

FAMILY FEUD

1950 wd's

The telephone was ringing...very unusual these days. Maxwell heard it while he was waiting to load up an order of tile into a van, being backed into the warehouse by one of his customers. It was nearly closing time on Friday afternoon.

Business had not been so good lately. Max thought it may be because of the sluggish economy, or the competition of the new home-improvement center's grand opening last year. Maxwell and his wife, Christine, had started this small building supply store some thirty years ago, (with fast, friendly service). Christine was the secretary, the accountant, the chief bottle washer, the no-nonsense account's receivable department and anything else that needed doing around here. Christine Johnson was doing everything she could to keep 'Johnson's Building Supply' store open. Max and Christine had accumulated a fair amount of money over the years, but after a bad venture to open up a new outlet store in an adjacent city, their money had been dwindling.

Max had parked a pallet of large tile just inside the doorway of the warehouse. The boxes were stacked up very high on their ends and were heavy. As he and his customer loaded the tile into the van, one box at a time, the telephone was still ringing. Out of habit, Max counted the rings silently to himself. He always said the phone should be picked up by the fourth ring. Customers appreciated getting through promptly to someone. *Eight...nine...where was Chris?* Finally, she must have answered it, or the person calling was pissed off and hung up.

"How's business?" the customer asked, while loading up his tile.

"Well, not so great..." Max started to say, looking up toward the office. He saw Christine was holding the receiver up as if to say it was for him. Over the intercom, Christine said, "It's your brother."

Suddenly, a furious pain struck down on Maxwell's foot like a sledgehammer. Unknown to him, while he was looking up toward the office, the box underneath the one he was picking up was slowly leaning over, falling on his toes. The thin-skinned cowboy boots he had on offered no protection from the impact. "Ouch!" Max yelled, seeing stars. He hobbled over to a nearby pallet and sat down. Nausea turned his stomach over. He

heard the bones in his toes crunch, or the sound of the tile breaking, or both. His foot was swelling so rapidly inside of his boot that it was already too tight to remove. He decided to keep the boot on. Maybe it would help hold his foot together.

“Hey Max, you okay buddy?” asked the customer.

“Just give me a minute,” Maxwell said, still registering that his brother was on the phone. Something bad always seem to happened whenever Barry was involved.

“Say, that box is all broken up. Can I get another one?” asked the customer. Max just stared at him in disbelief.

“Yes...yes, take an extra box.”

“Okay, thanks...I got to go. You sure you are all right. I bet that hurt, huh?”

“No, it was wonderful,” Max said.

“What did you do?” Christine asked... She had ventured out into the warehouse to see what was going on.

“I think I broke my toes,” Max blurted.

“You think you broke your toes?” Christine asked. “How did you do that?”

“Punting for the high school football team, what do you think I was doing?”

“Do we need to go to the emergency room?” she asked.

“No, we don’t need go to the emergency room. They cannot do anything with busted toes. Get me some aspirins.”

“Do you think you should take aspirin? Doesn’t that thin the blood or something?”

“Christine, please... just get me the damn aspirins,” Max said sharply. He noticed the expression on her face. Christine was very sensitive and protective of her husband. He slowed himself down a bit, making himself say, “Come on, I’m sorry.”

“Well, you don’t have to be so huffy about it,” she said.

“I’m hurting here. Cant you see that?”

“Barry’s on the phone,” she said.

“I know that... pure joy...what does he want?” Maxwell asked.

“I don’t know, he sounds upset.”

“Tell him I’ll call him back.”

“I did. He want’s to hold.”

“Jesus H. Christ.”

“What do you want me to do?” Christine asked nervously.

“Hang on a second... let me...get myself together here.”

Christine always got nervous whenever Barry was involved with them. She did her best to be cordial around him, but she never felt comfortable. He had worked here as a warehouseman one summer, staying at their house. Unknown to Max, Barry had come on to her once while he was drunk. Christine also knew Barry had a very bad drug problem, (or use to). Christine adored Maxwell. Barry was a different kettle of fish. Christine did not trust Barry Johnson. Barry still lived on the old homestead with his mother, trying to run the ranch the two brothers had grown up on, some five hours away by car. Christine thought Barry was pretty much running the place into the ground. She also knew Max still felt a sense of loyalty toward Barry, and to their dying fathers’ wishes for Barry to keep the old home-place going. That, and to help out their aging mother. Barry said he was willing to do that. Maxwell and his father had tried to help Barry by sending him to three different rehabilitation centers. The last one supposedly worked. Barry proudly proclaimed five years of sobriety. If it was not for that, there was no way Max would agree to let Barry take care of his mother after their father died.

Max limped toward the office. *Damn, this thing really hurts.* He flopped into the chair at his desk. "Hello... Barry?" The phone was dead. Barry had hung up. "Damn it! He hung up!" Max yelled. Christine heard him, but pretended not too. She knew Max's temper. He had come to her defense numerous times if anyone even thought about giving her a hard time. Max kept a loaded pistol in his desk. He would use it if he absolutely had to. "Christine! Do you have his new cell number? He changed it, didn't he?"

"I'm not sure. I think so," Christine said. She was getting anxious. The phone rang again. Max picked it up before it stopped ringing.

"HELLO!?"

"Max?"

"What? What's up Barry?"

"Max... mama died."

Max was momentarily silent. "What... when?"

"Last night, I guess," Barry said.

"Last night... and you're just now calling me?"

"Yes."

"I'm heading that way," Max said.

"Wait a minute, I need to talk to you. I'm just down the street. I'm coming in," Barry stated, then he hung up.

That did not sound good to Max. What was he doing here? Apprehension rushed through him. He knew Barry. If he had not been sober and something had happened to his mother, there was going to be hell to pay.

"Christine... Barry's here. He said mama died! Something's up!"

Max instinctively got up to lock the front door and to close the warehouse bay. Something told him to get ready for Barry. There was a thin unopened cardboard box of some kind standing in the corner of his office. He grabbed it to use as a makeshift cane. Max pulled the keys from his pocket and went through the showroom to lock the front doors. Another closed and locked delivery bay was in the back. An adjacent side door to that was the only other way in. Max was thinking that maybe he ought to have locked that one first. Barry use to come in that way when he worked here.

Christine was sitting behind the showroom counter. Max walked by her while going toward the front, passing back by her while going to the back.

"What do you want me to do?" Christine asked, trembling.

"Just stay put. I don't like this."

"He said Mama Johnson died?"

"That's what he said... last night!"

"Oh my God," Christine whispered.

Max pushed through the swinging door that separated the showroom from the warehouse. He was trying to hurry. He did not know what he was going to do after that. Maybe talk to Barry through the locked door.

About half way down the back aisle of the warehouse, (where the mortar supplies were stacked up against the wall); he met Barry coming in from the back. He had come in that way after all. He looked terrible. One look from Max was all it took to know exactly what he had been up too. Barry's blood shot eyes were as big as coffee cups, and completely dilated. Dark circles hung under them like swollen leaches. He looked as if he had not slept for a week. As Max approached him, he could smell the scent of chemical exhaust oozing out from human pores. Barry had evidently been using his old

drug of choice, methamphetamine. If Barry was in this kind of shape, he was in a very bad way, and capable of anything.

“What the hell are you doing, Barry? What happened to Mama?” Max yelled. He was very, very angry.

“I don’t know what happened Maxwell...I swear!”

“Where is she?”

“She was in bed when I left the house,” Barry said, looking down.

“Did you call the Sheriff’s office?”

“No... I didn’t. They might think I had something to do with it.”

“You did!”

“Well...I don’t know...but she was fine when I left. We went on a run, you know, to try to sell a little bit to make ends meet. I was only gone one night! When I got back this morning, it was as if she was asleep. She wouldn’t wake up Max!” Barry started to cry, automatically approaching Maxwell for some kind of reassurance. Max revolted backwards.

“No Barry, you messed up. You messed up big time! You know she needed her medicine... and...help to get something to eat. What were you thinking? I am calling the police...right now!”

Barry looked at Max with a grave expression and said, “no your not. You are not calling anybody. Did you make it to the bank this week for your deposits? I bet you didn’t. You were always late with that. I bet there still in that little safe behind the counter. I need it. I am getting the hell out ‘a here!”

“Your not going anywhere goddamn it!” Max said, turning toward his office on his cardboard cane. Barry jumped on him. He had picked up a box cutter lying on one of the shelves while walking in. He raised it now to cut Max while he was down.

“I’m sorry Max, I need that money!” Max did not think Barry would come down with the blade. Barry was standing over him, and then he did hesitate. For a brief second, Barry was back. The old Barry, the one that adored his older brother and possibly thought they were kids again, playing.

“What are you doing on the ground, Maxwell? I’m sorry; did I hurt your foot?” Barry asked, while extending his hand to help him.

A shot rang out. Christine had retrieved the revolver from the office, positioning herself behind an adjacent aisle. Max had seen her approaching while keeping constant eye contact with Barry. The bullet hit Barry behind his left ear, knocking him onto the sacks of mortar. Max cradled Barry’s head in his lap, looking into his sad, tired eyes. Barry asked, “Do you think Mama will forgive me?”

“I don’t know brother. I just don’t know,” Maxwell said.

