

Chapter 1 *"I'm allergic to snowbirds."*

Jim slumped down at the base of an old pine, a really old pine. It was the largest, tallest, widest tree for miles and miles but Jim had never seen it before. With no one around to see or criticize him, the tears began to flow. Sobs of guilt and remorse wracked his soul as he remembered the raw events of the night before.

He had been walking through these old forests his whole life, well almost his whole life; Jim had just turned twenty. It was his birthday, and John's. He wandered aimlessly, deep in thought, not really knowing where he was headed. Usually he had a destination in mind. One of his favorite places was the old fort he and his brother, John, had built when they were both seven. ...But not today.



Jim grabbed John's shoulder and shook him hard. "Come on John, let's go, Mom and Dad are asleep. They'll never know and we'll be back before they both get up to take a bathroom break. We have been talking about this for a week."

"*You* have been talking about it, Jimmy. I know you're not the sharpest tack in the box but this is a dumb idea. Did you look outside before we went to bed?"

"What's a little snow, don't be a wuss. Besides, the car has four-wheel drive and Dad just put those tires on a month ago. What could go wrong? I was just outside and there are only a couple inches of snow."

"Jimmy, I suppose you're gonna bug the crap outta me until I do just what you want and I bet you want me to drive too, right? Jimmy started fidgeting as he nodded. "If anything goes wrong it's your ass on the line, not mine; now move outta the way so I can get dressed. Hand me my boots. And while you're waiting go outside and clean off the car." Jimmy rushed out, slamming the bedroom door on the way. John looked up to the ceiling in silent prayer as he headed downstairs.

"Jimmy, your idea sucks. We only just got our permits a week ago and it's snowing out here like crazy. How many hours do we each have behind the wheel? Not enough as far as I'm concerned. Get in the car and buckle up."

"John, stop being a worrywart. Ain't nothing gonna happen. All's we're doing is riding a mile down the road by ourselves, on our own with nobody around to tell us what to do. It'll be our first trip together, driving to that little field by the side of the road where you can look up and see *every* star in the universe. And besides, the speed limit is only thirty, what could go wrong?"

"Okay but I'm not going more than twenty-five miles an hour cause of the snow plus I can hardly see with all this snow flying around. Here we go." John looked over at Jim. He had a smile on his face a mile wide. *My God, you'd think we were riding the Kingda Ka, going 128 miles an hour! He looks happier than a pig in the mud.*

John was keeping a sharp eye on the road while Jim was looking all around, even though there wasn't much to see. He hit that buck at twenty-four miles an hour. It flipped over the hood of the car, the windshield shattered and its left antler gored him in the neck. His immediate reaction was to brake as both airbags deployed. Jim looked over at his brother. John tried to say something, smiled and closed his eyes...



Jim had been too keyed up to sleep after coming home from the Champlain Valley Medical Center. He was given a clean bill of health by Dr. Clarke, the night shift physician. Other than a few scratches and the burns on his wrists from the airbag, he was fine, physically. He couldn't stop thinking about the ambulance at the scene of the accident and the policemen who asked him a million questions. *Say, did you know that airbag flew out at you doing 254 miles an hour!* The same phrase kept rattling around in his brain over and over. Sitting at the base of that ancient tree he let his mind wander, hoping he'd be able to drive that phrase out of his head.

His mom and dad were never too far removed from his thoughts. He remembered their last summer picnic, September 21st, the last day of summer. His mom, Clarissa, and his dad, Ben, had packed a fun lunch (fun because it was full of sweet stuff they knew was off-limits). John and Jimmy had peeked in the basket when their parents were in the living room discussing their outing, a leisurely twenty minute hike on a well-worn path still on the Honeycutt estate.

While Clarissa arranged the huge basket and its contents on a tattered red and black checkered tablecloth, Ben took the boys aside, sitting at the base of a distant pine, one of hundreds scattered willy-nilly on the property. Ben admired the young men his boys were becoming, just looking at them, waiting for either one to start a conversation. John looked at Jimmy and Jimmy stared back. Both were thinking the same thing. The twins often did that. *Why is Dad looking at us, not saying a word? What is he thinking?* The silence was maddening until John

started in, “Dad, you know what? Let’s talk about something neither one of us has ever asked you. Can you tell us something about the Honeycutt property?”

Ben smiled, his favorite subject, local history... “Well boys, let me start at your beginning because that’s when everything changed for me and your mom. In 2000, when you both came into our world, we had been planning on moving here, to Clinton County. Your grandpappy, my dad Noah, had passed away only two months before you were born. I sure wish he could have seen what you guys have become. Anyway, he willed this whole estate to me, all 450 acres of it. We’re not anywhere near the property line. Look around you; some of these trees are older than Methuselah. Well, maybe even older. Did you guys know he lived to be over 900 years-old?”

“Uh Dad, excuse me but you’re way off topic here. I know you’re almost sixty but... Methuselah, come back to us.”

“Sorry John. Sorry Jimmy. Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah, Grandpa Noah... he was born in 1920. As it turns out, his mom and dad saved a lot of their money. I remember my Grandpa Ebenezer and my Grandma Clara. When I was a boy, my nickname for Grandpa was Tightwad, my brother Bernard’s was Old Skinflint, and our nickname for Granny was Santa, Santa Clara, she was the sweet one, always giving us penny candy when Tightwad wasn’t looking. But I barely remember them; they both passed away when I was only seven. I loved them but I think I loved Grandma Clara more, but not because of the candy. Your great-grandpa Ebenezer and great-grandma Clara were both born in Georgia in 1880. Their parents were very poor and they were slaves during the Civil War. The slave owners were Honeycutts. ...Hence, our name. Hey, I think I hear your mom’s sweet voice.”

Jimmy was excited, “Dad, on the way back home can you tell us some more about our family history?”

“Sure Jimmy. Let’s go boys. Feedbag’s on!”

“Be right there, Clarissa. Give us a minute.”



The slightest smile graced Jim's face as he thought of that summer picnic just four months ago to the day, one of the last memorable days he'd spent with his mom, his dad and Johnny. He sighed as a tear leaked out of his left eye and slowly dribbled down his cheek. He did not wipe it away with the sleeve of his hastily donned shirt. Slumping down even further he felt drained. *Will I even have the strength to walk all the way back home?* Jim had left the house before sunup. He couldn't sleep anyway. The only reason he'd stopped next to this behemoth was because he was too tired to keep walking and he'd nearly tripped over an ancient gnarly root.

Sitting up straighter, Jim glanced around as the haze lifted. Looking at his watch, the one his dad had given him just two days earlier, a "pre-birthday" present, he noticed it was just 8 AM. *I can't believe I've only been here an hour, seems like forever. My dad rocks; this old Timex is the best. Love that bright blue light. I gotta think about heading home. I didn't think to leave a note and Mom and Dad will have a fit if I'm missing... again. A few more minutes and I'll head back. Time to face the music, as Dad would say.*

Jim dreaded the thought of heading home to confront his parents. They had been too stunned to say much of anything to Jim when they got home from the hospital at 2 AM. Jim was in shock; he didn't even remember climbing into his bed or if he did, or maybe he just sat in the chair next to his desk and waited.

Resting, Jim closed his eyes and breathed out slowly, trying to relax, a technique John had tried to show him many times, with no or little success. He stayed that way for a minute, motionless. A low hum caught his attention, bringing him out of his calming state. Opening his eyes, Jim looked around but he could not place the noise. *Let me close my eyes again, maybe that'll help.* After less than a minute he knew the sound was coming from above his head.

Standing up, he noticed a big knot in the old gnarly tree about nine feet above the ground. *That looks like a big old squirrel's nest and that hum seems to be coming from within it. Now how am I gonna get up there. I wish Johnny was here. He'd know what to do. I'm not the sharpest tack in the drawer.* Jim stopped and looked around as another tear rolled down his cheek from his right eye this time. *What would John do?*

He rested his left hand on the old trunk and closed his eyes, thinking. A smile creased his face as he opened his eyes and looked around. *Now, if I can only find a large three-foot stump.* Luck was in the air, all the nearby trees were older than dirt; many had broken apart over time, slowly turning into rich topsoil. Less than fifty feet away, Jim spied the last remnant of an old pine, a three-and-a-half-foot stump lying on its side. Jim walked over to it and stood there. Fifteen minutes and a cup of sweat later the stump sat next to the tree. The first time he tried to hoist himself up he nearly broke his wrist and clipped himself in the jaw. But he made it up on the second go-around. As he stood up on the stump, balancing himself on the less than flat base, the humming sound became louder. *What the Hell?* Squatting down, the sound dwindled.

Standing up slowly while leaning heavily on the trunk, Jim broke out into a cold sweat. *I sure hope snakes don't climb trees, especially rattlers.* Jim yelled into the knotty hole. *Here goes... please God!* Jim's left hand disappeared, then his wrist, his elbow and in up to his shoulder. *I know there's something in there that wants me to snatch it! But I can't reach it.* Jim overextended his shoulder until he felt a sharp twinge near his neck... *that hurts!* Jim withdrew his arm and looked at it for a few seconds while he tried to rub out the pain with his other hand.

As careful as he could, Jim lowered himself to the base of the stump and slid off until his feet touched the ground. *Wow, that was scary. I better head back home, have to come back another day.* Standing only six feet from the old pine, he could no longer hear that eerie sound. As Jim started heading back in the direction he thought he had come from, he stopped and turned around. "How am I gonna find this old monster again?" Looking around, he tried to memorize the area, the gnarly roots, the shape and height of the tree, the surrounding grassy

expanse and the other trees nearby. Jim leaned against a nearby tree, closed his eyes and thought of John. As Jim opened his eyes he knew what he had to do. Turning back toward home he began to mark his trail with little piles of rocks, placing a broken tree limb here or there. *Sure wish I had a can of white spray paint! I wonder if spray paint can kill a tree.* Walking slowly while marking his return trail, another noise interrupted his thoughts, one he recognized. *Hey, that's Dad. He's beeping the horn!* Thoughts of that magnificent tree and the hum vanished as Jim ran toward the safety and comfort of his family.



Ben saw Jim coming out of the woods and waved him over to the car. Jim stopped several feet in front of his father. Ben walked over to his son while he tried to put a smile on his face. A lone tear ran down his face but he missed it when he swiped at it with his sleeve.

“Dad, are you and Mom mad at me? I wouldn’t blame you if you were. I forgot to feed the animals and I didn’t leave you a note. With everything that’s happened I never should have left to begin with. But I just had to get away; I needed to think and be by myself.”

Ben gave his son a big hug and whispered in his ear, “Jim, we both love you no matter what happens or has happened.” Ben took a step back and put his arm around Jim’s shoulder. “We were worried about you but we knew you’d be back soon enough. Besides, I know how you get when you’re hungry. Come on into the house, mom just finished frying up some thick slab bacon and those farm-fresh brown eggs you love so much. I took a quick trip to the bakery this morning and bought us a dozen assorted sweet buns. And don’t worry about the animals, I called the neighbors and asked them to feed the gang for the next four or five days.”

“But Dad, how can you and Mom sit down and eat a big breakfast after what...what happened last night? My stomach is in knots, my nerves are on edge and I feel like screaming to high heaven... and I feel like an icicle.”

They walked toward the house, arms around each other's shoulders. "Jim, try to relax. Take a few deep breaths. Remember what Johnny taught you about meditation. Do you know who taught Johnny?" Jim shook his head. "I did." ...My *Johnny?*

Ben walked in the backdoor first and Jim followed right behind. "Sit at the table. Let me go and get your mom, I think she's upstairs making the beds and gathering dirty laundry. By the way, I guess she doesn't have to make yours, right?" Jim just shook his head and looked down at the table.

Ben yelled up the stairs. "Clarissa, Jim's back; hurry up before the food gets cold."

Clarissa yelled from the upstairs bathroom, "Okay dear, I'll be down in two shakes! I just need to wash my face and comb my hair." *I don't want them to see me like this.*

Ben walked back to the kitchen table and sat down next to Jim. They just stared at each other for a full minute; Jim put his head on his dad's shoulder. Two seconds later Jim began to shake and his eyes overflowed. Ben wiped Jim's eyes with his bandanna and held him in his arms. Tears continued to flow while they sat together, father and son crying, arms wrapped around each other. After a few minutes, Jim sniffled, blew his nose and dried his eyes. "Hey Dad, please don't tell Mom I was crying, okay?"

"I won't son, I promise if you promise not to tell her I cried too. Here comes your mom now."

"Good morning, Jim, you know we were worried sick about you, running off like that without even a note." Clarissa glanced at her son as she carried his dirty clothes to the laundry room just to the right of the backdoor. "Let's eat; we have a lot to do today."

Clarissa sat opposite Ben as she closed her eyes. Ben did the same grasping Clarissa's right hand while Jim clasped his mother's left hand. They settled down as Ben said The Lord's Prayer. Ben's voice was a bit deeper than usual. Clarissa

sighed once or twice as Jim screwed up his face. *I sure wish Johnny was here.* The ritual completed, Clarissa got up and served breakfast. The littlest smile crept over Jim's face as he watched his mom serve him eggs, bacon, toast, light with plenty of real butter, fresh squeezed OJ and a warmed sweet bun on the side. Before Clarissa sat down to enjoy the meal, she rubbed Jim's shoulder for a few seconds.

As was custom the family ate in silence, not that it was against the rules to speak during the meal. But breakfast was a bit more somber than usual, Ben thought about John and Jim while he sipped his fresh brewed Columbian. Clarissa tried to smile, all the while thinking about her family, their loss, but especially about Jim. Jim ate in small bites, not his usual shovel it in, feed the furnace race to finish style. He thought about his brother the whole time.

When everyone was finished with their main course, Clarissa cleared the dishes while Ben poured himself and his wife a second cup of coffee. Jim helped himself to a second glass of orange juice. His early morning outing had left him parched. Sweet bun in hand, Jim looked at his dad. Ben gave him the nod. He waited for his mom to rejoin them.

"Mom, Dad, I want to apologize for this morning. It was wrong of me to head out so early without leaving a note or waking you up to let you know I was going for a long walk in the woods. But... but more than anything, I need to tell you what happened last night." Jim sighed deeply and looked down at his lap. *Johnny please help me.* After a lengthy pause, Jim continued, "After you guys went to bed, I begged Johnny to take the car so we could go for a short ride. We had our permits so I figured nothing would go wrong. All I wanted to do was drive a mile down the road to the small field, you know, the one where you can look up and see every star. I asked John to drive because he is the better driver. I hounded him until he agreed. *But we never saw that 10 pointer until it was too late!*"



"Jim, are you alright... Jim?" He opened his eyes slowly until everything came into focus. *Why am I lying in my bed in the middle of the day?*

He noticed his mom and dad sitting on either side of him. "What happened? What time is it and Mom, why are your eyes so red?"

"It's 2 PM, you fainted right after you told us what happened last night. We managed to get you into bed and called Dr. Clarke right away. We didn't know what else to do but the doctor came over quick as can be. He gave you a quick check-up while you were asleep just to make sure you were okay." Jim looked at his mother, his eyes grew wide; his skin color darkened. "Jim, it's okay, we left the room while he examined you. Anyway, he told us you were suffering from exhaustion and anxiety and he gave me strict instructions to make sure you rest for the next two hours. We'll talk again when you wake up, rest now for a bit. Oh, before I forget, he gave you a light sedative to calm your nerves." Jim was too tired to reply as he rolled over and closed his eyes.



How am I gonna get up there? That knothole must be nine feet high. I wish Johnny was here; he'd know what to do.... How am I ever going to find my way home? And how am I ever going to find my way back to this tree. I wish John was here; he'd figure it out in a flash... Our Father who art in heaven, I wish Johnny was here... I really need to tell you what happened last night. Jim sighed and looked down at his lap. Johnny please help me!



"Man, I feel like I've been hit by an 18-wheeler." Jim looked over at his alarm clock. "I can't believe it's 4:30. I better get up and put on my happy face." Jim walked across the hall to the bathroom and took a quick hot shower. *I feel like I'm in Heaven, are you there, Johnny?* "What a stupid thought. Why am I so dumb?"

Ten minutes later he was sitting at the kitchen table having a cup of tea with his mom. "Jimmy, I'm glad to see you're up. You slept over two hours. I hope you

like chamomile; that should help a lot. I've been told it's a great stress reducer. In about half an hour, your dad and I are going to take a ride over to the church to speak to Reverend Garrett. Would you like to come along?

"No, but thanks Mom; would you mind if I take a walk down by the creek while you guys are gone? It's very peaceful down there and I enjoy looking for fish, turtles and frogs. I promise I'll be back before it gets too dark."

"Okay Jimmy, but be careful. And if the creek's frozen over do *not* go on the ice. Make sure you wear your insulated boots, your heavy gloves and your winter coat. Oh, and I'm going to give you the extra tea, you can take it with you in your old thermos. I don't want you to catch cold...and no funny business this time. Take a flashlight with you. The sun's already beginning to set."

"And before I forget, you asked me earlier why my eyes were red. I just remembered, I'm allergic to snowbirds!"

"Thanks Mom, you're the best. I'm going to head down to the creek as soon as I get my winter gear on and I'll take that thermos. After this morning, I can sure use some more hot tea. I think chamomile is my new favorite." *Snowbirds, I think she's pulling my leg.*

The creek was only six feet wide and usually no more than two feet deep. It was not visible from the backdoor but it was only a thousand feet away just beyond a string of young pine but still on the Honeycutt acreage. "Thank God, I won't get lost here." Jim found his favorite rock and settled down to think. *I remember that dream as if I just woke up even though it's been an over hour already. Usually I forget my dreams within five minutes. Johnny, I hope you're okay.*

I'M OKAY, JIMMY. I'M STANDING RIGHT BEHIND YOU.
TURN AROUND, DINGBAT.

⁴⁶"No way, I think I need more sleep. It must be the stress." Jim did what his brother asked of him, like always. "I don't believe it. Why are you here? How...?"

YOU CALLED FOR ME, FIVE TIMES, NO MAKE THAT SIX TO BE EXACT. AND YOU KNOW HOW EXACT I AM. Jim just shook his head. LET ME GIVE YOU THE RUNDOWN. ONE, THE KNOT IN THE TREE; TWO, GETTING BACK HOME; THREE, WHEN YOU SAID THE LORD'S PRAYER; FOUR, DURING YOUR CONFESSION TO MOM AND DAD; FIVE, IN YOUR DREAM; AND SIX, IN THE SHOWER OF ALL PLACES. DO YOU DENY IT?

"Johnny, you know I can't. But I can't figure out why you're here. Shouldn't you be in heaven or at least standing at the gate? I know Peter won't turn you away. You were always the saintly one and I was the trouble-maker."

DID YOU FORGET THE PROMISE WE MADE THAT FIRST DAY WE SPENT IN OUR FORT WHEN WE WERE SEVEN? REMEMBER, WE PROMISED TO ALWAYS HAVE EACH OTHER'S BACKS FOR EVER AND EVER? NOW DO YOU SEE WHY I CANNOT IGNORE YOUR CALLS FOR HELP?

"That was so long ago. I did forget. Say, I gotta go; it's getting really dark and I promised mom and dad I'd be back before dark. I can't wait to tell them all about you!"

WAIT, YOU CAN'T TELL THEM ABOUT ME. I KNOW YOU'RE NOT THE SHARPEST BUT THEY'LL THINK YOU'VE GONE AROUND THE BEND. IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT? I AM HERE FOR YOU SO DON'T WORRY.

"I guess not. See you around Johnny and... thanks." Jim started walking home. After about twenty yards, he turned around but John was gone. Jim continued on home.

As soon as Jim walked through the backdoor he saw the note on the table written in his mother's stylish cursive scrawl: *Jimmy, left-overs in oven, OJ in fridge, sweet bun on counter. Back later tonight, not too late. Enjoy meal and whatever you do, do not get into trouble. House better be clean when we get home. Love you, Mom and Dad.*

Jim grabbed the paper from the living room and sat at the table. Reading the news, he ate every morsel on his plate, engulfed his bun and drank his juice. *Sure glad the paper doesn't mention the accident or the deer... or Johnny.* Feeling full he lay on their overstuffed couch with remote in hand. *I hope Jeopardy's on. I'm in luck. Hello Alex! Sure hope you beat that.*



"Jimmy, wake up." Clarissa shook his shoulder gently while Ben reclined in his E-Z chair. Jim rubbed the rheum from his eyes as he sat up. "It's important or I'd let you sleep. We just got back from the parsonage. You can go right to bed as soon as we're done talking." Jim was too bushed to talk so he just listened. "The reverend explained the burial process to us. She helped us compose John's obituary notice. It will be in the papers tomorrow. She called Mr. Macky for us too; we have an appointment with him early tomorrow morning. Would you like to accompany us?"

Listening to his mother, tears began to roll down his cheeks. The longer she talked, the more tears flowed unabated. After composing himself, Jim hesitated to catch his breath, "Um, Mom and Dad, I know what you're saying and why you're telling me but it's too much to take in. It's my fault. I'm all tuckered out. Can we talk again tomorrow?" He did not wait for a reply. "Good night. Love you both."

Bleary-eyed and wrung out, Jim ambled toward his bedroom. Once inside, he turned out the light and flung himself on the bed, clothes and all. In less than a minute he was asleep, tossing and turning for the rest of the night. His dreams were fleeting and sparse. *John, I'm trying to tell you I am to blame...* JOHN APPEARED, SHOOK HIS HEAD AND DISAPPEARED JUST AS QUICKLY.