

Chapter 3

The stranger's first month with the Grays had passed slowly. His identity was still a mystery to John Gray. The circumstance in which he found this man was baffling. Surely someone would be missing this man. How could he discover the stranger's origins? He had once heard of a fellow up north who claimed to identify folks according to their fingerprints. John quickly laughed to himself. "Guy must be a real puddin' head."

The stranger lapsed in and out of consciousness. He would remain awake only long enough for John to help him to the outhouse. He continued to ramble in as many languages as John had fingers and toes. It was almost as if he was communicating with some one. The tone of his dialogue was frequently loud and terse. Some outbursts reminded John of the phrases Reverend Hurley would proclaim in his Sunday sermons. John had become accustomed to the daily ritual of carrying the stranger to the outhouse. "Sarah, this man's heavier than a dead minister. How much longer is he going to be ill?" But John had more pressing reasons to hurry the stranger's recovery. He was eager to discuss his unusual dreams, which involved the slowly recovering stranger. A frightening solution to his current quandary with his brother Dave was always at the forefront of his dreams.

One week later the stranger's undeterminable illness mysteriously disappeared. "I feel stronger than a twenty-ox wagon train," he exclaimed one morning as he bound out the front door. "I'll be back soon, don't you worry." Before John could stop him, the stranger had disappeared.

“That fella sure gave me some strange feelings, Sarah,” John pronounced awkwardly at the open door. “Wonder if we’ll see him again.”

Chapter 4

Mary was miserable without Hugh and had not gone horseback riding for over a month. She spent many days moping around the farm and daydreaming about her lengthy conversations with Hugh in the parlor. How could her father be so unreasonable? He had always been a cantankerous man, but she knew he loved her.

“I wish I knew why Daddy hated Uncle Dave so much,” she thought. She didn’t feel that Uncle Dave was intentionally trying to hurt her dad. All she wanted was to have a beautiful wedding with both her father and uncle present and at peace. They both could be unbearably stubborn. She smiled when she thought of how different Hugh was from her dad and uncle. She loved him so much.

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Hugh was heartbroken. However, his love for Mary outweighed any feelings of anger toward her father or uncle.

“I thought John Gray would be overjoyed at my proposal to his daughter,” he said to his father. “Now I can’t even see her. What am I to do?”

“Well, son, I would bet my best jumpin’ frog it may have something to do with that scoundrel David Gray. We both know David Gray is no good and he’s as sneaky as a snake oil salesman. He’s probably up in that office right now counting his money again. You just be sure to take care of Mary, and things will find a way to work themselves out.”

Hugh thought about this a while before speaking. “Bless it, that man can hold a grudge. It’s been ages since I stopped him from pilfering our farm. When will it ever end?”

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David Gray was counting money in his office when the stranger appeared at his door.

“May I help you?” he said without miscounting the paper money he was organizing into large piles.

“Greetings, David. I’ve finally come for another visit with you.”

The color drained from David’s face as he raised his head and locked eyes with the stranger’s. The mere sight of this man almost brought tears to his already bloodshot eyes.

“Mr. Viled, how did you know where to find me?” he managed to stammer out as his tongue swelled with fear.

“I’ve had my eye on you, David — ever since our meeting in London so many years back. I hope you’ve not forgotten our deal. It looks as though you’ve done fairly well since we came to our agreement. It was very shrewd of you to leave all your money to your niece, knowing very well that your estranged brother would never allow it. I knew you would be a good choice when we met that fateful day.” He winked at David, who was sweating like bacon in a frying pan as he squirmed in his chair. “I have a sneaking feeling your part of the contract is about to come to term.” A cold wind crept into the office and rattled his bones as the stranger closed the door behind him. The warmth had completely drained from his body as he managed to stop himself from shaking.

David thought about his first encounter with the stranger. He had been down to his last penny and hungry as a stray dog. The trip to London was supposed to free him from his

drab life and certain indentured future on the family farm with his brother. The stranger had appeared out of the alley almost as if he materialized from the darkness and fog. David's instincts had failed to warn him as the stranger approached with a devilish grin. It wasn't long before they were staring at half-gone bottle of scotch. "This man seemed so easy to talk to, and I did most of the talking," David remembered. Finally, the stranger simply asked, "What would you do to be the richest man in the world?" The question was very intriguing considering the squalor he was currently facing and the even more beleaguered future back home on the farm. At length, he answered the question as honestly as he could, considering the scotch working in his brain. Before he knew it the stranger had shook his hand and made his way to the door of the pub without a glance back.

David hadn't thought about his visit to London in many years. A grimace crossed his face as he stared at the stacks of money on his desk. David grabbed his coat and headed straight downstairs to the saloon for a bottle of whiskey to warm his frigid body and numb his brain.

Chapter 5

"I tell ya, Sarah, if I keep havin' them dreams, I'll never get a peaceful night's rest," John exclaimed over breakfast.

Sarah said, "Maybe you should track down that nice fella we nursed back to health. You said he was in your dreams. You know, John, it was one of the strangest recoveries I ever seen. He looked so bad for spell and then all the sudden he was right as rain. Didn't seem normal to me."

Just then, there was a knock on the door. John was half surprised to see it was the stranger standing on his porch as the strong winds whipped outside.

“Well, howdy. I was startin’ to think I’d seen the last of you.”

Mr. Viled stepped inside with a cold smile and shook John’s hand.

“The last name is Viled,” the stranger offered. “I don’t think I told you while I was laid up in your bed: I really appreciate you and your missus taking such good care of me. I was out of it for a good spell.”

John smiled. “Mr. Viled, it was the strangest damn thing I ever saw, but it’s good to see you back on your feet.”

“It was about time you and I had a talk, John. Let’s take a walk. The sun is starting to warm up the day, and I have a feeling you have some questions for me.”

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“To tell you the truth, Mr. Viled, I am not so surprised to see you. Ever since you stayed with the missus and me, I’ve had some pretty disturbing dreams. All of them involve my brother, and we’re always in some sort of real bad argument. But you are also in them and trying to keep us from wringing each other’s necks. It went so far in one dream that my own brother tried to kill me! I tell ya’, it really scared me.”

The grin spread across the stranger’s visage. “Well, John, that makes this a lot easier to bring up. I think your brother David may have some maligned intentions towards you and your family. I realize it may not be my place to stick my nose in other folks’ business, but to be honest, I’ve known your brother David for some time. We met in London many years before he acquired all his riches. I’d be a dishonest man if I wasn’t to tell you about

the conversation I just had with your brother, but it may be better if we go some place to have a little something to warm us up first.”

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The bartender lazily looked up as the two men entered the saloon and said, “Hey John, how’s things comin’ along with the weddin’?”

“As good as to be expected I suppose,” John hastily replied. He had other things on his mind.

“Set us up with a bottle of whiskey my good man,” Mr. Viled said.

They walked over to a dark corner of the bar, out of the bartender’s earshot, and sat down. Both men drank their whiskey in silence. Somehow, John knew deep down what the stranger was going to tell him. John reflected on the day 12 years ago when the quarrel with his brother began the growing hatred between them. How did their relationship get so twisted over the years? There seemed no way now to resolve their feud, especially in light of the recent news from Reverend Hurley concerning Mary’s inheritance. He knew I wouldn’t let her take his money.

“Thinking about your brother’s money, eh?”

“That was exactly what I was thinkin’ about.”

“Well, it’s best I told you now. John, your brother is an awful deceitful man, and I think he has some harmful intentions towards you. Seems to me your dreams are a prophecy of some sort. Don’t ask me how, but I have a hunch that the true nature of his will is not what you think. You see, he has absolutely no intentions of giving anything to Mary or

anyone in your family. It was all a ruse to show how much money he has and how little you have. He doesn't even have a will drawn up." The stranger tactfully lied.

"Damn him!" David yelled. "I really appreciate you being honest with me and tellin' me all this. Things have gotten to far out of hand between us, and I think a man to man talk with my brother is long overdue."

A smirk creased across the stranger's face as John Gray strode out of the saloon and into the cold wind. He had forgotten how much pleasure he got from this.

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Minutes later, a cold wind struck David's face as the stranger entered his office again, almost as if he had walked through the door.

"What do you want?" David stammered. "I thought I'd seen the last of you."

"On the contrary, my dear sir. I am exactly the person you want to see right now. I have a lucrative proposition for you. I just came over after talking with your brother and, to be completely honest with you, I think he has aims to harm you for shaming him with the will you had drawn up." the stranger tactfully lied again.

"But I love Mary and would do anything to help her. I had absolutely no intention of bringing shame to him or his family. Damn, he is one stubborn mule. John and I will never fix our relationship, but that is no reason for him to punish Mary and limit her future. She's a very bright girl and deserves more than he can provide. I just wanted to help her, despite how her dad and fiancée feel about me. She's my only niece."

“Well, David, I don’t think your brother sees it quite that way, so you’d better keep on your toes. But the true purpose of this visit is to make you a new deal. I am willing to let you out of the agreement we made so long ago in London.”

“I don’t believe you!” David yelled incredulously.

“Believe it, David. Although your choices have become somewhat limited, I fulfilled my part of the contract. Hence, you have achieved all the wealth and power you pleaded for when we made this deal. But you knew it would come with a price. Now I am willing to give you a chance to get out of our deal, and this is all you have to do.”

Tears came to David eyes as the stranger left his office. “How can I kill my own brother?”

Chapter 6

John sat at the table with Sarah trying to figure out a way to tell her his brother may try to kill him. He had been through a lot with his brother, but he couldn’t believe it could come this; two people with the same flesh and blood, resorting to murdering one another over money and power. The more he thought about his dreams and what the stranger had said to him at the saloon, the more worried he became. He needed to straighten this out with his brother. Things had gone too far.

John started, “Sarah, I can’t get over my dreams. I think David may have it out for me. Mr. Viled told me he knows David’s will is phony, and he has no intention to give Mary his money.

“But why would he do that, John?”

“Because he is trying to humiliate me once and for all. He wants the whole town to know I am the poorest man in the county. It has finally got to the point where I can’t do nothin’ to stop him. He’s just too rich, powerful, and arrogant. I need to talk to him and see if we can end this quarrel before someone really gets hurt.”

“Oh, John, please be careful. You have your family to think about. We love you and need you.”

“I love you too, Sarah. I’ll be back for supper,” John replied as he walked out the door.

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John started sweating as he walked the steps up to his brother’s office. He was miserable, both physically and mentally. Anxiety about the impending conversation with his brother had started to creep into his mind. What if his dreams came true? He slowly opened the door to his brother’s office. David looked up from his desk.

The look on the men’s faces could have split timber. Both thought of what Mr. Viled had told them.

“What are you doing here? I have nothing to say to you,” David said hoarsely.

“Hold your tongue and listen to what I got to say.”

“We ain’t spoke for twelve years, and I don’t plan to start listening to you now!”

“Sit back down and listen.” As David sat back down, John started to feel light-headed.

“I’m none too happy with what you tried to do to Mary and my family. You sent the Reverend over to tell us Mary was the sole inheritor of your will, knowing damn well there is no will. I’ve had enough of your lies.”

“What are you talking about? I have every intention of giving Mary all my money once I am lying in my grave. I have the will right over there in my safe.”

John’s chest felt like it was about to explode. He had never been so mad in all his life. “I know for a fact you did this to humiliate me, you liar. You know how poor I am and how hard I struggle to provide for Sarah and the children!”

“How dare you come to my office and call me a liar!” David cried as he rose from his chair to face his brother at eye level.

John let out a terrible scream of pain and clutched at his chest. David crossed the room just as John lost consciousness and tumbled backward. His body landed with a terrible thud as the back of his head struck the cast-iron safe. David ran over to his brother’s limp body and attempted to turn him over. His hands were covered in his brother’s blood by the time he realized John was dead.

Chapter 7

David sits alone in the hot jail cell in the Deer Lick sheriff’s office. He’s been locked up for the past five months and is waiting for transport to the state jail when the stranger appears in front of the bars.

Mr. Viled smiles intently at David before speaking. “You don’t look happy to see me. I hope there are no hard feelings. Can you believe I’ve been in this desolate place for almost six months? I can honestly say I will never return to Deer Lick, Missouri, again. I had intended to end up in Paris, but it looks as though fate brought us back together, David — if you believe in that mumbo jumbo. But it seems to have worked out for the best. I mean, I’ve given back your soul, your niece had a lovely wedding, and all the

money you've swindled in the past will hopefully go to a good cause. The only sad part was the unfortunate death of your brother. Oh yeah, and your life sentence in prison."

"You know I didn't mean to harm my brother; it was an accident. You set us up, and now I will rot in prison for the rest of my life."

"Well, it is unfortunate the jury didn't see it as an accident, and I guess what really happened will remain a mystery."

As the stranger turned to leave, he looked over his shoulder at David. "I have a strong feeling that you will live a long, long life, David. Au revoir."

The devil walked across the street to the saloon to get a jug of whiskey. He stood in the center of the street and poured the liquid over his head. He laughed as he thought of how much more he preferred leaving this place than entering it. He hated the cold. A moment later he struck a match, immolating himself and disappearing from Deer Lick within a blaze of flames.