

FATHERS
OF
EDENVILLE
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Black Rose Writing | Texas

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First printing

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ISBN: 978-1-68433-453-7

PUBLISHED BY BLACK ROSE WRITING

www.blackrosewriting.com

Printed in the United States of America

Suggested Retail Price (SRP) \$

Fathers of Edenville is printed in Garamond

*As a planet-friendly publisher, Black Rose Writing does its best to eliminate unnecessary waste to reduce paper usage and energy costs, while never compromising the reading experience. As a result, the final word count vs. page count may not meet common expectations.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

While Tucker visited his father, Shep dug under the fence at Howard's house and ran back to Sylvia and Forty's. When Howard and Mary noticed the dog was missing, they merely assumed Tucker took it with him. They ate breakfast. Mary gathered the laundry to get the washing done early. She thought she would also do Tucker's laundry, so collected his pants and other clothes from his room. She made it a strict habit to check every pocket before putting anything in the washing machine. Out of this automatic routine, she retrieved from his pants pocket an old, yellowed piece of paper. Checking to see if it should be saved or thrown out, she took it upon herself, as part of her task, to read it.

"I'm pregnant. It's true. What'll we do? I need you, Tucker?"

Mary was alarmed by this discovery. The paper and even the writing appeared to be extremely aged. Was it recent? She worried over it. She strived to dismiss it, telling herself it may be a note her brother-in-law hung onto for many years. Although, she thought it very strange he kept it in his pocket. She knew about his escapades in high school, especially with Sylvia.

Tucker may have thought all these years that no one knew of his afternoon walk home from school with Sylvia but, after all, Aunt Justice knew. At the time, Mary worked at the beauty parlor and Justice Walker was one of her regular customers. Women got to talking, while the beautician either cut, colored, or curled their hair. Justice was no stranger to this habit. Since she never married, she had no husband to complain about, as many of the women did. Sylvia gave her aunt plenty to talk about the day after she came home late from school with that look.

"I about *died!*!" Justice was indeed shocked, placing her hand over her heart and pressing it close to her. She continued, "I told myself, 'Justice, you have to do what's right for her,' but just stood there. Well, I thought at first I had seen a ghost. She looked exactly like her mother!" Again, her eyes rolled and her hand pressed against her bosom, for she prepared to tell the worst, "She's no longer a virgin. No man will want her now," and, striking the air before her, said, "thank-goodness, for Fortuitous. He'll do what's right for her. I know I can count on him." To herself, as though many nights had already been spent laying awake, worrying about her niece, she muttered, "She looked exactly like her mother . . . exactly like her mother."

Mary thought the note may have been from the incident Justice Walker believed had occurred. She remembered all too well, while she coiled and pinned and squirted solution over Justice's hair. Sylvia's aunt said more than she deemed appropriate.

"Mary?" Justice continued. "Now, I know you are part of that family, so I'm entrusting you with this mission," as her gloved hand, with finger raised, pointedly instructed Mary, "I need for you to tell your husband—better yet, your father-in-law, to keep that boy away from my Sylvia."

Mary never told Howard or her father-in-law a thing. Instead, she felt sorry for Sylvia that her aunt would go on about her in the most deplorable way. Had she done the right thing back then? Or, should she have done what Justice Walker requested of her? Unable to decide, she began to worry over the whole matter and absentmindedly stuffed all the clothes into the washer, sprinkled in some detergent, closed the lid, and started it up.

She looked out the back window at her husband practicing his golf swing. How could she tell Howard about Tucker and Sylvia now? Definitely not after all these years, though she did not know what else to do. The note burned in her hand like a dirty secret. The longer she held on to it, the more she felt compelled to tell someone. She decided to put it someplace. She pried into Tucker's business long enough, behind his back, no less. Hurrying off to his room, looking over her shoulder, she fretted over where to place it, somewhere where he would find it. Perhaps stuff it back in his pants pocket to be done with it. They were in the wash now and would take time to dry on the clothesline. No, that would not do, she told herself.

Mary struggled with the whole thing, going back and forth in her mind over all the possibilities that would determine her next move. The note could be from anybody, she pointed out to herself, not necessarily from Sylvia. It made more sense to her, the reason he carried it around, that it was not old at all. Combined with the fact he left that morning to pursue her whereabouts, she told herself, the note must really be from Sylvia. Mary could not bear to think about the life of a bachelor, but it dawned on her feminine sensitivities, "Tucker's having an affair with that woman! A married one at that!"

Old or recent no longer mattered. She knew, and even Howard had commented to her the night before, Tucker was in love with Sylvia. He departed that morning to find her wherever she may be. Mary clung to this explanation, secretly being a very romantic woman. She cried watching her love stories on television and thrilled each day her favorite story came on. It was her time, her own, private adventure into the mysterious yearnings of a woman's heart. She would never, ever tell a soul, but she rather enjoyed the fact Tucker playfully dubbed her and her husband, Howard Hughes and Marilyn Monroe.

She tucked the note into her purse and told her husband she had a little errand to run, instructing him to keep an eye on the washer for her while she was out. Having something important to do, she whisked away down the street to tend to the matter as it should have been tended to years ago. First, she went over to the beauty parlor to enlist the aid of a trusted friend.

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Tucker cut through the neighbors' yards to get to Howard and Mary's house, so he missed seeing Mary in the process of carrying out her secret mission. He may not have noticed her anyway, considering his frame of mind. Bearing a heavy burden of responsibility, his father's words weighed heavily on his conscience. "Do what I should have done," but what was that? Tucker supposed his father should have plainly and simply stayed away from Charity Cadwallad—

Tucker impulsively decided to tell Sylvia to her face that he loved her. His date with the pretty young nurse would either have to wait or not happen at all. His date with Destiny was due and he did not want to be late.

Once he entered the back yard, he discovered Shep got out, fairly certain the dog returned to Forty's house, so he let it go for now. More importantly, he needed to ask for his brother's help yet again. They sat together on lawn chairs out in the shady back yard. Howard listened very patiently as Tucker told him everything, about Jim Hart and Sylvia, about their father and Sylvia's mother, all of it. Howard told him he knew about their father's "sneaky business," which were the words he used, in order to maintain his usual sense of propriety. He also pulled out a few stories of his own to share with Tucker. Soon, they laughed over the whole thing. It served to calm Tucker for his arduous and important task ahead.

Working as an insurance salesman, Howard came into contact with all sorts of people. Now, while his clients' personal information demanded confidentiality, he found no reason to prevent him from at least pointing Tucker in the right direction. He also had a car. Before they could leave, Tucker needed to go to his old room where he slept the night before, only telling his brother he needed to gather up his belongings. Once in the bedroom, he began frantically searching for the note, his watch—his clothes! Where did they go?!

Howard told him, Mary probably put them in the wash, adding not to worry about his watch, because she always checked the pockets first. Tucker closed his eyes and wondered when his troubles would end. He checked, neither his watch nor the note could be found, unless—he looked into the small waste basket beneath the table, but . . . nothing. He lifted the lid on the washer and pulled out his dripping pants, checked the pockets and found his watch, ruined! The note he never took the time to read, but seemed important enough for Forty to try and conceal from him, disappeared without a clue. It might have been destroyed in the

washing machine, or—he shuddered to think Mary had taken it. What did it say?! He agonized over it, while Mary, note in hand, walked into town, planning to rectify the mistakes of the past.

Howard drove Tucker into the very next town. He pointed out his insurance office on the main drag. He and Mary used to live in a modest house at the edge of town, until his father entered the rest home. He dropped Tucker off at a trailer park, told him to ask around, while he went over to his office for a bit. Tucker, according to his brother's schedule, had one hour. Afterward, he needed to promptly return home or Mary would start to worry.

Tucker thanked his brother. He easily located the park's office in the trailer situated out front. The manager of the trailer park told him which space number belonged to Robert Cadwallader. Tucker walked down one narrow lane after another, circling around and doubling back, until he finally found the correct space number and the trailer which occupied it. The park, slightly neglected in appearance and a bit run-down, looked well-maintained compared to the trailer in which Sylvia's father lived. He thought it to be the most run-down of them all. Long, brown streaks of rust stains ran down its sides, crab grass grew thick beneath and around it. Soon, the manager came walking up from behind, lamenting over the trailer's condition, the overdue rent, and the owner of it, recently reported missing by friends.

"They told me Caddie never missed a card night. They were worried about the sort of company he's been keeping lately." The park manager shook his head, "I hope nothing happened to him." Standing side by side in the hot sun, he ended the conversation, giving one last comment, "He's such a quiet fella. Keeps to himself. Kinda different, but quiet."

Tucker thanked him and sat down on the rusty metal steps of the trailer, while he thought over what to do. Unable to think

of anything, except to wait by the road for Howard to return, he resigned himself to a long wait in the hot sun, throwing small rocks and pebbles across the street to pass the time. Eventually, Howard pulled up and Tucker got into the car. He told his brother what he learned about Sylvia's father.

Howard knew what he could do. "Call the hospital. See if he's there. Or, you can call the police to find out if he's been picked up. Then, there's always the morgue—"

At the sound of that word, Tucker flashed a look at Howard and exclaimed, "No, not that!"

Howard shrugged his shoulders, unperturbed at the idea of calling a morgue. "Well, you've gotta start someplace, especially if you want to find someone that's—"

"What?" Tucker quickly defended Sylvia's father.

"Well, Tucker, everybody knew he always went a little heavy on the juice," as his hand lifted an imaginary glass to his lips.

"He's Sylvia's father. Think of how she would feel hearing such a thing."

"All right, all right. So, what do you want to do? It's the weekend, but hospitals are always open." He briefly drummed the steering wheel with his fingertips and glanced at Tucker with a teasing smile on his face, evidently enjoying the situation.

"No."

"What? You're not gonna give up are you? You love her, don't you?"

Tucker flashed him another look, this time of surprise. "What do you know about it?"

"Aw, come on, little brother. It's obvious. Why, you two were quite an item as kids." This time Howard actually guffawed.

Tucker did not find it very amusing. "Let's go home. I've had enough. It's all getting very discouraging. I don't need your teasing, either."

Howard pulled onto the highway and drove off, looking straight ahead at the road, trying his best not to grin and smirk, because he enjoyed having fun for a change. Eventually, he settled down and merely drove them home.

Tucker sat quietly all the while, feeling more pathetic about his feelings for Sylvia than he did after the deputy told him he behaved like a guilty man.

"I-I feel like I've gotten off track, or something. I'm going about things all wrong." He suddenly remembered something. "Wait! Stop!"

Howard immediately pulled off the road and stopped. Tucker sat there, one hand braced against the dashboard, the other against the door as though prepared to jump out. Howard sat waiting and grinning, tickled at the sight.

"Well, now, you aren't going to just sit there like that, are you? What is it?"

Tucker remembered he planned to look for Sylvia. She may have visited the trailer park or had yet to arrive. He could go back and—

"Oh, nothing," and relaxed. "Let's go home."

They continued their drive home in silence. Howard dropped Tucker off at his own house, then went on home, himself. Tucker felt thoroughly defeated. He chose to give the matter some time. Monday, he agreed with his brother, might prove a better time to be conducting a search. If he did not hear anything by then, he promised himself to take action. Until then, he tried to enjoy the rest of the weekend, the last day and a half of his very strange vacation.