

LOT 12

by

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Vabella Publishing
P.O. Box 1052
Carrollton, Georgia 30112
www.vabella.com

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Author photo by Julie Acree Photography.

13-digit ISBN 978-1-942766-31-5

Library of Congress Control Number 2017901299

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To my three daughters,
Deniece, Sherryl and Catherine

ONE

My dad was killed a little less than a year ago in a terrible accident, on a rainy night, riding his motorcycle down one of Georgia's mountains. A car came at him around a curve with blinding bright lights and weaving all over the road according to another driver behind Dad. Dad swerved to miss the car but the car clipped him and he skidded off the road and down a steep embankment. The guy behind Dad stopped and called 911 on his cell phone, but by the time the ambulance got there, my dad was already dead. The man said my dad had to have been killed instantly because first the car hit him and then he hit a tree while he was tumbling head over heels down the embankment, and he broke his neck and other bones and suffered internal injuries as well. The Highway Patrolman said the car that hit Dad didn't even slow down and no one could give a description of the car because it was raining so hard. And it was dark.

The Highway Patrolman came to our apartment around 10:00 that night and delivered the news to us. Mom screamed and screamed and dropped to her knees on the floor. I think I just went numb. All over. And it has been terrible ever since. And the hurting inside never lets up.

"We're gonna be all right, Mom," I said quietly as I shoved my comic books into my box of stuff I was packing "You and me and Dinkus." My dog heard his name and thumped his tail on the floor behind me.

"I know, David," Mom whispered, wrapping a plate with newspaper and placing it in a box of dishes she was packing. "But this is so hard."

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I didn't want to move to Florida, and maybe Mom didn't want to, either, but I knew Mom was hurting something terrible, and we had to do something.

Mom was still having a terrible time trying to cope with Dad's death. I was hurting, too, bad, but I had to look out for Mom and I figured we had to do what was best for her. We HAD to move to Florida, not only to get away from bad memories, but to be where we could afford to live. It's called Survival.

Mom just fell apart when Dad got killed and I tried to comfort her. But I'm just a kid. I'm twelve, and I hurt bad, too. I sucked it up and pushed the pain back for her sake. Mom was in such a funk I thought she might commit suicide or something else awful. It was rough. Mom cried and slept an awful lot and didn't get out of her pajamas for days. She didn't lose her job but I know the people in charge of the nursing home where she worked were tired of her missing work all the time. But I guess they loved her and really felt sorry for her. And me. They let her work whenever she was able.

I didn't know what to do for her, but I took care of her the best I could making stuff for her to eat and keeping iced tea in the fridge. I stayed right by her most of the time at first until the school called and Mom realized that I was missing school and I might flunk a grade if I missed any more days. And she made me go back.

"Mom," I reasoned, "I need to be home with you where I'll be right there if you need me."

"No, David," Mom sighed. "You have to go to school." She turned and headed back to her bedroom. I went to her door to argue further, and as she crawled into

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bed, I heard her say around her tears, “I meant what I said and I said what I meant.” And her sobs drowned out anything more that she was quoting from Dr. Seuss. Our favorite.

I fixed most of the meals for us, TV dinners and stuff, and learned to make lasagna. The directions on the box made it pretty simple, but I substituted some of the stuff that we didn’t have. I used a jar of spaghetti sauce and Cheese Whiz and even scattered some bacon bits that I found in the cupboard on top of the cheese. My noodles were pretty crunchy, though.

“Looks good, David,” Mom said, and bravely took a bite. She was sitting on the sofa staring at the television in the living room. The television wasn’t even on. She was still in her pajamas and her long brown hair looked like it hadn’t been combed in days. It probably hadn’t. “Thank you, son,” she said, and set the plate on the coffee table in front of her. Mom said the lasagna was good, but she didn’t eat any more. She went back to staring at the blank television screen.

My black Labrador retriever, Dinkus, loved any and all leftovers. He crunched happily and licked his bowl clean. It was the same with macaroni and cheese. The macaroni noodles were always crunchy, too. Don’t know what I was doing wrong. Maybe because I was cooking them in the microwave? It seemed easier. Maybe I didn’t cook them long enough. But Dinkus loved the macaroni and cheese, too.

We ate a lot of soup. And tuna fish. And peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Those were really easy to make. And Dink ate a lot of what Mom wouldn’t eat. And we got by.

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Mom's parents died when she was sixteen, her dad with cancer and later on her mom with a stroke. Mom said she thought her mom died more from a broken heart. And Mom went to live with my Great Grandma Marge on the other side of our little Georgia town. That was before Great Grandma Marge moved to Florida.

So Mom didn't have a mother to turn to when my dad got killed. Great Grandma Marge couldn't come to help us, because she lived in Florida by then, and she was old and couldn't make the trip, anyway. She was older than dirt from whenever I could remember. She had arthritis and had lots of pains and right after Mom got married to my dad, Great Grandma Marge moved to Florida where the weather was hot and she said the climate was better there for all that ailed her.

After Dad got killed, I called Great Grandma Marge.

"I don't know what to do, Great Gramma," I said, "Mom won't eat and all she does is cry and sleep. "

"She's depressed and I'm sure you are too. You both have been through so much and I know it is hard for you to handle." And Great Gramma sighed.

I swallowed hard to keep from crying.

"Move to Florida," Great Grandma said brightly, "where the sun shines every day and it is nice and warm, and that would help cheer you both up." But we couldn't afford it. We sure didn't want to live in the trailer with Great Grandma Marge. It was too small for all of us. Plus, Great Grandma Marge was allergic to dogs.

My dad brought Dinkus home one night after he got off work. Dink was just a little black fluffy puppy that someone had dumped off at the body shop where Dad worked.

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“This little dinkus will be your dog, David,” Dad said. “And it will be your responsibility to take care of him. You have to feed him and make sure his water bowl is full all the time and potty train him or he can’t stay in the house. Oh, and clean up his poops in the yard and in the house too.”

I didn’t mind that at all. And he was a good puppy. He wasn’t hard to potty train but he did like to chew on everybody’s slippers and shoes.

Practically every morning when we got up, at least one of us was yelling, “Dinkus, bring that back,” and Dinkus would come trotting proudly out of whatever bedroom he had been in, carrying somebody’s shoe or slipper, and we would have to run after him and retrieve the item before he destroyed it. Our slippers were getting pretty raggedy.

Mom and I struggled off and on for months after Dad died, Mom working when she was able and paying the bills whenever she got a little money ahead, which wasn’t very often. Great Grandma Marge called us a lot and sent us a little money when she won at Bingo, and sent funny little cards to cheer us up.

And then Great Grandma Marge moved into an assisted living facility in Florida because of all her ailments she said, and she called to tell us she was giving her trailer to us. This was more than a miracle for Mom and me and Dink. Now we would have a real cheap place to live and a new life to look forward to. Great Grandma Marge may have saved our lives. I know she did. Mom and I thanked Great Gramma over and over.

Mom pulled herself together and we got ready to move.

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“Maybe the change of scenery will do us both good,” Mom said, as she sorted through our belongings, a pile for us to keep, a pile for Goodwill or Salvation Army, a pile for a yard sale. And she brought home empty boxes from the grocery store.

Mom perked up some and seemed to be looking forward to the move, and maybe was even a little cheerful about it. We had yard sales a couple of weekends before we left, getting rid of excess clothes and furniture and junk and stuff. And we hoped to make enough money for gas and food on the trip to Florida.

We did all right with the yard sales. We sold much of my dad’s stuff, some of his record collection and model cars and coin collection. We kept his old pick-up truck to haul the rest of our stuff to Florida and Mom sold her old Toyota to one of the neighbor’s grand-kids who was getting ready to go to college in Atlanta.

“I’ll get another used car after I get a job,” Mom said. “This old truck won’t last too much longer, and it sure isn’t very good on gas. But it should get us to Florida.”

“We won’t have to pay anything but lot rent and utilities in Florida,” Mom reasoned, “and the lot rent is pretty cheap. And the trailer is smaller than our apartment here, so we’ll have less space to clean.” My mother is pretty smart.

And so we got ready to move to Florida.

TWO

It was about an eight-hour trip to where we were going in Florida. The old pick-up truck did good, it never broke down once, but it used a lot of gas. We had enough money, though, and we stopped at McDonald's along the way for breakfast and later a late lunch, not only to eat, but to let the truck cool off and for all of us to go to the bathroom.

It got hotter and hotter as we got closer to our new home, and the scenery changed from red clay and Georgia pines to sand and palm trees and citrus trees. We were going to the middle of the state so we couldn't see the ocean. When we finally turned into the little trailer park, Mom breathed a sigh of relief.

"We made it, David," she smiled, and she looked tired. "Mike would be proud of me driving this old truck all this far." Mike was my dad. His name was Michael, but Mom always called him Mike or Mikey. She called him Michael David when she was yelling at him, and Dad called Mom Agnes when he was getting yelled at.

"Aww, Agnes, give me a break!" He would smile his crooked 'I'm sorry' smile and she would usually stop yelling and smile back. Mom's name is Shelley Ann.

Mom and Dad named me after my dad, but my name is David Michael. My dad said he did not want a junior. That sounded too sissified to him, and he thought Junior seemed like the parents couldn't think of a better name.

Mom unlocked the door to the trailer with the key Great Grandma Marge sent us. It didn't take long to carry our stuff into our new home. We didn't have that much and

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besides, Great Grandma Marge had left all her furniture and stove and refrigerator and even some pots and pans and linens and the washing machine and dryer, and odds and ends stuff.

It was hot and stuffy in the trailer and smelled like an old lady's home, you know, dusting powder and maybe a little lavender soap with a touch of menthol mixed in. It didn't smell dirty, it just had the smell of an old person. Mom opened the windows at once to air the place out but it was too hot outside, so she shut the windows and turned on the air conditioner. Thank goodness Great Grandma Marge left the electricity on.

"We'll have to be careful and not run the A/C too much," Mom said, "because it will run up our electric bill. But maybe by the time we get the first bill, I will have a job and we can afford it. I hope so."

The trailer was a small single-wide and was at the end of the one and only dusty road in Citrus Grove Mobile Home Park at the edge of town. Lot 12. There was a little bedroom at the front (mine) and a little bigger bedroom at the back (Mom's) with a bathroom, a small kitchen and a small living room in between. Big enough for Mom and me and Dinkus. I don't know why they named it Citrus Grove Mobile Home Park, because there weren't any citrus trees in the park, no orange trees, no tangerine trees, no grapefruit trees. But there were plenty of citrus trees all around, even in the field behind our trailer.

We moved just in time before school started. I didn't want to go to school, though, as long as Mom needed me. I didn't LIKE school all that much anyway.

"It's important to go to school," Mom said, "and you

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don't want to be an auto mechanic like your dad, do you? He didn't graduate but he was good with cars so that's the job he had and he liked it. He never complained about it. But you can do better."

I could probably be an auto mechanic. Or be a car salesman. Do you have to have a high school diploma to be a car salesman? I figured a job is a job and if you liked your job, you were okay.

"What difference does it make if I graduate from high school or not?"

"Because," Mom said, giving me her 'mama look', "you can do better if you have a good education. You might even become President if you wanted to bad enough."

I thought about that for a minute and wondered what it would be like being President of the United States. Nah. Too mind boggling for me. Too many people to take care of. Too many promises to make to the people. Then I would feel bad when I couldn't keep all my promises. Wouldn't I?

I didn't have time to explore the neighborhood before school started. Mom took me to the mall the next morning and I got a few new clothes for school with some of the money we had left from the yard sales. I got some jeans and polo shirts with collars because one of our new neighbors came right over to welcome us to the mobile home park and she said that is what her grandson wore to school and he goes to the school where I would be going. Middle school.

I was kind of scared, not only of a new school and new faces, but being in seventh grade. I wondered what the kids would be like here.

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Mom and I went to register at the middle school that afternoon. We took my report cards and papers from my old school in Georgia and Mom had my shots papers and stuff from my doctor in Georgia.

I glanced around at some of the other kids registering and they didn't look any different from me. Most of them were dressed in shorts and t-shirts because it was really hot. I was reading the booklet they gave us at the registration desk and it said we could wear shorts to school. We could wear jeans and our shirts had to have collars. Polo shirts preferably. So I was safe with my new clothes. No T-shirts, especially ones with pictures or words on them. No caps. No sandals. I laughed at that. Like I would wear sandals. NOT! I wore flip-flops back in Georgia, but I had already heard about the fire ants here in Florida and had had one nasty experience with a mound of them in our back yard yesterday evening, when I was wearing my flip-flops.

The neighbor across the road, Homer, saw me hopping around brushing the evil little critters off my feet and legs and brought over his insecticide sprayer and sprayed the yard good.

"This spray is good," Homer said. "I don't want you folks eaten up by these ants. And it is safe for dogs." It got rid of the ants. For a while anyway.

That evening we went to see Great Grandma Marge at the assisted living place. We all hugged and kissed and cried, and Great Gramma was so glad to see us but she was getting ready to play Rook with some other old people that lived there.

"I am so happy here," Great Gramma said, "I should have moved here a long time ago. The food is good, the

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people in charge are very nice, and I even have a couple of nice men friends that “cater to me.” Whatever that meant.

Plus, Great Grandma told Mom she was going to give Mom her car. She couldn’t drive it anymore because her eyes were getting bad and she barely passed her eye test the last Drivers Exam she took. Mom was extremely grateful. Now she no longer had to worry about the truck breaking down. Mom cried and hugged Great Gramma some more.

Mom made arrangements with Great Grandma Marge to pick her up the next day and they would go to the Clerk’s Office and get the title to the car changed and then go to lunch at Bob Evans, Great Grandma Marge’s treat. I was sorry I was going to miss going to lunch but I had to go to school.

On the way home, Mom was bubbling over. “I can’t believe all the good luck we are having, David,” she said, smiling happily. “First a home free and clear to come to, a safe trip down here from Georgia, a little extra money for necessities and now a car free and clear. What more could we ask for?” We both knew the answer. We could ask that my dad was still alive.

