

The call came in the blackness of the winter morning. I ran a hand over my face and answered with a tight-lipped, "Yes."

"It's me. I saw Dave in Reno, behind one of the casinos."

I snapped awake. "Did you talk to him?"

Annie's voice was quiet. That didn't mean much; she was always cautious and hesitant when she spoke to me. "We were on our way back from visiting some friends in Sparks when we saw him."

Sharon stirred beside me. "What's going on?" she asked, rubbing her eyes while she brushed her thick, chestnut hair from her face.

I cupped the mouthpiece in my palm. "It's Annie. She saw Dave in Reno." I returned to Annie. "Hold on. Your Mom is going to the other phone."

Sharon hurried to the next room.

Her calm voice came on the line. "I'm here now, Annie. Tell me about it. How is he?"

"He looked bad, Mom. Real bad. His clothes were torn and dirty. His hair was matted and long." Annie sniffed. "We have to help him."

"Did you talk to him?" I asked again.

"We just got home, Dad. Ray is putting the kids to bed."

"I want to know if you talked to him. Did you?"

She swallowed the sobs. "We were driving by when we saw him. Ray couldn't pull over. When we went back, he was gone. We couldn't find him."

"You go rest now, Annie," Sharon soothed, "Call me in the morning. I'll speak to your Dad, and we'll think of something to do."

Sharon came and sat on the bed. "Annie did the best she could. If you didn't act like such a damn tyrant, Rich, maybe the kids wouldn't be afraid to talk to you. We have to do something. We have to get him home."

"How are we going to do that? Do you expect me to come up with some magic way to find him?"

She stared at me. "I'm sorry we aren't all perfect. Focus on the problem. It's Dave and finding him. This is the first time in two years that someone has seen him. I don't need a lecture, I need Dave back. I want him here with us. You have to quit talking and finally do something. Go to Reno and bring him back."

"Look, I don't see ..."

"You don't see what you can do? Is that what you were going to say? You're a cop. You've spent twenty years helping other families. This time, help us. Now!" Tears formed in her eyes. "Stop spouting off. We should have been looking for him all along. That tough love crap hasn't worked."

Even as he was falling into the abyss of drug use, I was convinced that Dave needed to find his own way. Now, nothing else I might say would matter. How to find him was my problem. I was the cop, the expert. She had given me an edict. Find him.

Sharon sat on the bed watching me as I dressed and packed my backpack with clothes and other odds and ends.

“I should be in Reno in two or three hours. I'll let you know where I'm staying when I get there.”

She wiped her eyes with a tissue, nodded and clenched her jaw when I bent to kiss her. I knew she was hurting, but, as always, I didn't know what to say.

On the drive out of Chico, I thought about how badly Dave had failed. He joined the Air Force out of high school. He had the grades but he decided to bypass college. I thought it a stupid idea, but maybe military discipline would make him into what I wanted and expected. That was my mistake.

After boot camp, he was assigned to a base near Seattle. He called home once a week, mostly to speak to his mother and sister. After about a year, he called with news

“Dad, it's me. Can I talk to Mom?”

“What happened to 'please'?” I handed the receiver to Sharon. “It's Dave.”

“Yes, I could tell.” She gave me a look that screamed 'jerk' as she took the phone, “Hi, Honey. How are you?”

She listened for a minute, then answered, “Oh, Annie and I are just sitting here with your Dad watching one of his football games.”

She a smile spread across her face. “Well, that is wonderful. Is she nice? Great. Do you want to speak to your Dad or Annie? Okay, I’ll tell her. Bye, Honey.” Sharon hung up. “Annie, call Dave tomorrow”

After hanging up, Sharon announced that Dave had met a girl. “Her name is Rose and he's in love with her.”

“What the hell does a nineteen-year-old know about love?” I shook my head.

Both Annie and Sharon ignored me and began talking about Dave and his girl.

They were married in Renton, a suburb of Seattle, the following year. Sharon and I went for the weekend. Annie drove up from Corvallis, Oregon, where she was a freshman at the state university. She and Rose had become close. Close enough that Rose asked her to be Maid of Honor.

When he separated from the military, Dave and Rose stayed in Seattle, close to his in-laws. He went back to school at Rose's prodding. Meanwhile, he played drums with several local blues-rock bands on week-ends for a little extra money. The playing became partying. Booze and weed became speed and heroin. Dave was lost. Rose finally threw him out six years later. That was five years ago.

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I checked into a motel on Keystone north of downtown. I called Sharon from the room. “I'm at the Driftaway motel. I'll be here for a couple of hours catching a little sleep. I'll go looking for him when I wake up.”

“Ray called to ask if you'd like him to go there and meet you. He wants to help.”

“What's an accountant going to do?” I barked. “For Christ's sake, just tell him to stay home.” I was frustrated. I had been sent off to perform the impossible. Now Sharon wanted to saddle me with my son-in-law.

“Stop being a jerk.” She muffled a sob. “He wants to help.”

“I'm sorry, Sharon. There's nothing for him to do.”

“Are you going to the police department?”

“No. The police don't have the resources to help me.”

“If you tell them you're a cop they might help.”

“No, they won't. Besides, this is our business. Between you and me.”

“Stop worrying about your pride. This is our son. Bring him home.”

“I'll do all I can,” I said into an empty phone.

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I began my search from Virginia Street west to Keystone. Everywhere I looked I saw groups of the dispossessed crowding the area. Most were haggard figures leaning against railings or walls, or sitting on their haunches, passing a bottle between them and watching their present pass into the future.

At four in the afternoon I realized I was dog-tired and hadn't eaten since the night before. I returned to the motel and called Sharon.

“Where is he?” she asked without waiting for me to speak.

“I haven't found him. I'm going to grab something to eat, get a few hours sleep and then go out again.”

“Did you go to the police department?”

“No, I didn't. I know what they're going to tell me. There's nothing we can do' or something like that.”

“Please talk to them, Rich. We need all the help we can get.”

Dave's disappearance had magnified problems in our marriage. Sharon had turned into a silent and somber woman who'd lost her ability to smile. I spent most of my days puttering in the yard. I rarely saw or spoke to anyone. We spent most of our waking hours apart.

“Don't worry. I'll find him. I'll call later.” I hung up, shucked my clothes, and took a hot shower. I went to bed without eating.

It was two in the morning when I woke. I dressed and went to the coffee shop next door. An older white guy with slicked-back short, brown hair I guessed had been straightened with a hairnet was bussing tables. The coffee shop wasn't crowded but he was working hard, cleaning tables with a spray bottle and cloth rag. His actions were quick, efficient, and thorough. Men in the joint learn to bury themselves in their work. A cop can always spot a con.

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I motioned to him. “Can I ask you something?”

He looked at me with the same recognition, a con making a cop. “I don't know anything, Officer.” He turned back to his task with his head down and his eyes averted.

“I’m not from around here. I’m looking for a guy named Dave. I just need to get a message to him.”

“Sorry, I don't know anything.” He stayed with head down and eyes glued to his task. He was hurrying so he could move away.

“Look, I just want to talk to him. I promise he's not in any trouble.” I was rushing my words now. “He's a tall guy, dark hair. Used to play drums around town. His family’s worried, so they asked me to look for him.”

The blank face changed. His features softened, he pursed his lips and blew out a breath. “He's your kid, right?”

I hesitated a moment, “Yeah. His mom and I are worried about him. He’s been gone three years. His sister saw him here day before yesterday.”

He studied me before answering, “I’m Mike Wallis. If you want, I’ll ask around. But I don't know what else I can do.”

I wrote my name and cell phone number on a napkin and showed him a picture of Dave. “I don’t mean to insult you, but if you put any out any cash, I'll cover it.”

I began searching again. By seven in the morning, I had covered the area twice with no luck. I was depressed. I returned to the motel to get some sleep.

The search went nowhere and my feeling of impotence was grew. Except for my encounter with Mike Wallis, everything seemed pointless. Sharon might be right. If Ray was here, he’d be an extra set of eyes. Even after eight years with Annie, Ray and I weren't close. I

would give in. Sharon was right, I needed help. The local cops could offer advice. After all, it was their city.

She answered immediately. "Have you found him?"

"Why is it you answer the phone with a question?" I was tired. I felt as though I was on everyone's list.

"Quit feeling sorry for yourself. Right now, all I want is to find my son."

"Sharon, he's our son. Not yours. Not mine. Ours."

She began crying. "I'm sorry, Rich. Since Annie told us, all I can think about is if he's alive or dead or hurt?" Her voice steadied, "I know I'm taking it out on you and I'm sorry"

"Don't be sorry. I'm just tired. I'm back at the motel and I'm going to rest for a while. I found someone who'll ask around about Dave. I met him at a coffee. He's an ex-con. I told him about Dave. Says he'll try to help. For some reason, I believe him."

"Wait a minute." Her voice rose, "You told someone you just met about this, but you won't go to the police." I could almost feel her fury as she spoke.

"You're right. It's just that it embarrasses me to let other cops know about Dave. I decided to go to the P.D. this morning. I'll go when I wake up."

"I'm sorry." Her voice softened, "I love you. Go rest and call back when you can."

Sharon hadn't told me she loved me since we lost touch with Dave.

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I was up by three in the afternoon. I grabbed a burger and coke then went to the police department. An officer sat at the front desk inside the door reading the paper while listening to some country music station on a radio beside him. He didn't even turn the sound down as I approached.

I gave him my ID card, "Hi. I was wondering if you could help me locate someone?"

"Okay, Sarge, who is it and where do they live?" The officer looked at me with a little interest.

"That's just it. He's apparently homeless. He used to play drums with a lot of the house bands, but no one's seen for a while. I've got an old picture of him if it'll help."

"Drug user?" he asked.

"Yes, meth. But I don't know where or who he hangs with."

"Well, you've dealt with enough of these dirtbags, Sarge. Who the hell knows where to look. If he's a user, most of the dealers hang around the casinos. There's a bunch on the east side between Sparks and us. I can give you a list of the shelters in the two towns but most of the homeless just find a doorway. Is he wanted for something in California?"

"No, I'm just doing the family a favor."

"Well, you know what it's like, Sarge. We're too damn busy to look for some asshole just because he's missing. There're too many of them and too few of us. Sorry."

"Unfortunately, this asshole is my son."

He turned off the radio. "I'm sorry I said that, but it doesn't change anything. We don't have the manpower. I'm really sorry. Leave me your number and where you're staying. I'll spread the word to the patrol crews. If we come across anything, we'll call you."

I left my number, the name of the motel and a description of my car, then said my thanks and left. I was feeling even more exhausted than before I slept, and I hadn't started yet. A cold wind had kicked up. I wondered if my windbreaker would be enough.

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It was getting so dark I couldn't see anyone on the street, let alone recognize them. Huge black clouds rolled in and took over the sky. The thunderheads over the Sierras were beginning to envelop the mountains. The car radio announced the temperature was in single digits and a major blizzard would hit the next morning. I shut the windows. The cold had stiffened my face. The thought of Dave out there under these conditions weighed on me.

He'd been gone for over three years, and, although I worried about him a bit now and then, the impending storm made me face my loss. According to some of the newscasters, it was going to be a record setter. There were even some who thought there might be an ice storm.

I went to the coffee shop and asked for Mike. Had he learned anything? That was important, but just a somewhat friendly face would really help me.

He came out of the kitchen, his ever-present table rag in his hand. "I found some of the guys he used to play with. They say he's been wandering around West Fourth Street on the other side of Keystone. He's been avoiding them. He doesn't owe them any money or anything, but he might have a stash he doesn't want to share."

He put his hand on my shoulder as if offering solace. It was probably the first time he had ever touched a cop without getting in trouble. It was certainly the first time a con had ever put his hands on me without some strong reaction.

“Thanks. I appreciate what you've done for me ... us. Are you sure I can't do anything for you?”

“Don't sweat it. Just find your son.” There was a slight catch in his voice as he spoke. He went back to work without looking back.

The frigid March wind blustered through Donner Pass, down the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada, and down into Reno. My car heater was making little headway against the freezing cold. It had been three days since I began looking for him. The freezing wind seeped through the window attacking my face and hands. My nose ached, my face felt punctured by countless needles and my hands had stiffened.

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My phone rang and a woman's voice began without prelude. “Sergeant Ballmer, would you come over to the alley north of Fifth just east of Virginia. We're behind the Golden Shamrock. We have a man down and would appreciate it if you could come take a look.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said a bit perturbed. “Who is this?”

“I'm sorry, Sergeant. This is Officer Jablonsky from Reno PD. My partner and I are at a dead person call. The body matches the description of your son.”

My throat tightened and the pit of my stomach cramped. “I'll be there as quickly as I can. Thanks.”

It took me a little over five minutes to get there. Two patrol officers, a tall woman with her blonde hair in a bun and an even taller male officer were standing beside their cruiser. I motioned to them as I parked on the opposite side of the street.

The woman approached me. “The dead body is in a doorway on the other side of our car. Looks like he might have died of exposure. He's a pretty close fit to the description you gave the desk officer. Would you take a look for us?”

I walked with her to the other officer. “I'm Tredlow, Sergeant. Sorry about this but if you would take a look, we'd really appreciate it.”

The body was lying in a fetal position. I couldn't see much from where I was standing. The body lay on its side, knees up and hands clenched together at his chest. A dark, hooded sweatshirt hid his face. He was built like Dave, tall and broad-shouldered, curly, dark brown hair and those long muscular hands. The sight brought back memories of Dave as a boy, lying in his bed, in a fetal position with his hands clasped in front of him. In those days, I would come home after an evening shift and stand over him, watching in wonder. What in the world had gone wrong? I should have been looking for him all this time. The thought kept ringing through my mind. What if? What if? One of the most frustrating questions of all time.

“Is that him?” Tredlow asked.

“I can't tell until I get a better look.” As I looked down at the fallen form, I realized that I was shivering from more than the cold. The build and coloring looked like Dave. My God, what could I possibly say to Sharon. My breathing became shallow and labored.

Tredlow reached and lightly held my elbow. “The coroner’s okayed it, so we can uncover the face if you want a better look.”

With that, he stooped and pulled back the hood. The opening of the body's nostrils and the corners of his closed eyes had ice crystals forming. Even so, his skin seemed almost delicate.

He had a soft, scraggly beard and his long, curly dark brown hair was dirty and matted. His thin clothes were filthy. I pulled the long hair back from his face and stared for what seemed a lifetime. I gave a loud, spluttering intake of breath and my knees wobbled. I staggered a bit, reaching out to the wall to steady myself.

“Are you okay?” Tredlow seemed concerned.

“Is it him?” Jablonsky was straight forward and professional. She wasn't going to get emotionally involved.

I couldn't answer at first. Only a hoarse croak came before I clenched my mouth and tried again.

“No, that's not him. Thanks for calling me.”

I turned and left as quickly as I could. I didn't want them to see the tears in my eyes.

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I started searching where Mike had suggested. After hours of driving, I was ready to call it quits. I was westbound on Fourth, my eyes flicking from one side of the road to the other, when I saw him. He was walking from behind an abandoned gas station by the river a hundred yards ahead of me.

It was a few minutes past seven in the morning. I opened my window for a better look. Dave, his rail-thin body, covered by an old army overcoat wrapped tightly around him, was leading a small red pit-bull pup with a hemp rope tied to the dog's collar. The change in Dave was stark. His eyes were sunken deep into his gaunt, unshaven face. His dark, curly hair was dirty and matted with the refuse of living raw. He rummaged through a dumpster while the pup sat on his haunches and watched.

I was afraid Dave would bolt, but there was no other choice. I eased my car into the station and quietly called to him. He stepped away from the dumpster, grabbed the dog's rope leash and walked to my car. I opened the door and stepped out.

"Hi, Dad." He didn't blink. He didn't show any wonder or ask how I had found him.

"Hi, Dave. How are you, son?"

"Okay." He paused and looked at me with a slight frown as he squatted and stroked the little dog. "What are you doing in Reno?"

"Annie and Ray were visiting some friends a few days ago and saw you on their way home. They couldn't stop in time. They looked but couldn't find you, so they called Mom and me."

"So what? You just jumped in your car and came to get me?"

"Well, almost. I came right after Annie called us. Your Mom and I needed to find you. I've been here searching for you for three days."

"So what do you want?"

I wanted to cry. I had found him. Now, what?

“Where are you living?” I began again.

“I’ve got a campsite set up on a little ridge over by the river. I’ve been there for a couple of months.”

“I’m staying at a motel close by. Would you like to come over and clean up.” My heart was breaking, but I needed to remain as calm as possible. I needed to talk him into coming home.

“Can I bring him?” he asked as he pointed to the dog.

“I guess so. We’ll keep him at the motel while you and I get some breakfast.”

Dave picked up the pup with a gentleness I remembered from his boyhood. He climbed into the passenger’s seat and continued stroking his dog as we drove to the motel.

This different from what I had imagined our meeting would be like. I had thought he would bolt or at least back away. I had expected him to be surprised. Instead, he acted as if this happened every day.

“How’s Mom? Is she okay?”

“She’s going to be fine when I let her know I’ve found you. She always worried about you. It’d be great if you came home with me. Spend a little time with her. Doesn’t have to be permanent. Just for a while so you can get your bearings. What do you think?” I was pushing it, but after seeing that dead youngster in the alley, I had to do something.

Dave didn’t seem to react. He just kept stroking the dog.

“He's a good-looking little pup. When we finish, we'll figure what to do with him. Maybe find a rescue shelter.”

“No, Dad. I can't just send him off with someone he doesn't know. He's my friend. The closest friend I have.”

“You never know. He might need medical attention.”

“He's fine. I've washed him and made sure he doesn't have fleas or anything.”

“Okay, let's talk about it later. What's his name?”

“Stranger.”

“Stranger? How'd you come up with that?” I wanted him involved with me.

“I don't know. I woke up one morning and he was sitting beside me. He'd been wandering around. Nobody cared whether he lived or died. A stranger on earth, just like me. He followed me for a week. When I looked for food, he did too. He didn't seem to want anything. Just to belong to someone. He chose me. We've been together for a few months, now.”

At the motel, he took from some of the clothes I'd brought for him. He went in and took a shower.

Stranger, bursting with energy, spent his time first sitting and then running around the room at full speed, his tail slapping back and forth. He alternated between nipping at me and jumping onto my lap. When Dave came out of the bathroom, I realized how much he'd deteriorated since I last saw him. When he first left, he was six-foot-three and weighed a well-

muscled two hundred twenty pounds. Now, his shoulders and elbows were bony points on an incredibly thin body. I doubted he weighed one hundred fifty pounds.

“Why did you come looking for me, Dad? I was doing okay.”

I looked at him with wonder. “Dave, you aren't okay. You have a lot of problems that need solving. Let's get some breakfast. We can talk then.”

“I don't want to talk. I'm really tired. Maybe when we get back.”

“Sure, Dave. Whatever you say.”

We broke up some sticks of jerky I had and put them beside a bowl of water in the bathroom with Stranger. The small diner next to the motel was empty. A short woman with dyed hair came to the table and scribbled our order on her pad.

The waitress brought Dave his scrambled eggs and bacon and my oatmeal. Dave placed small bits of egg on his fork and brought them slowly to his mouth. After each bite, he set the fork back on his plate and chewed slowly. He picked up one piece of bacon between the tips of his thumb and forefinger. He nibbled on it between bites of egg. He left the toast untouched. When we finished, he wrapped the second piece of bacon in a napkin.

“It's for Stranger,” he told me. They were the first words spoken since we arrived.

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At the motel, Dave let Stranger out of the bathroom and sat on the floor at the foot of one of the beds. He fed Stranger the bacon, repeatedly breaking a small piece from the strip and offering it the dog. When Stranger finished eating, Dave rubbed the dog's head with a soft, gentle

hand. The dog lay down beside Dave and rested his head on Dave's leg. He was asleep in a matter of seconds.

“Your mother and your sister worry about you. None of us can stop thinking about you. I came looking for you to see if we can help. We miss you, Dave. We want you to get better.”

"What about Stranger?" Dave looked at me, before turning back to Stranger.

"Stranger might be a problem. We've been animal free since you left for the service. Your mom and I kind of like it that way.”

“Can't you and Mom make room?”

“A dog would be a problem. None of us have the time to take care of him and take care of you as well. Come home. Maybe we can find a good rehab program and a good home for your dog.” I tried speaking some sense to him. “He probably isn't healthy. Maybe we can place him where people can care for him. They can get him well and find him a good home. That way we can concentrate on you and do what we can to help you.”

“Stranger and I belong together. I can't let him go. If he's dispensable, then so am I.” Dave watched me with a look I had never seen before. “I stopped using over two months ago. It's been hard. Before that, I stopped for a month. I couldn't do it. I fell off the wagon. It took me almost a month before I tried again. You're never going to believe this, but I stopped because of Stranger. It's the first time since Rose and I broke up that anyone depended on me. I don't know if I can stay sober, but I know I won't be able to do it without him.” As he finished, his eyes glistened.

He placed his head in his hands.

I reached out haltingly until my hand rested on his shoulder. I was frozen at first, then memory kicked in and my fingers gently patted and rubbed his back. It was awkward as if I was regaining something; some humanness maybe, that I had lost somewhere in my past. I stopped being a cop and began being a father.

“God, Dad, I'm so tired of this.” His voice was a pinched whisper.

“Come home. We'll bring Stranger with us. We ... I love you, son. We'll find a good program for you. We can be home in three hours.” I put my arms around him and held him close. It was the first time I had hugged him since he was a small boy. Tears I didn't know I could produce began spilling down my cheeks.

I called Sharon, “I've found him. He's here and he's decided to come home. He's bringing his dog with him.”

“Let me talk to him, please,” she asked.

Dave took the phone and said a quick, “Hi, Mom.” He held the receiver to his ear and listened intently. He didn't speak. He just grunted a series of assents until he ended with, “Thanks, Mom. I love you, too.”

I took the phone from his outstretched hand and said, “We'll be leaving soon. We should be home in two or three hours.”

“Thank you, Rich.” Her voice was a quiet stutter. “Annie and Ray are with me. We're waiting for you.”