even the size of a football field. She found her father's tombstone. It was a simple metallic marker issue by the government. It said "SGT. Jonathan Parker. August 12, 1943-April 25, 1969, Vietnam War." There was an army insignia and cross embossed on it.

She took my hand and said, "David, do you believe in reincarnation?"

"What's that," I asked in return.

"That's when somebody dies, and their soul is transferred into somebody else who's just about to be born."

"I've never thought about what happens after somebody dies. Don't they just go up to heaven or something like that?"

"Yeah, David. But what is heaven? Where is it? What goes on there?"

"I guess there's no way to really know for sure."

"Maybe my Daddy wasn't supposed to die because of me just being born and when he did, his soul was put into you when you were born, so that one day he could see me through you and know that I was alright and OK..." Her voice trailed off.

"Is that what you believe?" I asked her.

She squeezed my hand ever more tightly. "Don't believe it. But...don't disbelieve it either. What about you?"

"Angela, I'm hardly sure of anything now. The only thing I am completely certain of is that I like it here with you right here and right now. With you and The Old Man."

"The Old Man," she asked quizzically.

"Your Grandfather."

She nodded her head affirmatively. "I like it. It suits him, but please don't say that in front of him."

"I won't. I promise."

She looked down on her father's grave and asked me, "David, when were you born?"

"April 25, 1970."

She opened her eyes widely, "Exactly a year after my Daddy died. Now that is interesting."

"An interesting coincidence." I suggested.

We walked around looking at the other gravestones. Some were ancient and unmarked. "Does it weird you out that all of these bodies are right here in the ground beneath our feet?"

"Yes, it does."

"Paw-Paw comes down here pretty often. He talks to Daddy's grave, puts flowers or a new little American flag on it and cleans off the marker."

"Do you know who any of these other people were?"

"I guess I know about a lot of them. I must be distantly related to about half of everybody buried here in one way or the other. There used to be a little sawmill town here fifty or sixty years ago. All that's left is that old caboose and the steps to the old schoolhouse my Paw-Paw went to when he was a little boy way way long ago."

We walked out of the cemetery and back onto the road. "C'mon you. Let's get back to the house and play some dominoes. I'll make us some lunch. Peanut butter and jelly sound good?"

"Sounds good to me." I said

"And maybe we'll rustle up a peach or two."

We continued walking down the road. She stopped and said "One thing is for sure, though. I'm not going to call you Dad or Daddy or Father. No way, no how."

I nodded. "No, don't think I'd want that. That would give me the creeps."

"The Creeps?" She echoed and asked.

"Yes, The Creeps. You know when you feel weird, uncomfortable and out of place."

"You're funny," she said, "but you'll do." She added.

He started running down the dirt road, so I followed.