

Chapter 4

“Let’s go Dave, it’s time to Go”. Taylor called out across the yard to her son.

Immediately, the eight year old sprang from the swing set and broke into a sprint headed for the Tahoe.

“Looks just like his ol’ man!” came a voice from the neighbor’s yard. It was Fred Biff, their neighbor, who was also the head basketball coach at RC. Fred grew up with Paul’s mother and were part of the same parish since they were children.

“Tell me about it!” Taylor answered. “I can’t keep up with either of them.”

“Heading out to see Rose?” Fred asked.

“Yes.” answered Taylor. “The home just called and said she started talking briefly this morning.”

“Really? That’s great.” said Fred.

“Yeah, Who knows...They said she seemed alert and coherent”, Taylor answered with a slight break in her voice. “I just thought I would go and see if David could get a glimpse of the “old” Rose Irwin.”

“I hope he can.” said Fred. “She was something, that Rose. I remember the day she got the news of Paul senior’s death. She was so strong....so very strong! She’s been through so much.”

PJ stood for “Paul James”; Paul senior was his father. In August of 1969, a telegram was sent to Rose Irwin informing her that her husband had been killed in Vietnam. He was only 28 years old when enemy fire brought down the helicopter he was in. Rose read the letter while holding PJ, only 3 months old at the time. Ever since then, Rose was both, the father and mother in PJ’s life. Rose ran the local playground when PJ was a

kid. Fred was there the day, Ralph Barrack, picked a fight with PJ. Barrack told PJ he was going to pound the shit out of him when he left the playground. PJ retreated over to his mom and told her of the impending doom. She told him to remember to lead with his left. PJ did, and the Bully of New York Avenue was deflated. Rose was PJ's source of strength. She was the person that molded him. PJ said he could not imagine not having her around. He knew that, soon, he would have to face this reality.

Taylor felt uncomfortable whenever she visited the Rosemont Nursing Home. It was located in West Orange, New Jersey in a beautifully serene setting. The property was surrounded by a stone wall that revealed little of the grounds inside. The driveway immediately inside the gate wound for about a half mile bordered on both sides by dense evergreens. As the main building broke into view, Taylor immediately noticed a myriad of lonely eyes peering through windows of rooms occupied by guests of the nursing home. "Sad," she thought.

As she parked the car she glanced up towards Rose's window. For a moment she thought she saw someone looking out towards them, but she wasn't sure. As she brought the car to a halt in the visitor lot, she looked back again towards Rose's window, but this time, there did not appear to be anyone there. "Wishful thinking," she thought, "I'd love to be able to tell PJ I had spoken with his mother today"!

As Taylor and David entered the lobby, two of the local female residents noticed David and smiled at him. David was a shy boy and moved behind his mother in response to the smiles. Taylor smiled and said "Hello, this is David, he's a little shy". The women, both in their 80's, giggled and craned their necks to get another look at David. Blushing, David rolled his eyes back into his head and said, "Com'on mom, let's go see grammy!".

Taylor chuckled and said “Ok, let’s go! See you gals later!”

As they entered Rose’s room, they found her sitting on the edge of her bed. When Rose looked towards them they noticed that her eyes were wide open, but red and tear stained, as if she had been crying. Just then, Dr. Mass entered the room. “I am so glad you were able to make it, Taylor” Dr. Mass said. “She seems to be very upset today. More flashbacks to Paul’s last moments in Vietnam. I thought you may be able to help comfort her”, he added.

With that, Dr. Mass patted David on the head, and left to continue with the rest of his rounds.

“Hello Rose”, Taylor opened, “How are you today?”

Rose lifted her head up slowly and gazed towards the window for a few moments. As she turned back towards Taylor, her shoulders slumped and her eyes welled up with tears. She reached out towards Taylor, and the two embraced.

“Paul has been in a terrible accident”, she said. “He’s been hurt very badly....his head is bleeding”, she added as she started to cry a little harder. “Lot’s of twisted wreckage...”, She groaned.

Taylor’s eyes filled with tears as she hugged Rose. “How tough it must be to lose the only man she ever loved”, Taylor thought. For the last 30 years these nightmares have been haunting her. The re-living of the helicopter crash ... the notification of her husband/s death...the funeral she attended with her son, PJ, or “little Paul ” as she liked to refer to him.

Taylor wished she could find the right words of consolation, but they just were not there. Instead, she simply held Rose in her arms until she had grown too weary to sit up any longer. As she helped Rose into bed, David continued to play with a ball he had smuggled into

the Nursing home. Taylor wiped the tears from Rose's cheeks and then kissed her.

"Come on Dave", Taylor said. "Grammy's needs her rest."

As they headed down the hallway towards the lobby, David turned back when he realized he had left his ball in Rose's room. "I'll be right back mom", Dave said, "I left my ball in Grammy's room." He sped off down the hall to her room and disappeared inside.

While Taylor waited near the lobby, David slowly tiptoed towards the table next to Grammy's bed. There was his ball right on the table where he had left it. As he reached up towards the ball, David was startled by the sound of his Grandmother's voice.

"My Paul...My little Paul...He's been hurt", she groaned. "Please tell your mommy to go to him", she added.

David stared at her for a moment and then ran out of the room and back down the hall.

"Mommy, Mommy", he called out.

"Shush"! she replied. "Some people are trying to rest right now"! she added.

As they drove home Taylor tried to explain to David what had just taken place. She told David about his grandfather and how he lost his life in the war in a helicopter crash. She explained that his grandmother had flashbacks and dreams about the tragedy.

"Was grandpa short?" David asked. Surprised by the question, Taylor fought back the giggles as she turned and looked at the boy. "Why no...I don't think so." She answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Because when I went back to her room to get the ball she said 'little Paul' had been hurt," he remarked.

"Hmmm", I don't know David...I don't think he was short", she replied as a strange uneasiness fell upon her.

“Come on, let’s get home and wait for Daddy to call us from camp.”

Chapter 5

When they returned home, Taylor noticed the red light flashing on the answering machine. It was indicating that 3 messages were received.

“I’m going to play Nintendo”, David shouted as he ran into the family room.

Taylor pressed the playback button on the answering machine. The first message was from Taylor’s friend, Bea Strong. She had just gotten tickets to see Jackson Browne at the Garden State Arts Center and she wanted to know if PJ and her were interested in going. “Well, that’s a dumb question...” Taylor giggled, “PJ owns every Jackson Browne album ever made...including a few bootleg albums. He wouldn’t miss an opportunity to see Jackson Browne ...NEVER!”

The second message was apparently a wrong number. ...a young boy, perhaps a teenager, leaving a message for a friend....”The long green line ...” he whispered. “It will be beautiful, man, beautiful!” He added. “...And you won’t regret it...we promise!” and then there was silence.

The third message caught Taylor off guard as she entered David’s room to collect a load of clothes for the wash. “Hello Taylor...This is Dr. Alonso with the South Sterling Medical Center ” the caller opened as Taylor rushed in to the den to hear the rest of the message. “This call concerns your husband, PJ. No reason to be alarmed,

however, it would be best if you could call me at 717-555-8956 when you receive this message.

Taylor immediately dialed the number and impatiently waited for the phone to be answered. "I hope it's not another bout with Kidney Stones" Taylor thought. Ever since PJ eliminated the caffeine from his diet, he hadn't had any more problems with them...however, the stress of unemployment could be a trigger.

"Good Afternoon, South Sterling Medical Center...How may I address your call?" a hurried operator squawked from the other end.

"Yes...I'd like to speak with Dr. Alonso, please." Taylor asked.

"Hold on while I page him." The operator responded.

The silence was deafening and Taylor's palms began to sweat. Taylor loved PJ to pieces. Some years earlier PJ was diagnosed with high blood pressure and high cholesterol. He had briefly given up running in his mid twenties and his weight ballooned. After his friend Kevin died of a heart attack at age 37, PJ decided to change his lifestyle and take up running again. Ever since, he has been a picture of health...except for the kidney stones.

"Hello...This is Dr. Alonso." a voice bellowed from the receiver.

"Hello...Dr. Alonso, ...My name is Taylor Irwin and I am returning you call regarding my Husband, PJ." Taylor replied. "You called earlier about..." she started to add.

"Oh yes, our runner friend." the kind doctor responded in a not so friendly way. "Well he took a bad fall and he's a little cut up...nothing severe, but, he has suffered a minor concussion and it would be best if someone could come and take him home. I don't think he should be behind the wheel of a car."

"You're sure he's ok?" Taylor asked in a worried tone.

“He’s fine...” the doctor answered. “When can we expect someone to pick him up?” he added.

“I can be there in about 3 hours,” Taylor lamented.

“Good...I’ll forward you to the courtesy desk and they can provide you with directions”, Dr. Alonso said as he switched the phone over to the operator.

“Courtesy Desk?” Taylor thought, “I hope they can help me with directions!”

After a small search to locate David, the two of them set out in the Tahoe to retrieve PJ. Along the way Taylor realized that she probably should have called PJ’s room to talk to him. She recounted what the doctor had said to her and she realized that she did not know the nature of the *cuts and bruises* PJ had.

“Mom?” David asked.

“What, Hon?” Taylor answered as she glanced over at him.

“Do you think Nike will get into Fred’s garbage while we are gone?” he asked with a grin.

“Oh shi...!” Taylor quipped. Nike was their springer spaniel. Six years old, 65 pounds, and hyper beyond belief. A week ago, he got into the neighbors garbage and left a trail of it leading directly to their house. It took Taylor two hours to clean up the mess before Fred returned home.

Lately, the dog seemed to be acting up quite a bit. First the garbage, then he went off into the woods and rolled around in a dead deer carcass. Taylor grinned as she recalled how PJ ran up and tackled the dog in a playful way only to realize the dog smelled like decaying flesh. Nike kept jumping on PJ until finally PJ was able to get out some soap and the hose and clean the dog up. The whole time PJ kept complaining about what a “smelly bastard” Nike was. It was comical watching the two of them.

“If he does...”, Taylor turned her attention back to David again, “then we’ll just have to ask Daddy to clean it up this time.”

“If he isn’t hurt to bad,” David added.

Taylor noticed the concern in David’s expression and assured him that the doctor said it was minor. But in her own mind, she wondered.

As Taylor continued her drive up Route 206, she remembered another Nike incident that PJ witnessed two weeks earlier. It was about 6 PM and PJ had left for a run at Warinanco Park. PJ had just passed a group of local runners that were in various degrees of warming up. Suddenly, out of nowhere comes Nike running across the football field directly towards the runners. He stopped and eagerly accepted the petting from the group. Then, as he turned to leave, he took hold of one of the runners shoes that was laying loose on the ground and ran off. As he sped out of site with the irate runner’s shoe, PJ decided to lay low and not let on that the dog was his. Later that evening when PJ returned home, he came across the shoe laying on the front porch of the house. The shoe was a Nike Oregon Waffle model, popular in the seventies, and still in pretty decent condition. “Nike probably did this guy a favor”, PJ told Taylor that evening. “They have much better shoes nowadays.

Taylor crossed over the Delaware River into Milford, Pa at approximately 5:30 PM. David was squirming a bit and she knew she better stop to use the restroom somewhere. She pulled the Tahoe over at a Getty station in Milford across the street from the Hoagies and Grinders Hut where she and PJ had their first lunch together. Back when they first started dating they used to go camping in the Poconos during their summers. PJ loved running in the mountains, and Taylor just loved the quiet times together with him.

A bell rang as Taylor entered the station and pulled up to the pump. An elderly attendant with a handlebar mustache approached the car.

“What’ll it be young lady?” he asked with a smile.

“Uh...fill it up, please”, Taylor answered. “And... may we use your restroom?” Taylor asked while nodding towards David as he emerged from the car.

“Oh yes, go right ahead”, the attendant responded with a slight laugh. “The key is in the office on the counter.” He added.

Taylor nodded and headed toward the office with David at her side. Upon entering the office, Taylor immediately picked up the odor of the attendants half-eaten Italian sub sandwich that was sitting next to the keys.

“I’m hungry mom,” David said noticing the sandwich on the counter.

“Me too Dave”, Taylor replied as she reached for the keys on the counter. “But we are in a hurry to pick up daddy. We’ll just grab some snacks when we leave.” She added as she pointed to a display case with chips, pretzels, and other junk food.

David’s eyes widened when he noticed a box of his favorite cookies. “Great mom,” he cheered, “they have Mallomars!”

“Wonderful,” Taylor mumbled as she led him out and around the side of the building.

Taylor waited outside as David went into the vacant restroom. “Make sure you wash your hands,” she told him.

“Yes mom,” he answered as he closed the door behind him.

David had recently graduated from toilet to urinal, but this was the first time he would use the urinal without dad being nearby. As he fumbled with his fly, he glanced

around the room taking in the array of graffiti that had been deposited over the ages. He noticed one that said *Milton High School Sucks!* “I hope I don’t ever go to that school,” he thought, as if the graffiti was written to inform him of important news items.

Above the mirror he noticed a poem that some scholar from yesteryear had left. *There I sat broken hearted...tried to shit but only farted...* it read in thick black ink. David giggled when he read it. He could never swear at home and reading it in the privacy of the Getty station restroom had him feeling as if he was getting away with something.

“David! Are you almost done in there?” Taylor’s voice emerged from outside the restroom.

“I’ll be done in a second mom”, David said as he hurriedly finished unzipping and started to relieve himself. As David methodically wet down the entire backside of the urinal, his eyes moved towards some tiny graffiti that was written on the grout between some ceramic tile bordering the urinal. When he finished peeing, he moved closer towards the tile so that he could read the tiny message. He squinted as he read the words that were written in faded blue ink. *David... it read. ...always remember ... the answer is blowing in the wind.* David turned his head at an angle so that he could read the remaining few words that ran vertically down the tile grout... *and help your mom feed Nike every once in a while!*

David dashed out of the restroom, eyes wide with an eagerness to share what he had just read with his mom. As his eyes glanced around to where she was he suddenly noticed she was holding a chocolate ice cream cone in her hands. She motioned for him to come and take it while she continued to pay the cash registered. A few moments later he was face deep in Hershey’s best and he had

completely forgotten about what he had read on the men's room wall.

Chapter 6

The rest of the trip to South Sterling, Pennsylvania was quite uneventful. David had fallen asleep shortly after finishing the ice cream cone. Taylor entertained herself by flipping through the radio stations in search of something that was not country music or news.

The South Sterling Medical Center was a rag tag collection of buildings of different shapes and sizes. The majority of the buildings were of red brick construction from, most likely, the early 1900's. The largest building had a more modern, glass solarium selection which appeared to be the main entrance. Taylor parked in the visitor's parking lot that was located immediately in front of the building.

"Com'on David...let's get up...we're here", Taylor whispered to David as she gently woke him.

David smiled as he focused on Taylor and then realized where he was. "Let's go get Daddy!", he exclaimed as he grabbed for the door handle.

Taylor quickly exited her side of the Tahoe and ran around and grabbed David's hand. He tried to pull free, but to no avail.

As they entered the building, Taylor noticed how busy this place, which appeared to be in the middle of nowhere, actually was. She noticed what appeared to be an information desk and she headed towards it. Just then, the emergency room entrance door flew open and two paramedics rushed in with a patient on a stretcher.

“Mary, we’ve got another client from Paintball Express,” the lead paramedic shouted.

“Okay, Tom”, a nurse in the emergency treatment area responded, “ put him in ER 4”.

“That’s the 4th one today”, the receptionist behind the counter said to Taylor as their eyes met. “That paintball place should have been closed down months ago!” she added. “Anyway, how can I help you,” she asked.

“I’m here to pick up my husband, PJ Irwin”, she answered.

“Oh yes, the runner with the concussion”, the receptionist answered. “He’s in Room 327...I think the doctor wants to speak with him before he leaves. I’ll let the doctor know you are here. Meahwhile, you can take the elevator to the 3rd floor and meet him in his room”.

David Smiled. “Oh boy”, he thought....”I love elevator rides!”

As Taylor exited the elevator on the 3rd floor, she again noticed how busy the hospital appeared to be. She walked slowly down the corridor until she came to room 327. As she poked her head in she saw PJ sleeping in bed near the window. He was the only one in the room. As she drew closer she noticed a slight abrasion on his forehead in the shape of a diagonal line running down through his eyebrow,...and continuing across his lower lip. She also noticed a similar slice in his chest....a long scratch, as if something slashed across his forehead, lip, and chest in one swoop.

“Is he asleep mommy?” David asked.

“Taylor?” PJ muttered.

“Yes honey, it’s me.” she replied. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh Taylor...”, he moaned. “It was all my fault.” He cried.

“What was all your fault?” she asked in a surprised tone.

“I caused the accident.... I killed them!” he started to cry.

“What?!” Taylor asked. “What accident?”

PJ looked at David and then back to Taylor. “The bus accident...the runners that were killed...I walked out in front of their bus early this morning and caused the bus to divert off the road.” He said as he tried to control his sobs.

“Whaaa..?” Taylor gasped. She had been told nothing of this on the phone.

“I’ve asked for an update on their condition...I asked if anyone survived”, PJ added. “But no one will give me a straight answer. I’ve got to know....my friggin head is killing me!”

Taylor dashed from the room and grabbed an intern that was walking past the nurses station. “What happened to the kids on the bus?” Taylor demanded.

“You must be Mr. Irwin’s wife”, the intern interjected with a grin appearing on his face. “I told your husband at least three times that there was NO BUS ACCIDENT.”

“What do you mean”, Taylor asked. He said he caused a bus accident....Taylor added before being cut off by the intern.

“I know Mrs. Irwin,” the intern said politely, “but it never really happened. Your husband was running before dawn, in the fog I might add, and ran into a steel utility pole support cable.”

“Is that why he has the racing stripe on his forehead and chest”? Taylor asked.

“Exactly,” the intern answered with a chuckle.

“He’s going to be alright”, the intern added. “Luckily for him, my neighbor likes to walk his chihuahua in the early morning”, he added. “He found your husband

unconscious in the middle of the road”, above the campground. “In a way, your husband owes his life to my neighbor’s chihuahua because that little rascal was up barking and wanting to go for a walk early this morning.” the intern joked. He then added, “When people suffer a blow to the forehead like he did, they often wake up with memory loss or speaking of visions and dreams”, the intern explained. “It is usually only a short term issue and nothing to worry about”, he added. “Trust me...he will be alright”.

Taylor felt relieved and got up to go back to PJ’s room. “Can he go home with us tonight”? she asked.

“Of course, but he can’t drive”, the intern answered, “he’s on some pretty strong pain killers right now”.

“So what did you find out”? PJ asked as Taylor entered the room.

“I found out you were most likely dreaming with regards to the bus accident” Taylor answered with a laugh.

“That’s what the doctor said, ...but I was there...I saw it all!” PJ barked back.

“PJ...relax”, Taylor answered, “ you whacked your head pretty hard and were out cold for a while. A local found you lying on the road above the campground” Taylor explained. “You apparently ran into a steel utility cable and knocked yourself out”, she added.

As Taylor reached inside her purse she asked PJ “Don’t you remember any of this?”

She pulled a compact mirror out of her purse and held it so that PJ could see the cut on his forehead, eyebrow and lip. “These cuts match the slice on your chest” she pointed out.

PJ studied the image in the mirror and the cut on his chest. “I see...”, he said in a relieved tone. “So there was no bus accident”.

“Nope!” Taylor replied. “Just a downed marathoner” she joked.

“I may be down...but not for long.” He added. “I got Sayed and the Open 5K Championship to prepare for.” And with that, PJ jumped out of bed...grabbed his head for a moment, then looked at David and patted him on the head.

“Com’on champ”, PJ said to David, “Let’s blow this pop joint!”

David smiled and helped his dad gather his things for the ride home.

“As they exited the hospital, PJ looked back at the building. He stopped briefly and hugged Taylor. He whispered into her ear in a cracking voice, “It was just so real...I...I’m so relieved”.

Taylor could feel his weight shift and his knees buckle slightly. She helped him to the car and they were soon on the way home. Along the way she mentioned the hero Chihuahua to PJ. He just moaned and shook his head.

Chapter 7

The ride home was a quiet one with both PJ and David sleeping most of the way. Taylor passed the time by listening to the latest Stephen King novel on cassette. She was an avid fan of the great horror writer.

As she turned onto Delaware Avenue near Rosedale Park, the cassette tape came to the end and automatically ejected and the radio started to play a song by Paul McCartney and Wings called “Band on the Run”. PJ always kept the radio station in the Tahoe set at 103.5, a seventies station. Taylor looked over at the sleeping PJ, smiled, and switched to 98.5 in time to hear the tail end of the latest Sting ballad.

As Taylor pulled into the driveway of their house, she stopped to get the mail out of the mailbox on the other side of the road. As she started to cross back across the roadway, she noticed a group of young men running down the street. As they passed, she was impressed as to how fit they were..and how extremely quiet they were. She couldn’t even hear their footsteps as they passed by. Her eyes met the lead runner’s as they passed.

“Hello Mrs. Irwin,” he said, taking Taylor by surprise.

“Huh?..Uh...Hi,” she returned as she watched them go by.

“Cute looking bunch”, she thought.

“And how quiet they run...like Kenyans.” she added.

As Taylor hopped back into the Tahoe, PJ woke up from his nap.

“How’ya feeling?” Taylor asked.

“Ugh..”, he replied

“Do you know those runners?” Taylor asked PJ.

Taylor motioned behind her up towards the road winding passed their house. PJ looked but saw no one.

“What runners?” he asked.

Taylor looked back in the mirror and could see no one, either. "They must have already passed over the rise in front of Weidels house", she remarked.

"Were they that local group of masters runners?" PJ asked. "That's what I need... a little more age group competition."

"No", Taylor answered. "They looked like high school or college age...kind of cute...nice form."

"Nice form..." PJ teased..." from the rear view I bet!" he added with a raised brow.

"Oh hush" Taylor snapped back playfully.

As she continued up the driveway, Taylor spied the western edge of their property. It was an open field with a view of Pleasant Valley Road approximately 1200 meters from the driveway. She knew this because PJ would use this stretch of road to do threshold level repeats of 1200 meters. She slowly inched the car towards the house while she tried to catch one last glimpse of the runners.

"Com'on ...show yourselves..." she thought to herself.

"Hey...how about parking this thing....I gotta piss! PJ blurted out."

"Strangest thing", Taylor remarked.

"What's that?" PJ asked.

"Those runners...I thought we'd see them over there by now!" she remarked and pointed past the Weidel's place.

"They were probably trail runners and entered the woods at the Baldpate Trail." PJ replied.

"Oh yeah...I forgot about that." Taylor said as she came to a stop and put the car in park. The Baldpate Trail was a beautiful trail through the old Kyzer Estate. The Kyzers had donated the land to the township with the stipulation that it remain undeveloped. The entrance to the trail was about 400 meters up the road from the Irwin

house. Taylor enjoyed running on this trail with Nike. Approximately a mile and a half into the trail there is a small clearing with some abandoned buildings and a pond. Nike loved to take a dip in the pond while Taylor would stop and stretch. On occasion, Taylor would invite PJ for a “run in the woods”. Undoubtedly these dashes would always end up with an escapade inside one of the abandoned buildings. On one occasion, a bare-assed PJ nearly got to meet the groundskeeper for the place. Fortunately, a scantily clad Taylor ran interference while PJ finished dressing and slinked out the back of the building and dashed off into the woods.