

FRIED ALLEY CAT

December 22, 1953

I blew into my cold fist as I dodged out of the way of a two-door, hardtop Studebaker. It was a '53 and looked like it had all the bells and whistles—that's what Dad would have said, anyway. He had always wanted a Studebaker, the 1950 bullet-nose Land Cruiser to be exact. Before he went away, he'd confided in me during one of our father and son chats that someday he was going to up and surprise Mom by buying one. I sighed as I watched the automobile maneuver down the snowy alleyway behind Kora's Kountry Kitchen. A lone streetlight blinked on . . . and I realized I was late.

Again.

Mom's imagination would have me finding trouble. I'd promised her that here in Bolton, Idaho, I'd be a good son. And I had every intention of keeping that promise. I was late because I'd stayed after school to clean the chalkboards for Miss White. She couldn't pay much, but I was hopeful I'd earn enough to buy Christmas gifts for my mother and little sister. Plus, working helped keep me out of that trouble I'd promised to avoid. I planned to lie low in this small town and make my mom proud. After all she'd been through, she deserved some happiness.

The snow was about a foot deep in the alley, so I walked in the tire tracks, trying to keep my damp sneakers from becoming even soggy.

"Come on, be lucky, lucky, lucky."

The voice came from beneath the wooden stairs that led to the second-floor back entrance of my apartment. It sounded like my new

friend, Horace Fellows. Before school had let out for the day, I'd heard that Ledge Larken and Hammerhead Wilson were trying to convince Horace to shoot craps with them. As soon as I could, I'd taken Horace aside and made him promise me he wouldn't get trapped into a game. But it sounded like he'd ignored my warning. Despite knowing I should go home, I crept around the stairs to see for myself.

I shoved my hands into my dad's worn denim jacket. Though the coat wasn't very warm, it made me feel as though Dad was with me—plus Mom said it made me look like a young James Dean. Peering under the dark stairwell, I saw Horace, and beside him were Ledge and Hammerhead. Horace was pink with hope as he shook his hand. I heard the clinking of dice.

"Don't drop that!" I said, and Horace stopped mid-shake. His chubby stomach pulled at each buttonhole, straining the seams of his red plaid jacket. Guilt smeared a red flush over his freckled face.

I glared at Ledge. He was thirteen, two years older than Horace and me, and was supposed to be Horace's "good" friend. The problem was, good friends didn't rope their buddies into playing dice. I know, because when I lived in Boise, my troubles started with shooting dice. Wanting to earn money to help Mom, I tried to play the game. But the only thing I managed to earn were her tears when she came to pick me up at the police station.

Ledge's pimply face creased into a grin, reminding me of the boys in Boise and the money I'd lost. Hammerhead stood quietly by. His body was built like a buffalo's—large head, massive shoulders. I'd heard plenty of rumors about him. Some kids said that even though he was only thirteen, he could bend metal with his bare hands.

Ledge tugged on his coat sleeves, which left a good one-inch gap of skin above his gloves. He ignored me, staring at Horace. Hammerhead grunted. "Drop 'em, or I'll win automatically."

Horace peered at me for guidance.

"Do it," Ledge commanded.

Rattled, Horace dropped the dice. Two ones. He turned to Ledge and asked, "What does that mean, huh? Did I win? Did you lose? What?"

"It's snake eyes, you dope. I win." Hammerhead held out his beefy hand. "Now pay up."

Horace dug in his pockets while his nervous eyes panned the area as if in search of an escape route.

“You do have it, don’t you?” Ledge glared at Horace. “You told me you did. It’s only a buck—you’ve got a buck. At least you did before we stopped at the candy store.” Ledge stole a nervous glance at Hammerhead.

I knew Horace had spent his money. My fingers rubbed against the coins in my pocket. Mom had given me some of the money to buy milk for Annie, and the rest was what Miss White had paid me. All totaled, I had a dollar. I knew I should walk away, let Horace get what he deserved, but I couldn’t do that, not to a new friend in a new town where I needed to stay out of trouble.

I pulled the money from my pocket and tossed the coins on the frozen ground near the dice.

“Double or nothing? You can win it all back,” Ledge said eagerly, his voice cracking.

“No!” I glared at Ledge and then Horace as I tried to warn him that this was a no-win situation.

Hammerhead scooped up the money and lumbered away without even a “thank-you” or “see you later.”

“Pa will be looking for me anyways.” Horace gave me a grateful look. And though I was glad I’d helped my new friend, I realized what I’d done—taken gifts from my family and, most importantly, milk from my sick little sister.

A shiver made me pull the denim collar of Dad’s old coat up near my ears.

Ledge grimaced and glared at me. “Just ’cause you moved here from a big city, don’t go thinkin’ you can take my friend away from me.” He tried to stare me down.

Horace wiped his nose on the back of his hand. “Leave him alone.”

I glanced at the wood-slatted stairs over our heads, knowing I didn’t have time to argue with Ledge. I needed to get home—but I couldn’t leave until Horace was safely on his way.

The back door to Kora’s Kountry Kitchen swung open. Light and voices spilled into the alley. We crouched lower into the shadows beneath the stairs. Shooting craps was illegal, and even though I had

nothing to do with this game, I didn't want anyone catching me at the scene of the crime.

"Sheriff Anderson, I know no *alley cats* carried off two cases of my top sirloin. Now, you've got to do something about this." Miss Kora's red hair was twisted on top of her head like a beehive, and sprinkled through the hive were tiny specks of golden glitter. A spit curl seemed glued to each of her cheeks. I'd heard she dressed up for every holiday. In February she wore pink heart earrings and silver sequins in her hair; on the Fourth of July she wore star earrings and red-white-and-blue ribbons. Now her Christmas-bell earrings dangled by her neck and flipped back and forth every time she moved her head.

Sheriff Anderson took his time walking around Kora's back door, studying the lock, testing the doorknob, and touching the frame. His big leather boots crunched in the snow as he moved closer to where Ledge, Horace, and I were hiding.

The sheriff stopped in front of the stairs, though his back was to us. He stood there for a long time studying the restaurant. Then he tugged his sheriff-cowboy hat more snugly on his head. "Well, there are plenty of footprints, but I don't see any cat tracks," he joked as he eyed the door. "Doesn't look like there's been a forced entry."

Zippering up his winter policeman's jacket with star emblems sewn on the sleeves, Sheriff Anderson rubbed his leather-gloved hand over his chin. "Nobody steals in Bolton unless they're starving; then again, if they're hungry, all they have to do is go to the church. Are you sure that meat is missing? Maybe you misplaced it somewhere."

"Sure, I'm always misplacing two cases of prime beef," Miss Kora said, then added, "Do we have to stand in the cold, or did you bring me out here on purpose to warm me up?" She cozied up next to the sheriff.

He stepped away.

"Oh, come on, I could really melt your icicles if you'd let me." She stepped closer to him.

I couldn't believe it. She was going to kiss him right here in front of us.

Holy smokes!

I bit my lips together, but when I looked at Horace and Ledge, all three of us burst out in nervous laughter.

Miss Kora swung around and peered under the stairs. “What are you hoodlums doin’ under there?”

Sheriff Anderson peered down at us as well.

At that moment, I saw the dice on the ground. Horace was closest, but he had no idea the trouble he would be in if the sheriff saw them. Ledge was on the other side of me. No way could he scoop up the dice before they were seen.

As fast as I could, I grabbed them.

“What do you have there?” The lawful grip of Sheriff Anderson latched onto my wrist. His voice was stern but soft enough that only I could hear it.

With the sheriff’s full attention on me, Horace and Ledge took off, like mice being chased by a tomcat. They nearly ran over Miss Kora, and they never looked back. Trapped, I could only watch them disappear into the night.

What had just happened?

I was going to stay out of trouble. I’d only been trying to help a friend, and now . . . now everything was all messed up.

“Is that you, Micah Connors?” Miss Kora stared at me. “No wonder your momma’s late again. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.” She popped her gum. “What were you doing under there anyway? Plotting to steal some meat?”

My heart pounded clear up my throat as a tidal wave of fear washed over me.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. Did you say his name is Micah Connors?” Sheriff Anderson slipped the dice from my fingers without Miss Kora seeing and put them in his pocket.

I was confused. Why didn’t he show Miss Kora the dice? Why did he put them in his pocket? Other cops I’d dealt with would’ve come right out and told the world what they’d just found.

“That’s his name all right.” Miss Kora rubbed her shivering hands over her bare, blue-splotched arms, fighting the cold. “Jiminy, it’s cold.” She noticed the sheriff was waiting for her to tell him more. “While you were out of town, him, his momma, and his little sister moved into my upstairs apartment. His daddy died fightin’ in Korea, and his poor momma tried to find a job in this *won-der-ful* town where no one steals. She couldn’t find no work. The rent was due, so

I told her to come waitress for me, but she's been late most every day 'cause of this little poop. He's supposed to be home babysittin' his sick sister."

"Well, Mr. Connors, sounds like you need an escort home. I'll see he gets there, Kora. You go on in and make sure you lock that back door." The sheriff smiled.

Miss Kora rubbed her palms together. "If meat keeps disappearin' I'll have to fry up some of those alley cats you seem so fond of." She smiled at the sheriff and hurried inside.

At that moment, I'd just as soon have become a fried alley cat as face the law . . . and my mother. I slowly lifted my eyes to look at the sheriff, the weight of the world riding my shoulders. What was this man going to do? And what was I going to tell my mom? After everything I'd put her through, she'd never believe I wasn't playing again.

The sheriff straightened to his skyscraper height. My eyes trailed up his tall, lean frame. He was a Goliath. Feeling like a shrimp, I wet my lips and tried to swallow the prickly thorn of trouble stuck in my throat.

The sheriff glowered down at me. "Now, why don't you explain what you boys were doing under there?"

BRIGHT BEAMS

“It’s like, uh . . . you see, I . . .” What could I say? How could I deny playing when I’d been caught red-handed? But I had no intention of confessing to something I hadn’t done. My future looked bleak. “What are you going to do?” I finally asked and stuffed my hands into my coat pockets.

“I have several options.” The sheriff folded his arms. “It all depends on what you were doing under the stairs.”

“Those boys were playing a game.” I kicked at the snow. “That’s all. Just some kids playing a game. I found them and tried to get Horace to go home—then you came out. Is there something wrong with that?” I hoped telling the truth would count for something.

“And you weren’t playing—you just happened to have the dice in your hand.” The sheriff waited for me to reply. His patience spent, he said, “If you were shooting craps—gambling—do you know what that means?”

I knew all too well, but I wasn’t about to let on to him. I shrugged my shoulders, trying to act clueless.

“Give it up, kid.” The sheriff took the dice out of his pocket. “See, what I have here is evidence that you are guilty of gambling. Gambling at your age is illegal. So, I can either put you in jail or tell your mom. What will it be?”

I didn’t know what to say. My mom had enough problems with Annie’s sickness. No way did I want her to know about this. Inhaling a deep, frustrated breath, I blew it out and said, “Jail.”

“Interesting . . .” The sheriff clicked his tongue, shaking his head. He returned the dice to his coat pocket. “You know anything about

some top sirloin missing from Miss Kora's? As of this moment, you're my number one suspect."

"No, sir! You've gotta believe me. I may have played a few dice games, but that was in my old life—not here! And I've never, ever stolen." My knees felt like they were about to give way. They always acted up when I found myself in a jam.

A broad smile broke over Sheriff Anderson's stone face. He started walking through the snow, down the alleyway toward the front entrance of my apartment. "You *were* shooting craps. No jail for you. We're telling your mom."

"Please," I begged. "I promised her I wouldn't play in this town, and I haven't! You have to believe me, please." He kept walking. I had to say something to make him stop. "It's almost Christmas, and Ma's been working so hard; I just can't disappoint her." My wet tennis shoes were like skates as I tried to keep up with the man who held my fate in his oversized hands.

Sliding around the corner to Main Street, where the street lights shone down on us, I ran smack into someone. Scraggly gray hair poked out below the rim of the old tramp's knit ski cap and hung all the way to the middle of his back.

The old guy's arms flailed as he tried to regain his balance. Something dropped to the ground. I watched as the tramp quickly scrambled to pick up an empty bottle and put it back in his pocket.

"Are you all right, Wolfgang?" Sheriff Anderson knelt beside him. "Haven't been celebrating early, have you?"

"Oh, no, sir. This here's a soda-pop bottle. Just didn't see you two comin', Sheriff. Guess I need to be more careful." His soiled and tattered overcoat looked too heavy for his slumped shoulders.

Wolfgang stood. He was only a foot away from me, and I wished it were farther. His breath smelled of onions and garlic. His square face smiled on me, revealing gaping, brown teeth. When I didn't smile back, the old man's grin turned upside down.

"You need anything?" Sheriff Anderson patted the tramp on his back. "Food? Money?"

"Dadgummit, I'm fine." Wolfgang blushed. "You wouldn't believe the treasures people throw away at the dump." He patted his pocket. "Even pop bottles are worth money."

With the sheriff occupied, I thought I could make my escape. Two more steps, one more step, and I would be out of sight.

“Mr. Connors! It’s not good manners to sneak off when you’re being escorted home.” Sheriff Anderson hadn’t turned to look at me, but I knew if I took one more step I’d be going home in cuffs.

“Looks like you’re busy, Sheriff.” Wolfgang wandered down the alleyway, heading toward Miss Kora’s trash barrels. “Be seeing you around.” He began rummaging through the garbage.

Sheriff Anderson walked past me, heading down the freshly shoveled sidewalk of Main Street. I followed, my head hung low.

The entrance to the front stairs leading up to my apartment was between Kora’s Kountry Kitchen and the Pharaoh Theater. The billboard read, “*Shane*, starring Alan Ladd, Jean Arthur, and Van Heflin.” I really wanted to see that movie. But the tickets cost too much.

Mr. Domingo, the owner of the theater, was bent over his shovel as he scooped snow from the walks. His once-tall body was stooped, his face crinkled like worn leather. I had occasionally said hello in hopes that if I were friendly to him, he might someday give me a free movie pass.

The sheriff stopped and leaned over to say quietly, “Tell you what, kid. I won’t make you fess up to your mom. I won’t even throw you in jail if you’ll work off your crime.”

“How?” I asked warily.

“For the rest of December, I want you to shovel off Mr. Domingo’s and Miss Kora’s sidewalks, each and every morning it snows.”

“What!” My mouth dropped open.

“Lower your voice, young man.” The sheriff’s steely gaze cut my protest short. “You want to talk to your mom?” He started for the door leading to my apartment.

Desperate to stop him, I shouted, “All right, you win!”

The sheriff halted.

I tried to think of a way to turn this in my favor. “I’ll do it, but don’t I get paid something? I mean, that’s a lot of work.”

“No money—in fact, you’re not to tell anyone you shoveled the snow.”

“What!”

“Your voice again, Mr. Connors.” The sheriff’s right eyebrow rose upward. “I want you to pretend to be one of Santa’s little helpers. You

rise and shine bright and early and get your caboose downstairs shoveling.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and then continued. “I’ll be watching. You blow it, and your mom and I have a talk.”

This man was serious. My shoulders slumped. Now, on top of staying up late to watch over Annie, I’d have to get up early and shovel snow—*for free*. I didn’t mind watching my little sister—she had always been and would always be special to me—but I still wasn’t ready to accept my undeserved punishment.

There had to be a way out of this. Grasping at threads of ideas, I finally thought of something. “You know, this was a really good idea and all, but, you see, I don’t have a snow shovel.”

“I’ll bring the shovel, you show up.” Sheriff Anderson opened the door to my building.

“You’re going to watch me work?” I couldn’t move. What was the matter with this guy? Didn’t he have some speeders to catch, some bank robberies to stop?

“I’m at Kora’s every morning for breakfast around six thirty. I’ll come an hour early, just for you.” He motioned for me to go inside.

I stood my ground. “You’re not my boss.”

“I’m the keeper of law and order, and you broke the law. So that makes me your boss, at least for the rest of the month.” He motioned with his gloved hand, directing me into the building. “Come on. I told Miss Kora I’d see you home.”

I closed my eyes. Being punished for something I didn’t do was so unfair. Then I thought of the many times I hadn’t been caught. My gaze slowly climbed up the towering man standing in front of me. I shrugged.

Before I could take a step, the clank of Mr. Domingo’s shovel hitting the ground drew our attention.

Shuffling down the sidewalk to the stoplight, the old man shouted, “Look, Sheriff, there in the intersection. What is that?”

Dark against the snow, some type of shack had been constructed on the island in the intersection. Stranger still, there seemed to be a light coming from within. At first I thought a few last rays of sunlight were bouncing off snow crystals. But this light was far too bright; it shone through the cracks of the building, drawing people’s attention.

Sheriff Anderson forgot me and followed the old, bent man. I couldn't help but trail after them.

Curious onlookers spilled out of Miss Kora's and Gandy's Gas 'N Pump. Even President Wellington of the First National Bank was drawn out to look at the island. The bright beams faded as more people crowded the area.

The sheriff glanced at the planked walls. The roof was as high as his chest. President Wellington rubbed his nose, and his right eye twitched. Miss Kora looked from person to person, her Christmas bell earrings swaying from side to side.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Domingo.

It was obvious what it was. Without thinking, I blurted, "A stable—you know, like in Bible pictures."

The adults stopped and stared at me, the presumptuous new kid.

"Of course! After all, it is Christmas." Sheriff Anderson stepped beside me.

"The question is, Sheriff—" President Wellington sniffed and tried to stop his eye from twitching, then continued, "—who authorized it? This was not brought up in town council meeting. I hope whoever is doing this does not expect the bank to foot the bill."

A buzz of frustrated chatter hummed through the crowd.

Finally, Sheriff Anderson said, "Maybe it's a gift. Let's wait and see what happens. Come on, folks, break it up."

"But what about the light that was shining?" I asked, curious to know where it had come from. "It's gone now, but that's what brought us here."

Everyone stopped and waited for the sheriff's answer.

"Probably just an oncoming car. Let's be on our way." Anderson motioned for everyone to leave.

People slowly abandoned the area.

I stared at the sadly built structure. The beams of light had been shining from the inside—I was sure of it. Car headlights couldn't do that. Something magical had happened here, and yet the only evidence that remained was a sad-looking replica of a stable.

"Mr. Connors." Sheriff Anderson's voice. "I need to take you home."

I gritted my teeth and followed him.