

Chapter One

Once upon a time I was just like you.

And I can remember feeling so secure with my life, when everything was going great, when one good day followed another good day; when the arrows were flying into the bullseye; when the river water was warm and my twin-sister Nat and me would ride our mats in the boat's wake; and when the baseballs were flying out of the park and people would cry: "way to go there Frank, just like Aaron Judge!" At dusk the sun would set red in the west with a backdrop of white cumulus clouds and blue sky and we would fall asleep and have nice dreams and everything seemed pretty swell.

You remember that?

I do.

And of course there were some minor incidents which set us back for a day or two: like when that Welsh Long Bow that I had been eyeing all summer at the sporting goods store suddenly disappeared when I'd saved up the money to buy it; or when the cat had a grand litter and two of the runts died because they couldn't get enough nipple and only four of the living got adopted, so Mama, without telling us, placed the other three in a sack and threw them in the river; or when the coyotes traveled south from the hills and the chickens quit laying golden eggs and one morning after loud midnight squawking, we found only red feathers in the hen house.

But then the good days pushed back and started to repeat themselves, life was happy again, a comedy, where everyone was laughing—most of the time.

So school started in Las Cruces and we had good teachers and were getting better grades than most of the other kids whose father was also a rocket scientist. But then one day Mama just picked up and left our family to go off to LA and that fairy tale called *Hollywood*. We'd been through this a few years before, when we were living in San Diego, but she came back then. This time she didn't, and the cell phone calls and text messages and post cards just dried up somewhere in the wide desert that separated our home from the California coast. Her last post card said she was living above the beach in a town called Pacific Palisades.

And then our dog Bara got lost on our camping trip with Papa in the New Mexico mountains, never to be seen again. We searched high and low for her for several days, but nothing ever came of it. Never found her body. Put out posters for her and talked to the Rangers, but nothing.

Weird huh? We had such a wonderful summer in Florida before my accident and now it seemed like one bad day followed another bad day, and my nice dreams turned into nightmares, and I started wondering about the course of my life—that maybe I was meant to live a tragedy.

Papa died last week. It was unexpected. It was a mystery the way that it happened and we suspect we'll never understand it. Sheriff came to the house late morning and said Papa's car engine gave out at dawn when he was crossing the continental railroad tracks west of Gallup. Said he refused to exit his 1947 Cadillac when the Southwest Chief was churning down on him.

Soon as the Sheriff showed up with the County Coroner at our house and started talking their spiel to Aunt Flo and Uncle Don; me and Nat had to walk away cuz their verbal stench was just too simplistic and full of false assumptions. Sheriff said Papa flooded the car engine with too much gas and then the engine died. Sheriff said he was working the ignition and his foot had the pedal to the metal trying to clear out the carburetor and then he died.

County Coroner said Papa had a deep needle mark on the inside of his left elbow and asked if he was an intravenous drug user.

"Of course not!" screamed Aunt Flo at such a suggestion. "Daniel never used drugs." She always used Papa's formal name when talking to people other than family about him.

County Coroner said, "We found upon examination that he was low some pints of blood." Like he was a car low on oil or something. Again Flo screamed at the Coroner,

"Do your job. Find out where it went, because his red blood count has always been in the fives."

The Coroner was new to our county. He had a strange way of speaking, like he had no emotional involvement. Maybe he didn't wanna suffer other people's pain in his job. Might get to be too much for him. He couldn't explain where Papa's blood went, except there was none at the scene. He did say, "The army is over there doing their job for which they are eminently trained, surveying the scene, gathering their facts, ascertaining their findings and then they will write a report."

Even Aunt Flo shook her head at that statement. "Idiotic nonidiomatic foreigner. Speak the local tongue."

I did ask them one question though, and that was, "What time did this happen?"

“5:30 AM”— this morning, and I knew the sheriff didn’t lie about the time because that’s when I woke up from my dream about Papa and me shooting skeet in the lower twenty acres of Aunt Flo’s ranch. I was all in a hot sweat and agitated that something was not right with my world and I couldn’t go back to sleep. My sister Nat came into my room crying, “Frank,”—that’s my name—“something bad has happened, but I don’t know what.” So we got into our street clothes and went out on the porch and just waited, waiting for another shoe to drop. First there was Mama who flat out left our family and took a train off to LA, then there was our dog, Bara, who disappeared into the New Mexico mountains on that excursion with Papa. So there was only Papa left and I knew it had to be bad. Nat was quiet. She’s always the quiet one. The patience of Job. But I will speak about that later, if there is a later.

They said they didn’t find any witnesses and the body was at the morgue for viewing. Soon as the Sheriff and his Idiot Friend left we had Uncle Don drive us out to the site of the car wreck. There are no houses out there. County people seemed to have already done all their work at the site so they were gone. They had dragged the burnt-out shell of the 47 Caddy off the tracks and left it there. But as we drove up, there were three men dressed in army fatigues searching around the wreckage for something, I know not what. I told Don to drive on past and we would come back when they were gone. He drove past about two miles and stopped at a liquor store where he picked up a companion bottle for his buddy Jack Daniels, who always rode shotgun wherever he drove.

The army was gone when we came back. Don stayed in his car with his buddy Jack, while we searched around and finally found some homeless man who lives in the bush half mile up from the accident. Had some trouble breaking his silence until I got one of Uncle Don’s half empty bottles of Jack, and then he opened up like a flower after a spring rain. We didn’t stand too close to him because he stank like rancid salami.

Said he woke up at the sound of the crash, and before it came to a stop, the train took the Caddy up beside his camp. He saw the car collapsed against the front of the Chief, stopped on the tracks. His camp was close, maybe forty yards north of the track. Said he likes to sleep close to the track because the clanging of train wheels lulls him to sleep. Said he saw something that looked like a man all dressed in black strutting around like a raven walk up to the car. He said—

He said to Nat, “Girl or Tom Boy or whatever you are, git me more Jack before I talk more.”

We went back to Don to get some more Jack and about ten minutes later he said this raven searched for something under the carriage of the car, but found nothing. Then he climbed in the car and began searching all around inside and found nothing. After several minutes of searching inside the car, this raven fellow went outside and walked all around the car and up and down the tracks, still searching. He didn't find whatever he was looking for. Then this black raven pulled something with an antennae out of his pocket. After about a minute he climbed back in the car and found something which he put in his pocket. Then he leaned real close like to Papa. Like he was going to bring him back to life, or maybe kiss him; he couldn't tell which. But he claimed he saw some small bolts of electricity jumping around in the car. After a minute or so this raven pulled out a black bag and repeatedly grasped toward something in the air. He said the raven could never get a hold of anything and finally quit and put away his bag.

Then the homeless man held out the empty bottle and said, "No more. I ain't saying no more. As God is my witness I say no more." Then he dropped the bottle and cried, "Now ya git outta here and whatever you are and wherever you git you better carry a Cross wit ya!" I went over to the track where there was still debris and looked at it real close. Like the Coroner said, no blood anywhere. I found the ivory knob for the Caddy stick-shift further up the track where the army missed it and took it with me. Nat asked the homeless man if the Sheriff or anybody talked to him about this and he shook his head and pushed his arm hard in the direction we were to leave him. "When it was done, that raven flew outta here like one of those black birds outta hell." He threw his arm up into the air with a flying away motion. "Now ya git out here!"

And that was that.

No witnesses Mr. Sheriff?

"You incompetent piece of horse turd!" I shouted to the all-knowing railroad tracks. I picked up a large rock from the ground and stepped into a baseball pitch, hurling the rock, with a green tracer following behind it, against an aluminum railroad shed just off the track, causing shovels, track spikes, and sledge hammers to jump high in the air before they crashed back to the ground.

I hadn't done that since the incident at Cocoa Beach the year before. Lot of force. Too bad I was aiming at the signal sign fifteen feet past the destructed railroad shed. Nat just showed her all-knowing smile.

I told Aunt Flo what had transpired at the railroad tracks with the homeless man and the army. She nodded. “You’ve done good. This was not an accident. I don’t know what it was, but I know this is not an accident. And I don’t like the fact that the federal government’s got it’s people out there. It’s just all too strange.”

Papa was one with that old car. He bought it as a present to himself for surviving a Mideast conflict. It was a lotus cream colored convertible that he would drive all over New Mexico. It stood out like its owner and people would ask to have their picture taken in it when the rag top was down.

Papa was born in his Daddy’s ancient Cadillac when our Grandpa Leo was barreling down the road south of Santa Fe with his wife laying stretched out in the back seat holding onto her bed blanket. She was subdued. She was ready. It was a cold winter morning with the gray New Mexico light climbing in the sky and the Caddy hit a bump in the highway, jumped in the air, and when it settled awkwardly back onto the pavement Papa stuck his hand outside of her, as if to gauge the reception. It must have seemed hospitable as he immediately started his passage to the outside world. He was out and taking Grandma's milk before the hospital shown in the headlamps of that old Cadillac. Grandpa Leo, a pediatrician, was so proud that he had his first boy. How do I know all of this? Papa use to tell the story on his birthday. A birthday we will continue to celebrate without his physical presence.

Now he is in what I hope is that place called Heaven. They named him Daniel and he always said it was because they knew he could tame Lions. Maybe so, but Mama is a Lioness.

Aunt Flo had the Cadillac shell put into a spare garage on her property. It was a quiet funeral. His sister was there, some engineers, hunters family friends. Leo was off the coast of Peru on a two month marine biology expedition and we never got a hold of him. After the funeral Flo had Papa cremated and we brought the ashes home. Ten days later we got an invitation in the US Mail that Mama was getting married at some place along the Pacific Ocean in Malibu. The invite must have got lost in the mail, because the wedding date was set five days away. And get this, she is marrying PK Murnau, the Billionaire!

“You kids,” said Aunt Flo. “You go and see your mother is being taken care of. Don will drive you. Take some of your father’s ash to scatter in the Pacific Ocean and here,” she pulled out a small Cross necklace from her compact—the Van Gogh Irises Flower compact that Mama had sent her—“Take his Cross necklace.”

I nodded. The Cross was the one he had made in Kayenta before shipping out to Afghanistan. His Marine buddies all got tattoos on their last leave before shipping out, while he had a Navajo artist fashion him the Cross—his mother was $\frac{1}{4}$ Navajo. He wore it for the duration. He survived intact. Most of the others perished and came home in pieces in body bags.

Now he has joined them.