



CHAPTER ONE

“Because there is really nothing in your three-dimensional world that can help you to understand completely who and what I am, you all try to figure me out in different ways. However, of all the ways human beings perceive me, or the names they call me, the Eternal Life Force – or the ELF – is the closest to what I really am. I am the Force that creates and sustains all life, and I am eternal.”

The ELF

Tony Celentano stepped onto the balcony of his eleventh floor condominium just as dawn was breaking over Tampa Bay. He stood still for a minute, testing the outside temperature, still dressed in the black silk boxers and T-shirt he’d worn to bed. The morning air was clear and cool but comfortable enough, he decided. He set his coffee mug onto the glass-topped table, settled his body easily into a canvas deck chair, and stretched out his long legs.

He looked out with some interest at an all-grey world. As the light slowly began to creep through the inky night sky, the dim outlines of the buildings he could see were shrouded in grey, the mist rising from the waters of the bay was grey, and because he wasn’t yet totally awake, even his thoughts were grey. He found it comforting. His whole world was still shrouded in possibilities.

Tony let his mind drift to nothing in particular until the sun came closer to the horizon and brilliant colors overtook the sky, reflecting down onto the water and turning the bay pink. Looking toward the east along the coast line of Tampa Bay, he could see the St. Petersburg Pier, and farther south, Al Lang Field and Alfred Whitted Airport. He could even see the stack of a cargo ship docked at Bayboro Harbor.

There was some local color associated with those landmarks. The first scheduled commercial airline flight took off from Alfred

Whitted in 1914, carrying the United States mail to Tampa in just twenty-three minutes. Tony could remember how a local pilot had proudly told him about that when his fourth-grade class visited the airport on a field trip. And then when they were in their teens, he and his best friend Frankie Doerrer had gone down to Bayboro Harbor to watch Jacques Cousteau's famous ship, Calypso being refitted for its next great exploration. Just last year, Tony and his Dad had toured the 'Tall Ship', The Bounty, while it docked for a month at The Pier. That was the vessel that was used in the filming of both the *Mutiny on the Bounty* with Marlon Brando, which was one of his father's favorite movies and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* with Johnny Depp, which was one of his.

Looking down from his balcony to the west, Tony could see the city of St. Petersburg coming awake before his eyes. The morning light tripped the sensors on the city street lights and traffic began to move slowly. Those who had worked all night were heading home. Others were getting an early start on their workday. He could hear the whooshing of brakes from a city bus and dim voices on the street below him.

Tony closed his eyes and opened his mind and his heart to memories he seldom bothered to visit anymore. On this particular morning, when so many things about his life were changing, he wanted to remember clearly how he got to where he was, hoping that it would help him see clearly where he should go next.



Tony's first conscious memory was on the day of his eighth birthday. He knew that most people could remember farther back than that, and occasionally a shadowy picture of some earlier event would play at the back of his mind, but his first clear memory took place a little more than thirty years ago, on March 6, 1980. That was the day that the Celentano family moved into their own house.

It was a two-story, white frame house, with a shallow front yard and a wide, welcoming front porch. The street, like many in the northeast section of St. Petersburg, was made of brick, and the sidewalks were formed from hexagonal tiles that zigzagged for blocks. There was a back yard with a clothesline, he remembered, and plenty of room for him to play catch with his dog, Lazy. An alley ran behind the house, and a single-car garage faced the alley. The family didn't own a car, but Tony figured he could keep his bike in there.

Tony's mother was visibly excited and his father quietly proud as they led him from room to room, telling him all the plans they had to turn the house that looked so huge to Tony into their new family home.

Because they had moved from a very small apartment, the furniture which had been delivered that morning was scattered sparingly throughout the large space, and most of the rooms either were, or appeared to be, empty. But when his parents took him upstairs to see his room, he discovered that for his birthday, his parents had bought him a new bed, a new dresser, a new desk and even a bed for Lazy. Even better, his father told him he could choose any paint color he wanted for his room and that together they would paint the walls that same afternoon.

He and his father, Luca, took a bus to the paint store, and after looking at dozens of samples, Tony chose a color called Sailor Blue. Then, just as his father had promised, because his father never broke a promise, Tony went to sleep that night in his new bed, in his new room, in his new house; happily inhaling Sailor Blue paint fumes from the walls they had just finished painting.

The next weekend, his mother sewed bright red curtains for the windows and a blue bedspread with sailboats on it for his bed. It was the last time Tony could remember that his whole family's attention was focused on him.

He didn't remember anything about how the rest of the house

got furnished or decorated, except for Denny's room. Tony's mother was pregnant when they had moved into the new house, and his little brother Denny was born shortly after Tony and his father had finished painting the baby's room Sunshine Yellow.

Funny how little details like those paint colors stick in your mind for thirty years, Tony thought, but those were the happy years, so he probably clung to every memory he could.

Denny was blonde and blue-eyed like his mother, while Tony had dark hair and black-olive eyes like his father. Tony simply adored Denny and never got tired of entertaining him. As soon as Denny got old enough to toddle, he and his brother were inseparable playmates. Whenever Tony wasn't in school, he was playing with Denny. Right up until the day Denny got killed. Tony's stomach knotted the way it always did when he remembered that day.

Whenever the weather was nice enough, which in St. Petersburg was most of the time, at about four-thirty in the afternoon, he and his mother and Denny would go out to the front yard and play in the grass while they waited for his father to come home. Luca Celentano never did like to drive a car, so he took the bus down Fourth Street every day to his job at The St. Petersburg Morning News and back home again at night. Like clockwork, every night at five-fifteen his father would come strolling down the street, whistling. People watching him would always say, "There goes Luca Celentano. Now that's a happy man."

It was a beautiful spring day, and Tony had been sitting in the grass, rolling a ball back and forth with Denny, who sat across from him grinning from ear to her. His mother sat with them, clapping for Denny every time he caught the ball.

They heard the phone ring, and his mother took his place in Denny's game while Tony ran into the house to answer the phone. It was a wrong number. He was just telling the caller, "Don't worry about it," when he heard the first squeal of brakes, then the second, and then his mother's blood-curdling scream.

By the time he got to the street, he could see his brother and his dog lying lifelessly on the bricks, about six feet apart. His mother was bent over Denny, crying hysterically, and his father was running toward them, full-bore, from a block away.

Before Tony could even talk to anyone he loved or see his brother one more time, a neighbor whisked him away from the scene and into her house, where he stayed for what seemed like forever. The worst part was that no one would tell him exactly why Denny and Lazy were in the middle of the street or why they were dead.

Finally, almost a week later, his father picked him up and took him home, and then Luca told Tony what he just barely had been able to figure out himself. Apparently, Lazy had come into the front yard just as Tony went into the house to answer the phone. Denny and his mother were sitting on the lawn, petting Lazy, when a squirrel ran down a tree into the yard. Lazy took off after the squirrel, and before his mother could even move, Denny ran after the dog, directly into the path of a delivery van. The impact threw Denny high into the air, and he died the minute his little body hit the street, just seconds after a car going in the other direction had hit and killed Lazy.

Tony was ten when that happened, and life from then on was as different from the life he had known before as a little boy's life could possibly be. Now, at almost forty, Tony understood that shock and grief could change a person in an instant, but he certainly hadn't known anything about that then. He hadn't understood why, in a matter of just a few minutes, he had lost his mother, his brother and his dog all at one time.

Oh, his mother was still with them physically, but mentally and emotionally she was a whole new person after Denny was killed. Day after day and night after night, she was angry, crude and violent, and if she wasn't any of those things, she was so exhausted from her constant tirades, she was dead asleep.

Countless trips to countless hospitals, recovery centers, and

mental health programs had failed to pierce the veil of guilt and blame with which she fortified herself, guilt and blame enough to go around for herself, for Tony, for the dog, for the squirrel, for the van driver and for some reason, especially for Luca.

From the day of the accident on, Luca simply did all that he could to cope with the hand he had been dealt, and if you asked Tony, his father was a candidate for canonization.

For eight long years, Tony had watched his father withstand his mother's relentless rage and do all he could at the same time to provide some sort of sensible life for himself and for Tony. They never could figure out why, although she yelled at Tony whenever he was in the house, it was to Luca that she did much worse. In an instant, she would fly into a rage and begin pitching things, lamps, dishes, kitchen utensils and furniture, and she always aimed them at Luca. Luca was consistently black and blue somewhere on his body, but he never did anything but try to sooth her when she was in a rage.

He also never let her uproarious temper tantrums stop him from doing anything that had to be done. Luca went to work at the same time every day, came home at the same time every night and, with Tony's help, saw that they were all decently fed and clothed in clean clothes. They always slept on clean sheets and lived in a clean house.

Luca helped Tony with his homework whenever he needed him to and he went to most of Tony's basketball and baseball games and weight lifting tournaments, but at the end of every day when all was done that had needed to be done and Tony's mother was finally asleep, Luca would shut himself in his study with his books, his television and his knitting until it was time to go to bed. The next morning, he would begin a new day without complaint, a day that Luca could count on to be pretty much like all the days before and all the days to come for as far as he could see into his future.

Tony found out later that while all the drama was playing out at home, at work Luca was climbing an invisible corporate ladder. Luca had started working in the print room of The Morning News

when he graduated from high school at the age of eighteen, sweeping floors and helping to roll the huge rolls of newsprint into place on the presses. He had done this job with care, but he had watched and learned and eventually was able to repair the huge presses when they broke down.

The Morning News was a family-owned company that was as loyal to its employees as they were to the paper, itself, so when his supervisors had become aware of Luca's innate intelligence and inventive nature, not to mention his loyalty and decency, they just had kept offering him more and more responsibility. Thirty years later, an integral part of the management team at the paper, he had been able to retire at the age of forty-eight with a pension that could support him the rest of his life.

Tony's childhood, at least from the age of ten, would be described by most as pretty dysfunctional, and it was, but it could have been much worse. Not only did he have his father as a role model for creating order in the midst of chaos, but he also happened to love school. He did well in his studies, and he was good at sports. What he liked most about sports was the way his body responded to the constant workouts. He grew muscular and well-toned and that gave him a sense of security about himself, which had made a difference.

For a few years, from the time he was about fifteen until he was seventeen, Tony also had the wise and gentle friendship of Bill Lee. From one of the men he worked with at The Morning News, Luca had learned about the Big Brothers organization, a public service agency that matched stable, young-adult men with teenage boys who were considered to be "at risk".

Luca knew that most of the Little Brothers came from single-parent families, but he went to the agency and explained that Tony virtually had no mother, certainly none that could support him emotionally, and that he, himself, was sometimes just too "used up" to give Tony as much attention and direction as Luca thought he needed, so he asked them to make an exception and match Tony with

a Big Brother.

His father explained to Tony that he had arranged for a man he didn't know to come see him so Tony would have another adult to talk to, but Tony wasn't particularly keen on the idea. He didn't really like to talk about his life at home, and he wasn't sure he wanted this guy coming to his house in case his mother went off while the guy was there.

But his interest peaked when a really nice-looking man knocked on his door the next Saturday morning and introduced himself as Bill Lee. Bill was the first oriental person Tony had ever seen up close. He was nearly six-feet tall, Tony guessed. His skin wasn't yellow, exactly, but sort of. He had almost black, fairly straight hair cut below his ears; dark brown, slightly slanted eyes; an undefined nose and a killer smile. But what really grabbed Tony's attention was that after Bill had introduced himself, he asked if Tony would like to go with him to the auto show at the Dome.

In spite of, or maybe because of, the fact that no one in his family had ever owned a car, Tony was nuts about cars. He spent at least half of every month's allowance on car magazines, and if he made some extra money mowing lawns for the neighbors, that usually went toward buying car magazines, too. His collection of magazines was impressive, and not coincidentally, his knowledge about cars was pretty impressive, too, especially for a kid who had seen the inside of an automobile only once or twice in his life.

Bill drove a nice little 1980 Triumph, TR7 with a deep, aqua metallic paint finish and leather seats the color of burnt honey. Tony thought he was excited just looking at it parked in his driveway, but when Bill put the top down before they even took off, he thought he might have just died and gone to heaven.

The indoor stadium where the car show was being held wasn't all that far away from where he lived, but it was the "drive of a lifetime" for Tony. He could remember it today as if it had happened yesterday. His hair blew and his eyes watered and he felt like a

million bucks. He wished with all his might that some of the kids from his class would see him drive by, but he didn't see anyone that he knew.

He asked Bill about a billion questions about the car, and Bill, surprised that Tony knew as much as he did about sports cars, answered easily and knowledgeably. In about ten minutes, they were comfortable with each other, and before the day was over, they had formed a friendship that twenty-five years later wasn't over yet.

Bill had to travel for the investment company he worked for, so he didn't see Tony every weekend. But they saw each other a lot. Sometimes they tinkered with one of Bill's three sports cars, which were always in varying degrees of running order—or not. Sometimes they went to a baseball game or a movie, but what Tony liked best was when they went kayaking.

As they glided along in a kayak, they talked. Tony told Bill about everything: a teacher who was hassling him, a kid in school who was in trouble, his mother's latest temper tantrum, his frustration at never being able to bring his classmates to his house and finally, the subject that embarrassed him slightly even to talk to Bill about---his father's knitting.

Tony adored his father, but frankly, it embarrassed the hell out of him that his father liked to knit. Once, about a year before, he had screwed up the courage to ask his father about it. Tony and Luca had been sitting in Luca's study and Luca was knitting a cardigan sweater for Tony's mother in her favorite color, ice blue. The yarn was angora, so the sweater looked soft and pretty, Tony had to admit. "Where did you learn to knit?" he asked his father casually.

Luca had been expecting the subject to come up pretty soon. After all, he'd been a teenager himself when he'd first learned to knit, but he could still remember how uneasy he had felt for years about what would happen if any of his friends had found out about it.

"My mother taught me when I was just about your age," Luca answered easily. Then, already guessing what the answer would be,

Luca asked, “Want me to teach you, Tony?”

“No!” Tony’s answer came out firm and sharp. It wasn’t that he didn’t appreciate the sweaters his father knit for him. Actually, they were pretty cool. It was just that in his mind, men weren’t supposed to knit. What if, heaven forbid, any of his friends saw his father knitting? It wasn’t likely, because at least so far, Luca had knit only at home in his own study, but even so, the thought of it made Tony shudder.

Somewhat amused, Luca responded to Tony’s sharp “No” with his usual calm acceptance. “I can tell you have kind of strong feelings about my knitting, Tone.” Without looking at Tony, he went right on knitting. “Wanna talk about it?”

“I thought men didn’t knit, that’s all.” Tony hung his head a little, caught between being ashamed of feeling critical of his father and feeling justified for being critical of him.

“Lots of men knit, son. Let’s see. . . ” Luca set down his needles, stood up and walked over to his bookshelf. He searched for a few minutes until he found what he was looking for. Casually, he handed Tony a book titled *The Manly Art of Knitting* by Dave Fougner. The book cover showed a picture of a cowboy sitting in the saddle, knitting.

“Read this,” Luca suggested. “It may make you feel better about my knitting, but son, with or without your approval, I’m going to keep right on knitting.”

“What does it do for you? To knit, I mean. Sure, the stuff you knit is great, but you can buy great stuff for a lot less trouble. Why knit?” Tony looked right into Luca’s eyes and added, “I guess I just kinda need to know, Dad.”

Luca leaned back and closed his eyes. Tony was 14. It was an age Luca remembered, when you were half-boy and half-man and adults sometimes expected you to be one and sometimes they expected you to be the other. Since you couldn’t read their minds, whatever you did was usually wrong. Tony’s asking about Luca’s knitting was part of his need to know something about what it meant to be a man, and Luca knew that whatever answer he gave could be

important to Tony’s image of himself. His heart ached a little over Tony’s discomfort, and he gave the kid some credit for braving a conversation about a subject that could be kind of touchy.

“Well first, son, I knit because I like to knit,” Luca began slowly. “I like to take these strings of yarn and turn them into little works of art. For me, it is as good a way to express myself as painting a picture, or playing the piano; or writing a book. But that’s not the only reason. I’m also very good at knitting, and it matters to everyone to be good at something.

“And beyond that, it is calming. I like the simple orderliness of knitting. The yarn does what I tell it to do and goes where I want it to go. It doesn’t give me any grief, you know? And frankly, Tone, I can’t say that about much else in my life these days.” Then realizing that he might be getting a little too philosophical for a 14-year-old, Luca cuffed Tony gently on the chin and said teasingly, “Including you.”

Tony relayed the gist of that old conversation to Bill as the kayak drifted around some thick clumps of cattails. Then he admitted, “I kinda understand what it means to my father to knit, but it’d still embarrass me if any of my friends found out about it.”

Bill guided the kayak into a little cove where they could drift safely then turned so he could look directly at Tony. He asked simply, “Did you read the book he gave you?”

“Yeah, I did, and it was pretty cool. If the guy who wrote the book ain’t lying, a lot of guys do knit. Truck drivers, football players, businessmen, even one Congressman. And they all gave different reasons for doing it, but mostly it was to keep from being bored. Knitting used up their extra energy better than reading or playing cards or other stuff.”

“Do you think your father has a boring life, Tony?”

“Well, my mother keeps it pretty interesting, and he has me to see to, too, but yeah, I guess he doesn’t get to do much that he would like to do. He hasn’t got any friends. He’s probably kind of bored sometimes.”

Reaching into the cooler for a couple of cold Cokes then handing

them to Tony to pop the tops, Bill prodded, “Why do you think he doesn’t have any friends?”

“He doesn’t have time, I guess.”

“And if he did have friends, do you think he’d be any more willing to invite his friends to your house than you are?” Bill was careful to keep his tone gentle so Tony would be able to think more about his answers than Bill’s questions.

“I suppose not.”

“You really love your father, don’t you, Tony?”

“I feel bad for him, Bill. I really do. And yes, I love him. I love him a lot. I wish there was something I could do to make his life easier.”

“How about letting him knit without worrying about your disapproval?” Bill suggested.

Tony sat really still for quite a while, just thinking. Bill didn’t say a word.

“I guess that’s what caring about someone is all about, isn’t it?”

Tony finally answered. “Letting them do what they want to do just because they like to do it, instead of thinking about how you feel about it. He does that for me. He doesn’t try to talk me out of doing new stuff, even if it isn’t stuff he would probably like to do.”

“We’re all different, Tony,” Bill said kindly. “We can do anything we want to with our lives if we believe we can. But if we want to be free to do what we like, we don’t have a lot of right to decide what other people should do with their lives, do we?”

“He asked me if I wanted to learn to knit and I said no,” Tony offered, hanging his head a little as he remembered how he hadn’t just said no; he had said No!

Bill reached over and put his hand companionably on Tony’s shoulder, letting him know that whatever his answer was would be okay, and then asked, “Do you want to learn to knit, Tony?”

“Well, it would be actually pretty cool to knit one of those big, heavy ski sweaters. Maybe I could learn and make you one for Christmas.” Tony grinned at Bill, then clapped him on the back,

which was his way of saying thanks for letting me talk about this without making me feel stupid.

“Now that would be cool,” Bill said as he signaled Tony to turn the kayak around and head back for the dock.

Tony did knit him that sweater, he remembered, although it took him almost a year to finish it. It was his first one, and it had a few slipped stitches in it, but if the weather was cool enough, Bill wore that sweater proudly almost every time they went somewhere together.



Yeah, Bill is cool, and knitting has turned out to be even cooler. Tony thought. It’s kept me from being bored, too, a few thousand times, and think of the bundle I’ve saved buying presents!

Saying that made him think of how proud he was of the really fancy Christmas stockings he had knit for his best friend Frankie’s sister and her husband when they got married last year, and the newest one he’d just finished, all in pink and white, for their new baby girl, Andy. Not only had the newlyweds liked their Christmas stockings, but Frankie had really liked them, too. Even so, it continued to amuse Tony that after all these years and dozens of great knitted presents later, it still freaked out Frankie to see Tony knit.

Tough, Bro, knitting is just my thing. Tony thought as he got up to refill his coffee cup.

When Tony came back to the balcony, Frankie was still on his mind, and Tony began to think about their first meeting.



It all began, Tony remembered, on an otherwise uneventful school night when he was 17, just before summer vacation started. Luca got home from work that day as usual. He and Tony cooked dinner and cleaned up, and while Tony was doing his homework,

Luca went through his usual routine to settle down Tony's mother for the night. When he thought she was asleep and had checked to make sure Tony was okay, Luca went into his study and closed the door as he did every night.

But that night, Tony's mother wasn't asleep. She got out of bed, and when she couldn't find Luca to scream at, she ferreted out Tony in the living room watching TV. He listened to her for a little while, and then he tried to calm her down the way he had seen his father do, but it didn't work.

She wasn't stupid. She wanted to hurt someone else, anyone else, to try to ease her own pain, and she knew just how to do it. She may not have hit Tony with things, but she hit him with words, painful, horrible words, shouted over and over and over again.

Because he resembled his father in looks and mannerisms, one of her favorite verbal tirades always involved Tony's Italian heritage. "You're just like your father, nothing but a dumb guinea. You'll never amount to anything any more than he has. You're too stupid to go to college and too full of your own good looks to see what a loser you really are."

Tony could see she was just warming up for more to come, and not knowing what else to do, he bolted. He grabbed his jacket and ran up the back alley as fast and as hard as he could. He crossed a couple of busy streets, cut through some vacant lots and just kept running until he ran out of breath completely.

He was bent over at the waist, panting and gasping, when he slowly raised his head and saw it, a patch of woods, about the size of a basketball court, he guessed, right in the middle of town. It was getting dark, but Tony decided there was still enough light to check it out, so as soon as he could breathe normally again, he pushed his way in where the trees grew close together and the underbrush was pretty thick. The closer he got to the center the darker it got, but that didn't slow him down. He just kept plowing through until he found himself in a kind of clearing in what he thought must be just about

the center of the woods.

It was just a small patch of ground covered with a thick layer of pine needles, but to Tony it seemed like the most secret, private, safe place in the whole world, and until that very moment, he had no idea how much he wanted a secret, private, safe place of his own. He sat on the ground, with his back against a big tree and breathed deeply, and without meaning to, he let his mother's angry words replay through his mind. All he could feel was the hopelessness of all their lives.

Tears began to stream down his face, tears he had been holding back for years, and they fell faster and faster until deep, wracking sobs shuddered through his body. He cried for his mother, he cried for his father and he cried for the loss of Denny and of Lazy. He cried for the loss of their whole happy family and he cried for his own helplessness to do anything to change it.

He bawled and bawled, beating on the ground with his fists until he was so spent he could hardly move. Then, without knowing he was doing it, he curled into a fetal position and sank into oblivion.

The birds woke him as dawn broke. He came back to life, amazed to find himself in the middle of the woods. Stunned by the relief he felt from having let go of so much he had held in for so long, he just lay there without moving for quite a while. Then he sat up and looked carefully around. He was absolutely delighted with the new secret place he had stumbled on the night before when he had been feeling just about as bad as he had ever felt in his life.

Heading out of the woods to go home, he said to the birds, "I'm calling this place Sherwood Forest. You can stay here because you were here first, but otherwise, from now on it's all mine!"



CHAPTER TWO

Tony could hardly stay away from Sherwood Forest. Nothing in his personal experience had exposed him to churches or cathedrals, mosques or temples, or even grottoes or shrines, except what he had read about, but he had no need to know of them. He got the same kind of awesome feelings of wonder when he sat in that little grove of trees that one might in get in the finest edifices ever built to worship the gods.

He didn't make it there every day, but he went whenever he could, sometimes right after school and sometimes at night after everyone in his house was asleep. Occasionally he needed to work out a sulk or a "mad" when he sought the sanctuary of Sherwood Forest, but more often Tony went there simply to think, plan and dream the way any normal seventeen-year-old boy would.

Lately, he'd been thinking about what he might do after he got out of high school the next year and now he had something new to think about. He had been doodling on his notebook before class started when his new art teacher, Mr. Barnes, saw him doing it. Mr. Barnes had come down the aisle to look at what Tony was drawing and asked him if he did much drawing outside of class.

"Yeah," Tony told him, "I draw things sometimes like you see in newspaper advertisements. I like to see if I can make my stuff look like their stuff."

His teacher leafed through Tony's notebook, looking at other doodles, too. "And can you?"

"I can most of the time. I like that kind of drawing. It's cool."

"Is it something you might like to do when you get out of school, like work for an advertising agency?" Mr. Barnes asked.

"I think I'd like that a lot," Tony said honestly, "but I don't know if I'm good enough for that."

"You could go to Vo-Tech," his teacher suggested. "They have classes in graphic arts. Let me see what I've got." He handed back Tony's notebook. "I think you've got some talent there, Tony. It ought to be explored." Mr. Barnes went to the cupboard at the back of the classroom and came back with a brochure that told all about the graphic arts department at Vo-Tech, which he gave to Tony.

That afternoon, with the brochure in his pocket, Tony headed for Sherwood Forest, but about twenty feet into the woods, he stopped cold. Someone else was in there with him. Tony listened, and what he heard were deep, wracking sobs coming out of someone who was seriously bummed out. Because he had been there, himself, not very long before, Tony could feel the frustration and the helplessness in those sobs, and for a few minutes, his empathy clouded his own distress that somebody else was in "his" place. Somebody was in Sherwood Forest, using it as the same kind of safe spot that he had believed was his alone.

He waited for the crying to stop and then quietly approached the center clearing. What Tony saw, sitting under his favorite tree, was an emotionally spent teenage boy just about his own age. He was a picture of misery with his long blond hair falling into his tear-streaked face.

As he caught sight of Tony out of the corner of his eye, the boy sprang to his feet and looked straight at him, a myriad of emotions crossing his face in rapid succession: surprise, fear, embarrassment, and finally anger.

Tony stood perfectly still for a minute, quietly sizing up the

kid, wondering if he could take him in a fight. They were actually pretty well matched. Both boys were well muscled and about the same age and height. They could fight, of course, but Tony decided there was a serious question about which one of them would win. Since Tony didn't like to lose, he thought he'd try to avoid a physical confrontation if he could.

"What in the hell are you doing here?" Tony asked first.

"No, what the hell are you doing here?" the other boy shouted at him. "You got no right walking in on me. This is my place."

"The hell it is!" Tony shouted back. "This is my place, and I think it's about time you went home where you belong."

"Unless you own these woods, fella, I ain't going nowhere," the blonde boy said, taking a defiant stance and holding it. "How long were you standing there?"

"Long enough," Tony sighed, and as he remembered the sound of the boy's sobs, he lowered the fist he hadn't realized he'd raised.

"Look, I don't own this place, and I don't suppose you do, either," Tony said. "And don't worry about me hearing you bawling. I come here to do that, myself, sometimes. That's why, I guess, I've been letting myself believe it was all mine."

The two boys locked eyes, and each boy saw in the other's an odd kind of mirror image. Each set of eyes held a degree of understanding and acceptance that neither had ever seen before coming out of anyone of any age.

"I'm Frankie Doerrer," the blond boy said, extending his open palm toward Tony.

"Tony Celentano," Tony answered, accepting the handshake.

"You live around here?" Frankie asked.

"A few blocks east of here," Tony answered. "You?"

"A few blocks west of here. We must be about the same age, but I've never seen you in school. I'm a junior at St. Pete High. You?"

"I'm a junior at Northeast," Tony said. "I guess a few city blocks make a difference in your school assignment. Why were you

bawling? Girl trouble?”

“I wish,” Frankie said. “No, my old man drinks and then he comes home and beats on my mother. I could live with that. What I can’t live with is that she lets him. This morning we had to go to the emergency room, but she wouldn’t press charges. She just takes it and takes it, and maybe she can, but sometimes I can’t.” Frankie let out a long slow breath, wondering why he had confessed all that to a perfect stranger in the middle of a patch of woods. He must really be losing it. He certainly was surprised at Tony’s answer.

“I know how you feel.” Tony said, “I’ve got the opposite problem. My mother beats on my father every night. If she isn’t yelling swear words at him at the top of her lungs, she’s punching him or throwing things at him, and the sicker she gets, the stronger she seems to get. Last night I had to patch up a big cut on his eyebrow from a plate she threw at him. He probably should have gone to the emergency room, but he wouldn’t go.”

They fell into silence for a minute, each thinking that as weird as his life was, maybe it wasn’t quite as weird as the other guy’s.

“How did you find this place?” Frankie asked.

“I just ran out of the house one night until I couldn’t run any farther, and here it was. I fought my way into the center here and thought I’d found the most private place in the world. I’ve been coming here ever since, especially when I want to think about something serious.”

“I’ve been coming here for the same reason, for the last three months,” Frankie said.

“Same here,” Tony said in surprise. “I wonder why we didn’t bump into each other before.”

“I guess it just wasn’t time,” Frankie answered philosophically.

“Yeah, so now we share it?” Tony suggested.

Frankie was surprised that he was less upset to hear Tony ask that than he thought he would have been. “I guess we do. I have a name for it,” he said, suddenly feeling a little self-conscious again

but somehow compelled to explain. “You’ll probably laugh your head off, but I call it Sherwood Forest because it seemed like the place where Robin Hood picked to be safe.”

“No shit!” Tony answered in amazement. “That’s what I call it too, Sherwood Forest!”

And somehow, from that moment on, Tony and Frankie weren’t just friends; they were more like brothers, and they’d thought of each other that way ever since.



Speaking of which, Tony thought on his balcony, I’d better get showered and dressed and go meet Frankie.

He and Frankie had a standing Saturday morning breakfast date at nine o’clock at the Green Bench Café on Central Avenue, and they hadn’t missed a single Saturday in twenty years.

Tony’s cat, Trainwreck, rushed toward him as Tony came in from the balcony, and wound himself enthusiastically between Tony’s legs. To keep himself from tripping, Tony bent down to lift the cat to his chest. With a soft purr, Trainwreck nestled his head in the bend of Tony’s neck, content now that breakfast was on the way.

About a year before, Tony was coming out of a downtown office building where he had been visiting a client. He turned a corner and saw a big cat clinging to a telephone pole about four feet off the ground, with a snarling little dog nipping at its tail. Immediately feeling sorry for the cat, Tony ran off the bad-tempered dog. Then he reached for the cat to peel it off the telephone pole, wondering if he would get clawed in exchange for his good deed. Instead, the cat turned and nestled his head into Tony’s neck, just the way he was doing now, obviously grateful to have been rescued.

Tony had carried the cat to his car and set him down on the front seat, thinking he would have to take him to a veterinarian, but when he examined the now purring cat, he discovered that all his wounds

were old ones. There was a patch on his back where his long orange and white fur would no longer grow. There was also a bite out of his tail, and one of his ears was half chewed off.

“You look like a train wreck,” Tony told him, and then without any further thought, he drove the cat back to his condominium. He fixed Trainwreck a bowl of water and a can of tuna fish, and the two had been very compatible roommates ever since. By now, Trainwreck weighed nineteen pounds and was a fine, healthy specimen of pure tomcat, complete with battle scars and a surprisingly happy disposition.

In the kitchen, Tony gathered up Trainwreck’s dish and rinsed it under the faucet. Then he opened two cans of cat food and emptied them into what was really a dish made for a small dog. Putting it down in front of Trainwreck, Tony said with a grin, “Better beef up, Buddy. You just never know when Darth Vader may come by.”

Tony chuckled as he thought he saw Trainwreck shudder. Darth Vader was the six-pound Chihuahua that lived down the hall, and he scared Trainwreck right down to his bone marrow. If the cat even heard the tiny dog in the hallway, he scrambled hell-bent-for-election to the top of the armoire in Tony’s office and wouldn’t come down until the condo had been quiet for at least two hours.



Half an hour later, freshly showered and wearing slim-fitting jeans and a white T-shirt tucked in at his trim waist, Tony stepped into the hallway, and looking at his watch one more time, he decided to drive to the restaurant rather than walk. He usually loved the walk up Central Avenue, but today he didn’t want to be late. It was just too important a day.

He found a parking space about half a block from the restaurant, and as he walked along the sidewalk, he was caught by the paradoxical thought that although sometimes part of one’s life changed dramatically in what seemed like an instant, other parts of

it stayed remarkably the same.

For twenty years, he and Frankie had kept this Saturday morning breakfast date without fail. They had come to each other week after week, with good news and bad, with sniffles and sneezes, with broken hearts and broken bones, but they always had come to each other. Since that day in the woods when they had taken joint ownership of Sherwood Forest, they had each other’s back one hundred percent.

In those same twenty years, the Green Bench Café hadn’t changed much. The décor was the same. The menu was the same. The owner was the same. *Solid*. Tony thought as he pushed open the glass door.

In front of him, Pete, who owned the restaurant, stood at the counter smiling, thinking pretty much what Tony had been thinking, that as much as things changed, other things stayed the same. Business had been alarmingly slow for the past six months, but Pete knew in his heart of hearts that good economy or bad, he could depend on having two regular customers every Saturday morning: Tony and Frankie. Somehow, that helped him stay grounded. But Tony and Frankie weren’t just customers anymore. They had become buddies. They’d seen him through good and bad times before, and so they would this time.

“Hi ya, Pete,” Tony said cheerfully. “How’s it goin’?”

“Good, good. Good to see ya, Tony. The usual?” Pete asked with a grin.

“What else? Frankie here yet?”

“At your table,” Pete answered as he called the order over his shoulder. “Two over easy, corned beef hash crisp, Bench fries, whole wheat toast and butter it hot.” He hit the sale button on the cash register, collected Tony’s money and handed him his thick, mud-colored pottery coffee mug. With a wink he added, “Cream, no sugar.”

“Yeah, yeah, so I’m in a rut,” Tony smiled and shrugged.

Carrying his coffee and a few extra napkins, Tony rounded the

corner into the dining room and saw Frankie reading a magazine at what they really did think of as “their table.” In all the twenty years they had been coming here, they’d had to sit somewhere else only half a dozen times.

Ruts are not bad things, Tony told himself. They are pretty comforting to slip into when all the rest of your world is going through its spin cycle.

The restaurant may not have changed much in twenty years, but he and Frankie certainly had. Even though they had been built pretty much alike as teenagers, they were different specimens now. Tony didn’t know whether it was Frankie’s German heritage or the type of manual labor he did that had made his body thicken, but he was a big brute of a man now. About six feet two, Frankie probably weighed 250 pounds, but he didn’t have an ounce of excess fat on him. He was solid muscle. His light blond hair had turned sandy, and he wore it in a long crew cut. His eyes were still piercing blue, his somewhat round face was clean-shaven and his overall look was wholesome.

Tony also was six feet two but slim, even lanky by some standards. He, too, was muscled and toned. He worked out in the gym at least four times a week and did curls with twenty-pound weights every day. He also swam laps in the condo pool most nights. His hair, almost black, was well-styled, his features quite fine, his skin was a bit on the olive side, and he wore a close-cropped beard that framed his oval face.

The two men didn’t dwell on it, but they knew they were good to look at, especially when they were together.

“Hey, Bro,” Tony said as he set his coffee mug on the table, causing Frankie to look up blankly from his magazine into Tony’s smiling eyes.

“Hey, yourself!” Frankie rose quickly to give Tony one of those handshake-one-armed-hug combinations men tend to give when they’re genuinely glad to see each other.

“Am I late?”

“Hell, no, I’m early,” Frankie answered. “I had to take my sister to work this morning. Her car’s broke down, and if Mike had taken her, they would have had to wake Andy up, so I volunteered to be Julie’s driver. Then I just picked up a magazine and came here for an extra cup of coffee. I told Pete to put my order in when he put yours in so we can eat together.”

Tony reached over and picked up Frankie’s magazine, which, not surprisingly, had a picture of Mickey Mouse on the cover, standing at the front gate of Disney World.

“Anything new happening in Fantasy Land?” Tony grinned widely as he passed the magazine back to Frankie.

Frankie loved, in fact adored, Disney World in Orlando. It was one of his passions, and he went there as often as he could spare the time, just because he liked being there.

“Not much,” Frankie answered seriously, ignoring Tony’s smirk. “They’re talking about building a new section called the Land of Horrors, but so far I don’t see anything about them starting up yet.”

“Well, won’t that just float your boat?” Tony’s eyes continued to twinkle. “You can do *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the Magic Kingdom all at the same time. Your dream come true.”

“If you don’t stop trash-talking my particular interests this morning, Bro,” Frankie said with a certain edge to his voice, “I’ll stand on the table and announce to the whole restaurant that you knit.”

“You can do that if you want to, but I’d rather call a truce,” Tony said, still having a hard time covering up his amusement. “Just for getting you riled up so early in the morning, I’ll go up and get our breakfasts. Give me your ticket so I get the right number, in case you ordered something different today.”

“Yeah, yeah, I will the day you do,” Frankie growled. “When you come back, you can tell me what’s got you so itchy, or maybe I could say bitchy, this morning.”

Tony brought back the food in two short trips and then fiddled

with ketchup, salt and napkins before deciding he wasn't quite ready to share his news yet.

"So how is Julie? he asked, referring to Frankie's sister.

"Jeez, Tony." Frankie found himself getting a little misty-eyed. "It just makes me so damn happy to see her so happy. She really loves Mike, and I think he's perfect for her. And that baby girl!" he went on. "She sure is somethin' else. She wrapped herself around my heart when she was only minutes old, but she's growing up so fast! She can actually play with me now, and you should see that kid eat!" Frankie noticed Tony grinning from ear to ear again, and he stopped abruptly. "Well, you asked," he said, looking kind of offended.

"It makes me happy, too, Bro, to see you so happy about Julie." Tony chuckled, feeling genuinely glad for Frankie. "You worried about her for a long time."

"Yeah, I did. I wasn't sure she would ever get married. She was so afraid she might marry someone like Dad and wind up like Mom. But," he let out a sigh of relief, "Thank God, that ain't happenin'. Now, tell me what has you so full of piss and vinegar today."

"What have you got going on today, Frankie, when we finish here?"

"Are you trying to change the subject again?"

"No, I just thought if you weren't busy, I'd rather tell you what I have to tell you back at the condo. If you've got time, I'll buy you a beer and tell you about my whole..." Tony searched for a word and couldn't find exactly the right one. "I guess you could say 'interesting' week."

Curious and a little bit wary about what might be coming, Frankie said, "I can cut out a couple of hours. I was just gonna tinker with my car, maybe sneak back for another quick visit to Andy, and then get ready for my date tonight. I'll admit you've got my attention. Are you done eating yet?"

"Not quite," Tony laughed. "I've hardly started yet. Don't get upset. Nothing's wrong. In fact, a whole lot of things are pretty right. It's just... complicated. That's all."

They ate in companionable silence, each knowing there was

absolutely nothing either one could say or do that would totally shock the other. But Tony was wondering where to begin to tell Frankie what his last couple of days had been like, and Frankie was wondering how much of Tony's news might mean changes for him, too, because they always worked together like a well-oiled team.

A short time later, they waved goodbye to Pete and took off separately, heading for Tony's condominium.



Back in his car, Tony's thoughts picked up where his morning tour down memory lane and ended.

When his graduation from high school was just a few weeks away, Tony had a conversation with his father that he had put off for as long as he felt he possibly could. He wanted to study graphic arts but couldn't see how he could do it without some continued help from Luca. He told Luca what he wanted to do and then asked if it would be all right if he got a part-time job and went to school for eighteen more months while still living at home.

"I think, Tony," Luca answered calmly, "that you should be setting out on your own once you turn eighteen."

Tony was astonished. Apparently his father already had given Tony's future some thought, too.

"Well, Dad, I hadn't thought about moving out quite so soon. Can I ask a few questions? I mean, do you think, without some additional training, I can find a job that pays me enough to live on my own right away? And why do you think I want to move out and leave you alone with Mom just because I'm turning eighteen?"

Before Luca could say a word, Tony rushed on. "How come you don't seem at all surprised that I want to be a graphic artist when I just figured it out for myself? And just so I can understand what you just said, how long have you been thinking about all this?"

Tony took a deep breath and tried to settle himself down a little

so he could hear Luca's answers.

"OK, let's take those one at a time," Luca said seriously. "A nice little efficiency apartment on the north side, not too far from downtown so you can walk to work and Vo-Tech, will probably cost you about \$250 a month, maybe a little more, plus utilities and telephone. Then you'll have food and some entertainment, though you probably won't have too much time for that until you graduate from Vo-Tech. I'd say you'll need about \$800 a month to live pretty decently, maybe a little more. You can work at least thirty hours and still go to Vo-Tech. You can probably earn \$200 a week, even unskilled, especially if I pull some strings for you at The Morning News. And you could probably eke by on that, but here's what you don't know about, Tony.

"I've been putting money in a savings account for you since you were born, \$20 a week taken out of my pay. I know that doesn't seem like much now, but eighteen years ago it was a sizeable chunk out of the money I brought home to feed the family. Since it came out of my pay automatically, your mother never even knew about it.

"On your eighteenth birthday, I will change the account from my name to yours. It will have almost \$20,000 in it and I'll put in enough to make sure it's an even \$20,000. With that money, plus what you earn while you are in school, you should be well able to make it on your own, Tony. Not only until you get out of school, but until your career really takes off for you."

"Dad," Tony said, emotion filling his voice, "I don't know what to say."

"Well, don't say anything yet, son, because since I'm on a roll here and you asked all the right questions, I'd like to finish giving you the answers. To answer question two, the reason I want you to move out when you're eighteen is because you really aren't going to have any other choice. I've been talking with your mother's doctors and with her sisters back in Connecticut. They have found a really nice place up there near them that will take her in and take care of her."

"Take care of her?"

"This may be hard for you to accept, Tony, but your mother isn't happy, and I'm not happy, and I don't know about you, but I'm tired of not being happy. I loved Denny as much as a father could love a little boy, and I love you even more because I've loved you longer. And believe it or not, I still love your mother, but she doesn't even know who I am some of the time," Luca explained patiently.

"Her rage is so blind, she is living with a stranger and so am I," The doctors say there is always a chance she could snap out of it, but there's nothing they can do to make that happen. Tony, I can't live like this forever any more than you can. And beyond that, I have to be practical and ask what would happen to your mother if something happened to me. Did you think I wouldn't fix things so you wouldn't be left with that responsibility?"

"I never even thought of it, Dad. I'm sorry, but I just never did."

"It's not your job to think of things like that, Tony, but it is mine, and believe me, I've thought about every part of this a lot." Luca absently reached for his knitting, but then he changed his mind and just kept talking.

"I'm only forty-seven years old, and because I started at The Morning News when I was eighteen, I can retire next year, after thirty years, and get a pretty good pension. Your aunts assure me that the place where they want to put your mother is very nice, and it looks beautiful from the pictures they sent. They have a very competent staff to help her there, and to tell you the truth; I think they secretly suspect that if they could get her there, away from us, out of this house where Denny died, maybe she would get better. And for all I know, Tony, they're right. Anyway, that's the plan."

"When?" asked Tony, feeling as if all the breath had been knocked out of him at once.

"Next month, probably, after you graduate. Serenity House, which is what this place is called, will have two openings then, and they've agreed to put your mother in one of them on a six-month

trial basis. I have to pay for the first six months but after that, if she stays, the state of Connecticut will pay for her care. I plan to take her up there as soon as Serenity House says they can take her. Her doctor here will sedate her before the plane trip, and their doctors will meet us at the other end.

“It’s perfectly OK for you to stay here alone for a few days while I’m gone, Tony, but you can also have Frankie come and stay with you if you want the company.”

“Then you’ll be coming back here?”

“Until I retire, sell the house and you find your own digs, yeah. I thought you and I could stand a few peaceful months together before we go our separate ways.”

“You’ll be starting a new job, starting school, starting a life as a man, Tony. And you’ll be OK. You’ve always been OK. You’ve been seeing mostly to yourself and even some to your mother and me since you were ten years old. You can cook and clean and do laundry and even hold a part-time job. The only difference,” Luca said with a smile, “between living here and living on your own is that I won’t be in the next room knitting.”

“That will hardly be the only difference, Dad. You’ve never not been here for me, not even for one day, since I was born.”

“I’ve been here physically, Tony, but sometimes I’ve checked out emotionally. It was either that or go crazy myself.”

“So, when I’m living in my own apartment, working and going to school and becoming a man, what will your separate way be like, Dad?” Tony asked.

“When the house sells, and by the way, you can have anything you want from here for furniture to get you started,” Luca said, “I’m going to New York and share my brother’s apartment for a while. Your Uncle Fred is alone, I’m alone and we’re still relatively young bucks. We both have pensions. He’s got a part-time job, and I’ll get one. We won’t be eligible for Social Security for a while, but eventually that will kick in, too. We figure we can try getting

into some trouble together as two bachelors for a while. I’ll be near enough to Connecticut to visit your mother if the doctors think I should, but... ”

“But?” asked Tony after a fairly long pause.

“But you might as well know I’m going to get a divorce, Tony.” Luca watched an array of emotions pass over Tony’s face, relief mostly, he thought, but some sadness, some regret and maybe some slight panic.

“You OK, son?”

“Yeah,” Tony answered automatically. “I’m OK. I guess it will all sink in after a while. Mostly, I’m sort of stunned that you did all this planning, right here in the same house with me, and I had absolutely no idea you were thinking of leaving.”

Luca had never been a demonstrative man. He had loved Helen, Tony’s mother, and still did in some ways. In the early years of his marriage, he’d felt comfortable enough touching her in front of other people, but he knew he’d never transferred that physical affection to Tony even though he loved him dearly. *It’s a bit awkward to start now*, he thought, *but now is when he needs it*. So Luca put his hand securely on Tony’s shoulder, then drew him into a hard, manly hug.

“Do you want me to answer your third and fourth questions, Tony?” Luca asked as physically he drew apart from the son he loved so much.

“I don’t even remember what they were,” Tony answered honestly, feeling as though at least a month had passed since he had asked those questions instead of just twenty minutes.



CHAPTER THREE

“You asked me, Tony, why I’m not surprised you want to be a graphic artist,” Luca said, as the two sat discussing the changes that would soon take place in their individual and collective lives. “It’s because you’ve been fascinated with advertisements and commercials since you were a baby.”

Luca, paused, letting his own mind wander back a few years.

“I remember when you weren’t much more than two, your mother and I took you with us to a restaurant. You couldn’t read yet, of course, but when the waitress put a bottle of A-1 Sauce on the table, you recognized the bottle from an ad you’d seen on television and calmly announced, “Ahh, the touch that adds so much!” The waitress looked at you in amazement, and your mother and I burst out laughing.

“Then right after we moved into this house—I guess you were 8 then—you and your mother were going to dye Easter eggs. She realized after she read the directions on the box of dye that she needed vinegar. I offered to run down to the store to get some, and you reached up, gave me a big hug and sang, ‘Oh, thank Heaven for 7-11!’

“You drew and colored grocery ads and furniture ads from the Sunday paper all the time as you were growing up. I used to find your drawings all over the house.” Luca chuckled. “And I had a hard time throwing some of them away, because sometimes you

were pretty good. In fact,” he said as he got up, went to his desk and pulled a file from his bottom drawer, “I didn’t throw all of them away. I just couldn’t.” He handed the file to Tony.

Not only was Tony surprised to find himself looking at drawings he had long since forgotten, he was amazed to hear Luca tell stories about when he was a little boy. *Why have I never heard either of those stories before?* he wondered. *I guess it was just too painful for Dad to talk about the time when we were still a pretty happy family.*

He tuned back in to what his father was saying just in time to hear, “So I’m sure learning to create ads is the right thing for you, Tony, and that you will be good at it. When you knit, you show me that you understand design. You’ve taught me things I never would have known to do with the yarn without your coaching. I taught you to knit, but you taught me how to use my knitting to make more beautiful things. You have a keen imagination and a quick wit, too, and they’re both important qualities for work in advertising. I’ve known some great graphic designers at The Morning News, Tony. They like what they do and they make good money at it. I think it’s just about a perfect calling for you.”

“That means an awful lot to me, Dad,” Tony said, adding, “I’m pretty grateful to Mr. Barnes for looking at my doodles and encouraging me to consider designing for a living. Since you think it’s a good idea too, that’s about all I could ask for.”

“I’ll have to drop by and thank Barnes, myself,” Luca said. “You know I had him as an Art Appreciation teacher in high school at Boca. He was a good guy and I enjoyed all of his classes. I think he’ll be glad to hear that I still appreciate him, but this time because of what he’s done for you.”

Realizing that so far this was turning into the best and the longest conversation he and Luca had ever had, Tony was surprised when his normally quiet father went right on talking.

“Now for your last question,” Luca said, and Tony drew a complete blank.

“You asked me how long I have been thinking about this, making these plans, and I guess I would have to say since shortly after you met Frankie Doerrer last year. He was the first boy you ever brought home with you, and when I heard you guys in your room playing records, talking about sports and girls and all the things teenagers should be talking about, I realized how abnormal your growing up had been up until then.

“But you and Frankie weren’t allowing the strangeness of your lives to keep you from having a sense of normalcy, some good times, and a really close friendship. Again, you became my teacher, Tony, because I realized I wanted some of that normalcy, too,” Luca confessed. “So I let myself think beyond what I had always just accepted as my duty, to see if there might be other solutions for me, too, and then your aunt called and proposed this new idea. At first I thought, ‘I can’t put Helen in some kind of home in Connecticut. How do I know she’d be happy?’ Then I thought, ‘Well, she’s certainly not happy here; nor are the rest of us.’

“So I read the material your aunt sent me, and I talked to your mother’s doctors here about how they thought she would be cared for in a group home like that, and since they fully approved, the whole plan seemed to make more and more sense the more I thought about it.”

Luca walked over to his desk again and pulled a copy of the brochure for Serenity House out of his file to show to Tony. But before he handed it to him, he finished his thought. “So as long as I know that I’m living close enough to check in on her, at least for the first year, I feel all right about it. I will be less than an hour and a half away by train from Serenity House when I’m living in Brooklyn with Fred, and Helen’s sisters will live only a few miles away from her.”

He handed Tony the brochure and Tony put it in his pocket to look at later. “I’m really going to miss you when you go to New York, Dad,” Tony said, his voice still a little shaky. “It will take some getting used to, having you so far away all the time.”

“Well, don’t think I’m not going to be keeping my eye on you, too, Tone,” Luca said, cuffing Tony lightly on the arm the way he often did. “Your Uncle Fred hates winters in New York, so we’ve already decided I will use the money from the sale of this house to buy a little condo here and we’ll both come down for at least three months every winter. When we get a little older, maybe we’ll even stay down here for good.”

And every January for twenty years since, just as he had promised, his father and uncle had driven from New York to St. Petersburg and, depending on the weather in New York, had driven back in either April or May. The rest of the year, a steady stream of their New York friends had come down to enjoy their condo.



As Tony was pulling into his space in the parking garage of his condo, he saw Frankie angling into a visitor’s space on the same floor of the garage. They got into the elevator together, and when the door opened on Tony’s floor, there stood his neighbor and Darth Vader, ready to go for a walk. Tony wished his neighbor good morning, ruffled Darth’s tiny ears, and then headed toward his apartment with Frankie.

“Who was that?” Frankie asked.

“That was the only other resident on my floor, and frankly, one of the few left in the building,” Tony said. “And believe it or not, Trainwreck is scared to death of that dog.”

“Can’t say I think much of the dog, either,” Frankie commented, “but the owner? Now that’s not a bad little package.”

As soon as they were inside the condo, Tony headed to the kitchen for a couple of beers and to check his phone messages. Frankie sat down in the living room and waited patiently for Tony to come back and finally tell his story.

The couch was strategically angled to provide an ever-changing

panoramic view of Tampa Bay through the sliding glass doors. On this day, Frankie noticed the sky was deep blue and dotted with snowy white clouds. The smooth-as-glass water of the bay, just a shade deeper than the sky, showcased dozens and dozens of the pristine sails of large and small boats, their fortunate owners out for a Saturday sail. The result was a scene of peace and tranquility, and after just a few seconds of looking at that view, Frankie felt fully relaxed.

Shifting his attention back inside, Frankie was struck, as he always was, with how really nice Tony’s apartment looked. Tony’s natural instinct for good design, whether he was creating an advertisement, designing a sweater, or decorating a room, was exceptional in Frankie’s opinion. He readily admitted to having no such talent, himself. Still, he could appreciate simplicity and style when he saw it.

The room Frankie was admiring hadn’t happened by accident. When Tony first moved into the condominium, he had lived with nothing but the canvas deck chairs and glass-topped table, which were now on the balcony, for more than a month, until he got a real feel for the way he wanted it to look. Then he carefully had selected the furniture pieces and artwork to create a design he could really love to live with.

He bought the dark brown leather sofa first and then the autumn-brown, granite coffee table in front of it. On that table he had placed a Steuben Glass sailboat. The boat stood about eighteen inches tall and was exquisite in its design. The sofa was banked on either side by a pair of bamboo Chinese chests. Each chest held a sturdy bronze lamp with a raw silk shade the color of heavy cream, and Tony had crafted a beautiful hand-knit throw in that same rich cream-colored yarn, which was tossed casually on the back of the sofa, just calling for someone to lie down right there and take a long, peaceful nap. A modern version of a large wing chair, covered in a teal blue fabric with a slight shadow print, was pulled to one side of the coffee table, and a three-foot square ottoman covered in tufted chocolate-brown suede filled the space on the other side.

On the opposite wall, Tony hadn't seen a need for window treatments, considering that he lived on the eleventh floor and no other buildings faced his condo, so instead, he had a gorgeous, deep teak wood frame built around the extra-wide sliding glass doors. As a result, the panoramic view of Tampa Bay appeared to be a moving work of art.

For a little bit of whimsy, Tony had selected a three-foot-tall, tooled-leather hippopotamus, with an engaging smile, which greeted his guests at the front door. Other artwork placed attractively around the room consisted of framed enlargements of some of Tony's favorite designs. Their graphic lines and brilliant colors were lively and playful and, as Tony often said, they reminded him to be grateful for the clients who made it possible for him to afford to live there.

As that thought crossed Frankie's mind, he frowned. The ad agency Tony had worked for, for over fifteen years had closed their St. Petersburg office.

Jeez, it must be eighteen months ago now, Frankie thought.

Tony had been struggling to find work. Still, he hadn't complained about it much.

Well, maybe that's what his big news is going to be about today, Frankie considered. *Maybe Tony has landed his dream job.*

Tony came into the room carrying two bottles of cold beer and a bag of pretzels. He sat down on the opposite end of the couch and glanced out the window, wondering if they should go out and sit on the balcony. No, this will be better, he decided to himself and flipped up the lid of the ottoman to take out his knitting.

Uh-oh, Frankie thought. *This is serious, because he doesn't knit in front of me unless he has to really think before he talks.* Tony had never quite convinced Frankie that it was normal for a grown man to knit.

"What are you working on?" Frankie asked, thinking it might be easier for Tony to warm up to any more serious subject by talking about something else first.

"A throw for the new couch in Dad and Uncle Fred's apartment," Tony answered, spreading out the work he had already done for Frankie to see. Using textured yarns, Tony had created a tone-on-tone checkerboard patterned throw in navy blue that to Frankie, looked good enough to be featured on the cover of a decorator magazine.

"I told you they redecorated their apartment, didn't I?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, you said they got a wild hair, sold all their old stuff and called in a decorator. Did they ever tell you why?" Frankie asked.

"No, but I think the furniture they had was mostly hand-me-downs from Fred's old house, and they probably decided they didn't want to bother replacing one piece at a time. Dad always was one for calling in an expert rather than trying to do something he didn't know much about," Tony recalled.

"Here, look at the pictures." Tony reached into the ottoman again and came out with a little picture album. "Dad sent these last week."

Frankie looked at the first picture and raised an eyebrow. "Jeez, Tony, this is pretty classy! It must have cost a mint."

"Yeah, well, my old man's a classy guy," Tony said in a tone that was half amusement, half amazement.

"Must have inherited those genes from his son," Frankie said, still thinking about how much he liked the way this apartment looked.

Tony took one deep breath and then he said, "OK, Frankie, I'm gonna just tell this story exactly the way it happened, and if you have any questions, just interrupt me, OK?" With that, he began to knit vigorously.

"Last Tuesday morning, I transferred \$5,000 from my savings account to my checking account to pay my monthly bills, just the way I have every month since my severance pay and unemployment ran out eight months ago. Of course, I knew that I was using up my savings while I looked for a job, but I didn't realize how much I had spent until my account showed a balance of only \$2,100 after Tuesday's withdrawal. Not enough for even one more month's expenses.

"I felt pretty depressed about it all day, but that night, I bit the

bullet and paid the mortgage payment and my car payment and the minimum payment on my credit cards, and then it really hit me. This is it. I could lose everything now.

“I tell you, Frankie, I’ve never felt like that before. We didn’t have much money when I was a kid, but I was always warm and fed and had a roof over my head. And I’ve worked since I was sixteen years old. I never had any trouble supporting myself. I lived well and I saved for a rainy day, but who the hell knew it was ever gonna pour for eighteen months?”

“Jeez, Tony, you could always come to me,” Frankie interrupted.

“I know that, Bro, but for how long? I didn’t have any long-term solutions in sight. I probably wouldn’t admit this to anyone else on the planet, not even Dad, but I was scared shitless. I mean petrified. I went into a panic that you wouldn’t believe. If I could have gone back to Sherwood Forest and bawled it out there, I would have, but I couldn’t. So instead, I just did it right here. I sat right here and cried my eyes out like I did when we were kids. And once I got started, I didn’t think I’d ever stop. Poor Trainwreck went mad. He even licked my tears for Christ’s sake, and all I could do was rock him in my arms and cry some more.”

Tony set his knitting aside, visibly shaken by the memory of that whole episode. He took a swig of beer, got up and looked out the window for a while until his emotions settled back down.

“Now brace yourself, Frankie. The rest of this is going to be a little hard to swallow, but it’s true. I swear it’s true,” Tony said as he sat back down on the couch.

“In the middle of rocking Trainwreck and sobbing and trying to stop bawling, I started to get mad. I began screaming and hollering at myself for being so stupid, because I put myself in this place, or rather I spent myself into this place, and I know it. That sailboat alone cost \$2,000,” he said, gesturing toward the glass sculpture in front of them. “But I should be able to get myself out of this mess, too,

shouldn’t I? It just seemed like the whole world had conspired against me. No one would hire me and I just didn’t know what else to do.

“As my temper began to cool off, though, all of a sudden I remembered how some of those crying and screaming jags used to end in Sherwood Forest. And Bro,” Tony turned and put his hand on Frankie’s shoulder, “this is about the only thing that ever happened to me that I’ve never told you about, but I guess you’ll see why when I tell you now.

“I’d get mad at myself back then, too, for whatever stupid thing I’d done, and all by myself in that woods, I’d scream and holler and swear and beat my fists. But sometimes, when my temper began to cool off, I would look up and see a happy little guy that looked like an elf, peeking out at me from behind a tree. Of course, I thought I had finally gone nuts, but it didn’t seem to matter at the time. He would slowly come out from behind the tree and climb up on my knee. He never said a word, but his eyes were full of understanding, and then he would smile at me and I would just know that everything would be all right. All that temper and all that sadness would suddenly be gone and I would feel very peaceful. Then I’d turn my head or something and he would just be gone.

“I hadn’t thought of that elf for years. In fact, I didn’t let myself think of it even then, except for a few minutes after he was gone. I knew a hallucination when I saw it, and I wasn’t admitting that I had just had one, even to myself.

“But when I was sitting here on this couch, that elf did come back to mind, and I wished with all my heart he would come again and take away the terrible pain I was feeling, worse, I can tell you, at this age than it ever was when we were kids, Frankie. Then, we didn’t think everything was our fault, but now, there’s no one else to blame,” Tony said, shaking his head.

“So I laid my head back on the couch here and just the thought of him calmed me down a little. So I said to Trainwreck, ‘Where the hell is that elf now, when I really need him?’

“Trainwreck put his paw on my face and began to pat it, as if he was trying to get my attention. I opened my eyes, and I swear to you, Frankie, there he was. There was the ELF sitting right on the edge of this coffee table, swinging his legs and smiling that same kind smile, just waiting for me to discover him.”

This time it was Frankie who got up and walked to the window to look out at the view. Why the hell did this not sound as crazy as it should? he wondered. Something about an elf rang a bell in his mind, too, way back somewhere, but he couldn't seem to bring it forward. Maybe if he just kept listening he would remember why what Tony was saying was actually making some kind of very weird sense.

He turned back toward Tony. “How about another beer?” he suggested.

Tony relaxed visibly. At least Frankie wasn't going to bolt. “Sure, I'll get it. Want anything else?”

“Yeah, I do,” Frankie said, “I want to hear the rest of this story.”

When they settled back on the couch again, Tony began to describe the ELF. “He was somewhere between two and three feet high. Since he was sitting down, I couldn't tell exactly. He had a very kind face and a little white beard. His eyes were green and soft. He was wearing a purple, pointed hat, just like I would expect an elf to wear. His head was solid, human-like, but his body was made up of colored bands of pulsating lights. I could see his body, but it was also sort of transparent, like those holograms we used to see in the Star Wars movies, remember?”

Frankie nodded, “Yeah, I remember.”

“Anyway, I asked him, ‘Who are you?’” Tony then repeated the conversation to Frankie:

“I am the ELF,” he said, “which is short for the Eternal Life Force. I am the Life Force that created you, and I have been inside of you since before you were born, Tony. I've also been with you all the time you have been here on planet earth, and I will be with you after you die. I am you, and you are me, always have been and always will be,

but normally I am invisible to you. Generally, you can't see me like you are seeing me now; nor do I usually speak to you in words.”

“How come I've never known about you before, if you are, as you say, me?”

“Oh, you have known me before, Tony. You know, as all human beings do, that something you can't see operates your body when you aren't paying attention, and heals it when it is hurt. You are also in constant communication with me and me with you. You talk to me with thoughts and I answer you with feelings.”

“How come I can see you now?”

“You are, just at this moment, in such a state of distress that I knew I couldn't get through to you any other way. The power to solve your problem has always been available to you, Tony, but you are going to need my help this time to discover what you already know. So, here I am in a somewhat physical form so you can see and hear me. This isn't the first time you've seen me like this, is it?”

“Was it you who came to me in Sherwood Forest?”

“It was.”

“How come you didn't talk to me then?”

“I didn't talk to you, but I did communicate with you. Before you saw me, your mind was filled with thoughts of things you didn't want, and it was your thoughts that were making you feel so sad and then mad. But just the sight of me, when you were still a boy, startled you out of your bad thoughts, and when I would climb onto your knee and just smile at you, it made you feel immediately better. You began to think hopeful thoughts like ‘Everything will be all right now,’ and as soon as you started thinking that way, good things began to happen to you.”

“They did?”

“Yes, they did. Whenever you think hopeful thoughts, good things start to happen. If you remember, not long after I came to you as the ELF the first time, you met Frankie.”

“I sure didn't put that together,” Tony admitted.

“That wasn’t your job, certainly not as a teenage boy, anyway. But the information I am giving you now will help you for the rest of your life on earth, Tony. You’re old enough to understand it and remember it now. Whenever you are thinking about something you don’t want to happen, you will begin to feel some sort of bad feeling. For example, when you thought about possibly losing everything you’d ever worked for, you felt really, really bad, didn’t you?”

“You could say that. I don’t remember ever feeling worse.”

“Those really bad feelings should have served as a signal to you that you were thinking about things you didn’t want to happen, like foreclosure, repossession, loss of credit or even homelessness. It is very important that you turn your attention away from what you don’t want in order to begin to experience what you do want.

“Even Trainwreck tried to distract you from thinking about those things, but you were so deep into those thoughts that it took something pretty drastic to bring you out of it. So that’s why I’m here, Tony,” the ELF explained. “To help you think the thoughts that will solve your problem instead of continuing to make it worse.”

“Why isn’t Trainwreck afraid of you?” Tony asked. “He’s scared to death of Darth Vader, and that dog is a quarter the size of you and doesn’t vibrate.”

When he heard his name mentioned, Trainwreck jumped down from Tony’s lap and lazily strolled toward his litter box.

“I know he is,” chuckled the ELF. “Even I think that’s funny. Trainwreck has had such bad experiences with dogs in the past that he avoids the whole species, no matter what size they are. He and I will have to work on that. But to answer your question, he isn’t afraid of me because all animals are very much in contact with their own spiritual nature.”

“Were you communicating with Trainwreck when he was stuck up that telephone pole?”

“He called for help, yes, and not just to get away from the dog. He was also telling me he was tired of fighting for his life out on the

streets. For a while it was fun, but he wanted to finish out his life in a cushier place.

“Now, you probably won’t remember this part, Tony, but just the night before you met Trainwreck, you and Frankie were visiting his sister, Julie, and you were petting her cat, Cat Ballou. You liked that cat and you sent out a strong vibration that told me that you might like a cat of your own, so when Trainwreck called for help and you happened to be right in the neighborhood, I just made it possible for you to find each other.

“You know, it confounds me,” the ELF said, “that human beings still believe their best relationships happen by coincidence. Isn’t there enough evidence of such miracles around to help you all “get it” that there are invisible forces working on your behalf?”

“So you choose who we have relationships with?” Tony asked. “Are we just fooling ourselves that we have something to do with that?”

“No, I don’t choose your relationships for you,” the ELF answered firmly. “Part of the purpose of your human experience is for you to make your own choices about everything you have and do. But I do arrange for compatible life forms to be together in the same spaces sometimes. I made it possible for you and Trainwreck to meet, yes. But you decided to take him home and make him your roommate.”

“Did you put me and Frankie together in Sherwood Forest?”

“I did, but I didn’t decide that you would become friends; you did. You each wanted someone in your life who would understand what you were going through and like you anyway. When you met, you weighed your choices, to either beat each other up or take a chance and become friends. You chose to become friends.”

Tony looked over at Frankie and asked cautiously, “You still all right with this story, Bro?”

“I’m listening,” answered Frankie, which was all he could manage to say at the moment.

“OK, so you say I already know how to solve my own problem,” Tony said to the ELF, still suspicious. “I have to ask, does this have

anything to do with religion? Am I going to have to start going to church and doing stuff like that to get my life back?”

“Not unless you want to,” the ELF said smiling. “Religion is not a spiritual concept. It is a human invention. It works for some people but not for others. I don’t think church is really your bag, Tony.”

Tony sort of snickered. “You don’t talk much like something as huge as an Eternal Life Force; you talk like a regular person.”

“Well, as I said before, I don’t usually talk at all, but I want to help you work through your problem, and more than that, I want to help you understand how to solve other challenges for yourself in the future. Are you ready to get started on that now?”

“I thought I was at the end of my rope before you showed up,” Tony said simply. “I have never ever felt this helpless before, even when I was a kid. Am I going to be homeless?”

“There is no end to your rope, Tony. I will always give you all the rope you need. And you’re going to be homeless only if you choose to be.”

“I can’t see any way out of this,” Tony said simply. “I’ve looked at it from every angle, and I’m just trapped, that’s all. Even though I swore when I left home that I’d never let myself get trapped again, by anything, I spent my way into this mess, thinking I would always be able to earn a living. I still can hardly believe I can’t do that.”

“You already know what the solution is to that problem too, Tony,” the ELF added, “but that is not what we need to talk about first. You never have a question in your heart without already knowing the answer,” the ELF explained.

“And you also know how to get out of your financial crunch, Tony, with relative ease, as a matter of fact. You’re just not willing to see the solution that is right in front of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean there is a solution you are not allowing yourself to see or to take advantage of.”

“It’s pretty difficult, when you aren’t bringing in any money and all

your savings are gone, to see any kind of solution,” Tony said, frustration returning to his voice again. “At least it seems to be for me.”

“And when you think about all your savings being gone and having no job, how do you feel?” the ELF asked.

“I feel just awful.”

“And you will keep feeling awful as long as you continue to think about those things, Tony, because you are thinking about what you don’t want.”

“Well, what the hell—oops, sorry. What should I think about then?”

“What do you have that is valuable, Tony?” the ELF asked simply.

“What I have,” Tony answered, now with real irritation, “is an almost empty bank account, a mortgage that will soon be overdue, a car payment that will soon be overdue, and credit cards I won’t even be able to make the minimum payments on. What I don’t have is an income that will provide the money to change that. I don’t see anything of particular value in any of that.”

Then Tony thought to himself, *Exactly why am I talking to this imaginary toy? I must be almost as crazy as my mother was. Maybe it’s hereditary.*

“You’re not crazy, and you’re talking to me because you don’t have any other better solution in your mind at the moment, Tony,” the ELF answered kindly.

“You heard that?” Tony asked.

“I hear what you are thinking all the time, Tony. I am you, remember?”

The ELF looked deep into Tony’s eyes and smiled the same smile Tony remembered from his childhood. Then he said, “Just relax, Tony. There is a very simple way for you to solve your own problem, and you’re going to like it. I promise.”

“And immediately, Frankie, I knew he was right,” Tony said, “and I did feel a better.”