

CHAPTER 1

The sensation of defying gravity still lives in my memory from the first visit to my grandfather's farm, running down the path to the barn. The joy of being there made me leap into the air at full speed and, extending my leg like a hurdler, floating for an instant before landing. Experiencing that infinitesimal amount of weightlessness became a ritual on future visits. It's been over twenty years since those halcyon days, yet today they race through my mind as we head out to that little house and iconic red barn atop the sloping meadow. My cherished Grandpa Dreyfus passed it on to me as I hoped he would. Hard to believe I almost forgot about it until a week ago when the lawyer came to our apartment to deliver the keys in person. The moment we closed the door behind him, my wife Sally started in about selling it.

"This is a long way from Cleveland Heights," she said, sitting next to me in the passenger seat. Her pink ASICS sneakers rested on the dashboard of my Honda Civic as she flicked ashes out of the whistling crack in the window.

I glanced at her through my aviator sunglasses. "Like I didn't warn you."

We had been together for ten years, married the last eight. Disregarding the rust spots, my fourteen-year-old white Civic was holding up better. If only there was the human equivalent of oil changes and lube jobs to extend the life of a marriage. As the obscene imagery in the thought hit me, a sly grin trickled out.

Sally exhaled the last of her smoke, flicked the butt out the window, and whined, “Are we there yet?” I ignored her rhetorical prompt. Then Cher’s “Believe” came on the radio, capturing her attention.

She caught my interest in a bar one night while I celebrated the last of my college exams. I couldn’t miss the knockout strawberry blonde serving drinks. It became lust at first sight for both of us. A few months later, she moved in with me, ditched the barmaid gig to pursue a career tract at The Gap. Marriage came into our conversations with “safe sex” being all the rage among those seeking carnal fulfillment. For me, matrimony seemed the next logical step into adulthood. For Sally, it seemed more about the ring, the gifts, and the dress. It helped that my graphic design business had become a reliable livelihood, and her job at The Gap advanced to career status.

I slowed from Interstate highway speed to that posted for a narrow county road making me feel closer to see the recently planted fields, farmhouses, and sheds. The only businesses in view for miles were at freeway junctions. Decades ago, the original dusty trails traversed by horses and buggies were covered with gravel. Then cement slabs were poured to accommodate the increasing numbers of motor cars. Asphalt completed the evolution despite the cracks at the cement seams, producing a repetitive thumping sound inside the car’s cabin—dah-dant, da-dant...

It pulled me back into the trance, recalling those times with the only grandpa I knew. He taught me how to drive, shifting gears on the column of his old Studebaker, bouncing over the rutted farm lane. Near the end, I killed the engine by slamming the brakes without clutching. He told me about that sweet spot between accelerating and releasing the clutch. “It will come once you learn to relax,” he said. “Life comes easier when you learn to be calm.” Soon, I engaged the gears like extensions of my arms and legs, without a screech or stutter. His compliments and

confidence in me over the years meant more to me than I ever acknowledged. *Ain't it the way.* My daydream went deeper. His Belgian baritone voice said, "You treasure this farm, and it will treasure you someday, eh?"

"Jack!" said Sally, breaching my reverie. "I think you just missed the turnoff."

"Oh?" I pulled to the side of the road to study my MapQuest printout. "You're right."

"What, my seeing the sign with an arrow back there wasn't good enough for you?"

"Sorry."

A dirt road ahead provided an easy turnaround, and in about for a half mile, the sign in question appeared. *Avilla, population 1,249.*

We lowered our windows entering the town to get a better look at the houses, a mixture of small clapboard structure with brick ranch styles. The streets looked only three to four blocks deep. One majestic veranda-fronted Victorian with circular driveway occupied the better part of a block. Then came a tall red-brick Catholic church next to a playground and park, followed by a series of two-story dwellings. Retail store fronts started appearing, among them a tavern, beauty salon, and a cute café. The business district, if you could call it that ended before Sally could get out a snarky remark. Staying on the same street, residential blocks resumed until we reached the gateway of the Avilla Cemetery. A newer Marathon gas station dominated the next intersection on the opposite side. A 55- mph speed limit sign further out signaled the western edge of town.

As I picked up speed, Sally said, "I hope that wasn't the city you said was nearby."

"No, that's Fort Wayne, further south."

"And is Fort Wayne an actual city?"

"It's got a professional orchestra."

She turned to him and lifted her sunglasses. "And how would you know that?"

“I did some research on the area.”

“And having an orchestra makes it a city?”

“To some people.”

“Well, let’s get packing!”

I let it go.

At last, I spotted the farm. “There it is!” I pointed forward to the left. As I slowed to turn, my heart took off, making me breathe deep.

The gravel pathway was about a quarter mile long. Counter to my desire to speed up the lane, I brought the car to a crawl so we could examine our mini estate. Sally focused on the house with its green shingles and faded red door flanked by two windows. Except for taller trees and generous plant-life, it matched the grainy image in my memory. Our windows came down again, letting in the crisp April air. The road leveled at the top of the grade and shrunk to a pair of dirt tracks rolling several yards to the barn. I parked slightly behind house.

I sprang from the car and stretched. Sally got out brushing cigarette ashes off her pink “Gap” sweatshirt with glittered letters. In silence, we surveyed the panoramic view of the newly gained property. A breeze tossed her shoulder-length hair.

“So, this is it,” she said, hands propped on her hips.

I spread my arms over my head. “All three acres!”

“You certainly didn’t exaggerate.” It wasn’t a compliment.

“Bah-dump-bump.”

Walking to the front, I pulled out the key ring. Patches of weeds mingled with sprouting grass. I opened the screen door and pushed a key into the weathered wooden door and turned the deadbolt lock. I took a couple of tries, then I twisted the brass doorknob, gave it a shove, and it

creaked halfway open. Sally looked over my shoulder as we stepped inside. It was essentially a one-room efficiency, but cabin-like feel with pine-paneled walls and wood flooring. The kitchen area on the right had a linoleum floor and faded 1940s wallpaper. Similarly dated appliances lined the wall, with a small window above a porcelain sink.

At the center stood a potbelly wood-burning stove lined up against what appeared to be a structural column that went up to a tin-tiled ceiling. I studied it while Sally inspected the stove and refrigerator. A lonely, dark wooden desk and chair sat in front of a window on the east wall. I couldn't resist inspecting the drawers for anything left behind and found a pad of paper and whittled pencil.

The back quarter of the house had a raised floor. I stepped into it. "This was the bedroom area. It all looks smaller than I remember. But then I guess that's natural."

"Small is right," she said. "And this must be the bathroom." She walked to a small door on the western wall and pushed it open. Sunlight flashed down on her as she looked out at a direct view of the barn some fifty feet away. "What the hell?"

"Oh, I forgot. That's the door to the outhouse. So, you were kind of right." I took her hand and led out onto the grass. "And there it is!" I pointed to a molting gray booth with only a few chips of white paint. We meandered over the yard.

"Why didn't you tell me the place doesn't have indoor plumbing?"

"It's been almost twenty years. I forgot some details. Besides, a real bathroom might have been added for all I know." Sally shook her head at my amusement.

"Now I see why your mother passed on this." She walked over to the car to get her cigarette case from her purse. As she walked back, I pointed out the property borders.

“Our land goes north to the ditch along the county road we came in from. There’s a stretch between those two maple trees where grandpa had a vegetable garden. The lane is the eastern border. You can see the neighbor’s crops breaking through the soil. It was part of the original farm.” I turned around, facing south. “We’ve got another acre behind the house until the woodland. Don’t you love the pines and the white birch mixed in there? The dalmatians of trees.” I pivoted to the west. “The property ends behind the barn by those big rocks.”

She stood in a thinking position, one hand on a hip, the other holding the cigarette at the ready near her face.

“Okay. I’ve seen enough,” she said. “Let’s get back.”

“What? We just got here!”

“I’ve seen enough.”

“But you haven’t seen the best part!” I whipped off my Cleveland Indians jacket and dashed toward the barn. By the time Sally reached me, I had already opened the padlock and opened the double-doors. A stale odor of decaying hay, animals, and machinery oil drifted out. I welcomed it into my nostrils. “Mm, good old barn smell!”

“Ew!” Sally replied, pinching her nose.

Several feet into the empty structure were a handful of stalls for livestock built into the walls. A scattering of bales remained, mostly on the upper deck. When I spotted the built-in ladder on the back wall, I rushed to climb it. Near the top, I looked down at Sally with a grin.

“It’s high!”

“Duh! I hope you break your neck.”

“Sarcasm?”

Stepping on the floorboards of the loft, I leaned forward against a stack of bales to hold my balance and viewed the lower level from above. At the west end, I saw the outline of the large opening used bring in the bundled field grass up from below. My eyes grew wide with the memory of the view from there twenty years ago. With both hands wrapped around the iron handle, I yanked. Nothing. I jerked harder and my hands gave way. Sally laughed below. I was glad to amuse her. I'm no bodybuilder, but still in decent shape for a thirtysomething. I spit on my hands, gripped it, and pulled. "That budged it some," I yelled down to Sally. Then I gave it a final heave ho, letting a deep grunt. It came open with an ear-piercing screech. The force of the heavy wooden door flung me onto my back into a mound of hay inches from the edge of the loft.

"Jack!" Sally shrieked.

The heavy crop dust penetrated my nostrils. I pinched my nose to stifle a sneeze, then after a moment to compose himself, went to the large opening in the wall and marveled at the westward vista. "What a view! You should come up! It's magnifique!"

"No thanks. I'll take your word for it."

I gazed out at the tapestry of dark fields and woodlands to the horizon where I could just make out a car and semi-trailer on an Interstate highway. The elevation offered me a thrilling view of the rural landscape. Looking up to the sky I whispered, "Thank you grandpa." As I clamped the window shut, I spotted a thick twine rope with a metal hook used to hoist up the bales. I followed it up to its rigging near the ceiling.

"Jack, I need to pee," Sally shouted. "And I will not use the outhouse!"

"I'm coming down," I replied. With one foot in the hook, I pulled the rope to test its tightness and give. Satisfied, I pushed off the edge, swooping down to the floor faster than I

expected. Horrified, Sally screamed as I braced for a hard landing inches from her stiffened body.

She leaned over me. "Jack! Are you okay?"

Rubbing my aching hip, I said, "Now that's not at all like I remembered it."

She rolled her eyes. "You idiot! Thanks for not knocking me over."

Sitting on the floor to catch my breath and settle my heartbeat, I noticed a faint outline of a square near the north wall.

"Jack, come on. I need to go!"

With my hands, I cleared the dust and debris for a better look. It was a cutout alright. I used one of my car keys to get the grim out of the grooves forming a square. Then I angled the key to get under it for leverage. After repeated tries nudging the one side, it lifted enough to get my fingers under the two feet wood panel.

"What's that?" said Sally, looking over my shoulder.

"A secret compartment or trapdoor to...I don't know what."

"Well, figure it out later!"

We took off down the lane onto the country road and sped away towards the Marathon station in Avilla. While she did her business, I filled my tank. On the way back, I asked her what she thought about the farm. She confirmed my read on her reactions. While she wasn't disappointed because I kept her expectations low, she hoped I was downplaying it. Alas, it wouldn't fulfill her fantasy of a huge windfall to pay for her dream house and a shiny new car of her own.

But the hatch door I exposed provided some unanticipated thrill. I told her how grandpa had kidded me once about confronting a bootlegger back during Prohibition. "He was a damn

good storyteller. The moment he had me believing him, he laughed it off. But maybe there was some truth in it, and he's got a distillery hidden down there along with bottles of over-aged moonshine?"

She said, "Who was that famous gangster from Indiana?"

"Dillinger, one of the FBI's Most Wanted. He staged his greatest escape from the law in Indiana. But he wasn't a bootlegger. Just robbed banks, I think."

"And killed people. You don't think... there are bodies—"

"No. Grandpa wouldn't have been any part of that kind of business." I parked closer to the barn this time and took a flashlight and screwdriver from the glove compartment. As we walked up to the square hole, I added, "Besides, they'd be skeletons, not bodies." She slapped me on the shoulder.

The screwdriver worked much better than my key. The covering, about the same size as an attic trap door, popped up, and I set it aside. I raised the screwdriver, exclaiming, "When you got the tools, you got the power!" Then exchanged it for the flashlight and spied into the black hole. "Oh, my god! I don't believe it!"

"What? Let me see! No, wait. Do I want to? It's not a dead bod...skeleton, is it?"

"Not a full one. Just a bone or two scattered about. Some critter got to 'em." I snickered.

"Come on, Jack, give!" she nudged him to move over and took the light. "You're jerking my chain, aren't you?"

She bent her head and pointed the light down in. "It's just a bunch of junky old car parts."

"There's a ladder leaning against the wall. I'm going in for a closer look." I put the penlight into my mouth and started down cautiously. Any of those wooden steps could be rotted. Touching ground without incident, I scanned the underground hollow about two-thirds as deep as

a basement. A tarp of some kind covered most of the ground and another oilcloth was draped over something vaguely rectangular shaped and waist high. I walked the length of it.

Sally called out, "What do you see?"

I lifted a corner of the sheet and couldn't believe my eyes. The chassis for an old car with a distinctive radiator. "Holy shit!"

"What is it?"

My mind raced. I knew she wouldn't get the significance of it, so I didn't answer right away. I climbed back up the ladder and popped my head out. "Here's Johnny!"

Sally gasped. "Goddam it, Jack!"

Crawling out, she slapped me hard on my backside, as I expected.

"That's not just any old car down there. That's a Bugatti!"

