

Eliot Parker

The Prospect

A photograph of a dirt path lined with trees, leading towards a green field. The path is made of light brown earth and is flanked by large, mature trees with dense green foliage. The path leads into the distance, where a bright green field is visible under a clear sky. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

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Sports

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By

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To my dad, Brent, whose love, understanding, and support are qualities I will always cherish as they inspire me each day. Dad, you also taught me to love the game of baseball, including all of its intricacies.

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"Loggers lose 4-2!"

The arrogant tone of Charleston Alley Cats radio broadcaster Jim Thomas was echoed throughout the rusted speakers at Clark Field. Unfortunately for him, nobody was around to listen. The ballpark seats were now unusually silent. The only sounds heard around Clark Field were the sounds of 1,000 pairs of feet clapping against the concrete as fans frantically

flocked to the exits complete with the occasional brash grumbling and complaining from fans who hate to see their team lose.

Under the grandstand, fans talked, laughed, moaned, and argued over why the team was the town disappointment, at least for the day. The voices were stern but unrecognizable, concerned yet calm, loud and yet soft.

On the field, the Loggers players aimlessly gathered their equipment and proceeded to scurry down the steps onto the platform landing adjacent to the dugout and down the narrow corridor to the locker room, where there would certainly be time for individual reflection for the team's dismal performance.

The last man off the field for each Loggers game was manager Walter Mann. A robust and burly individual from Athens, Georgia, Mann spent 10 years as a first baseman for the Chicago Cubs in the 1970's. During his career, Mann hit .287 and drove in over 400 runs. His tenacity and hustle made him a fan favorite in Chicago, yet he owns the Major League Baseball record for most errors by a first baseman. Nevertheless, Mann retired from baseball in 1980 after being diagnosed with a degenerative right hip that today makes him walk with a slight gait. He has managed the Sheaville Loggers since 1990.

Mann looked over across Clark field and the grandstand and sighed greatly. He looked up at the sun-drenched sky as it proceeded to bypass the stadium and slip behind the large green mountain behind the center field wall. All day, the sun lit up the sky in magnificent splendor. The rays beamed across Sheaville for the entire day, as sun was an orange appetizer for a main course of crystal clear blue skies and with a touch of a light breeze. His glance shifted to the short, narrow isles littered with empty food wrappers, plastic cups, and other refuse. The empty seats featured chipped blue paint. As far as the Walter knew, those seats had not been painted since he came to Sheaville in 1990.

As Mann turned to walk towards the dugout platform, he heard footsteps scraping across the infield dirt. Mann loved to hear the sounds of cleats on dirt. It often reminded him of the days he used to patrol the infield and platoon first base. However, by now the field should be totally empty. Walter always made sure it was.

He abruptly turned and walked to other side of the dugout and climbed the three concrete steps and rose to reach field level, near the third base on-deck circle. A crisp, cool breeze slammed against his right cheek, causing his baldhead to formulate goose bumps.

What he saw in this distance was a tall, muscular shadow coming towards him slowly, with one hand carrying a baseball glove and the other a swollen, fiery red bag. The bag was the only splash of color on the dark shadow as the evening approached. Mann assumed the bag contained baseball bats, though he was not certain. The shadow was coming into focus slowly, almost creeping along the infield as it approached third base. As it approached the dugout, the shadow became bigger but its features remained conspicuous.

In the distance, Jim Morris continued to talk. He was reading over the box scores of today's game and was preparing to begin the game summary. Mann quickly glanced towards a silver speaker covered with rust, then quickly returned to the field.

After what seemed like hours, the large dark shadow came into focus. Mann's eyes widened and his nostrils flared slightly. "Damn it, Triplet, what the hell are you doing?"

Shane Triplet abruptly stopped in front of his manager and cautiously slid the red bag off his shoulder and it skidded against the ground. Shane's light blue eyes glistened in the ongoing sunset and his wet and golden blond hair hung over his left eye. Walter immediately slammed his hands against his hips. Shane took his left hand and slid strands of his hair over his eye as

he ran his hand towards the back of this head.

Shane was silent. He knew what was coming. From his other teammates, he learned that Walter Mann did not talk much, but when he did, you listened and followed his instructions explicitly.

“Yer new at this game son, so let me speak frankly,” Mann barked. “When the game’s over, you gather yer things and follow the rest of your team into the dugout.” He pointed with his index finger towards the steps leading to the dugout.

As he spoke, his drawl became thick and slurred. Shane squatted alongside his bag, which did contain baseball bats, and gathered it by the large red strap. He flung the strap over his right shoulder and exhaled a deep breath. His eyes immediately met the frozen stare of his manager.

Walter shifted the balance of his body to his right foot and the muscles in his face tightened as he continued his lecture.

“Yer no better, nor different than the rest of them, you here me?” Mann barked. “You wanna be a part of this team, this experience, then get yer act together and start acting like it. This ain’t high school kid!”

Walter knew the entire backgrounds of each of his players explicitly, including Shane Triplet. The veteran manager knew that high school coaches with talented players would often times overuse that player to garner attention and success for the team, even if it meant having that one player do everything. The problem, as Walter sees it, is that you create a superiority complex in young kids that leads to patches of self-righteous behavior. When those players become minor league ballplayers, those patterns of behavior can be hard to break. Shane Triplet was fitting ungraciously into the stereotype.

Throughout Walter’s evolving tirade, Shane listened patiently. He was waiting for a chance for Mann to shut up so he could speak. Finally, Shane saw an opportunity to explain his actions when the manager inhaled deeply.

“Walter, I blew the game today,” Shane said in a placid tone. “Biggie wanted a curve ball and I threw a fastball. I didn’t listen. The tying run and the go-ahead run scored because that asshole hit my fast pitch. We lost because of me!” Shane began to tap his left cleat against the ground nervously. “I just wanted a chance to throw a couple of pitches in the pen before the end of the day.”

Shane’s head slowly dropped until his eyes were level with Walter’s abdomen. Walter sensed the concern and frustration from his young starting pitcher. He gently placed his right hand on Shane’s left shoulder- the shoulder that was free from the weight of the presumably heavy red bag.

“Son, this ain’t the end of the season.” He created a pregnant pause before he spoke again. “This is yer first game in the minor leagues...yer gonna have some good ones and some bad ones. The important thing is to learn from what happened today and grow from it.”

“Learn what? How to throw a curveball!” Shane wined. “I have been throwing curveballs since...”

“Not that,” Mann snapped back. “Learning to listen to your head sometimes instead a yer guts. Trust your teammates. Learn to lean on the experienced guys like Biggie for help. They ain’t here to see you fail, and neither am I.”

Walter withdrew his hand from Shane’s shoulder. He looked at Shane’s dusty gray uniform with the blue embroidered word “Loggers” sown across the front. Shane’s eyes continued to glisten in the sun, but they quickly turned placid as sunset and dusk had begun.

Walter and Shane both felt the breezes begin to increase. Behind the dugout, Jim Thomas

was signing off and thanking the staff and sponsors of WCHS-580 radio in Charleston for their support of the Charleston Alley Cats.

Walter looked long and hard at Shane Triplet. This kid is going to be good, he thought. The trick, Walter knew, was going to be getting Shane to let his natural talents take over and resolve overanalyzing everything. A pitcher has to learn that baseball is not a one-man sport... that the game is the sum of all of its parts. These things would have to be explored and resolved as the season progressed, Mann concluded.

Finally, Walter turned and went down the steps across to the dugout platform and disappeared into the narrow hallway. Shane turned and faced the field for the final time that day.

He noticed several men sprinting all over the field carrying shovels and water hoses. Another couple of men began starting the engines of lawnmowers. All of them wore solid blue shirts with brown shorts and light brown caps. Conformity, Shane assumed. The obnoxious sound of the sputtering engines immediately filled the park. The engines gasped and panted as the men began pushing them gently across the outfield and behind home plate. Sheaville always took great pride in maintaining a good playing surface for the baseball teams. Each afternoon (or in this case evening) the grounds crew would generously water the playing surface and cut patterns of light and dark stripes in the grass on the baseball field. The effect was created by a combination of reel mowers with rollers laying the grass in different directions and the reflection of sunlight of the blades of grass. Where the pattern is a lighter shade of green, sunlight is reflecting of the leaf blade surface. Where it's darker green, the sunlight is reflecting off only the tips of the grass blades.

Shane watched the men and simultaneously looked at the large mountain resting behind the center field wall. The mountain looked dark and majestic since the sun went down, almost as if it was protecting Clark Field and all its history. The pitcher snapped his head around and quickly followed the same path as his manager; running down the steep concrete steps across the dugout platform and down the narrow hallway into the locker room.

When Shane came out of the darkness, he saw most of his teammates frantically changing clothes, cleaning out their lockers, and scurrying back and forth . The locker room reminded Shane of what a prison cell in a federal penitentiary must resemble.

Five rows of floor space featuring approximately ten small lockers, with a long, wobbly wooden bench nailed to the floor in front of each row of lockers. There were no windows in the locker room, just a large fan that sat near the entrance covered with dust. The rusty showers and sinks were in the right rear corner of the locker room. Unfortunately, there were only three sinks and three showers for the entire team, so patience was indeed a necessary virtue. The walls were cream colored, and like the seats on the main concourse, were chipped and in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint.

Shane shifted his feet and walked towards the last row of the lockers. He approached the first locker in the row and immediately slammed his glove against the mental door of his locker and flopped down heavily on the bench. As his bottom hit the wood, the bench swayed back and forth.

A loud deep voice suddenly echoed throughout the locker room. "Hey loser...hey pretty boy... hello, anyone listening?" Shane turned to face the nasally voice he heard penetrating his right eardrum.

"The next time I tell you to throw a curveball fucker, you had better do what you are told and

throw a fucking curveball. If you don't, your ass is mine!"

Once Shane turned towards the voice, his face winced in frustration. The derogatory remarks came from Jason "Biggie" Rowan, the starting catcher for the Sheaville Loggers. Biggie was a three year veteran of the team, which in minor league baseball can be a curse as much as a blessing. Biggie was well liked by most of the team, primarily because he watched out for players he liked, spoke his mind, and put up with zero foolishness from anyone. Most of that came from going up in several housing projects in New Jersey. His upbringing was never openly discussed, but instead was an understood cause for his style of communicating. Not to mention, at 6'7, 228 pounds, nobody ever questioned anything he did not said, much less question his background.

Shane decided to reply to Biggie's remarks. "Yea...yea, I gotcha," moaned Shane as he began to remove his uniform. His shoulder was throbbing and his fingertips were slightly numb. After throwing 102 pitches, he figured understood the source of discomfort.

"I know you one of the best chances we have this year to win the division, but you keep throwing dog shit on full counts punk and we are never going to win nothing! This is supposed to be our year!" Biggie shouted. He slowly stood up and marched to the end of the row of lockers to speak with Shane face to face. His comments and movements did little to squelch the surrounding commotion in the room.

By now, Shane had removed his entire uniform and was standing alone next to his locker in a pair of red and white boxer shorts splattered with red checks. As he turned to place his socks and cleats in his locker, Shane caught a glimpse of his approaching teammate from the corner of his left eye. Biggie's movements created a large shadow that devoured the locker room.

Shane was forced to look up to see the large catcher. Biggie reached down with his right hand and sunk his fingers into Shane's left shoulder. Reacting out of instinct, Shane aggressively swiped Biggie's arm to the side and jerked his head to the side. Sweat was pouring from the young pitchers face as his senses became overstimulated with the anticipation of what Biggie might do and as well as the temperature in the locker room combined with the stench of sweat.

"You made your point," Shane said coolly. "I screwed up out there today, but it was just one game and we have 112 more to play before the season is over. We will play those chumps from Charleston at least four more times this year." Shane was essentially repeating what Walter had told him a few minutes ago and he knew it and was quite proud of himself for being able to recall Mann's speech.

Biggie eyed Shane and smirked. "Must be that Pennsylvania 'tude. Your awfully cocky for someone who has played only one game in the minors sissy boy." Biggie attempted to lift his left hand and pat Shane on the cheek. Instead, Shane took a step backwards and Biggie's palm missed his face. Suddenly, Biggie's smirk became a scowl and he carefully eyed the pitcher from head to toe.

Biggie Rowan knew, that despite his size, Shane was not a pushover. Shane's neck neck was thin, yet his shoulders were broad and his arms were long and muscular from the shoulder blade to the forearm. He was 6-3 and weighed 205 pounds. His hands were rough and chapped, and his fingers were long and thin. His pectorals swelled outward from his chest cavity and his nipples were flat and bright pink. His abdomen muscles were tight and toned. In fact, when Shane was shirtless and he spoke, the muscles flexed and twisted as he spoke. His waist was small, yet his thigh muscles were large and his calf muscles stuck out three inches from the back of his legs. His nose was pointed and his lips were thick and rosy red. His skin color was tanned as well as smooth and without blemishes.

Biggie began retreating slowly backwards. Shane's eyes were fixed tightly on the catcher. His lips were pressed tightly against his mouth and his fists were clinched, just in case. Biggie's hands and fingers were small, thick, and his legs were long and powerful. Shane knew that Biggie could easily handle him if a physical encounter ensued.

"We are going to have some fun together this year, rookie," Biggie snarled as he reached his locker at the end of the row. "You and I are going to hang." He pointed his index finger directly towards Shane. "I am going to be watching you, fucker!"

Biggie slammed the metal door to his locker, grabbed his bag of bats, and stormed out.

Shane now found himself alone in the locker room. He figured the game had been over for an hour now. Shane sighed and began reassembling his locker and folding his uniform.

II

A minor league baseball team is affiliated with a major league team and any minor league team has two main goals: the development and preparation of young players for the big leagues and the forging of a successful local business. Although there are some baseball stars that are drafted or signed to contracts and go straight to the majors, they are the exception to the rule. The majority of players play at least one minor league season. Occasionally, exceptional players whirl through the minor leagues in one season and end up in the majors the following season.

The first recognized minor league was the Northwestern League, which was organized in 1882. In 1883, the Northwestern League, the National League and the American Association signed an agreement that bound the clubs to honor the contracts of players on reserve lists, to recognize each other's suspensions and expulsions, to establish territorial rights and to form an arbitration committee to settle disputes. The next National Agreement, which came on the heels of the American Association's collapse in 1892, established minor league classifications for the first time and awarded major league teams the right to draft minor league players at fixed prices. Briefly, organized baseball was confined to the northeast quadrant of the country, expanding to the South in 1885, to the upper Midwest in 1886, to California in 1887, Texas in 1888 and the Pacific Northwest in 1890. By 1963, 90 percent of the minor league clubs were major league affiliates and the overall number of minor clubs was down. But that had changed by the 1980s, when minor league baseball exploded, topping 20 million in attendance in 1987 for the first time since the 1950s. Harlan Shea understood these practices, and helped found the Sheaville Loggers.

One man, Harlan Shea, contributed to the storied history of minor league baseball.

Sheaville, like most of West Virginia, is located in the Appalachian Highlands and has some of the most rugged land in the United States. The state has no large areas of level ground, except the strips of valley land along the larger rivers. Mountain chains cover the eastern section of the state. Steep hills and narrow valleys make up the region west of the mountains. The state's rough land has sometimes caused difficulties for West Virginians. Much of the ground is too steep and rocky for farming. Highways, railroads, and airports are hard to build and floods from mountain streams often threaten valley settlements. However, Sheaville was blessed with valuable hardwood trees that grow on the slopes of hillsides overlooking small narrow valley lands.

But Sheaville is the small town most minor league players hope they never experience. Because of their often-remote locations and size, many minor league players, especially those from larger cities, view small town life as if it's the threshold of hell itself. However, athletes who commit to playing minor league baseball understand living in small towns as a right of

passage. One advantage of small town life lie in the people that make the town thrive. For Sheaville, 2,000 men, women, and children bore the responsibility.

Many of the current residents of Sheaville are decedents of the original founders. By the early part of the twentieth century, industrial companies were looking to exploit timber from the West Virginia mountains in order to clear land for mining. The slogan used back in those days became a household motto for companies who tried to lure workers the West Virginia mountain community: "where there are trees there is money." Sheaville's history saw times when the community housed 65,000 people from all across the United States. Each day and night, the men would march through town at all hours to the logging yard on the outskirts of town. Dozens of trucks came from the larger cities all around the state, including Charleston, Huntington, Parkersburg and Wheeling. The trucks would load up the timber, take it back to the larger West Virginia cities where the timber would be weighed and driven to other states across America. However, once the trees began to disappear, so did the jobs and so did many of the workers and their families.

Sheaville's town founder, Harlan Shea, first convinced the companies and workers to move to West Virginia. West Virginia could be a viable and profitable economic venture for the timber industry, because, according to Shea, the abundance of forests and willingness of workers to log the mountains could provide companies with the potential for large profits and low expenses. Harlan Shea was a tough and shrewd man who always got what he wanted and was a master manipulator of people. He was even quoted by The Charleston Gazette, the state's largest newspaper, as being a person who could "sell ice cubs to Eskimos."

Harlan's idea was to use whatever measures were necessary to get what he wanted, and he did not care how much it cost or who he had to take advantage of to get it. His powers of persuasion came with a cost, often a hefty cost in terms of salary windfalls that many companies gladly paid him.

During Sheaville's success as a thriving timber-logging town, the timber mills cut down over 2.8 million acres of trees from the mountainside outside of Sheaville. Day and night, families of the mill workers could hear the piercing, squealing sound of the blades dicing trees into small segments or the thunderous boom of trees smashing into the ground after being disemboweled from their stumps. The men worked 12 hour shifts, earned good wages, and Harlan encouraged the companies to provided health insurance and benefits for the workers and their families.

However non-stop logging took its toll on the community. Almost six decades of uprooting trees from their roots and hauling them off to cities near and far left the mountains around Sheaville barren. By the 1980s, an old Harlan Shea was becoming an ineffective business lobbyist following a massive stroke that left him paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair. Meanwhile, timber workers and their families were going elsewhere for work-many of them choosing to relocate to other countries in Latin America to cut down rainforests-in order to earn more money have more stable job security.

As the workers began to flee Sheaville, Harlan Shea decided to create a baseball team featuring workers from the mill. His goal in creating the team was to give the workers an incentive to stay in the town and continue working instead of leaving the area. He created the first organized company baseball team in the state of West Virginia in the 1970's. They were appropriately named "the loggers." Harlan used his connections and influence around the state to convince the chemical manufacturing company Carbide in Charleston to create a team. Soon, coal companies in southern West Virginia and around the state created teams and by the late 1970's, there were seven company baseball teams from across the state

competing in organized baseball. Each team played one another twice, with each team playing each other at home once and away once. The men on Shea's team liked the roads trips because it gave them a chance to be away from their wives and see other cities and areas of West Virginia.

Included in Shea's invention was a ballpark for his team. Using his own money, Shea built Clark Field. He named it after Clifton Clark, the first saw mill worker to ever approach Harlan expressing interest in playing for the team. Shea figured that since it was his money, he could name the ballpark in honor of anyone or anything he wanted.

The stadium was built on the north end of town next to Central Avenue, the street that takes travelers to Interstate-64, which eventually leads to Charleston and Huntington. The field, however, was built backwards, thanks to Shea not being able to determine which way he wanted to stadium to face-away from town or towards town. Therefore, the sunlight sets in the hitter's eyes throughout afternoon ballgames and the 354-foot centerfield wall is very shallow. Despite these building embarrassments, the men and the community were proud of Clark Field.

It wasn't until 1985 after Harlan Shea's death that an official minor league baseball team was created in Sheaville, and in 1986, the Appalachian Baseball Association was established. The Cincinnati Reds team adopted The Loggers as one of their farm system teams that year.

Now, Sheaville is an economically depressed version of itself, complete with few jobs and fewer citizens calling the town home. Yet Harlan Shea brought minor league baseball to Sheaville, West Virginia. And thanks to him, baseball was the hottest extracurricular activity in town. In fact, it was the only extracurricular activity in town.

III

Shane always hated the walk to any ballpark after a loss. Today's walk was going to be even worse. In a little less than 72 hours, the Sheaville Loggers were swept in a three game series by their rivals The Charleston Alley Cats and were in last place in the ABA division. To make matters worse, Shane felt responsible for losing the opening game of the season for the Loggers, engaging his manager in a sermon about responsibility and work ethic, and drawing the frustration of the team's starting catcher, Biggie Rowan. If anyone could use some time alone at Clark Field, it was Shane Triplet.

Shane began the early morning 2-mile march through town to Clark Field. The path to the ballpark was a scenic and sometimes solemn journey, because the trip was a painful reminder of Sheaville's prestigious past and its floundering future.

The walk began down the dusty dirt road alongside the winding hollow where Shane and his mother Joann lived. Their house was dilapidated yet quaint. It was a one-story rancher home with a degenerating back porch facing the mouth of the hollow. The end of the blue porch sagged forward, dragging parallel to the yard. The porch furniture was old and certain pieces, including the swing, were in desperate need of repair.

Along the exterior of the house, the white siding was encased with tangled masses of ivy and several of the siding planks were missing or had rotted away. The roof leaked in several places, forcing Shane to always be looking for buckets or jars to catch rainwater. Most of the windows were missing or broken and duck tape and plywood boards served as the alternative to glass. JoAnn Triplett worked at Ruth's Diner in Sheaville and she would often work double shifts to earn extra money. She always promised to use the extra money to fix up the house, but Shane never saw one penny spent on improving their home. He just assumed that the

house would be repaired one day, or it would fall over, whatever scenario came first. The morning continued to move forward rapidly and Shane constantly scanned his watch to check the time. He gripped his red bag tightly against his shoulder racing towards the opening at the end of the hollow.

Sheaville was always busy during the early morning hours. Mothers were busily getting their children ready for school and droves of little people stood eagerly at several of the designated bus stops in town waiting to be picked up. Downtown Sheaville was the anchor of the community. Maple Street cut right through the center of town. Unlike the road leading to the Triplet house, the street was paved, although it was only two lanes wide. If any traffic followed Maple Street through town, the road would lead them to a 4-way stop interchange bisecting with Central Avenue. If you turned right, Central Avenue took you towards the residential areas of Sheaville and out to old man Shea's dormant logging mill. A left turn at the stop sign would lead you past Clark Field and more importantly, to the I-64 on-ramp. Seventy miles west on the modern 4-lane highway would take you to Charleston, the state capitol and 115 miles away would take you to Huntington, the state's second largest city. Outside of Huntington, roads leading to Kentucky and Ohio could be discovered and traveled.

As he began walking briskly towards the mouth of the hollow, he heard the sound of moving tires against the dirt. He noticed clouds of light brown dust began to wisp around him, tickling his nose and forcing him to sneeze. The oncoming noise grew louder and louder. Shane stopped and faced backwards towards the direction of his house. Approaching him was the girl on a bicycle, and suddenly Shane was drilled in the chest with a tight and heavy object. The girl sped by Shane in a cloudy haze, almost knocking him off his feet. Her bicycle wheels continued to grind against the dirt, and the only images Shane could distinguish was the girl's red baseball cap and navy blue shorts. When the dust settled, Shane massaged his chest and looked towards the ground. Resting at his feet was a copy of The Charleston Gazette newspaper.

During the midst of another coughing and sneezing binge, Shane picked up the paper and moved it to the palm of his right hand. He reached back and threw the newspaper as hard as he could towards the direction of his house. The newspaper spun in the air end over end and landed on the back porch of the house.

"Not bad," muttered Shane satisfactorily.

Shane briskly walked down the dirt road leading to the end of his hollow and turned right onto Central Avenue. As he progressed on Central Avenue, he admired the homes and property of some of the town's more opulent residents. Anyone who owned or operated any type of business in Sheaville usually lived closer to town, and their homes were larger and very decadent. Since spring training in March, Shane became familiar with many of the houses. He knew that Ruth Busby, owner of Ruth's Diner lived in the two story white home with the rose bushes in the front yard. Frank Miller, the owner of the Sheaville Drugstore lived alone in a green house with canvas awnings. His wife died ten years ago, and the awnings served as a tribute to her, primarily because she fussed at Frank for years to place awnings on the front of the house and he never did until she died.

Eight houses down from Frank's house was the first morning destination. Shane stopped and stood in front of a one-story red-brick home nestled on a small culdesack against one of the mountainsides. This was the temporary residence of one of Shane's closest friends on the team, Chaz Martinez. Chaz was the shortstop for the Sheaville Loggers and he was ranked as one of the top shortstops in the ABA. A native of the Dominican Republic, Chaz grew up in Louisville, Kentucky where his dad was an accountant and his mother was a native Dominican

and a teacher of English as a Second Language to middle school students. Shane always assumed that is how Chaz learned to speak English so well.

Shane always enjoyed Chaz's company even though he was boisterous, loquacious, and sometimes crude. He loved to laugh, and he loved to spend time with Shane. Finally, the young pitcher squinted and noticed the sunlight reflecting of the glass screen door as it flung open. "You ready to go or not?" Shane questioned.

"Put your piston back in your pants, I'm coming," Chaz said. The shortstop also had the propensity to make sexual innuendoes. Actually, it was more like a habit than an unusual occurrence. Shane figured that sense he lived with the Mitchell family during the season, he was not able to talk as freely as he would like. Morton Mitchell was the mayor in town, and for some reason Shane knew he ran the house like he ran Sheaville: with an iron fist.

Chaz bounced down the porch steps with his glove and bat and out onto the street. His skin was dark, and was round with deep set brown eyes that radiated youth and vigor. Chaz gave Shane a crooked look. "Don't worry, we have plenty of time to get to the park...we have almost twenty minutes."

"With your speed, we might make it by lunch time," Shane said laughingly as he placed his right arm over Chaz's left shoulder. Chaz in turn pinched Shane lightly on the cheek.

"That's what's the matter with pitchers. You never move, so you really cannot judge speed. Except when you're getting bombed in the early innings by throwing meatballs to a bunch of underachieving hitters," Chaz said in a teasing tone.

Shane kept looking forward, removing his arm from Chaz's shoulder. The two players were walking in rhythm as their feet were grazing the ground.

Shane quickly glanced at Chaz. His eyes were wide and he was breathing heavily as the pace of the walk intensified. "Please, don't remind me about bad pitches and underachieving hitters. I cost us one of those games against Charleston," Shane said. "I haven't felt so bad since I was in high school."

"Ah, Mann must have gotten on you a little bit," Chaz said.

"Yea, for that and other shit," retorted Shane.

Chaz pulled a pack of cigarettes from his uniform pocket. Chaz placed the cigarette between his thick lips and lit the tip with a lighter. Tobacco smoke fizzled out of the cigarette and his nose as he inhaled and exhaled, and he placed it between the index finger and middle finger of his left hand.

"Don't worry about Mann, he is who he is. Listen, I can remember last year," Chaz paused as he took another draw from the cigarette. "He used to ride my ass like a dog in heat, but he is always like that to rookies. Especially guys like you... the supposed 'savior' of the team."

Shane wiggled the cigarette away from Chaz's hand and began to smoke from it. "Yea, Mann said something to me about that. I do not want to be labeled the savior of this team. I am just here to play ball, you know, to try and make it to the big leagues."

Chaz chuckled. "Well, I have been here for two years, and I wonder if I am any closer today than I was two years ago."

But Shane's success playing baseball is the exact reason he was brought to Sheaville by Walter Mann and the Loggers organization. While playing baseball in Pittsburgh, Triplet earned a reputation as one of the state's hardest throwing high school pitchers. Shane regularly approached 93 miles per hour on the radar gun, occasionally hitting 95 during games. He began his junior season at Carrick High School in the starting rotation before finishing the season as one of their primary short relievers. Shane struggled with his control at times and was always trying to improve the mechanics of his delivery. Eventually, he was

given the role of closer. He responded by going 0-2, with nine saves and a 3.20 earned run average in 12 appearances. Shane was placed back in the starting rotation by the end of his junior year and pitched effectively for the rest of the season, going 8-4, with a 3.15 ERA in 15 starts.

By the time his senior season approached, he was receiving college scholarship offers and several scouts from Major League Baseball teams began taking interest in the 6-3 pitcher. Although he had just 25 games of experience in the starting rotation, scouts from the majors and colleges loved his fastball and his change-up pitches. He finished his career at Carrick High School with an 17-8 record and a 2.61 ERA and he struck out more batters than any other pitcher in Carrick High School history. Those figures were enough to bring Shane Triplet into the Cincinnati Reds organization, and ultimately, to Sheaville, West Virginia.

Chaz and Shane quit talking and finished smoking the cigarette. Both players continued walking west down Central Avenue until they reached the Central Avenue-Maple Street interchange. One school bus and two cars were all jockeying for position at the interchange, trying to determine which vehicle was going to pass through the stop sign first.

Chaz turned to Shane as they walked around the stopped cars. "Man, I would love to have a beer right now. Yep, that would be the best thing to have at this very moment."

"Isn't a little too early to be hitting the booze, Martinez?" Shane asked. "After all, you can't wow us with your dazzling defensive skills if you can't stand up straight."

"Yea, well when you bend over and then stand up straight, we lose ballgames because that normally means someone has slammed your balls out of the park" scoffed Chaz with a wide smile that displayed a mouth full of fluorescent white teeth. There was an odd moment of silence, almost suggesting that Shane agreed with his friend.

"Forget it. Listen, when we get back off that road trip at the end of the month, you and I ought to get together and do something. Maybe we could go to Charleston or something. See the sights, drink the beer, and fondle the women."

Shane raised his right eyebrow and glanced disdainfully at Chaz. "Let's see, spend money I do not have, get drunk, have sex, miss curfew, get arrested...."

"Wait a sec, nobody said anything about getting arrested," Chaz said waving his index finger wildly. "None of us can afford that. Besides, you need some pun-tang to lighten you up."

Shane thought for a moment. "Remember what happened the last time you guys went to Charleston during spring training this year? You, Head, Deitzler, and Biggie all were so damn drunk, that you missed curfew and I had to borrow Mama's car and come and pick you up. We were 2 hours late to practice the next day..sheesh, I thought Mann was going to kill us all!"

"Mann creams himself over everything," retorted Chaz.

"Irregardless, no trips to Charleston with you guys until we have a day off," Shane added as he quickly looked at Chaz.

"Weeelllll," Chaz began returning Shane's stare. "In case you haven't noticed, we do not get a day off until the middle of May and then no more longer breaks until the ABA All-Star game, that is, unless any of us make it as an all-star."

"I am not counting on being there," replied Shane.

"Speak for yourself."

Shane and Chaz saw Clark Field on the horizon. They continued talking about baseball and sex, which always seemed to come up with Chaz. Finally, both players walked around to the chipped red-brick entrance to Clark Field, which proudly splattered the phrase, "Home of the Sheaville Loggers" on the front of the stadium. Both players walked inside raced one another up the concourse ramp and onto the field, down and across the dugout platform and into the

locker room.

Most of the players agreed early morning practices were horrible. If your team plays the night before, usually everyone is groggy and cranky the next morning. If the team plays in the afternoon after practice, practices are normally sloppy. As the Loggers trotted out onto the field warm-ups, thick, gray cumulus clouds slowly swallowed the sun. The mountain behind center field morphed into a pale green dark blotch. However, Walter Mann's philosophy was always practice should always be conducted-rain or shine-as long as there are no signs of lightening or torrential downpours.

The Sheaville Loggers stood in a single file line like soldiers preparing to receive their marching orders. The day always began with the same exercise routine: 60 jumping jacks, 45 squat thrusts, 50 pushups, and a variety of other exercises tailored for each player's position. Usually only 45 minutes was devoted to warm-ups, and then players scattered across the field.

After warm ups, Chaz was busy scooping ground balls at the short-stop position from the bat of his second baseman teammate, Ryan Head. Head was another player who had spent more than one season in Sheaville, although exactly how many seasons was anyone's guess. He did not talk about it much. Actually, he did not talk much at all. Perhaps it was his stuttering problem. Ryan was a bit undersized for a second baseman. At five feet nine, he was attractively slender, handsome, with clear green eyes and sandy red hair.

He told Chaz during their rookie season in Sheaville that his classmates and teammates in high school tortured him because he stuttered and was the victim of the equivalent torture when he played college baseball at UCLA. The best way to handle it, Ryan concluded, was to not speak unless spoken to. Chaz realized that Ryan was always able to convey this thoughts and emotions through his expressions and body language effectively, and that was all right with him. After all, you do not need to speak much to turn a double-play in the infield.

Ryan hit several ground balls in different directions at Chaz. Some of the balls rolled slowly across the infield grass and others raced by rapidly. Chaz's responsibility was to pick up the ball and relay the throw to Harry Deitzler, the team's first baseman.

"Y-y-y you are on top of it t-t-today," stuttered Ryan. "You can r-r-really anticipate the direction the ball is going."

"Thanks," replied Chaz, smiling. "I do what I can."

"Well, we all would like you to cut down on your errors."

Those words were peppered with the familiar thick, husky, southern dialect of Walter Mann. He stood directly behind Chaz watching his shortstop gather and throw the baseball to first base. Little did he know Mann had been watching him for a few minutes. When he turned around, Mann was standing with his chest raised and arms folded. Chaz always hated it when Walter watched. For some reason, he felt like his manager was just waiting for him to make a mistake.

"That's enough grounders for now Head," ordered Mann. "Hit him some pop-ups so he can practice catching them pop flies. And Deitzler, I want you to run from second-to-third base each time the ball is comin' down. We play Greensboro and Macon in the next few weeks and their men can run like the dickens. If we get into a bases loaded mess, Martinez needs to be ready to catch it when there's lots of action going on 'round him."

Ryan nodded and took his position at second base. All three players held their breath and waited for Mann to walk away. Finally, he did.

The silence was driving Chaz crazy so he spoke first.

"Man, he always....."

“Yea, we know,” piped Harry as he came racing across the infield. “Creams himself over everything.”

“H-h-h-e is just trying to g-get us ready,” said Ryan.

Harry looked at both of his teammates. Each of them started staring at the ground. Harry was tall and cagey with curly brown hair that hung in clumps below his ballcap. His face was drawn and peppered with small scars, presumably from adolescent acne. His lips were thin and his brown eyes small and dark.

“Well, we are 0-3 and in last place, so I guess there is nowhere to go but up. We will be okay fellas. Macon and Greensboro had two of the worst records in the league last year. I am sure will be back and well over .500 in no time,” Harry said confidently.

Chaz disagreed. “Last season was last season. Seems like the only team that hasn’t improved since last year is us.”

Ryan could not understand why Chaz was so negative about this team this season. Last year, the Sheaville Loggers won the Appalachian Baseball Association division and led the league in runs scored per game. However, the pitching staff had the highest era in the association. But Ryan glanced across the diamond to the bullpen and somehow he believed that Shane Triplet was capable of changing all of that.

IV

Joann Triplet wiped the countertop over and over with a damp dishrag, as she did at least 100 times a day. After the breakfast crowd came through Ruth’s Diner, the place was always quiet. Instead of the normal chime on the front door bell ringing constantly, the only sound heard was dishes being cleaned in the kitchen and eventually packed into plastic containers for use during lunchtime.

Ruth’s diner was a flat, elongated faded white building with a sloped awning and two large glass windows which allowed customers to look towards town and vice versa. Inside, the faded wooden tables and chairs were spaced appropriately throughout the room, sometimes resting awkwardly against the chipped, faded white and black tile floor. The counter was nestled right against the kitchen wall where meals were prepared and slid through a metal port in the wall.

Joann hated working at the diner. Not because she did not like Ruth Busby, the diner owner. In fact, Ruth was a great person to work for-mainly because she let Joann run the day-to-day operations at the diner and her son, Jack took care of the cash register and paying the bills-but because working at the diner reminded Joann of the reality of life in Sheaville.

The dishrag began to dry out so Joann dipped it into a pan of soapy water and proceeded to weave around the diner’s booths and chairs. Cleanliness was something Ruth’s Diner always prided itself upon and the customers were always quick to let Joann know if the tables were not spotless. So, she made sure each inch of the restaurant was clean and orderly.

While she wiped the tables and seats and picked up loose refuse that had fallen on the floor, the glass door to the diner flung open and the bell rang feverishly. Ruth turned around and saw a short, dumpy man waving to her as he waddled closer. It was Frank Miller, owner of Frank’s Drugstore.

“Well, I swan, what are you doing here this early?” questioned Joann. Frank just shook his head and grinned.

“I know I’m a tad early, but I wanted to come in and see ya, cause I haven’t talked to ya in ages and I’m awfully hungry today for some reason.”

The latter phrase was the excuse mechanism Joann had come to know and love from Frank Miller. He used to never come into the diner until his wife passed away. She was stricken with breast cancer right when Sheaville witnessed the majority of logging mill families leaving the area. She spent six months at CAMC General Hospital in Charleston undergoing chemotherapy and Frank had to close down his drugstore during that time because he could not find anyone to run it. Now he came into the diner every day for lunch. Joann felt that he also enjoyed having someone to talk to.

“Frank, honey, no need to apologize. I am glad to see ya. You’re the first customer to come in here since breakfast ended two hours ago.”

“Well, I’ll just walk up to that there counter and sit down and wait for ya,” he said. Frank’s usual seat on the counter was to sit in the third chair from the left.

Joann waddled her way around the counter and reached for her notepad and pencil. “So what’ll it be today sexy, the usual? Pastrami on whole wheat bread and a side of potato salad and decaf coffee?”

“Yer an angel,” replied Frank, winking as he felt his cheeks blushing.

He rested his elbows on the end of the counter and took off his black sun visor. The late morning sun always made the temperature warmer in town and Frank wore the visor so he could see everyone walking around Sheaville. He purchased the visor because many of the Sheaville Loggers players teased him about his eyesight and being 68 years old. Some of the players said he did not notice them walking to Clark Field everyday, so Frank fixed that by buying the sun visor a few years ago.

Frank reached into his pocket and pulled out a receipt. “Joann!” he hollered. She immediately ran out of the kitchen. “I found this today cleaning out some of them old drawers in the back of my store. I thought you might like to see it.”

Joann inquisitively admired the yellow paper from the corner of her eye as she poured Frank a cup of coffee and gently placed his sandwich and potato salad next to it. As she opened the yellow piece of paper quickly and wadded it up and threw it across the diner into a trashcan. Joann walked back into the kitchen not saying a word.

Frank just shook his head. Before he noticed, another man plopped down in the seat next to him.

“Is my medicine ready yet old man?” said the giggling man. He smacked Frank on the back and continued to giggle.

“Why if I don’t know better, I’d say you are Mayor Mitchell.” Frank swiveled his seat clockwise. “And low and behold if it ain’t the one and only.”

The two men sheepishly shook hands. Frank tried to get along with everyone in Sheaville, but Morton Mitchell was always a unique exception.

“See, you are in here eating when you could be filling my prescriptions,” chided the mayor. His short stubby hands rested on the counter he attempted to wedge himself comfortably into the chair. Mayor Mitchell was chubby, with short arms and long but plump legs. His hair was dark brown and thick, and his face was smooth and beset with dark, protruding circles under his eyes and above his pointed nose.

“Well, if you were not sitting in this here diner as much as you do, then maybe you would not need those prescriptions,” remarked Frank. Morton gave him look that resembled a child who was suddenly disappointed by his parents. Frank just turned around and stared forward.

“Nah, a little cholesterol and blood pressure is good for us all, Frank. It makes us realize that life is too short not to eat what you want.”

Frank’s response almost coincided with Morton’s words. “Or eat until ya shorten life...it just

depends on how ya say it.”

Morton decided that it was best to change the subject. After all, since Frank Miller was the only pharmacist in town, the mayor knew to instigate the pharmacist, but not too much.

“The Loggers aren’t playing very well,” said Morton as he quickly peeked at the Charleston Gazette sports page sitting in an empty seat on the right side of the counter. “Worst start in sometime.”

“I ain’t worried about that,” Frank said reassuringly. “When Joann’s son gets crankin’, you wait and see what’ll happen.”

Morton scoffed, shaking his head. “Did you see him on opening day? Jeez, he looked disorganized out there.”

“It was his first game...give him some time to mature,” Frank reminded the mayor. “Nobody learns to ride one of them bicycles in one day. I always say throwing a baseball is the hardest thing to do.”

“If you are wanting to play good baseball, it is the most important thing to do,” Morton said.

Frank snorted and rested his cheek on the palm of his right hand. “Who are you, Joe Nuxhall?” he asked.

Joe Nuxhall was a known name around Sheaville. For decades, he and Marty Brennaman were the radio announcers for the Cincinnati Reds baseball games. WCHS radio in Charleston broadcast the Reds all season, every season because Charleston and the southern end of West Virginia were considered “Reds country.” The same could be said for Sheaville. At night, the signal from Charleston boomed into town and anyone could listen to the games on radio. Sheaville always supported the Reds, especially those who can remember the organizations numerous championships during the 1970’s. During those days, the Reds were referred to as “The Big Red Machine.” Tony Perez, Joe Morgan, Johnny Bench, and Sparky Anderson were just a few of the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame players that were the backbone of the franchise. Frank Miller remembers when most baseball games were played during the afternoon, but network television had changed that. He loved to talk about the “good old days” of baseball, but with Morton Mitchell in the room, Frank usually lost his zeal for storytelling as well as his appetite.

Morton reached down and rubbed his stomach. His stomach was always round and firm, and if you did not know the mayor, you would assume that he swallowed beach balls instead of mayonnaise and cheese soaked biscuits. Even though he was overweight and stricken with high blood pressure and cholesterol, he loved to eat and loved to tell others how to eat.

“Boy, I could really go for a good steak sandwich today,” he proclaimed. “Yea, loaded with mayonnaise, cheese, lettuce and tomato.” He slid off the stool and turned his neck around the room several times. “Where did Joann go?”

“If she was smart, away from you.” Frank mumbled as he sipped his now lukewarm coffee.

“Now why would she leave? She is a great waitress. Besides, that son of hers is old enough to take care of himself.” Usually, this is when the mayor decided to enlighten the residents of Sheaville with his knowledge. In most cases, this was the time Frank Miller left Ruth’s Diner, but today he decided to stay, partly because he had only consumed half of his pastrami sandwich and because someone had to defend the person Morton was going to malign.

“You know, that is the problem with single mothers today. They are always looking out for their children. I think partly because they feel guilty and embarrassed that they have to raise kids alone. So they overcompensate by tailoring their lives to each and every need of their child. It just amazes me....”

Frank fully turned his stool to the right so his eyes met Morton’s. Morton glanced into the

pupils of Frank Miller. They were hollow and the dark wrinkles under his eyes made him seem like someone who needed two good days of sleep. Regardless, Morton looked away and began tapping his fingers against the countertop.

“All of this hodgepodge coming from the mayor of our town who is supposed to represent us folks,” Frank said strongly. “All of this coming from the mayor of our town who has a beautiful daughter to take care of and raise. Mayor you should be ashamed of yourself.”

Suddenly, the sound of rattling plates echoed throughout the diner. Frank and Morton assumed it was Joann cleaning up the dishes from breakfast. Morton used the distraction as an avenue to change the topic of conversation.

“So, you think Triplet has what it takes, eh,” injected Morton. “Well, he better start learning to think a little on the mound instead of trying to outmuscle hitters. I’ll swan, that homerun he gave up to Mike Hendricks was one of the worst pitches I have seen.

“You are forgetting that it was that there eighth inning when it happened and he had already thrown over 100 pitches,” added Frank.

Morton waved his hand in an abject manner. “Doesn’t matter. He did not think. Yep, I do not see him lasting much longer here in Sheaville. I predict he will get traded by July.

The mayor turned and was drilled with a soapy, wet washcloth right between the eyes. He yelped as the rag stung the skin on the bridge of his nose. When he wiped the water from his eyes, he noticed Joann Triplet at the end of the counter staring at him intently. Neither he nor Frank knew how long she had been standing there, although Frank assumed she had been there since the plates rattled in the kitchen.

Gritting her teeth she spoke to the mayor coolly. “Mr. Mayor, if you want something to eat, I suggest you order it. If not, then get your scrawny patoot out that back door back there.” She pointed directly behind the mayor as she approached him.

Silently, Frank was enjoying every moment of this embarrassing moment. Nothing was more entertaining than watching Morton Mitchell stick his foot squarely in his mouth. He could demean anyone he wanted anywhere in Sheaville, but in Ruth’s Diner, you were expected to treat everyone with respect. Morton took a long look at Frank and he grinned sheepishly at the mayor. Morton placed his feet on the floor and sprang out of the counter stool. He knew what he said was wrong, but believed it to be fact. He was not about to apologize to some waitress or pharmacist in a diner. Instead, he walked confidently and quietly to the back of the diner and flung the door open in anger and disappeared around the corner.

Almost instantly, Shane, Chaz, Ryan, and Harry walked into the diner. They each greeted Frank and Joann cordially and then sat down at the counter.

“W..w...w..was that the mayor that just left?” Ryan asked with a slight squeek in his voice.

“Yes,” said Frank and Joann simultaneously.

Joann grabbed Frank’s plate, figuring he was not going to finish his pastramis sandwich. Frank spoke first. “So, how was practice, boys?”

“It was okay, just the usual,” replied Chaz. “This morning, we worked on ‘fundamentals’.” Chaz indicated the fictitious question marks with his index fingers.

Frank laughed as Harry walked away from the counter and went to the restroom. Shane gathered all of their bats and gloves and placed them in a booth next to the countertop and sat down where Morton Mitchell had been sitting earlier.

“Things went decent today, mamma,” Shane said. “I worked on my curveball a little and locating my fastball better.”

“Atta boy,” Joann said proudly as he patted her son on his back delicately, although she had no idea what a fastball was or the importance of throwing a curveball.

Even though Joann had no idea what Shane was talking about, she smiled and cocked her head and spoke affectionately. "I am glad to hear that honey."

"Well, I am fuckin' starved, can we eat?" groaned Chaz. Joann began looking for her notepad and pencil but for some reason, she paused.

Chaz figured the mood had been better in the diner prior to Morton Mitchell's arrival. After all, eating a few times in the diner made anyone an expert in determining what kind of a day the whole town was having based on the conversation of a few of Sheaville's residents. As he plopped himself into the far-left bar stool, he addressed everyone in the diner.

"Well, you can tell the mayor's been here. This place is like an damn morgue. You should try living with him sometime. Now that is an experience."

V

The Sheaville Loggers next opportunity to avenge the disastrous start to their season came during a four game visit by the Macon Braves. The Macon Braves are one of ABA's most prestigious minor league franchises. In the late 1960s, players such as Jackie Robinson, Duke Snider, Ted Williams, and a hustling, hard-hitting slugger named Pete Rose all passed through the Macon Braves farm system. Everyone in Sheaville knew about Pete Rose since he was a superstar for the town's beloved Major League Baseball team, the Cincinnati Reds.

Macon's history of prosperity as a minor league team always draws the ire of other organizations, including the Loggers. In 1991, led by future Major League All-Star Chipper Jones, the Macon Braves won the division in their first year as a member of the Atlanta Braves minor league farm system. The M-Braves, led by a slew of young prospects, won the division in 1992 and they sported the Appalachian Baseball Association's best regular season record.

Yet, as Walter Mann always reminded his players, all good things come to an end. Over the last two seasons, Macon finished 12 and 18 games under .500 respectively. The franchise fired several managers and position coaches during that time and replaced their minor league general manager twice. Many of Macon's best prospects graduated to Major League Baseball early, often staying in the minor leagues for just a year or slightly longer. Consequently, the Braves talent pool suffered and the recently drafted prospects from college and high school were suffering the growing pains of being in minor league baseball for the first time.

Walter knew the importance of this game for his team and their psyche. This was Loggers could and should beat the Braves. A 3-3 record was a pleasant thought for the manager, even as everyone in Sheaville began to question the team's heart and talent following a 0-3 start to the season.

As the players scurried out of the dark corridor from the locker room and sat on the bench just next to the entrance, Mann was busily completing his lineup card. He turned to address his team. Walter always enjoyed these brief moments before the start of any game. He watched as the players laced their cleats, drilled the interior of their leather gloves with the palms of their hands, adjusted their protective cups comfortably around their crotches, and talked secretively with one another. At the end of the bench, Shane Triplet was pacing nervously. Walter felt that his star pitcher might suffer from internal combustion if the game did not start soon.

"All right men," Mann said, clearing his throat. "I want you to put those first three games outcher minds. Forget about Charleston, forget about what folks in town has been saying, what the press has been saying, everything." He scanned the bench once again, realizing he had the entire team's attention.

“Triplet, you start today. I want you to focus and play within yourself. None of them hero’s antics either. Biggie, I want you behind the plate to help him. Everyone that started game one is starten today. I want y’all to treat this as opening day. Now Macon’s down, but they ain’t out. I want you to play with the same passion as you played when them damn Alley Cats were here. Questions?”

Shane was still standing up near the concrete steps, which lead to the field. His arm was resting on the top of the dugout. Easier said than done he thought to himself. He leaned forward and faced the rest of the bench, full of players wearing white uniforms complete with determined facial expressions. Sitting in the middle of the row was Chaz Martinez, who caught Shane’s look and nodded his head. Shane’s friend was such a good defensive shortstop, Shane knew he could get away with a few bad pitches as long as Chaz was guarding the field behind his right shoulder.

With no questions, the team jogged up the dugout steps past Shane. Shane eventually climbed the steps and walked to the pitchers mound to warm up. He glanced around the ballpark and saw that once again, another capacity crowd filled Clark Field to watch the Sheaville Loggers take on the Macon Braves. The fans quickly rose to their feet and roared and applauded as the players came onto the field. Since Sheaville was the home team, Macon batted first, which Shane preferred, because he liked being able to set the tone for his team early in the ballgame.

The sun was bearing down on the ballpark, soaking the field in a magnificent orange glow that made Shane’s skin warm instantly. Some fluffy white clouds surrounded the sky and a stiff breeze was swirling throughout the ballpark. Shane could notice several people sitting behind home plate wearing wind-breaker jackets. For an afternoon game in mid April, the temperature was cooler than usual.

Shane stood on the mound and scoured the field. He could hear the sound of crackling leather to his right, and he noticed Harry Deitzler was throwing a ball to Chaz Martinez and Ryan Head, trying to loosen their arm muscles and prepare for the upcoming speed of the game. Shane bent down and gripped the baseball tightly that lay at his feet. When he faced home plate, he noticed Walter talking to 228-pound Biggie Rowan.

Shane could only imagine what the two were discussing. The pitcher imagined the conversation probably centered on him and how to keep the game close so another set of mistakes did not plunge the team to 0-4. Mann and Biggie seemed oblivious to Shane watching them.

Shane noticed Mann talking quickly, sticking his finger into the center of Biggie Rowan’s chest protector. Biggie did not speak much, just nodded his head in agreement.

“Listen here, Jase,” Walter demanded. “I want you to call a gooden today. Get Triplet to use his off-speed stuff so we can save his arm for the late ones.” Biggie concluded his manager meant “innings” when he said “late ones.”

“Sure thing, skip,” Biggie replied, almost speaking as if he had spoken the phrase so many times before.

“Now, I want you to check wit me and go out there if he ain’t got his head in it, got me?” Walter asked rhetorically. “Help ‘em and me manage the game.”

Biggie nodded his head forward.

As the home plate umpire took his position behind the plate, Walter walked off the field and gave a long look at Shane. Shane, watching his manager intently, almost guided him to the dugout with his own eyes. Walter’s face was expressionless and his cheeks were full of blood. Shane knew his manager wanted to win this game bad, and for that matter, so did Shane.

Harry hollered at Shane from first base. "Nice and easy Shane."

Shane did not turn and face his teammate, preferring to watch home plate and get ready to throw the first pitch. His heart began to race and his toes wiggled vigorously in his cleats. Show them watch you've got is the only thought Shane could conjure at this point.

Carlton Rogers, the second baseman for the Macon Braves strutted into the left portion of the batter's box and eagerly tapped the end of his bat against the plate. He was one of Macon's best hitters from last season, but so far this year, he was hitting just under .230 with 0 runs batted in. Dust began to rise from the batter's box causing Biggie to rub his nose incessantly. The home plate umpire pointed at Shane, indicating it was time for the game to start.

The public address announcer mentioned Rogers name and position, but Shane could not recognize the muffled words, nor did he want to. He needed to focus solely on Biggie's glove and his hand signals, and forget who was hitting or what their name might be.

The first sign of the game was made. Biggie rested his index and pinkie fingers against his left thigh. Shane knew exactly what that signal meant-curveball on the inside corner of the plate. Seldom did Shane ever start a ball game pitching curveballs. Instead, he used his fastball to set up the curveball. Against Charleston, his first five pitches were fastballs. However, Shane took the sign, planted his left foot into the pitching mound rubber, swiveled the ball amongst his fingers inside the glove and brought the glove level with his face.

Behind him, Ryan, Chaz, and Harry all exchanged glances with one another and looked towards home plate. By the time they looked forward, Shane had unleashed the first pitch of the game.

The curveball sliced through the crisp April air, buckled Rogers's knees and landed just where Biggie had instructed, on the inside corner of the plate.

"STRIKE," yelled the umpire. The crowd clapped and cheered almost in unison.

Rogers looked at the umpire and then looked at Shane in amazement. Shane decided the scouting report compiled by Macon must have mentioned that he loved to open things up with his fastball. Shane now understood why Biggie wanted a curveball pitch to start the game.

Biggie threw the ball back to the mound and Charlton dug his cleats against the dirt, once again creating dust. The wind picked up the dust and blew it around the batter's box in a circular pattern. Charlton placed the bat on his shoulder and tightly massaged the handle in his hands. His wrists were flexible and twisting back and forth. Biggie looked up at him and he looked like a giant holding a small stick. From Biggie's position though, everyone appeared that way.

The next sign was two fingers placed against Biggie's his right thigh. Two fingers equaled a slider, which was used by pitchers to force a batter to swing at pitches inside and outside of the strike zone. Shane agreed with the sign. He loved to pitch fast and loathed pitchers who spit, scratched, and used every other delay in between throws. Shane brought his glove up and threw his arm forward violently.

Almost as soon as the ball was out of Shane's hand, he winced. The ball was not sliding to the outside corner of the plate. Instead, it was hanging in the middle of the strike zone. Carlton Rodgers moved his arms forward, placed his left foot firmly on the dirt and swung the bat counterclockwise in a beautiful rhythmic motion.

The edge of the bat slammed against the ball creating a hollow "pop" that shot the baseball in the air like a cannon ball rifled from a cannon. The ball flew down the right-field line and the crowd gasped as the ball remained level and headed for the right-field wall.

"Shit!" Shane exclaimed in anger as he watched the ball travel. He turned to home plate and noticed Biggie, the umpire, Carlton, and everyone in the stands watching the baseball intently.

Walter Mann and the rest of the team had emerged from the dugout and they were also watching the baseball. Shane turned again to watch it.

Chaz began jumping up and down from his shortstop position. "It's going to be caught...there is no way that's gone." Shane heard the comments made by his friend, but somehow he did not believe them.

Pat Sutton, the Loggers right fielder inched closer and closer to the white wall behind him. When his back scraped against the wall, he looked up. The ball traveled over the wall, just to the right of the fair/foul pole.

Shane could do nothing but exhale and slump his shoulders. He raised his hand and waived, almost attempting to thank Pat for not giving up on the pitch. Pat recognized Shane's gesture and waved appropriately in response.

Carlton Rodgers cursed in anger and jogged dejectedly back to home plate.

Walter Mann walked out of the dugout near third base. He made some sort of unrecognizable hand movements to Biggie. The next pitch was going to be a fastball. Mann decided Shane needed to quit toying with this guy and get him out by whatever means necessary.

The sign was administered and Shane turned to face his team behind him. Everyone's expressions were solemn, yet for some reason, Shane knew the team was behind him. Shane planted his leg and delivered a fastball right down the center of the strike zone. Frustrated by the previous pitch, Carlton swung early, attempting to prove he could smash a homerun that would stay fair. Instead, the ball nailed Biggie's glove and Carlton swung at nothing but late April air.

Shane Triplet recorded the first strike out of his minor league baseball career.

Frank Miller and Phil Rodney pushed their way through the crowd milling around the concourse area underneath Clark Field. Frank hated being late for a Sheaville Loggers game, but today he had no choice. His plan was to close the drugstore at 11:00am and be at the ballpark in time to watch batting practice and the players warm up. However, a rush of customers needing prescriptions as well as toothpaste, shampoo, and cleaning supplies flooded his store right before 11:00am. This was a usual occurrence at Frank's, especially since today was Saturday and his store was closed on Sundays. By the time he was finished checking out customers and completing inventory, it was 2:15pm.

Luckily, Frank ran into Phil Rodney on his way to Clark Field. Phil, Frank, and Ruth Busby shared one large flat structure that was divided into three different stores: Frank's Drugstore, Ruth's Diner, and Rodney's Department Store. Frank and Phil had been friends for over twenty years and they enjoyed watching baseball games together. Frank and Phil were both unable to close their stores early, so they decided it was better to be late for a game together than alone. As they walked up the concourse ramp and reached the seating bowl, the residents of Sheaville were already enjoying the game. Kids were munching on hot dogs and cotton candy while their dads kept score of the game in the team program. Frank had thought about going back to the main concourse to get a hot dog, but judging from the crowd, he decided to wait until later.

"Where ya wanna sit Frank?" asked Rodney. The stiff breeze was blowing his thick dark hair all across his forehead and he reached down to pull his brown dress slacks up and he rolled up the sleeves on his blue dress shirt. Phil and Frank were opposite in appearance. Phil Rodney was tall and slender with salt and pepper hair and eyes that always revealed a quiet

intensity. He exercised constantly, and was always considered Sheaville's most eligible bachelor. For some reason, Phil always remained just that, a bachelor.

"Anywhere you can find a seat," Frank replied. Thanks to the indecisiveness of his friend, Frank was able to see the scoreboard in center field and noticed the Loggers were beating the Braves 2-0 in the eighth inning.

Phil grabbed Frank's arm and led him across the length of the seating bowl. "I see a spot over there," he said confidently, although amidst the crowd of people, Frank did not earnestly believe him.

They reached a section of seats behind home plate. Luckily, there were two seats close to the aisle. When Phil came upon them, he deduced that someone must have been sitting in the seats at one time and left, judging by the empty hot dog wrappers and globs of ketchup and chili that littered the ground next to the two seats.

"So what'll it be, Frank. The seat with the special sauce, or the seat with the black handrail in your face?" Rodney winked playfully at Frank.

Frank scratched the back of his head. "Well, I'll take my chances with the sauce."

Phil motioned him to proceed to the seat and both men sat down gently.

"I cannot believe we got a seat so close," Phil said, draping his left arm through the handrail.

"Usually, you have to get here way early before the game starts to get seats like this."

"Well, had things worked out, we da had these seats before someone else," Frank added.

"Interesting how each game always tells a different story."

As Frank wiggled in his seat to get comfortable, Phil obnoxiously tapped Frank's arm.

"Hey, look here. Shane's throwing a two-hitter." The tone in his voice was laced with excitement. "I'll bet, he is throwing a gem today."

Frank squinted his eyes and smiled. "I'll bet John Brown by George Jefferson, you are right. It's good to see him throwing so good."

Shane Triplet was pitching the best game of his brief minor league career. Through 7 ²/₃ innings, Shane had given up two hits, and only one Macon Brave had advanced past second base. In addition, Shane had struck out nine hitters.

Frank and Phil began watching the action that was taking place on the field. Shane looked fresh and determined. The skies above Clark Field began to turn milky as the clouds eradicated the bright sunlight.

Walter Mann ran out of the dugout towards the mound. He summoned for Biggie, Ryan, and Chaz to meet him at the mound. Shane had now given up two consecutive base hits and the next Brave hitter, Mike Dupay, was the go-ahead run waiting impatiently in the on-deck circle with two outs.

"Uh oh, look at this, Phil," yelled Frank. Phil turned to face Frank and then directed his attention to the pitchers mound.

"Maybe he is just seeing how ol' Shane is feeling." Frank waived his hand nonchalantly. "You know how Mann is, he preaches pitching and defense. He watches them pitchers tightly."

Although he was unsure what his friend had said, Phil shrugged his shoulders and remained silent.

Walter spoke softly, yet maintained the edginess in his voice. "Okay boys, now it's time to assess some things. Shane, you have pitched a beauty, but I have got Kugal ready to come in and shut this thing down."

Shane's mouth tightened and he wiped the sweat from his brow. He knew that Walter had confidence in Brandon Kugal and he did not want to squander the lead. But Shane felt that he could get the next hitter out.

"I can get this guy out," Shane said forcefully. Although his shoulder felt like it was on fire, he believed he could muster enough strength to smoke another couple of pitches by Mike Dupay. "Look, I have gone this far, please, let me finish it up."

Walter paused for a moment and waited for some analytical assessment from Ryan, Chaz, or Harry. Neither player spoke. Biggie, however, was not short on words.

"He's done skip. This fool's curveball is hanging in the zone too high and his fastball is losing velocity by the minute." Biggie began pleading. "Bring Kugal in and lets get this win."

Walter looked at his players and folded his hands on the top of his head. His elbows almost bumped the bridge of Harry's nose. Walter considered the conversation he gave to Shane about work ethic and trust a few days earlier. He studied Shane for an instant and Shane's eyes were sparkling under the sunlight. His hands were covered in chalk and dust and he was panting heavily. Walter got a strong singe in his gut telling him to let Shane finish. Instead of listening to his brain, the manager stuck with his instincts. After all, he trusted his instincts when he was a player and he relied on them to a great extent as a manager.

"Triplet, you can finish it. But do not make me regret this decision."

"I won't and you won't. I promise."

Harry, Ryan, and Chaz all winked at one another and gave Shane a pat on the back and assumed their positions in the infield. Biggie frowned and proceeded back behind home plate.

"Frank, they are going to let him keep pitching," Phil observed. "I am not sure about this. This could get real ugly real fast."

"Stop being so negative," Frank replied bitterly. "This kid has a heart the size of Texas and he is going to finish off this inning."

Shane vindicated Frank's assertion by forcing Mike Dupay to hit a soft ground ball to Chaz Martinez at shortstop, and he relayed the throw to Harry Deitzler at first, retiring the side. Walter pulled Shane out of the game at the top of the ninth and Brandon Kugal recorded three outs for the save.

The fans roared and screamed as the two teams exchanged handshakes and pleasantries with one another. Shane approached Biggie Rowan, who was heading towards the dugout trying to unhook his chest protector from his lower back.

"Thanks for the support out there today, Biggie," Shane said.

Biggie stopped and turned to face Shane. As he turned, he saw the pitcher standing still with his legs together and arms at his side.

Biggie walked up to Shane and poked his finger into pitcher's breastbone. Shane swallowed hard. Flurries of players were scrambling in different directions, and all Shane could focus on was listening to the sounds of their pattering feet.

"Pretty boy," Biggie uttered with his trademark baritone voice. "I don't have to support you on shit you fucking choad. When you can pitch like you did today all season long, then you will get the support you want." Biggie turned his head and his nostrils flared.

"Mann likes your rookie ass and that is fine. Just don't expect everyone on this team to like you." He swiped his finger over the brim of Shane's hat. "Why don't you just keep your fucking hole quiet and let your arm do the talking." When he was done tracing Shane's cap brim, he reached with his left hand and socked Shane in the chest.

Shane gasped and fell on one knee. He held his chest tightly, wheezing and coughing, trying to catch his breath. His eyes watered and his mouth became dry.

When he did manage to gather some air, most of the Loggers had run into the locker room.

Shane could hear a faint noise in the background. He looked up and saw Frank Miller and Phil Rodney shouting and motioning for him to come to the wall behind the dugout. Shane

sauntered over and smiled at the two men.

“Hey Mr. Miller and Mr. Rodney. Good to see you.”

“No, no,” interjected Phil “it is good to see you. You were as great today as I have ever seen a pitcher in this here ballpark.” Meanwhile, Frank shot a puzzled look at Phil, who had been inconsistent in his belief in Shane’s potential and performance.

“Thanks..I appreciate that.” Sweat was dripping from his face and he could feel strands of hair falling into his eyes.

Phil turned to Frank and smacked him on the back.

“Shane, I did not think you could do it, but let me be the first to say, you proved me wrong. Great job today.” He outstretched his right hand and he and Shane shook hands firmly.

Shane had always liked Phil Rodney, but he considered him to be a man who always conformed to other people. He did not like confrontation, and usually told people in Sheaville whatever they wanted to hear about any topic in general. Shane did not know if that was a quality to admire or reject, but he found it peculiar nevertheless.

Shane paused for a moment and stared at the ground. With his eyes squinted, he asked the question he had been thinking about all afternoon.

“Did mama make it today?”

Both men looked at each other. Frank ran his fingers over his mustache and mumbled. “No, no Shane she didn’t. I’m sorry.”

Shane wiped the sweat pouring from his nose and then took his cap off his head. “Thanks for being honest with me. I’ll catch you later. Thanks for coming!”

With that, he trotted into the dugout to join his teammates.

VI.

Nothing excited Walter Mann more than giving victory speeches to his players. Nothing was more loathed by the Sheaville Loggers players than listening to their manager give speeches. However, speeches and lectures-albeit over wins, losses, or slips in personal character-were the normal part of life in minor league baseball. Managers assume correctly that players do not improve without consistent coaching about baseball and life in general. When you have a roster of 30 baseball players from across the world, all with emotional baggage brought about from their upbringings, combined with the naïve inexperience of being a young adult, sometimes coaching and speeches are the least of a manager’s worries.

Mann made sure his speeches always started out on a good note. He always mentioned to the team what they did well in any particular game, even recognizing individual players for their contributions to the win or loss. “Pluses builds self-esteem” is a phrase the portly manager always repeats to his team, time and time again. Yet Walter always made sure the Loggers knew and understood what cost them a victory. These statements became the crux of practices and batting practice.

The reactions from the players were always mixed. Shane Triplet always listened and sometimes even took notes on what was being said. Biggie Rowan was usually stuffing a candy bar in between his thick, shapely lips, often breathing so heavily that some players believed that air conditioning had been installed in the locker room. Ryan Head and Harry Deitzler usually daydreamed and Chaz Martinez often took small naps during this time, because after being on the team for a couple of seasons, his conclusion was that he had listened to Walter Mann enough and that sleep was something to be attained at any given

opportunity.

Walter never really chastised the players for not listening. After playing a 3-to-4 hour baseball game, he knew their attention spans would be short. But the possibility that one player was listening, and usually that was Shane, gave the manager the justification to continue his lectures.

As the month of April progressed, the lecturing, the “fundamental practices” and the familiarity of the baseball season routine began to pay huge dividends for the Sheaville Loggers. The opening month of the season finished better than the beginning. After starting the season 0-3, the Loggers creamed the rest of their rivals in the ABA. The Macon Braves, Lexington Legends, and the Greensboro Bats were winless against the Loggers. More impressively was the fact that Lexington and Greensboro only scored 9 runs against them in 8 games. The Columbus RedStixx did manage to earn a 2-2 series split with the Loggers, but Sheaville only lost those two games by three runs.

Shane Triplet pitched in three of those games. His command and control of his fastball mixed with his knee-buckling curveball earned him ABA player of the month. His earned run average, or the average number of runs scored against him when he pitched, dropped from 4.14 to a miniscule 1.43. He led the ABA in strikeouts with 39 and was finally living up to some of the great expectations placed on him by his teammates, himself, and more importantly, the Sheaville community.

By May 2, the Loggers were facing their first extended road trip of the season; ten games in fourteen days against three different teams in three different cities. The trip would take the Loggers to Lexington, Kentucky, Columbus, Ohio, and finally to Lakewood, New Jersey and back to Sheaville. Walter was not concerned about the veterans on this road trip-they knew what to expect. However, keeping the rookies nerves under control would be a challenge.

The Sheaville Loggers had two days of practice before the trip began. Thanks to the breakdown of the Delmarva Shorebirds’ team bus following their latest road trip on May 1, the Loggers got an extra afternoon of practice to compliment their already scheduled day off.

Chaz Martinez saw his manager pacing towards the bullpen and took the opportunity to approach Ryan Head in the batting cage behind home plate. Walter did not like laziness or foolishness during practice, so players misbehaved when his back was turned. In some ways, it was difficult to discern if the players were young adults or young adolescents.

“Is that swing getting any better?” asked Chaz, slightly accenting his words with with a slight Spanish accent. “We are going to need your bat on this road swing.”

At first, Ryan ignored Chaz and took another couple of swings at baseballs discharged from the pitching machine. Ryan’s first swing earned him nothing but a warm breeze but he made solid contact with the ball and drove it into left field.

“Last I looked, I was h..h...hitting .295 and you were h...h...hitting .263,” redirected Ryan. “Speaking of swings, you took s...s...some big whiffs against Columbus during that last series. Maybe y...y...you need some time in the cage.”

“Well, one of those strikeouts was because that umpire was four feet of the inside corner and he called me out,” retorted Chaz. Ryan knew where this was heading.

When Chaz struggled at the plate-which was one of the main reasons Ryan believed he was still in the ABA instead of moving up to AA competition-he always had an excuse. If Ryan had a nickel for every single Chaz Martinez excuse, he would be a billionaire.

“I see that look on your face, Head. Don’t worry, I will get my swing back in time for the Charleston series. You can count on it.”

“...b...b...but we have three other opponents before them. We may need you to h...h...hit a

little against them,” reminded the second baseman.

Chaz’s voice suddenly screeched as he responded. “Hey, speaking of creamy, what are we going to get into on this road trip. Hookers? Strippers? Beer?” The shortstop was talking so fast, saliva was being launched from his mouth and landing on Ryan’s dusty but once dry uniform.

“W...we will have a g...g...good time.” Ryan slung his bat down next to home plate and jogged to the pitching machine to turn it off. His gaze trailed off to the right and he saw Shane and Biggie playing catch in the bullpen. Neither of them were speaking to each other. Ryan wished that his friend and Biggie would reach a truce, but Ryan was completely aware of Biggie Rowan’s dislike for rookies, especially highly touted rookies who had proven nothing. Thinking of Shane, Ryan fired a question at Chaz Martinez.

“D...d...didn’t you and Shane already have t...this discussion?” Ryan’s voice was hollow and it trailed off against the outfield wall and the large green mountain, which always watched over Clark Field.

“Ah, he needs to learn to enjoy things, Chaz responded.”

“A...a...at whose expense?”

“Who said anything about expense?”

Ryan jogged back to the batting cage and faced Chaz, rolling his eyes. “Well, you have a r...r... reputation for causing s...someone an e...e...expense on road trips. Sometimes it’s monetary, s...s...sometimes it physical, sometimes it’s r...r...r...really physical...”

Chaz interrupted. “Look, how was I supposed to know that chick in Hickory last summer had crabs. You really couldn’t tell by just looking at her.”

“ Y...y...you could minus the three pitchers of beer you g...guzzled.”

That night last year in Hickory, North Carolina was indeed a night to remember. The Loggers were crushed by the Crawdads 11-2 during a horrendously hazy, hot, and humid evening. Tired and dehydrated, some of the players, including Chaz, Biggie, and Ryan went to a bar across the street from the ballpark. Harry Deitzler would have come along, but he missed the game with back spasms and could not walk very well.

After talking with some of the Hickory fans and listening to the taunting and trash talking, one of the Hickory players, closer Andrew Pickney, decided to buy the Loggers players some pitchers of beer for acting like true professionals as they were getting obliterated on the field. Pickney originally bought three pitchers of beer for the whole team, but Chaz decided to drink the three pitchers himself.

What happened next has been the subject of debate in the Sheaville Loggersclubhouse. Eventually, Chaz ended up with one of Hickory’s notorious town prostitutes and got genital crabs through sexual intercourse. Chaz never figured out he had genital crabs until he could not stop scratching his crotch. Walter Mann suggested he go to Charleston to the Kanawha County Health Department and get tested. Three weeks and 64 ounces of antibiotic cream later, Chaz Martinez was cured.

Ryan could not resist poking fun at his infield partner. “I...i...in fact, I do not think I am going to sit next to you on the b...b...bus on Wednesday. Y...y...you might have s...something else bad d...d...down there,” Ryan pondered, point to Chaz’s groin.

“Damn, Head, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say your J-E-A-L-O-U-S.” Chaz spelled the word “jealous” several times waving his hands over his head. “Stank cuchie is better than none at all. You should try some sometime.”

Before Ryan could respond, a grunt came from behind the two players. Walter stepped between the two of them, rubbing his fingers against the corners of his mouth.

“Ladies, whenever use two are done talking about whose pecker is smaller, I would like use to do something out here today.” Ryan could not tell if he was serious or light-heartedly joking with them. Chaz thought he was exhibiting a little of both emotions.

With that said, Ryan and Chaz walked towards different ends of the ballpark, much to the pleasure of their skipper.

The life on a minor league baseball player revolves around practice, games, meals, sleep, and travel. It's often a scramble to make time for other interests. For practical and team-building reasons, each minor league baseball teams travels together, normally on buses, for away games. Each baseball organization has a different attitude towards travel; some encourage wives or girlfriends to travel to away games, while others consider families distracting and they prefer that they stay home-or if they come to away games, at least stay in a different hotel.

Harlan Shea believed families were the most important part of society. He viewed families as the glue that held communities together. When he created his Sheaville Loggers company baseball team in the 1970's, he encouraged wives, parents, and children to come to Clark Field and support the team. Many times throughout the year, Shea paid for and provided post-game picnics for players and their families. This was a huge success for several years, primarily because the picnics allowed the players and their families to get to know one another. Many of the players worked at the logging mill together, but the rigorous work schedule did not allow many of them to interact with one another.

Shea even encouraged families to travel with the team to other cities across the state. Most of the wives declined the invitation. After all, they had children to raise and a house to maintain. Life in Sheaville did not provide many opportunities for vacations or traveling. Nonetheless, Harlan Shea offered to pay for lodging, meals, and other personal expenses for any family member traveling with the team. Although the timber pioneer had no children himself, he had a great grasp of the importance of family on a person's physical and psychological health.

Once the ABA was established in 1981, the equation of players, families, and away games resulted in a different solution. The league required individual teams to determine how and where the players would live during the season. Some of the more affluent major league baseball organizations in larger cities would buy huge apartment complexes and condominium buildings and arrange for most of the players and their families to live in the same building during the season. During road trips, the organization would rent an entire hotel for the players and their families.

However, for minor league baseball affiliates from smaller cities, such as the Loggers, players were the only ones allowed to travel on road trips. During the season, the organization asked residents of Sheaville to house players throughout the season. Many of the elderly women in town-many whose husbands had died working at Harlan Shea's logging mill or had died from other causes- loved taking in Loggers players. This gave the women a chance to have someone to converse with, cook for, and in some cases, a “strapping young hunk to keep them company”, as one elderly female Sheaville resident once said.

The residents of Sheaville always knew when the Loggers were preparing for an extensive set of away games. Usually the day before the trip, players would scramble around town gathering materials needed for the long bus ride to Delmarva, Lexington, Hickory, Savannah, or wherever. Each player had his own “to do” list. Many of the lists were similar. Players always made sure they had plenty of snacks to eat, batteries for their portable compact disc devices, and an abundance of clean clothes to wear before and after games.

Shane marched down Central Avenue and turned onto Maple Street. It was late afternoon and the town was flurrying with activity. Women and children raced across Maple Street, never concerned about traffic because there was very little during the afternoon, except for the occasional school bus. Doors to various stores and businesses, including Ruth's Diner and Rodney's Department Store, opened and closed dozens of times each minute.

Shane waved and said hello to several residents who spoke to him. Many of them congratulated him for being named ABA player of the month for April. Some of the townspeople just smiled and gave him a gentle pat on the arm. Shane felt a warm rush of joy come over him as he progressed through town. These people are really glad I am here he thought to himself.

The afternoon was quickly turning to dusk and Shane came into town for two reasons: to tell his Mama goodbye and to stop by the drugstore to get some items for the long road trip ahead.

Persistent rain had drenched Sheaville for over 12 hours yet sunshine finally crept out in the late afternoon. Shane always appreciated sunny days, especially when pitching; it helped him see every inch of home plate, from corner to corner, and top to bottom.

The door to Ruth's Diner flung open nearly smacking Shane on the nose.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed. Not noticing who came out of the diner, Shane asked, "Can I help you with the door? It might save us both some problems."

The only response given was a slight groan. Shane saw a heavy-set middle aged man storming out of the diner with mustard and ketchup splattered all over his white cotton shirt. Shane eyes focused on the face of the individual. It was Morton Mitchell, the mayor of Sheaville. And he briskly disappeared around the door down Maple Street, not even looking at Shane or responding to his question.

Shane walked into the diner, looking for his mom. He surveyed the room, and saw and heard plenty of people talking, laughing, and eating sandwiches and French fries.

Shane noticed Jack Busby, Ruth Busby son, pounding numbers into the cash register and watching the metal cash drawer fly open. He noticed Shane standing by the front door.

"Hey Shane! What are you doing here?" Jack motioned for Shane to come and sit at the counter, but Shane decided to stand instead.

"I am just looking for mama. We are heading out of town in a little while and I just wanted to tell her goodbye. I will not be home for ten days."

Jack twisted his left eyebrow and rubbed his small grease-stained hands together. "She left a couple of hours ago, right after the lunch shift. Said she wasn't feeling well, but she looked fine to me."

A rush of concern came over Shane's face. "Is she sick?"

"Not that I could tell," replied Jack. "Joann wasn't herself today. Usually she is always so bubbly and cheerful, but today she just kinda moped around. In fact, she did not greet one customer when they came in, and that is not like her at all."

Shane sauntered towards Jack and eventually reached the front of the diner, dropping his hands on the countertop. His hands formed into two fists and he began tapping them lightly on the wet countertop. The counter smelled like bleach

Shane felt the muscles in his chest tighten and he pulled his blue Nike t-shirt away from his chest. Jack thought he was going to tear the center of the shirt, but nothing happened.

Grinding his teeth, Shane muttered. "She told me she was ok...she promised me she was better. I knew it, I knew I shouldn't have fallen for it." With that said, he slammed his fist on the countertop, causing some plates and glasses of other paying customers sitting at the counter

to rattle and vibrate.

Jack did not know what to say. He was unsure of the relationship Shane and Joann had, although he always assumed it was an amicable one. Flustered, Jack wiped his fingers against his grease stained apron and leaned forward towards Shane, nearly touching him nose-to-nose.

I am sure it was nothing, Jack said soothingly. "People get sick all the time and sometimes they just need some time to rest and recover."

Shane looked at Jack through the top of his eyes. Jack was taken back from the cold, frozen stare exhibited by the young pitcher. Somehow, somehow, Jack wondered if he should have kept his mouth shut and let Shane find out how his mother was feeling.

"Please, Jack, do not fence with me. You know Mama's depressed, she's been depressed for as long as I can remember. For some reason, this place upsets her and I cannot understand why. She has gone to Charleston, Huntington, and even Morgantown for treatment and the medication doesn't seem to be...."

Shane's tone was placid and pleadingly serious. Yet nothing was going to prepare Jack, the co-owner of Ruth's Diner, for the next feature of this downward spiraling conversation. Shane broke his frozen stare with Jack and noticed an empty glass abandoned by a customer who had just finished eating. Shane slipped his right hand around the glass and launched it across the diner against the wall behind Jack, the wall located next to the kitchen. All Jack could do was duck behind the counter as the glass shattered against the wall under the force of Shane's throw.

The diner was instantly silent. Jack slowly rose up from behind the counter, only showing the tips of his furry black eyebrows. As his eyes peered over the edge of the countertop, he noticed Shane turned around, staring at the other customers in the diner. When Shane turned around to face Jack, a tear ran down his eye.

Jack held his breath and waited for Shane Triplet's next move. All the young man could say was, "I am sorry about that. I..I guess I lost it."

Shane's voice trailed off as he began to sob quietly. "I do not know what to do Jack."

The rest of the diner, realizing that Shane's incident was a solitary event, began to eat and talk calmly. Jack, now standing tall above the counter once again, reached into his tee-shirt pocket underneath his apron.

"Listen, uh, do not worry about the glass. Look, I shouldn't have said anything. It was none of my business to mention your Mom. But there is something you should have."

Jack extended his hand and slowly retreated his fingers to reveal a crumpled piece of yellow paper. "I found this emptying the trash a couple of days ago. I figured you might want it."

Jack watched as Shane's head rose slowly and met his stare. Shane ocean blue eyes were drowning in tears, hovering on his eye-lids like a river getting ready to spill over its banks. Shane took the paper and clenched it in his hand.

Without hesitation, Shane walked across the diner, and flung open the door, just like Mayor Mitchell has done a few minutes earlier.

Shane's mind was completely occupied with what Jack had said, what his reaction was, and the condition of his Mama. How was she? What if she was depressed? What if she was really sick, like from the flu? Wait...if she was really sick, then why did she not miss the entire day of work instead of coming in and then leaving? These questions bounced around his brain like a pinball.

His eyes barely noticed the people passing him in on the sidewalk. In what seemed to be seconds, Shane was walking down Central Avenue, away from Clark Field and heading home.

As he briskly walked up Central Avenue, he managed to smoke two cigarettes, which calmed him slightly. His blue shirt was now soaked with sweat, and his neck was stained with the remnant of wet tears. His legs ached and his mouth was extremely dry. With all of the considerations and questions zipping through his conscious, he almost walked past the red-brick home snuck next to the large green mountain. Shane was hoping his friend Chaz would see him walk by. He really could use someone to talk to.

Instead, Shane was greeted by someone coming out of the garage adjacent to the house. At first, he noticed a figure pushing a bicycle. The figure came into focus, and Shane noticed the individual was wearing blue shorts and a baseball cap.

Chaz did not have a sister, Shane thought. Nor did he have a girlfriend, because he was too much of a hustler for that. The girl threw one leg over the bicycle and began to crank the pedals forward.

Shane thought inquisitively. Blue shorts...red cap...bicycle. Then, he pieced the clues together. The person on the bicycle was the newspaper delivery girl.

The girl rode around the fence to the sidewalk where Shane was standing. She looked up in time to notice him standing there, and she slammed on her brakes, squeeling the tires against the asphalt.

She looked up, but the red hat covered her eyes. Her hair was pulled back, away from her neck and the tip of her nose was round and shadowed thanks to the bill of the cap. "In a hurry?" Shane asked sarcastically. He could not believe that with everything that could be going on with his Mama, he was stopping to talk to some kid on a bike.

The girl raised her head, eye level with Shane. He still could not see her eyes, but he had a pretty good feeling she was watching him. Her shoulders were bare, as she wore a red top that was low cut and trimmed in navy blue. The red shirt contrasted perfectly with her blue-jean shorts, although the shade of red did not match the color of the baseball cap.

"What does it matter to you!" she barked.

"Well, I mean, you are pedaling that thing like your pants are on fire," Shane replied observingly.

"Cute." The girl proceeded to reposition herself to pedal once again, but before she could, Shane spoke again. "Aren't you the girl that delivers The Charleston Gazette in the mornings?"

"It depends," she responded. "Who are you and where do you live? Only certain houses in Sheaville receive the newspaper."

Shane thought this girl was trying to sell him a subscription. "I am not going to tell you who I am. Since I saw you first, you can tell me who you are first."

The girl did not respond.

Shane could feel the muscles in his arms and hands tighten. A slight evening late spring breeze was blowing his hair from side-to-side. "Forget it. I do not have time for this. I have to go catch a bus to God only knows where, get my bags packed, my glove loosened..."

"So you play baseball," she interjected. "For the Sheaville Loggers." Shane thought he noticed a smile creeping across her face, but he could not tell. "I have seen them writing things about you in the Gazette."

"I do not read much."

"Really?," replied the girl. "I assumed all you jocks always read the newspapers and the box scores to see how well you are doing."

At this point, Shane realized that he was dealing with someone who had a little baseball savvy. He placed his hands on his hips and dropped his head. When his eyes reach the pavement, he noticed the girl was wearing navy blue sandals and her toes were painted with a vibrant red

toenail polish. For an instant, Shane thought her toes might be bleeding, but then the girl would be screaming indefinitely instead of being so calm.

“Miss, uh, I did not catch your name....”

“Olivia”

“Right...well, O-L-L-I-V-I-A...,” Shane made sure he spelled and enunciated every letter. “In this league, we are all in the same boat. Nobody here is really that good. If we were, then many of us would have been called up to the double-A teams. Instead, we are here trying to prove ourselves.”

Olivia snorted in conjecture. “Did you read that out of the minor league baseball players manual or do you actually believe that? By the way, I only have one L in my name, player,” Olivia retorted, holding up her index finger.

Shane was tired of fencing with this girl. For the last 10 minutes, he was carrying on a conversation with a girl he didn't know, a girl whose face he could not see, and a girl who seemingly enjoyed razor sharp verbal exchanges. Finally appalled with the circular nature of the discussion, Shane tightened his face and squinted his eyes, almost appearing like he was crying. “Very funny. Forget this, I am outta here.” He walked past her and proceeded north up Central Avenue.

In the distance, Shane heard the door to the house slam shut and sound of someone running. Instead of turning, Shane kept on walking. Olivia turned to watch Shane leave, when suddenly she witnessed a rock wisk by her face and land in between Shane Triplet's shoulder blades.

“Aw, shit!” Shane chirped.

“That's what you get for not saying hey, jackass!”

The tone of voice and type of language was characteristic of Chaz Martinez. Rather than deal with his wining, Shane decided to humor his friend and see what he wanted. He turned around, now tired from the walk to and from town and his mind still heavy with the thoughts of his mother.

“Did you meet Olivia?,” asked Chaz.

“We've met,” said Olivia, in a displeased tone of voice.

Shane's mind began to spin once again. Chaz used to live with Susan Ratcliffe, one of Sheaville's elderly ladies who had been adopting Loggers players for several years. She was described by former players as a sweet lady, and one hell of a cook. She lived south of Maple Street towards the old timber mill. Her husband had worked for Harlan Shea and was the foreman at the mill. He was gone now, and she accepted Loggers players for company and companionship. Chaz never told Shane why he was no longer staying with her..

Shane's body language established the disposition that something about this scenario was not right.

Chaz decided Shane's stunned reaction was too good to pass up. He approached Olivia and placed his arm around her shoulder. At first, Olivia squirmed and tried to get away. To counter her movements, Chaz squeezed his fingers on her rotator cuff and his finger nails dug into her skin. Olivia bit her lower lip and smirked at Shane. She noticed the young pitchers blue eyes were glazed over since the breeze was now blowing in his face. Shane's lips were dry and coated with crusted saliva. His legs were together and his posture resembled that of a soldier called to attention by his lieutenant.

“I do more than know her, Triplet. I sleep with her every night.”

Olivia jabbed her elbow into Chaz's solarplexus. He coughed slightly, then raised his hand to cover his mouth. Remaining calm and stoic, Chaz awaited Shane's reaction.

Shane had no reaction. He stood still and his blue eyes were roving back and forth at the

couple. Shane was trying to make sense of this prank, but to no avail.

Deciding the joke had continued long enough, Chaz broke his embrace with Olivia. "Sike, Shane! I was just kidding ya." His accent was becoming muffled with the Dominican dialect, something that always crept up when he talked fast. "I do sleep with Olivia every night. That is because her family is my team family during the season."

Shane body went limp. The muscles and internal organs in his body exhaled all the oxygen it had been storing since this whole fiasco began. Shane could see the sky behind Olivia and now apparently Chaz's home was blazing orange, a sure sign the sun was setting. The young pitcher had lost track of how long it had been since he left Jack and the shattered glass at Ruth's Diner. What about Mama? If she was ill, could his delay make the situation worse?

Shane could fill his cheeks simmer with angst and he knew he had to go. Now was just finding the polite way to do it. Polite? Hell, Chaz and Olivia had not been polite to him. What would be so wrong in just turning around and darting up Central Avenue and up towards the mouth of the hollow. Shane wanted to. Every fiber in his body wanted to, but for some reason, he kept staring at Olivia.

Olivia was able to verbally joust Shane pretty well and he was unable to really rattle her resolve. All the psychological skills and tricks he had learned playing so many years of baseball did not phase the girl at all. She intrigued him. Unfortunately, Chaz did not keep the atmosphere silent.

"You packed and ready to go? I got us some cigs at Frank's, in case you did not make it."

"I didn't," was the only words Shane said. Moreover, those were the first words Chaz heard his friend speak in quite some time.

"Let's clear the air," chimed Olivia. "I am Olivia Mitchell. My father is Morton Mitchell, the mayor of Sheaville. You may or may not know him, I don't know. Chaz here decided to move away from Ms. Ratcliffe's home because he believed she wanted in his pants. I cannot imagine Chaz thinking that....." She cocked her head sideways and raised her eyebrows in obvious disdain for the shortstop's incessant obsession with sexual ideas and thoughts.

Shane blinked hard, shocked that this girl would be the type to use such lucid language.

"Anyway," she continued speaking in a sweet but confident voice. "Dad decided it would be good to take in Logers because it would give him a reason to go to the games. We called Walter Mann and asked him if anyone needed a place to stay. He recommended Chaz and just like that, we have a third member of our household."

Shane Triplet's Adam's Apple bounced around his throat like a rubber ball. Chaz never mentioned any of this before, nor did Shane realize he was verbally sparring with the mayor of Sheaville's daughter. Shane did conclude that this was his way out.

"I saw your dad today Olivia, he was coming, or rather charging, out of the diner. He had mustard and ketchup on him. He did not look to happy."

"Jack probably squirted him. Dad always thinks he can talk enough about Republican politics to force Jack to change his political affiliation. When Jack hears enough, well, that is what happens." She smiled again and Shane relaxed his stance.

Feeling sweaty from the commotion, he took off his blue shirt. As he removed the shirt, sleeve by sleeve and then over his head, he noticed Olivia studying his every move. Shane's muscles were defined and his arms were large and shapely. His skin around his belly button stuck out from his abdomen like a bulls-eye. Upon placing the shirt in his left hand, Shane even noticed Chaz staring at him. Shane shook his head, causing his blond hair to bounce across his forehead. He did not want to imagine why Chaz was staring.

"Thanks for the family history lesson. I have to go. Martinez, I will get you for this later."

Remember, we will be spending a lot of time together. Nice dealing with you, Olivia with one L.” And with that last comment, the pitcher turned and sprinted up the road towards his house.”

“Glad to see you two could meet,” inclined Chaz jokingly. “I can tell that went well.” Olivia was not listening. All she could do was watch as Shane Triplet disappeared over the hill onto the lower half of Central Avenue.

VII.

The hollow leading to the Triplet home was an isolated journey. With only two other houses occupying the area, the deteriorating two-story white Triplet home sat on a small hill overlooking the other homes. Aside from the house which was never maintained, a large, flat field lay west of the home, and it was Shane’s responsibility to keep the grass mowed and fertilized. Because Joann Triplet was always working, nobody else was available to maintain the field. But with baseball season underway, Shane had little time to do anything that was not affiliated with the Sheaville Loggers, much less take care of three acres of green grass.

The hollow was dimming into darkness as the sun set on another day in Sheaville, West Virginia. Shane raced up the dirt street, thinking about nothing other than his mama. Since the previous episode with Chaz and Olivia, he did not know how his delay would ultimately impact his mother.

Shane did notice the Charleston Gazette newspapers had not been picked up from the front porch, probably because Joann did not take the time to notice they were out there. When he reached his home, he opened the rusting fence gate and skipped up the crumbling sidewalk towards the front door. After swinging open the wooden screen door, his eyes were blinded by the bright lights in the kitchen.

As Shane’s retinas and corneas adjusted to the lumination, a plate slammed against the white cabinet next to the front door. Shane jumped with fright as the pieces of the blue plate made smaller secondary breaks once it hit the wooden floor.

Shane looked up, his jaw hanging and his body tense. “What the...!” he yelled.

“Your late!,” said Joann Triplet. The 39-year old chunky woman was sitting at the round table in the center of the kitchen, with her blazing red hair sticking out from her scalp in many different directions. Her violet eyeliner had trickled down her face and her pink lipstick had faded. Her waitress uniform appeared to be hanging off her body, and part of her bra was showing. Leaning back in the metal chair, her feet were propped on an adjacent metal chair.

“Mama, what happened to you today,” questioned Joann’s son. “I came to say goodbye to you at the diner and Jack said you left because you were sick. What happened?”

Shane crouched toward the floor and made an attempt to pick up the large chunks of destroyed plate. But his mama’s answer would halt that procedure before it began.

“Yea, no thanks to you. I am sick because of you. I have been sick because of you, and because of you, I will probably always be sick.”

Shane dropped the small pieces he had in his hands and rose slowly. By now, his blue shirt was lying in the floor and sweat was running from his forehead. His chest was soaked and his head began to throb. Stunned, he caught a whiff of whiskey, which had permeated throughout the kitchen.

“Mama,” he whispered, “your sick. Why don’t you go and lie down and get some rest.”

“I am not getting ANY rest! For one thing, I am not tired. Secondly, I am just dandy right where I am. Why don’t you get your ass moving and get the hell outta here. I will be just fine on my

own...always have been, always will be. It's all about baseball, right?"

"That's not fair. You know I do not want to go, but this is how it is. This is how my life is and will be for quite some time." Shane watched as his mother eyed him coldly, almost indicating she did not know or trust her son.

"Mama, I hate to see you like this. Please tell me what happened that got you like this today. I mean, you were doing so well."

Joann scoffed. "I have not done well since we moved back to this rotten town. I cannot believe that all the teams in baseball drafting last year and this is where you end up. I mean, I left this town once thinking I would never return, and low and behold here I am back here once again."

Shane gingerly approached his mother sitting at the table. The rest of the kitchen, like the rest of the house, was in ruins. The wallpaper was peeling from the corners of the room and the refrigerator barely kept food cold. The pipes underneath the kitchen sink leaked constantly, and the dripping water was the perfect paradox for the dirty dishes piled high in the auxiliary sink, which were in need of cleaning. As Shane inched closer, his mother jerked backwards and dropped her resting leg to the floor. Her eyes were bloodshot and the wrinkles on her cheekbones were suddenly thick and defined.

Joann reached below her chair and pulled out a half-empty bottle of whiskey and placed her lips around the rings of the open end, engulfing a large amount of the brown liquid. "Don't move, I swear...you had best stay away from me!"

"Mama, please, this is no way to treat yourself. I know you have that borderline personality disorder, but please, leaving work and getting drunk are not ways to handle this. Maybe we need to go back to Charleston to the hospital and have you checked out."

"So what," Joann qualmed, totally ignoring the second half of Shane's sentence. "You like your smoked tobacco, I like my whiskey. You know what, you can thank this town for that. That's right. Good ol' Sheaville, West Virginia. Your father use to smoke those blasted cigarettes like they were going to run away from him. I guess it was because there was nothing else to do in this town but saw trees and smoke. Sure didn't help him any."

Shane was aware of his mother's propensity to redirect every problem in the life of the Triplet's to Roger Triplet. Although he was killed in a sawmill explosion back in the late 1970's, partly because Harlan Shea had failed to keep his equipment updated and inspected, Shane barely knew his father. Shane was three years old when Harlan Shea gave his family a \$100,000 settlement for the accident. His mother, being the opportunist she is, fled Sheaville and moved to Pittsburgh. Roger Triplet was from the Pittsburgh and he and Joann had been there many times after they were married. When Shane was conceived, the trips north ceased. It had always been Joann's intention to return to Pittsburgh permanently, and when Roger was killed, she and Shane moved there.

With no central father figure, Shane sought comfort in baseball. Like most kids, he progressed through t-ball, little league, senior league, and finally completed with an outstanding three-year high school baseball career at Carrick High School. While Joann never supported Shane's decision to play baseball, she tolerated his choice because it gave him a reason to maintain good grades and it kept him, for the most part, out of trouble.

One unfortunate consequence of Shane's decision was it left him somewhat introverted as a person. He was always popular with girls, yet he never paid much attention to them. Shane's friends consisted mostly of his teammates and since they spent a lot of time together throughout the school year, he developed some meaningful relationships with some of them. However, the majority of Shane's spare time was spent practicing the fundamentals of baseball. Seldom did friends come by the house or call to ask Shane to go someplace. He

never discussed the issue, even when his mother probed him about it again and again. In fact, Joann would often come home after working as hostess for a nearby Bob Evans restaurant and catch her son throwing baseballs into an old fishing net that was tied between the branches of two trees. On certain evenings, Shane would be swinging a bat into the humid summer air, working on improving his stance and the fluidity of his swing. His idol was Pete Rose, one of the greatest baseball players in Cincinnati Reds history. "Pete always works on the fundamentals of everything," Shane would always tell Joann.

When Shane graduated high school, the nightmare scenario Joann Triplet had envisioned but hoped would never happen materialized. Shane was courted by several colleges and universities to play baseball for them in exchange a free college education. Instead, he opted to enter the Major League Baseball Draft, and was selected in the 2nd round by the Cincinnati Reds. Parliamentary procedure for all Major League Baseball Draft picks is eventual minor league baseball system, which for Shane, meant being sent to the Appalachian Baseball Association to play for the Sheaville Loggers. Joann was mortified. Since moving back to Sheaville, she was never the same.

She found a waitress job at Ruth's Diner, mainly because Ruth Busby was ready to slow down from her frantic work schedule and her son Jack needed someone to wait tables at the restaurant. With few friends except the everyday customers like Frank Miller and Phil Rodney, Joann always felt alienated in this town. After a few months being in a town and place she loathed, Joann Triplet's moods changed. She was becoming increasingly irritable, and was moping around the diner and the house. In her absentmindedness, she often forgot to cash her paychecks or pay the bills. American Electric Power threatened to cut off electricity to the Triplet home and West Virginia American Water Company shut off water in the house twice. If it wasn't for Shane discovering what had happened, he and Joann would have been homeless for sure.

After several weeks of this behavior, Shane became concerned and tried to talk to Joann about her problem. She remained stubborn and secretive, and she refused to share her feelings with her son. Finally, Shane asked Ruth Busby what to do. Ruth recommended taking Joann to Charleston Memorial Hospital to have her examined by the psychiatric physicians at the hospital. After tricking his mother into going to Charleston by promising her a trip to the Charleston Town Center Mall, they wound up at the hospital. Ruth called and warned the hospital of her arrival, and Joann was admitted for observation. After two weeks of analysis and tests, the doctor's diagnosed her with borderline personality disorder. Shane new very little about it, but following consultations with the medical staff, he became familiar with the severity of the illness.

Borderline personality disorder describes long-term disturbance of personality function. Disturbances suffered by those with the disorder include a pervasive instability in mood, extreme "black and white" thinking, chaotic and unstable personal relationships as well as a disturbance in the sense of self. Joann developed this disorder over the death of her husband and not coming to terms with her personal grief, at least according to the doctor in Charleston. After heeding his mother's instructions, Shane froze. He was now three feet in front of the table, and within arms-length of his mother. With the right conditions, Shane could grab her or the whiskey, but given Joann's behavior, the idea was risky at best.

"Mama, our situation has nothing to do with Dad." Shane's tone became more rigid. "We are here because I am trying to do well, trying to get to the big leagues so that we can have a better life for ourselves."

Joann snorted at her son's objectives. "You listen here and you listen good! Nobody ever

comes to this town and leaves with any hope. Look at all the families still stuck here. The ones who did not move away when the mill was shutting down were lured to stay here by false promises. Now look at them and look at us. We are stuck here. No hope, no future, no life... just an existence. Now don't tell me you have bought into all of that crap that ball club has been feeding you about 'making it big.' It won't happen. It is the curse of Sheaville." Joann's foot began to tap against the faded wooden kitchen floor. Her lips twitched and her face became red, but with each sentence spoken, she gulped another portion of whiskey.

"I will make it here. I am a prospect, just like anyone else. I am here to make it, not to stay here forever. Mama, you made the sacrifice for me coming back here. And I am going to make it for the both of us...you wait and see."

"You have your daddy's optimism. It always believed Sheaville would prosper. Hea." Joann started wobbling in her chair and she scraped the chair legs against the floor, lifting herself upward using her wrists to a standing position. The top portion of her waitress uniform, already sagging, continued to spill off her shoulders. Her once covered breasts were now exposed and her uniform fell towards her waist. "Your daddy was not an honorable man, Shane. You speak of him as if he were a saint. He was a no-good mill man who did what he wanted when he wanted."

"That is not true!"

"It is!" Joann screamed. Shane's head jerked backwards violently as his nose caught the burning smell of alcohol that blanketed Joann's words. "I bet you didn't know that he had some girlfriends. Oh yes. Roger got around...and around and around and around." Joann began waving her index and middle fingers at her son.

The effects of the alcohol were taking their toll on Joann. Her body was swaying back and forth and her speech was becoming slurred and unrecognizable. As she continued talking, the sweat continued to form on her forehead. The young pitcher was unsure what to do, but he raised his hands and placed them on his hips, ready to catch Joann Triplet in case she fell forward.

As Shane considered how to respond to the things Joann was repeating, the phone in the living room rang. Joann turned abruptly towards the living room, which was next to the kitchen and then looked back towards Shane.

"Mama, we need to get that. It might be the team. We are leaving for Lexington tonight." She eyed him disdainfully. All Shane needed for her to do was walk into the next room and answer the phone. Then he would grab the whiskey bottle and discard the contents. At least a lack of alcohol might calm her down.

Joann slid slowly alongside the table. By now the phone was on its second ring. Instinctively, Shane was waiting for her to clear the entranceway. Once Joann was around the corner, he would have the glass bottle and hopefully have his mother under control.

Eventually, Joann stumbled into the living room. While she picked up the phone, Shane took the bottle in his hand and pushed the table backwards with his hands, almost jamming it into the refrigerator. But the spare chair that Joann used as a foot-stool was jutting outwards, and Shane ran into it on his way towards the sink.

He slipped as his knees scraped against the tile floor, getting sliced by an edge of upcoming tile. Blood began oozing from his knees and the bottle of whiskey shattered into the floor. Now the kitchen floor of the Triplet home was a mixture of broken glass, blue bits of a dinner plate, and blood stains. The room resembled a war zone. When Shane stood up, his mother was standing in front of him. She looked possessed and he was uncertain what she would do or say.

Joann grabbed Shane's arm and slung him into the next room. Spinning around, yet keeping his balance, he moved forward and walked directly towards her. This time, Joann had a spatula in her hand and she struck Shane across the face. He winced in pain as he was spurned sideways, facing the telephone on the table. She assaulted him again, this time striking him on the back of the neck, dropping Shane to the floor until he was resting on his two gashed knees.

His blood soaked knees stained the faded pastel-blue carpet and he rolled over facing his mother. She knelt in front of him and grabbed her son's cheeks and pulled him close. Touching nose to nose, she hissed, "My boy, my sweet, beautiful baby boy. My boy, the baseball star." She then stuffed her mouth against Shane's lips and began kissing him heavily.

Sore and bleeding, Shane was motionless. Joann broke the kiss and stared at her son. His blue eyes were hollow and his face was sunken and suddenly clammy. "My beautiful boy," repeated Joann. "Mommy doesn't want you to be late for the game." Her eyes widened as she licked her lips.

"You had better hurry, the bus is ready to leave without you."

VIII.

The empty and scared white bag lay on the concrete front porch of the Morton's House on 806 Central Avenue. Olivia's watched read 9:45 a.m. For her, time seemed endless. After delivering copies of The Charleston Gazette for more than three years, she should be used to the feeling of exhaustion. However, the more she delivered, the worse the feeling became.

She dumped herself into the wicker chair on the front porch. The chair cushion felt soft and comfortable against her aching calf muscles. She lowered her red baseball cap over her eyes in hopes of catching a quick nap. Certainly college would not be this exhausting, she often told herself.

Morton Mitchell opened the screen door to the front porch and stepped outside. It was raining in Sheaville and the late spring rains had been forecasted for several days, yet fittingly the skies chose Friday to quench the Earth, at least Sheaville's part of the Earth.

"Tired, sweetheart?," asked Morton condescendingly.

Olivia was tired and in no mood for her father's normal patronizing remarks, so she wiggled in her chair attempting to get comfortable. She wanted to make sure he understood that she had no plans of moving anytime soon.

"Just think, it's all worth it once the paycheck comes at the end of the month," Morton said decisively. "I know how much you like going to the bank and filling out that deposit ticket."

"Yea, but it's the 30 or 31 days of work that get to me," she retorted sheepishly.

Morton shook his head and his daughter's reasoning. He was busily trying to button the sleeve cuffs on his butterscotch dress shirt. After what happened at Ruth's Diner, he was going to make sure that no stain would be distracting on his clothing, should a staining happen again.

"I still do not understand why you make me have this newspaper route daddy?" asked Olivia. She wiggled the toes in her white sneakers as she awaited his response. Although Olivia knew what she was asking for when she posed the question, something inside her hoped the response would be different. It wasn't.

"This job teaches you two things my dear...accountability and responsibility. Having to get up at 4 a.m. everyday teaches you responsibility, riding your bike all over town is good exercise, and collecting subscription fees from customers teaches you good intrapersonal skills. Not to mention, having you out there is good public relations for my office."

“Somehow, it all comes back to politics,” Olivia responded, waving her feet back and forth. “I just wish that newspaper you delivered wasn’t so liberal,” added Morton. Indeed, The Charleston Gazette was a liberal newspaper, and everyone in Sheaville knew it. Olivia can remember discussing the newspaper in her newspaper class at Sheaville High School. The class got her interested in journalism and after being a reporter and editor for four years, she decided to go to Marshall University in Huntington and major in Print Journalism. That was always one advantage Olivia understood about being a newspaper carrier. After college graduation, maybe the Gazette would consider her for a full-time position. Delivering the news was much different than reporting the news though. “It’s amazing that I can get elected as a Republican in such a Democratic region, but that is the essence of being a good politician. Take a look at the front page of the regional section today, Olivia.” He walked over to where Olivia was sitting and strung the front page out in front of her. He could not tell if she was paying attention, but she rose up in her chair, which was a pretty good sign she was looking and listening. “Read that.” He pointed to a story in the lower right hand corner of the newspaper. The headline read:

Sheaville Mayor Successful in Balancing Budget

“See, that is good for me. I am up for re-election next year and voters remember these types of things.”

“Actually,” Olivia concluded, “the only reason they include Sheaville in the paper at all is because we are in their delivery area. Trust me dad, newspapers are not necessarily altruistic ventures.”

“Always a pessimist,” Morton responded.

Olivia now realized that she was not going to get any peace and quiet as long as her father was on the porch. He would be going to work soon, but soon could not come fast enough. She sat upright in her chair and she pulled off her cap. Her auburn hair was woven in a bun, which rested tightly on the center of her head. “Hey, I heard the Loggers are on a long road trip,” she inquired.

“Yep, something like that.” He continued rustling pages of the newspaper scouring each page for news. “Since when did you become interested in the Loggers?”

“Well, I met one of the players yesterday. I think that is the first time I ever had a conversation with one of them.”

Morton’s lip twitched. “You’ve met some of the players before, when you were little. You just do not remember it.” Morton Mitchell loved to fondly recall the past. He loved to talk about the way life used to be. Olivia was usually involved in past stories in some manner, primarily because Morton did not tell a story that did not have her in it.

“Well, I met him as I was going into town to get a new bike reflector. He was a little odd, but he and Chaz know each other, apparently.”

“Which player is it?”

Olivia paused thoughtfully for a moment, staring at her hands as she twiddled her thumbs. “Shane somebody.”

Morton, now finally looking at his daughter instead of the newspaper classifieds noticed her eyes roaming around the porch, not fixated on any particular object. "Well, you and everyone else in this town seem to think that he is going to put Sheaville on the map because of his talent. Well, I am here to tell you that it will not happen. Mark my words."

"Daddy, I didn't say anything about what he was or was not going to do playing baseball. I just told you that I met him," Olivia stated, trying to incorporate factual evidence into the conversation. "He seemed okay. A little distant, but I figure if Chaz knows him, then he must be okay."

"Chaz is a good boy," noted Morton. "Follow his lead and he will never steer you wrong."

"Maybe, maybe not, it just depends on how you look at things," Olivia replied. "Shane really was confused about not knowing that Chaz was staying with us. When he found out, he was really...."

Morton Mitchell, listening attentively since Olivia mentioned Shane, erupted. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE KNOWS CHAZ LIVES WITH US!" His voice was loud and words shot out of his mouth as his cheek bones swelled and his hands were flapping against one another.

Olivia was startled out of her seat, stood upright, and faced her father, wondering what she had said or done that got her father so upset.

"Young lady, the less Shane Triplet knows about this family, the better off we all will be. I do not want you associating with him. Hear me! I will inform Chaz of this when he comes back in town."

Confused and angered by this sudden temperament change, Olivia responded the only way she knew how-by asking for justification. "Why? You cannot tell me who to talk to and who not to talk to. Sheaville is so small, I will probably run into him all the time."

"You had better not!" Morton grumbled. Seething, he stormed off the porch and hopped into the driver's seat of the Mitchell family's Honda Accord.

IX

The five-hour bus ride from Sheaville, West Virginia to Lexington, Kentucky was anything but exciting. The bus was packed with 30 players and managers and all of their equipment. The bus seats were narrow and small. Shane's long legs spent most of the journey wrapped around Ryan Head's seat so they would not ache under the confined conditions.

The Lexington Legends were one of the most recent additions to the Appalachian Baseball Association organization. Founded by several business and community leaders in the city, Lexington became a destination many minor league baseball players dreamed about. Because of the eccentric fan support plush team facilities, and other organizational support, the Legends were able to field one of the better teams in the ABA, at least since their inception.

When the Sheaville Loggers arrived at Applebee's Park for the pre-game "walk around" and batting practice, many of the players were stunned at the superiority of the facility. The stadium was a modern marvel in minor league baseball. The venue seats more than 6,000 people and was built with special seating and eating areas to accommodate fans of all ages. There are 5,061 seats in non-padded permanent chairs, 500 seats in permanent bleachers and two-lawn seating areas that will accommodate at least 1,000 people.

The Loggers were taken to the visitor locker room so everyone could change into their light green uniformstrimmed in blue accented by the cursive Loggers embroidered on the front.

What the players witnessed was a dressing room that appeared like a room from a four-star hotel. Restrooms were conveniently located throughout the locker room. There were two First Aid rooms for players and coaches and the lockers were wide and spacious. The entire room was air conditioned, and was so cool, some players actually complained about being cold. The stadium was light years ahead of Clark Field, but Walter Mann assured his team to not forget where they were and who they were going to play.

"All right men, I know that this place is like that Greenbrier," referring to the nationally recognized four-star hotel and entertainment complex located in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, "but we have a job to do. We finished up that month of April on fire and I want to make sure we keep it going. Now, remember what we worked on in practice. Good relays from the outfield to the infield, watching the base runners, especially at first, and of course, not getting behind in that count."

Walter's speeches were always centered on the same themes: stay focused and play good sound fundamental baseball, and, if you can help it, win.

Shane and the rest of the Loggers took the field in front of more than 5,800 fans at Applebee's Park. It was the largest crowd the team had seen all season. When Shane took the mound for his ninth appearance of the season, he dug his cleats repeatedly into the dirt on the pitcher's mound. As the national anthem was blasted over the public address system, Shane could not gather his thoughts. Although he did not feel like being in Lexington or playing baseball, he had a responsibility to himself, the team, and most importantly, his mama. He had made arrangements for Frank Miller to check on Joann in the evenings to make sure she was taking her medicine and not drinking. Jack Ruby gave Joann a couple of days off to regain her strength and quite possibly her sanity. Shane's knees were still scabbed as a result of falling on the floor but the welt on his face from the spatula attack had subsided.

As the signal was given by the home plate umpire to begin, Shane Triplet's eyes and his demeanor began to shift internally. Almost like an electric switch had been thrown, Shane locked into home plate and was preparing to face his first batter of the game. He shoved a wad of chewing gum into his right jaw and began to take his stance on the pitching rubber. Harry Deitzler approached from first base as Lexington Legend Jeff MacCorkle came to home plate.

"Shane, this guy is good," Harry said in a rough whisper so softly that Shane barely heard him. "Okay, so what do you suggest for me throw to get this bitch out."

By now, Harry caught glimpse of the home plate umpire coming toward the mound and Harry became a little flustered.

"I do not know Shane. All I know is he is he is fast and hits lines drives to all parts of the field and is regarded as an excellent bunter. He tore us up last year. So do what you have to do. Just thought I'd let you know." And with a wink, Harry trotted back to first base, just before the umpire made it to the mound.

Occasionally lead off hitters with speed will try a bunt in the beginning of a game in order to catch a pitcher off guard. Knowing this, Shane decided to throw a fastball toward the inner half of the plate and see if MacCorkle would bunt the ball. He was a left hand hitter, so Shane would have to be careful not to let the pitch hang over the plate or a bunt could be the least of his worries.

Shane slid hit feet together, raised back and fired a fastball right where he wanted-on the inner-half. MacCorkle bunted, and the ball dribbled towards the left side of the mound, near third base. Harry stretched his stance at first and Shane scooped up the baseball, through it across his body, and the ball smacked into Harry's glove, beating the hustling MacCorkle by

two steps.

Instead of becoming too excited too early, something skipper Walter Mann despised, Shane just tipped his glove to his first baseman and Harry responded with a nod and a smile.

“Good team work guys!” barked Chaz Martinez from his shortstop position.

Walter Mann clapped incessantly from the dugout. Rubbing the sweat from his bald head and wiping his hands on his swollen gut, the manager was unsure what took place was too good to be true, so he stepped out onto the field to look at the scoreboard, just to make sure there really was one out in the top of the first inning.

One main disadvantage to playing the Lexington Legends was each player on the team was a superior hitter. Walter had informed the players about what the team was capable of as they got off the bus that morning. Lexington was hitting .391 on the season and they lead the Appalachian Baseball League in doubles with 53. They were sixth in the league in homeruns with 26, but second in the league in runs batted in, with 67.

Shane was inundated with fans waving balloons, hats, and other Lexington paraphernalia at him as he tried to prepare for Tito Camerillo, the Legends third baseman to step into the batters box. Biggie Rowan was covered in sweat after just one batter yet he continued to squat in between batters. Tito dragged his bat against the ground and raised it over his shoulder. At least he was right handed, Shane thought.

Biggie’s first sign was for a curveball on the outside corner of the plate. Shane obliged, always working quickly in between pitches, but the pitch landed low and inside. Biggie made the same sign, and once again Shane spun a beautiful curveball, but again it was inside, forcing Camerillo to jackknife back from the plate. Biggie shook his head and looked at Walter for another sign.

Walter did not ask Shane to throw his change-up pitch too often, primarily because young pitchers learning to throw correctly often needed seasoning before they learn to get the pitch to move across the plate in seconds. When the pitch was not executed properly, any good hitter could deposit the ball for a hit or worse. Tito Camerillo was certainly a good hitter.

Walter ran his hands all over his body, touching his arms, nose, hands, wrists and all points in between. It was Biggie’s job to break the code. The instructions were for Shane to pitch Tito a fastball on the outside portion of the plate. Walter’s reasoning for choosing this pitch at this location was to make Tito Camerillo guard all corners of the plate. Since Shane had come inside twice, Tito would probably be expecting a pitch down the middle of the plate to avoid moving the count to three balls and no strikes.

Shane got the sign from a crouched Biggie Rowan and stared backwards at the scoreboard at Applebee’s Park, eager to discharge a fastball. Located in right center field, the 13’ x 17’ video display scoreboard was the focal point of the stadium. It was nearly 90 feet tall and 70 feet wide featuring a five-foot analog clock. The display system includes a text message center, auxiliary signs, advertising displays, and a speed-of-pitch display. The display is used to show game-in-progress information and out of town scores, as well as advertising for upcoming events and general information.

When he turned around, Tito Camerillo was eagerly chewing on a wad of bubble gum, awaiting the offering. Shane set, delivered, and threw a fastball that bit the outside corner sharply. Like Walter had predicted, Tito was not prepared for the pitch, and he was slow in moving his bat from his shoulder to make contact with the ball. The result was a pop-fly pitch in foul territory beside Harry Deitzler, which the first baseman grasped for the second out of the inning.

Adrenaline slowly began to pump through Shane shoulders. Now he was physically and

emotionally in game mode. His arm was loose; he rediscovered some control, and was now ready for the next batter. The Lexington Legends next hitter was Micah Lucas, a small but feisty player who was dangerous with the bat when he made contact, but his overzealous plate discipline created a penchant for swinging at bad pitches.

Walter Mann strayed father away from the dugout. Reluctantly, he was standing close to one of the Lexington Legends' third base coaches. The same jumbled signs were delivered to Biggie and conveyed to Shane. The call: a heavy dose of fastballs with lots of movement.

In rapid succession, Shane fired three straight pitches at Micah Lucas. The first was high and outside, and Lucas swung and missed for strike one. Next, Shane smoked another fastball down and inside, almost hitting Lucas on the shin. Again, he swung and came up empty. Lastly, Shane fired a pitch that split the plate in half. This time, Micah did not even swing and was called out on strike three because he watched the ball whiz past him.

As the Sheaville Loggers jogged back to the dugout, Shane's teammates patted him on the buttocks and gave him many congratulatory remarks. Ryan, Chaz, and Harry were the first to offer praise, and right fielder Pat Sutton was soon to follow. The team had come to realize there was something special taking place when Shane Triplet pitched. What amazed Shane, and perhaps the entire team, was the applause heard around Applebee's Park. Shane walked off the field into the dugout. Not knowing how to respond, he paused and listened. That was the best way to savor a job well done.

The Sheaville Loggers were demonstrating good fundamental baseball skills throughout the afternoon against the Lexington Legends. Pat Sutton was 2-4 on the afternoon, with one of the team's only runs batted in. Chaz Martinez had successfully executed a sacrifice bunt in the top of the fifth inning that allowed Biggie Rowan to advance to second base following a base hit. Ryan Head continued the inning with a double down the left field line which scored Rowan. However, Shane Triplet was unable to successfully reach base or earn a hit during his at bat, popping out and leaving Head stranded at second base. The Loggers did have the lead, 2-0. Any problems Shane may have suffered hitting the baseball was easily forgotten due to another stellar pitching performance. Through 7 1/3 innings, Shane had surrendered only 4 hits, all singles, and struck out 11 batters. In between innings, Chaz kept reminding his friend that the ABA strikeout record for a season was in jeopardy, although Shane modestly disregarded his claims. The Loggers eighth inning appeared to be going smoothly for the visitors from Sheaville, West Virginia.

After retiring the first Legends batter of the inning, Shane once again faced Micah Lucas. On the day, Lucas was 0-3, striking out twice and nearly beating out a close relay throw to first base during the fifth inning. The formula Walter Mann decided upon using with Lucas was similar to the one used earlier in the game; fastballs with movement. This time, the Lexington Legend prepared for Shane and his arsenal of pitches.

Prior to Micah stepping into the batters box, Walter stared at his statistics sheet. Part of his responsibility as a manager in the Appalachian Baseball Association was to keep track of the performances of each of his players throughout the season. The sheets were mailed to Cincinnati Reds headquarters in Ohio so the organization could determine which players had progressed enough to be eligible for promotion to the next level of minor league baseball. Mann was always concerned with the performance of his pitching staff. He always felt that good baseball teams became great baseball teams with good pitching and sound defense. Today, the Sheaville Loggers were following that mantra. Yet Mann surveyed the stats sheet

and noticed Shane was closing in on 100 pitches, which is often considered a breaking point for pitchers.

From the dugout, Mann's pitcher looked sullen and surly. The pitcher's gray uniform was blemished with sweat circles and nearly hiding the embroidered word Loggers sown to the material. The moisture running down his face was like a stream down a West Virginia mountainside. But Shane gave no indication to his manager between innings that he was tired or that he was experiencing any shoulder soreness. Always cautious, Walter lethargically wobbled to the mound to examine the situation personally.

With a simple twitch of the manager's hand, Biggie Rowan, Chaz Martinez, and Harry Deitzler met Walter Mann at the mound. Shane was becoming too familiar with this conference. Fans in the stands began to stand and hoards of binoculars were focused on the mound as everyone tried to guess what was being said.

"How ya feeling lad," Mann asked forthrightly. "By my numbers, use been out here an awfully long time today. I think someone else needs to close it out."

Tired but determined, Shane would not admit to needing rest. "I am fine, skip. Let me make this guy 0-4."

"I let Biggie be the judge of that." He turned and was eye level to Biggie's deep set eyes. "How's he holding up?"

Harry tried to speak, or rather stutter in his case, but he could not utter a syllable in time. "He's done," Biggie answered plainly. "His tank is about on empty. There is no way that he can get this jack ass out throwing pure heat."

Shane caught Biggie's glare. For a moment, the two stared intently at each other. Suprisingly, Biggie shifted his focus to Harry and Chaz, challenging them to override his opinion with a vote of confidence for their friend. Instead, the two teammates looked away.

Walter extended his right hand, indicating to Shane that his day was just about over. With no qualms, he spiked the ball into the palm of his manager and brushed by Biggie Rowan. Biggie passed glances at the three men remaining on the mound, and placed his mask back over his face.

Dejected, Shane paced back to the dugout amidst a flurry of applause from the capacity crowd. Legend or Logger, many of the fans realized they had witnessed a stellar performance by a talented pitcher. Shane walked into the dugout, slammed his glove against the ground and flopped onto his lean, muscular frame onto the bench.

Chris Taylor, the Loggers closer this season, was brought in to finish the inning. He would be expected to also pitch the ninth and final inning. Chris throws a splitter and a wicked curveball that often times freezes hitters at the plate. An excellent athlete, he's got a good move to first base and get the ball to the plate in a timely manner which keeps steal attempts to a minimum. Despite his talent, Micah Lucas deposited a 1-1 pitch over the center-field wall for a homerun. The lead was cut to 2-1. After walking the next Lexington batter, Chaz, Ryan, and Harry were able to turn a double play which ended the inning. Lexington failed to reach base in the ninth inning, and the Sheaville Loggers hung on for the victory, 2-1.

X.

The weather in Sheaville continued to deteriorate for a Saturday afternoon in late May. The sun was mixed with small, blurry gray clouds all afternoon, but now the clouds had squished together to create a combustible thunderstorm. The lightning ricocheted throughout the town, bouncing off the old, decaying saw mill outside of town and bouncing off of the buildings in

town. At Ruth's Diner, customers were breezing in and out rapidly, each one doing their best to dodge the large rain droplets that littered Maple Street.

Frank Miller was slurping up the remnants of a cup of coffee, when he signaled for Jack to fill it up. Most of the time, Jack was steadfast in keeping the customers' beverage glasses full, but it was increasingly difficult to refill cups and cook baked steak and mashed potatoes for table three at the same time.

"I'm afraid Joann won't be back in here for another couple of days, Frank," said Jack, sounding like a psychological expert. "I just do not think that she is ready yet."

"Can you take care of things here just fine? I just want her to get better, that's all."

Jack continued. "But you know something, Frank, what if she doesn't get better?" Frank slid his black sun visor over his head and placed it on the countertop. He rubbed his hands through his thick white hair and looked disoriented in having to answer that question.

Jack, wearing his usual white stained apron took his forearm and wiped the sweat from his eyebrows. He anticipated Frank's response. Jack always considered Frank's opinion to hold great merit because of the thoughtfulness and judiciousness he places on every statement.

Speaking softly, Frank leaned closely to Jack. "I think that she will get better. She has to get better. Shane needs her. Joann knows that."

Jack, with a steady voice, disagreed. "But you know as well as I do that she hadn't been the same since Roger died and when they moved back here, well, it seems like she hasn't been the same since. Besides, who's to say these episodes may or may not happen again?"

"Well, I hardly think we can be the judges of that," Frank added. In hopes of distracting himself, Jack slowly scoped mashed potatoes on the slender white plate already plastered with a generous portion of steak smothered in dark beef gravy. He walked the plate over to table three and promptly returned to the counter, getting change from the register for a \$20.00 dollar bill for another customer. Frank turned and scanned the diner, looking taking inventory of the clientele.

"So was Joann doing better today?" asked Frank gingerly as he observed Jack fondling dollar bills with his fat fingertips.

"She seemed tired," Jack said with certainty. "I took the paper in and checked on her, like Shane asked me too. She was still wearing that nightgown but she was sitting in that living room reading the newspaper. Joann seemed all right, just like her normal self. But something was different, dag gummit. It seemed like she was hiding something, or afraid that I would find somethin' out. I dunna know."

"Well, she is going to act and say a lot of things until she gets over this spell that's fer sure." Frank noted. "I just hope it's a long time before she has another... for Shane's sake anyway." His voice tapered off as he aggressively took another swig of coffee.

"You may not get your wish." The voice was the smooth and solemn voice of Phillip Rodney standing over Frank's shoulder. "I just got a call from Mabel Hugart, Joann Triplet's neighbor. Mabel says she heard screams from the house. Something is wrong gentlemen, something is indeed wrong."

Sheaville destroyed Lexington during their three game series at Applebee's Park. The closest the Legends ever were to defeating the Loggers was in game one when closer Chris Taylor nearly blew the lead in the eighth inning. Since then, Sheaville pounded Lexington 7-1 and 8-0 respectively. During that stretch, the Loggers offense was dynamic, taking advantage of every

pitching mistake by the Lexington staff. Chaz Martinez and Biggie Rowan tied with 6 RBI's a piece during the last two games, which were more runs batted in than any other player on the team.

The ride from Lexington to Columbus would be much shorter than the trip from Sheaville to Lexington. Shane's riding partner was Harry Deitzler, and traveling next to the first baseman was always peaceful because he always slept the entire way. Shane loved that aspect of Harry in general. As a teammate, he was always supportive and as a friend, he was worth his weight in gold.

As the solid white motorcoach with the gray, red stripped interior chugged up Interstate 75 towards Cincinnati, Shane reached for the yellow piece of paper Jack had given him a few days earlier. Wadded and faded, the slip was small and compact, and by the time Shane had unwoven it, it rested in the palm of his hand perfectly. Squinting in the darkness, he was able to make out the information written on the slip:

Roger Triplet:

Harlan Shea

Notice Received: 6/5/78

MM

Shane's mind began to scramble, trying to assume and decipher what the note was for, what it meant, and why Jack Busby gave it to him. While he was reading, Harry's head bumped into Shane's left shoulder. Snoring and unfazed by the collision, Harry continued the nap. In return, Shane twitched his shoulder upward, sending Harry shifting lifelessly across the seat, causing his head and body to slouch into the aisle slightly.

Harry Detizler looked like he was 9 or 10 and could sleep like he was in a coma. He had brown, spiky hair, short and faded on the sides. He had a small but fit build with wide hips, a long face, thin and crisp eyebrows, narrow green eyes that jumped out and a small round button nose.

Instead of fretting over the note, Shane placed it back in the left pocket of his brown shorts and decided to go to the portable bathroom and then catch some sleep. Climbing over Harry would be a challenge, but utilizing his long legs, he was able to stretch over him and land in the aisle. Chaz and Ryan were sitting in the two seats across from Shane and Harry's row and were both asleep; Chaz with his portable compact disc player earphones tightly situated on his ears and Ryan with his head back and his mouth open.

Walking through the aisles on the bus was difficult because the design of the vehicle and its movement forward tended to pull a person's momentum backwards. Shane overcame this obstacle by grabbing hold of the seats in front of him and walking slowly, carefully attempting not to disturb his teammates. When he reached the bathroom entrance, he noticed Biggie Rowan sitting on next to the bathroom on the flat, large seats that were not really considered seats at all.

With one leg resting on the seat and his arm draped over the seat in front of him, Biggie looked relaxed and uncomfortable at the same time. Shane concluded that the frame of his body. Biggie's dark complexion made it difficult to determine what expression was on his face, or even figure out if he was sleeping or not. Shane opened the plastic bathroom door

cautiously, causing Biggie to lean forward in an attempt to determine who was standing in front of him.

“Ah, pretty boy, I thought that was you,” Biggie uttered sleepily. “I could smell that pussy scent of yours a mile away.”

Shane took one step forward, trying to disappear into the bathroom as quickly as possible. He managed to turn on the light, which caused Biggie to shade the light with his left hand.

“What’s wrong, you don’t want to talk punk?” Biggie was standing up. Tilting his head forward he grabbed the door as Shane attempted to close and lock it.

“Knock it off, Rowan,” Shane commanded softly but sternly. “I have to go piss, and yes, I do not really want to talk to you. You are not that stimulating to talk to at 10:30 at night.”

“Well, you and I need to talk...FOOL! You really think you are something. So does everyone else. I have news for you; you have a long way to go!” And with that, Biggie’s large hand grabbed Shane’s arm and slung him out of the bathroom. Jerking Shane to the left, the pitcher slammed into the back of the bus and the force of the collision put Shane on his back, with his legs bent and sticking straight up.

The noise startled Walter Mann, who was sitting towards the front of the bus, engaging in some friendly discourse with the bus driver. A self-prescribed insomniac, Walter did not sleep much, no matter how tired he was. He looked over his shoulder as the driver simultaneously looked through the rear view mirror trying to ascertain what was going on behind him.

Shane slid and squirmed as he kicked his feet against the seat in order to sit upright. Biggie Rowan’s maroon shirt was now stained with blotches of sweat and his lips were turned inward. As he leaned forward, Shane retaliated against his teammate, grabbing his throat and squeezing his Adam’s apple with his long, slender fingers.

Biggie through a punch at Shane, which landed on his shoulder but the power behind the hit was diminished as the catcher wheezed and gargled while the grip on his throat got tighter.

“I just wish you would leave me alone!” Shane shouted. By now, the entire bus was awake, even Harry Deitzler. Nobody rose up to defend Shane or Biggie, primarily because there was no room to execute such a plan.

Walter Mann demanded the bus driver to pull over and he sprang towards the back of the bus. Biggie was now on one knee and his face was turning a mixture of red and blue.

“How do you like that! Huh? I am so sick of your harassment, your snide remarks, EVERYTHING!” Shane’s voice was loud and brusque and he continued his verbal onslaught.

“What do you want me to say...huh? You called a great game today? I am not scared of you. You here me! I am not scared of you, or anyone else in Sheaville, in West Virginia, anywhere. I am a prospect, just...like...YOU!” Shane took his knee and planted it into the chest of a kneeling Biggie, who was almost lying on his stomach.

Walter lunged forward and grabbed Shane by the arms and wrestled the pitcher to the aisle way by the bathroom door. The bus was slowing down and pulling over to the right shoulder on Interstate 75. The rest of the team was looking on intently. Pat Sutton was sitting in the row in front of Biggie, and he rushed to see how he was doing. Biggie was wallowing in the floor, coughing and rubbing his throat and stomach.

“What in the name of Sam Heck are you doing Triplet?” barked the manager. Get your little scrawny butt outside, and Biggie, well...” Realizing his condition, Walter turned to watch Shane rush off the bus. “You outside too! The rest of you, I want you to stay on this here bus!” Walter’s thick southern accent was booming through the bus, vibrating off of every square inch of the vehicle.

Biggie was able to join Walter and Shane outside the bus. Leaning against the silver exterior

frame, Shane's arms were folded and he maintained a scowl as he looked towards the ground. Biggie leaped past the steps on the bus, trying to show Shane that what just occurred did not affect him physically.

"All right, you two have just about 30 seconds to tell me what is going on." Cars and trucks were zooming past the parked bus and the moonlight was illuminating the men with a phosphorescent glow as they began to discuss the problem.

Shane stepped forward. "I'll be glad to start. For some reason, Biggie does not like me. I do not know why. He blames me for everything wrong during the first part of the year and he loves to tell me what a worthless piece of shit I am." Shane's head was bobbing back and forth and his hands were waving in succession. "Look at the numbers. I am producing, he is not. I am winning, he is striking out. I think it's a little jealously, if you want to know the truth.

Walter could only rub his forehead in amazement. Shane was never loud or boisterous, yet his cross demeanor was an expression of frustration. Shane was now facing Biggie and their noses almost touched. Walter intervened, squeezing in between the two athletes.

"Biggie, what's you go to say for yourself."

"I do not like this pretty boy punk," he remarked quickly, heavily enunciating the beginning of each word. "Ever since he came to this team, all we hear about is how the fate of the whole damn team rides on him. Well, he ain't the Loggers...in fact, he ain't shit. He is a part of the Loggers. We are a team and we are doing well because we are a part of the team. He is a part, not the whole."

The manager noticed that Shane was becoming agitated at the comments. Attempting to deescalate the exchange, Walter asked for proof from his catcher.

"You don't believe me, well then, look at this." In his shirt pocket, Biggie had obtained a copy of the sports section from the Lexington Herald Newspaper. On the front page was a story about the Loggers' 2-1 win over the Legends. The bottom portion of the section contained a column written by Jim Dunlap, sports editor of the newspaper, discussing how and why Shane Triplet was the best thing to happen to the Appalachian Baseball Association and how his dignity and tenacity are the envy of every pitcher in the league.

While Walter quickly angled the paper underneath the glowing moonlight, gazing over the story, Shane abruptly asked, "Are we done here?"

"Not yet," mumbled Walter. The article was very supportive of Shane and even Walter was hesitant to mention the contents of the article. Since his pitcher seemed uninterested in what the story had to say, he felt that it was not prudent to discuss it in great detail.

Biggie stood with his arms folded, occasionally turning to catch a glimpse of his teammate. Shane glared intently at Walter as he was reading the article, fully aware what Biggie was doing, which was a pathetic form of intimidation.

Walter emerged from the reading, rubbing his eyes and nervously patting his foot against the ground. Both Biggie and Shane waited patiently, their body language resembled men who were being sentenced in a court of law.

"Men, or should I say boys," Walter said cantankerously, "what you two did tonight on that here bus was disgusting and it sends a bad message to his teammates. Let me be clear. I will not, I repeat will not have divided players on this team. You two acted like a bunch of sissies who can't work out problems and blasted disputes. Now, the both of you are going to get there, stand, say yer sorry to yer teammates and I want Biggie to come towards the front and change places with anyone. You two ain't allowed to play when we get to Lakewood, understand? Each of ya will serve a one game suspension for each of you. Biggie, count yer blessings that I ain't drilling ya for more than that. If this ever happens again, you too will be off my team,

clear?

Biggie and Shane acknowledged their comprehension with a nod of their heads.

“Good. Now get on the bus so we can get going.”

Walter disappeared onto the bus and Shane was quick to follow his manager. As he stepped up the bus platform, he felt a gentle touch and massage on his shoulder. Biggie whispered into his ear, near touching his earlobe with his tongue.

“This isn’t over pretty boy.”

XI

Phil Rodney and Frank Miller sprinted down Central Avenue. Jack Busby could not come because he had to manage the diner, but he would stand near the phone in case emergency personnel needed to be contacted. Instead of calling the state police, Frank and Phil decided to take care of the matter on their own. If West Virginia State Police had to be called, then Sheaville residents would be concerned and Phil and Frank would have to explain it to Mayor Mitchell. It was Jack’s idea to leave the police out of this, if possible.

Phil was driving his red Jeep down the street as fast as it would move. Jerking the steering wheel, the car streaked up the hollow where Shane and his mother lived. Neither men spoke. Each held their breath, hoping for the best, but expecting the worst.

As they charged up the three crumbled sidewalk steps, Phil noticed no lights were turned on. His only thought: if Joann were in there having another personality, how and where would they find her?

Frank banged on the back door, opened it, and immediately charged through it. The room was dark, but Frank stroked his fingers along the wall until he found the light switch. When the lights came on, there was no sign of Joann Triplet.

“Phil, you search the living rooms and I’ll check those bedrooms.” Phil touched Frank’s arm, acknowledging that he understood and the men went their separate ways.

The house smelled like old, and musty. The green carpet in the living room was tattered and stained and the coffee table resting next to the chair by the small window was covered with dust. Absent from the home were any decorations, pictures, or personal indications that anyone lived there. If Frank and Phil did not know Joann and Shane, they would swear the house was abandoned. The doors leading to the bedrooms were old and coats of paint were peeling of the door frames in large chunks. Each room had very few lights, especially the living room hallway leading to the bedrooms. The singular light bulb was dim at best and Frank had a hard time seeing his way down the narrow corridor adjacent to the living room once he found the switch.

The bedroom doors were closed, and Frank did not know where to begin. The first room in the corridor was the bathroom, and when he opened the door, the conditions were deplorable. The bathroom was covered in dirt and soap scum and the sink and bathtub were rusting badly. The toilet was dirty and sections of hardwood floors were beginning to rot away. Frank blinked hard, pulled the door shut, turned and continued up the hallway.

Meanwhile, Phil was scouring through the living room, looking behind chairs, under couch cushions, and behind small pieces of furniture for evidence of what happened to Joann or where she might be. Just like the carpet, the couches were old and white stuffing was seeping through large gaping holes. Phil scanned the room and noticed that the furniture did not match and that pieces were placed in odd areas throughout the house. Chairs were placed against doorways leading to other portions of the house. The couch was against the chipped stone

fireplace, where one arrant spark could easily set it on fire. The appearance of the interior of the house was that of puzzle pieces strung out over a very small area. Discouraged with his search, Phil Rodney called into the next room for his friend.

“Any luck Frank?”

There was a muffled response from the corridor and Phil could not interpret the sound. Nervous and somehow exhausted, Phil took one of his callused hands and wiped the sweat from his pointed nose. His denim shorts were concealing sweat that was beginning to drip down his leg. Since the house was not air conditioned, Phil’s nerves and the increasing early summer humidity made the inside of the Triplet home stifling hot.

Phil’s thoughts were abruptly stalled with the appearance of Frank Miller. “In here Phil, quick!” Both men raced down the hallway to the last room on the right. Once inside, they found Joann Triplet sitting in the floor leaning against a bed. The bed was sagging on the left side, pressed against the floor and the corresponding yellow wall. Sheets and pillows were tossed all over the room and an old white wooden desk was the only other furnishing in the room. Frank dropped to one knee and picked up Joann’s hand. Her fingers were cold and clammy and she gave no verbal or non-verbal indications that anyone had entered the room.

“Joann, Joann, we got a report of some screams coming from this here house. It’s me, Frank Miller. Phil Rodney is here too. What’s going on here? Common, now, don’t you being playing tricks on us.”

Phil leaned forward and shrugged his shoulders. “Go and see if you can find a towel and ring it good with some cold water. And make sure it’s not a towel that’s got some gunk on it,” ordered Frank.

Joann’s lips trembled yet she remained in an upright position. Frank’s first thought was that she was in a catatonic state. The silence in the room was deafening and Frank, not being trained in psychoanalysis, did not know what to do or say. He decided to scoop Joann up from the floor and sit her on the bed. She was a robust woman, but after some positioning and shifting, he was able to sit her down on the maroon colored sheets.

Phil Rodney returned with a towel soaked in water. Frank jerked it from his friend and began wiping the forehead and neck of Joann Triplet. Still unfazed by the touch of cold, wet water, both men held their breath, not knowing what was coming next.

“Today’s is the day,” Joann uttered, sounding like a taped audio recording. “Roger died today...fifteen years ago today. I figure that he is still here you know... still stalking me... still punishing me for taking myself and my boy to Pittsburgh all those years ago. I wanted to go there, he did not. Probably because all his whores where here and he would miss the fresh pussy he got on a weekly basis.” She began twirling her hair around her fingers and she continued to stare forward.

“Yep. Boys, life was once good here in Sheaville. It isn’t anymore. Now Shane is here living the dream for us all. Trying to make something of him in a place where nobody escapes the fatalism of West Virginia. Sometimes, I just wonder why I am here. I wonder why you are here. I wonder why any of us are here. There is no future, no escape, just eternal complacency and denial.”

“I am going to call the police,” blurted Phil. In protest, Frank stuck up his hand and shook his head. He had no intentions of letting the West Virginia State Police escort Joann to a psychiatric facility in Charleston. That is exactly what would happen if Phil made the call. After several minutes of listening to Joann, Frank decided to intervene.

“Look, pumpkin, you ain’t alone in his. We are all here to help you. Me and Phil and Jack and Shane...you’ve got Shane. He is a wonderful lad: bright, smart, handsome, and talented.

Honey, if he says he's going to get you two outta here, then by George he'll do it. Now lets get you into bed and let you rest, all right? We can talk more about this in the morning time."

Joann made no movements and said nothing. Frank and Phil were not sure she was going to respect their request, but she managed to swing her legs around, nearly kicking Frank in the face with her right heel. She rolled onto her side, facing the wall. Frank gently covered her up with a blanket and motioned for Phil to walk out of the room.

Back in the living room, Frank paced across the floor. Phil's legs were covered with sweat and his nose was speckled with it as well as he spoke.

"What are we going to do about this? Pal, she needs help."

"What she needs is to take her dag gum medicine," Frank said crossly as he stopped pacing and looked toward the kitchen. "Listen, you ain't to say a word 'bout this to no one. When we get back to town, I am going to see Mayor Mitchell. We need to have us a talk."

XII

In baseball, if you cannot score, you cannot win. That part of the game was tough for the Sheaville Loggers in their four game series with the Columbus RedStixx. The Loggers lost three of four games against the RedStixx, managing only six runs, including back-to-back nights when they were unable to score any runs at all. The Loggers' pitching, which had been a strength since the middle of April, was now becoming a glaring weakness. After giving up a combined 12 runs in their last 8 games, Sheaville's pitching staff surrendered 23 earned runs in four games.

Manager Walter Mann tried all sorts of strategies to improve the pitching. He had his pitchers adjust their stances on the mound and tweak their individual deliveries towards home plate, but nothing seemed to work.

Sheaville did have an opportunity to spilt the series with Columbus, but squandered chances in the first and second innings against right-handed pitcher John Peralta. After a RedStixx two-base error started the first, putting Ryan Head at first, the next three Sheaville hitters struck out. In the second, Sheaville received consecutive one-out singles from Harry Deitzler and Biggie Rowan. Chaz Martinez then drove the ball deep to left-cente field, but the Columbus right fielder was able to make a tremendous over-the-shoulder running catch for the second out, taking away an extra-base hit, and Pat Sutton grounded to second to end the threat. That series of events was indicative of the entire series. The series featured ruined opportunities, poor pitching, culminating in losing three out of four games and dropping the Loggers to third place in the Appalachian Baseball League's standings, behind the Charleston Alley Cats and the Savannah Sandnats.

Shane did not fare well against the Columbus hitters. He was unable to get any movement on his fastballs and his breaking pitches hung towards the middle of the plate and he paid the price. Columbus lambasted Shane for 8 runs and 12 hits in 5 2/3 innings in game 3 of the series. It was his first poor pitching performance since early in the season.

Before the Loggers could return to West Virginia, they needed to take care of the Lakewood Blue Claws. Lakewood is located in Ocean County, New Jersey. It is a favorite destination of many ABL teams because of its feature attractions. The county is the second largest in the state in terms of size and one of four New Jersey counties which border the Atlantic Ocean. The county is in close proximity to two of the America's largest metropolitan centers, New York City approximately 60 miles to the north and Philadelphia roughly 50 miles to the west. In addition, Atlantic City is located 50 miles to the south. These metropolitan areas are easily

accessible to Ocean County via several major highways, which was somewhat of a novelty to the Sheaville Loggers players who were not used to seeing many highways in the entire state of West Virginia.

The first game of the series was supposed to be Shane's turn in the rotation, but because of the fight with Biggie on the way from Lexington to Columbus he served a one game suspension. For the most part, the Loggers did not discuss the fight amongst themselves, although Chaz had fun chastising Shane about it. Walter always kept matters involving individual team players isolated from the rest of the team. Anyone who spoke about incidents off the field to fans, family members, or the media were dealt with swiftly and severely.

The first game was tied at 0-0. Alex Hedge, Shane's replacement in the rotation, was only 18 years old, and a Texas native who went 34-19 in three seasons playing for Baylor University. A tall, husky pitcher with a chocolate brown goatee and a chubby face, Alex had an excellent fastball and he was one of the most cerebral pitchers on the team. However, Walter did not like to use pitchers who were so young too early in the season, especially with the team contending for first place.

Alex was pitching amicably into the sixth inning. He had surrendered 8 hits and 4 walks, but only two runners scored, giving Lakewood a 2-0 lead. Yet Lakewood would break through against his fastball in the bottom of the sixth. Jeremy Richards doubled to left to start the frame and was sacrificed to third by Blueclaws pitcher Evan Kyle. After leadoff hitter Steve Frame walked, Ben Cignetti came up with a single the other way to left field for an RBI and a 3-0 lead. By the seventh inning, Richards and Frame had two more singles, and Cignetti hit a triple towards the gap between center field and right field for a two more RBI's and a 5-0 Blueclaws lead.

Disgusted with the turn of events, Walter removed Alex Hedge and brought in closer Chris Taylor. Since the Loggers had not really used Taylor in the series with Columbus, Mann figured he was fresh and capable of providing some long inning relief. Shane sat in the dugout with his arms folded and talking quietly with some of his teammates. His manager had decided to stagger the suspensions, so Shane would miss a start during one game in the series and Biggie Rowan would miss the next game. Shane and Biggie had not spoken to each other since the bus incident. Even during warm-ups and practice sessions, both players proceeded with their routines, exchanging looks but nothing more.

Before the bottom of the eighth inning, Harry went up to Shane sitting on the bench.

"I wonder why Chris is being brought in now. He has not worked two innings all season long. I just hope that he can get Richards and Frame out. Those fellas are killing us."

Shane agreed, but added, "If we do not start hitting the ball and soon, it will not make much difference how many innings Taylor has pitched."

Harry wiped the sweat from his left cheek as it streaked down his face. Harry always perspired more than anyone on the team, regardless if the weather was cool or blazing hot.

Harry reached and patted Shane on the arm. "I know you want to pitch, but I am so glad that you gave Rowan a good whooping. Boy, he can be a real jerk sometimes."

Shane looked and saw Harry's childlike face darkened in the oncoming afternoon shadows. "I had some pinned up anger and I just lost it. I'm not too proud of it."

"Oh, I no you're not proud. I just think that he needs to support you and I guess that you need to support him. We are a team you know. A family. We need to stick together and get along."

Scratching the corner of his mouth, Shane thought about a clever and rational response to that statement. "Every family has their squabbles from time to time, though."

Harry wiggled his mouth from side to side. "Yea, that's true. And I guess that some people in

some families just do not get along at all.”

“You got it,” winked Shane. He stood up and tapped Harry lightly on his left hand. Harry chuckled as he watched Shane raise his head out of the dugout to see what was happening on the field.

What was transpiring on the field was quickly becoming a disaster. Chris Taylor had walked one batter in the bottom of the eighth inning and surrendered a triple to another. The next hitter was Jeremy Richards. Ben Cignetti, who was walked on four bad pitches, was watching Taylor from behind the mound. The sign from Biggie Rowan was for Taylor to throw his patented slider in the hopes of forcing Richards to hit a ground ball to induce a double-play. Taylor, not used to long relief appearances, paid no attention to Cignetti, and as soon as the slider pitch was thrown, Cignetti was running towards second.

The slider slipped into Biggie’s glove on the outside corner of the plate. Richards swung and missed the pitch completely. Biggie flung off his catcher’s mask and threw a bullet to second base. Ryan Head ran in the direction of the throw and stood at the appropriate distance in between the runner and second base. The throw was low, but Head managed to scoop up the ball as Cignetti began his horizontal decent into third base. Ryan reached around and placed the tag on the hand of Ben Cignetti. Unfortunately, Cignetti’s hand reached the base before the tag.

Walter Mann, a brusque manager during close calls, was screaming at the second base umpire. Some of the words did not sound like ordinary English, but Shane and the other Loggers enjoyed watching his baldhead turn the shade of a fresh skin bruise. The umpire turned his hands clockwise in circles, letting Walter know he did not want to hear what he had to say.

Biggie Rowan was visibly upset at himself for making such a poor throw. Chris Taylor would be even more rattled, as the next Lakewood hitter, Jerry Kelley, blasted an 0-2 fastball from Taylor all the way towards left center-field for a three-run home run. Kelley knocked in at least 50 RBI’s for the Blueclaws over the last two seasons and was part of an impressive hitting trio with Ben Cignetti and Jeremy Richards. Jerry lived up his reputation and the Loggers would never recover, losing 8-0.

After three days of games, the Sheaville Loggers found themselves losers of four straight games and six of their last seven. Suddenly staring at 30 wins and 25 losses, as well as losing three games in the standings to first place Charleston, the Loggers headed back to West Virginia as a team with a slightly broken spirit.

XIII

When Shane arrived back in Sheaville early Monday morning, his home never looked so good. Although he was unable to spend the Memorial Day weekend with his mother, he was anxious to see her. Moreover, he wanted to inspect her progress or regression in battling her borderline personality disorder.

Approaching the house was always the same. The dirt road leading up to the hollow was churned slightly as thin coats of dust lay on top of the more solid, compact surface. The green field next to the house was still tucked underneath the mountainside, although the grass was starting to resemble a hay field, and the little white house still titled on the grassy knoll at the top of the road. No lights were visible, but for once, piles of old Charleston Gazette newspapers were not strung along the rotted porch. Either Joann had noticed the papers, read them, did both, or did neither. Shane concluded that idea was really anyone’s guess.

As he walked into the kitchen, Shane noticed the dishes had been washed and the floor had been mopped. The distinct odor of watered-down bleach circumvented throughout the room, and the aging tile floor almost sparkled. In the living room, furniture had been rearranged. The coffee table was now in the middle of the floor. The chairs were now facing each other in the corner of the room, closely resembling a Franklin Roosevelt fireside chat. For the first time in years, Shane could see the glass doors on the cobblestone fireplace. The house looked and smelled different.

Shane dumped his bags, including his glove and bats, in the floor and marched to the bathroom. He felt drained. His legs ached and a sharp pain was coursing through his lower back. For the most part, he noticed his arm did not hurt, although it experienced its usual allotment of fatigue and stress. Yet his shoulder was sore and Shane had a difficult time moving it backwards in a counter-clockwise motion. Walter had suggested that it might be tendonitis, but Shane refused to believe such foolishness. Tendonitis was something that afflicted unprepared and overzealous pitchers. Shane considered himself neither of those. But the most puzzling ache came from the left side of his body. The pain centered next to his rib cage, and pulsated near his abdomen. It was a dull, sharp pain that was so intense at times, that he would become doubled-over in pain. Yet after a few seconds, the pain would subside. Shane's initial thought indigestion from eating too much junk food since the season started. But the pain had been going on consistently for a couple of weeks.

He had not visited a doctor since his physical prior to spring training, his appendix could be suffering. Thus, Shane made a mental note to give his condition some more careful thought.

The Triplet bathroom had also received a thorough cleansing. Shane observed as he walked into the room. The sink and toilet were cleaned, and the soap scum caked on the glass shower door had been wiped away. Shane turned on the water in the sink and splashed several generous helping across his face. As he paused to look at himself, he believed his face had seen better days. His eyes were sunken and the dark circles protruded around the base of his impossibly long eyelashes and his cheeks was sunburned badly.

Shane peeled off his white cotton t-shirt and his gray sweatpants. He loved to wear sweatpants in the evenings because the softness of the cotton helped him relax and rest better, but tonight it was too warm for that. Shane splashed generous handfuls of lukewarm water over his entire face and walked down the hall to his bedroom with droplets of water falling onto the carpet.

He leaped back onto his twin bed and switched on the radio. The Reds were on Charleston's WCHS-580 AM and the raspy and slick sounding voice of announcer Joe Nuxhall was jumping through the radio speakers. Joe Nuxhall, the old lefthander. Today was not a good day for the Reds, however. Losing to their rivals the St. Louis Cardinals 3-1 was bad enough, but pitcher Rob Dibble left the game in the third inning with a foot injury. Nuxhall sounded melancholic in his diagnosis and prognosis and Shane could not help but compare Dibble's struggles in this game to the struggles the Loggers were having over the last several games, minus the foot injury and all.

Shane closed his eyes to relax. He wanted and needed rest. Traveling on a bus for hours going to places all across the eastern United States, compiled with smearing Biggie Rowan's face with his fist and missing a scheduled start were becoming too taxing to think about. Had it not been for a loud crash against the front screen door, Shane would have been able to forget all about those worries and slept intensely.

Instead, he was forced to race to the door to confront the commotion. Shane stuck his neck around the door and found Olivia on a bicycle stopped below the steps leading to the road.

She was shielding her eyes from the sunrise, eagerly trying to determine who was exchanging glances with her. Shane knew immediately, and noticed that Olivia was wearing the same red hat from several weeks ago, although this time she had on white shorts and a black tank-top with spaghetti straps. He still could not see her face.

She nonchalantly waived and Shane hopped out from behind the door and sauntered down the steps to the road. Olivia was riding a bike that resembled a cross between a mountain bike and a trekking bike. It was solid white trimmed in blue with a suspension fork, adjustable angle stem and cold-forged linear-pull breaks. She seemed to fit snugly on the bike, although her smallish physique made the bike appear somewhat larger than it actually was.

“What’s with all the noise, Olivia with one L,” Shane inquired coyly. By the way, I did not tell you this the other day, but that’s a weird name for a girl. Olivia.”

Olivia ignored his statement, but correctly assumed what brought Shane outside. “You’re still asleep at at seven thirty?” turning her eyebrows upward.

“...Anyway, I know one thing, you guys choked on the road trip. Not what anyone in town was expecting. Speaking of my name, Olivia was my grandmother’s middle name, thank you very much.”

Exhausted with thinking about justifications for the losing streak, Shane just smacked his lips together. “Well, we will do better. Some things went on behind the scenes that sort of affected how things went.”

Olivia smirked and raised her right eyebrow in curiosity. “Ah...the problems would have nothing to do with you and Jason Rowan would it? I mean, the word in Sheaville is you kicked the crap out of him. I find that hard to believe, he being so much taller than you and all.”

In a moment of machismo, Shane blurted out, “The bigger they are, the harder they fall.” Shane could not help but wonder how Olivia was always supplied with fresh information. She had a great understanding and knowledge of current events Shane reasoned, no matter how large or insignificant.

“You do not strike me as the violent type. From what Chaz says you are just a big softy. Nothing like the ‘rough and tough’ pitcher you portray on the mound.”

Olivia was having fun mimicking a monkey and talking in a scruff voice when she mentioned rough and tough. Shane’s reaction was not the same. He just stared at with a blank expression; although she was sure he probably thought she was acting foolish.

Shane walked towards Olivia and circled around the bike, while she watched his maneuvers and turned the back in unison with his movements. Now Olivia’s back was facing the house and Shane was within shouting distance of the back door.

“Well, you like to analyze me, so let me try it on you. I think that you cannot carry on a conversation that does not involve you spreading how much you think you know. So now let me tell you what I think.”

Folding her arms and resting the equilibrium of the bike between her legs, Olivia embraced the challenge. “I am not analytical. I just think baseball players overinflate their significance. You play a game with wooden sticks, leather gloves, and balls. It’s not meant as an insult, just some friendly advice.”

“And you, of course, have so much experience in life and baseball,” Shane replied, licking his lips. He grinned and placed his left hand on his hip. He inhaled a deep breath before speaking.

“I see you as a the girl who probably delivers newspapers because you have some aspiring dream to make something of yourself and you totally enjoy the fact that baseball players are here because it provides excitement in your usually dull and uninteresting life. Shall I continue?”

Olivia was dumbfounded. Standing facing a person she had only met and spoken with twice, she placed some of his comments in context. Since her mom divorced her father four years ago, all she was consumed with was delivering newspapers, and making good grades at Sheaville High School. For the last several months, her eagerness to enroll at Marshall University and take part in the W. Page Pitt School of Journalism and Mass Communications was her primary objective.

Olivia had no friends, mainly because she found solidarity to be the only consistency in what she viewed as an inconsistent world. And for some reason, here was this guy lamenting her characteristics and idiosyncrasies. The whole idea was novice and strange.

“What’s the matter, cat got your tongue?” Shane taunted. “Or maybe I have stumbled onto something.”

“You do not know me Shane Triplet. Just because you play baseball and may be slightly older than me does not mean you know me.” Her mannerisms were frantic and defensive. “I like who I am, what I do, and...and...furthermore, I like what I like and do not like what I do not like. Right now, I do not like you.”

“I’m hurt,” Shane said lackadaisically.

“Look, I have your newspaper bill here. That is why I stopped by. It looked like nobody was home so I waited to see if you would come to the door and pick it up. So here it is.” Olivia outstretched her hand. Encompassed in her tightly wound fist was a yellow envelope with letters printed on the front of it in black ink.

Seizing the opportunity to end this encounter and catch a glimpse of the girl hidden behind the baseball cap, Shane leaned forward. This was going to be good, and he knew it.

“If you wanted to deliver the paper, you should have thrown it on the front porch. That is where you toss it most of the time anyway,” Shane said, trying to sound charming. “Thanks though for the bill. Service with a smile,” he said, giving a very fictitious grin.

He slowly grasped the envelope and prepared for her to let go. While Olivia loosened her grip, Shane snuck his other hand around her back and yanked the baseball cap off of her head. She yelped and strands of her hair jutted from her pony-tail.

“What was that for!” Olivia demanded, now sounding abrupt and irritable. Her right hand immediately covered up a shiny gold necklace.

Shane knew that Olivia was a petite woman but his eyes focused immediately on her slim build and small breasts. But her complexion had a dark Mediterranean look. She had the most beautiful dark eyes Shane had ever seen. She had two dimples on her cheeks and her dark, raven hair fell down to her shoulders in several ways. Olivia was strikingly beautiful, but in an eccentric and surreal sense. Her beauty was not overpowering, but invited a person to want to step forward for a closer look.

“Thanks for nothing,” she pronounced, picking up the cap from the ground blowing dust and dirt from the bill of the cap. “That was not nice. You are not nice. I need to go. Just make sure you pay that bill by the end of the month.” Olivia was busily adjusting her spaghetti strap top and rearranging a thin gold necklace tied around her neck. Shane had not noticed it before.

“Before you go, that necklace, it has something on the bottom. I mean, most of them do.”

“I like it just fine,” Olivia said, trying to sound as prissy as possible.

“You seem to be concerned about it because you are favoring it,” noted Shane. “Something about that necklace must be special.”

Sulky, Olivia satisfied Shane’s inquiry. “Come here.” She reached out and grabbed Shane’s right arm, just below the elbow. Shane’s arm was smooth and muscular and Olivia could trace his veins with her fingers, if she so desired.

She grabbed Shane's nicotine stained fingers and placed the charm on his fingertips. Leaning closely, he adjusted his eyes to the small object. Even though Olivia was sweating, she smelled wonderful; almost like a girl who had just bathed in baby powder. When his eyes focused, he noticed one side of a gold cross was attached towards the left side of the necklace. However, there appeared to be room for another portion of a cross to be connected to the pre-existing one. The necklace nonetheless was not gold, but some type of synthetic substitute. Shane observed the color fading at the bottom of the jewelry.

Olivia attempted to stare into Shane's blue eyes, since they always seemed to glisten when he was focused on something. Instead, because of the position of his head, which just happened to be centimeters from the shimmering cross and inches from her breast, she remained content to communicate to his forehead.

"This is the cross of St. Paul. Paul was one of the greatest disciples and men in the history of the Bible. I try to live my life like Paul did by loving God, trusting him, and being the best person I can be."

Shane shriveled his mouth inward and shrugged his shoulders, leaning back into a straight standing position. "Just looks like any ordinary cross to me. But, hey, if it makes you feel better about yourself, knock yourself out. I do not know much about Paul though, so I cannot challenge your accuracy on that."

"You know nothing about the Bible?"

"Well, a little," Shane admitted. "I know about Adam and Eve and Jesus dying on the Cross of Cavalry and raising up three days later. I just never considered religion important. I am spiritual. Yes indeed. I say my prayers every night and I always say my prayers before any baseball game. I guess you could call me a deist. I believe in a higher power, I just do not attend church and read the Bible and all."

"You are agnostic!" Olivia said knowingly. "That's okay I suppose. I do think it is tough to live in this world without God's help. To each his own, though. Obviously, you do not like listening to what others have to say anyway." Olivia was speaking very prophetically.

"Yea, and Jesus died on the cross of Calvary not Cavalry. I seriously doubt there were any horses involved."

"Semantics," Shane hedged.

"You need to get into church though. I know you will not regret it."

"It's funny how you seem to always know what's best for me. I can make my own decisions."

Shane saw Olivia's lip quiver and her body sway to the left, still holding the bicycle still between her legs. "I'll tell you what. You come to one of the Loggers' baseball games, particularly when I pitch, and I will go to church with you for two weeks. How's that?"

Soon an awkward moment of silence fell on the conversation like a heavy load of bricks. For the first time in their brief encounters with each other, Olivia and Shane had nothing to say. Olivia, trying to keep her bike balanced by leaning forward, was waiting for Shane to utter more zany demands regarding his bet.

Olivia was determined to not subject herself to being propositioned. In turn, Shane was anticipating another theology retort, but it never came. Disturbed by the silence, Olivia broke the peace while exhibiting a large yawn, although she did enjoy the calmness for about 30 seconds.

"Not a chance, I hate baseball. If you played football, then maybe we would have a deal."

"Suit yourself. We're done here, right?"

"Beat's me," Olivia responded, tossing her hands into their air. "You were the one that came out here. I am just doing my job, sir."

“Thanks gal. It was nice being tortured by you again. Please come by the next time you would like to wake me up and give me a bill that I cannot possibly pay at this time.”

Shane had turned to walk back up the steps near the back porch of the house. When he turned back towards the road, he noticed Olivia giving him a salute as she sped off down towards the mouth of the hollow. Shane saw something in the sand as she fled. He skipped back down the steps and onto the street.

Lying in the road was something shiny and small. He reached down to lift up the object. It was Olivia's golden cross necklace.

XIV

Frank Miller stomped down the sidewalks of downtown Sheaville like a man possessed. The town was unusually busy for a Friday morning. Usually, the walk down Maple Street would have taken him fifteen to twenty minutes to complete, but today, he zoomed past everyone and they resembled beams of color sliding past the corner of his eye. In Frank's opinion, when something needed to be done, delays were not acceptable, especially when it concerned Morton Mitchell and the state of affairs in Sheaville.

Morton Mitchell was in the midst of his second term and third turn as mayor of Sheaville. During the thriving days of the logging mill, Mitchell always believed that Harlan Shea was doing a disservice to the community by working the men of Sheaville too hard and not compensating them properly, although no worker ever complained to Harlan about low salaries. Of course, Morton's motives were not altruistic; he always contended that he was underpaid as a foreman at the mill.

He vented, publicly and privately, that wages that were not as competitive as logging mills in other parts of the United States or the rest of the world and that the low wages would turn Sheaville into a ghost town. At the time, everyone thought he was preaching rapture in throughout the small community. Eventually, the men would leave and Sheaville would become the place Morton predicted. The mayor was successful in using many of his predictions as a campaign to promise an economic resurgence in the town, but six years later, little had changed.

Morton's personality coupled with an arrogant and obnoxious demeanor forced Frank to see him as a man with one virtue: emptiness.

The mayor's office rested in the middle of downtown Sheaville. The manila stucco building was long and low-slung with one window that ran its entire length. When someone stepped inside the oak door and turned around, anything and everything going on in the street could be seen. Frank tip toed around a little boy playing marbles on the sidewalk, entered the mayor's office, and nearly tripped on the carpet inside the doorway. Luckily, he caught hold of the wall and regained his balance.

Morton was on the telephone with his feet propped up on the desk as he leaned back in a larger black leather chair. His desk was a small, polished cherry oak one that was slightly different in color from the dark cherry oak door that Frank just passed through. The top of the desk was orderly and a couple of file folders were stacked on top of one another and placed near the right edge of it. The outer wall behind the desk was surrounded by file cabinets and filled cardboard boxes, yet Frank could not tell what was in them. On the walls, pictures of articles written by the Charleston Gazette about Sheaville were mounted, framed, and hung in chronological order. Frank was wearing his spectacles, and he could read the byline of the earliest article written by Sam Thomas, former publisher of the newspaper, dated September

15, 1960.

Morton seemed uninterested that someone was in his office, but he eventually hung up the phone. "Well, hello Frank!" the mayor proclaimed. "It isn't time for my prescriptions to be refilled, so what can I do you for." Morton noticed Frank's disheveled appearance. "Something the matter?"

"Nope," Frank said simply.

"Okay then, what is it?" Morton said, folding his hands, placing them behind his head while his feet remained on top of the desk.

"Mayor, I will make this here short and sweet. I know you have...lots of things to do. Actually, I shouldn't have to say nothing because you already know what this week is and what's it about."

The mayor's eyes circled around the room as thought cautiously. "No, Frank I really don't. So why don't you refresh this old mind of mine."

"All right, I will." Frank folded his arms and walked closer to the desk. His shadow was cast throughout the room thanks to the sunlight beaming in from the outside. The mayor appeared to have no idea regarding what Frank was going to say. "Dag nammit, eighteen years ago the saw mill exploded and yet another year has passed by and your ain't had a ceremony or nothing to recognize it. You are responsible for it."

Morton rolled his head a few times and then removed his arms from behind his head, folded his hands, and placed them on his pudgy stomach. "That is ridiculous Frank. I am not sure anyone in this town needs to be reminded of that tragedy. That fire was on of many tragedies. The men knew that every time they walked into that mill. That's the chance they and their families took. The mayor then scratched his chin before continuing.

"I mean, really. The state police investigated the fire and determined it was an accident. The mill blew up because of faulty wiring in the electrical system."

"That's right," said Frank, interrupting Morton's explanation. "A wiring system you were supposed keep up with as foreman of the mill."

Morton shot Frank a perfunctory glance. "I was paid to check the electrical system once a month. What you are insinuating is that I somehow did not do my job and let that accident happen."

"You know as well as I do that that there system in the mill was forty blasted years old and should have been replaced. Many men told ya. Remember all the power outages out yonder? The system couldn't handle the power use and bunches of times we lost power throughout the whole town."

The mayor began to become more defensive. "If I remember correctly Frank, everyone in Sheaville was aware of the electrical system out that way because of the blackouts. We needed all the electricity we could get. Sometimes, there is a little price to pay for prosperity."

"For Pete's sake, a man lost his life for it. And what happened because you did not ask Harlan for money to replace the thing is darn near pitiful.

Morton now swung his feet around and stood up. He interpreted Frank's comments as insipid and auspicious. Frank was loosening the buttons on his peach colored shirt and his glasses were slipping down the bridge of his nose. The mayor placed his hands on the desk, fist first and leaned inward, coming closer to Frank. "I have no idea what you are talking about. I am 'bout that accident. But what you are proposing is just outrageous. I was not in charge of those men and it was not my responsibility to take care of them. Besides, I would never have let them be harmed under my watch and I sure as hell am not going to make the residents of Sheaville remember that accident through some sort of damn memorial."

By now, Frank was becoming alarmed with Morton's ability to forgo the issue and clear away the memory. Frank knew the real story and why this could and probably did happen. "You could have done something and you didn't. It's hard to tell how many men would of died out there had it not been late.

Morton walked around the desk with his hands in his pockets and moved near the stacks of boxes. He began lifting them one by one and moving them near the front door, trying not to topple Frank in the process.

The mayor used the time to remember what happened. One mill worker did die in the accident. Morton remembers it clearly. The one man that died was Roger Triplet. Morton would never forget the state police pulling his burned body from the mill site.

"Frank, you come in here each year and mention this memorial....but this year...does this have anything to do with that Triplet boy and his mama?"

Frank rocked backwards momentarily on the balls of his heels.

"They have suffered and are suffering now cause of what happened!"

The mayor verbally shot back. "How are they suffering? Shane's is doing all right this year for the Loggers. Joann has a job working for Ruth and Jack Busby. Harlan's family gave them a large chunk of money for Roger's death. Why are we even discussing this Frank? This happened eighteen years ago. Let it go. Roger is gone and just because you have these wild fantasies that I was at fault will not bring him back."

Frank gritted his teeth and felt his heart thumping in his chest. His first impulse was to kidnap the mayor, drive him out to the old mill, tie him to a tree, and leave him there. Nobody would miss him, that's for sure. However, Frank did not want Olivia to experience what Shane was going through now.

"He has no daddy! Joann's sick! Phil Rodney and I is doing what we can to help 'em. Shane misses him and so she does too."

"Well, Roger did not miss her," the mayor said. "Frank, you know as well as I do that Roger was an alcoholic and a womanizer. He slept with more women and more husband's women in this town than anyone ever did or ever will. He died before Shane was even old enough to remember him. Joann spent a lot of nights alone, not because Roger was working, but because he loved beer, cigarettes, and women. Well, women other than her. Had she not become pregnant, he would have left her immediately...and what do you mean you and Phil are taking care of her. She's a grown woman, last I checked, and can do it herself."

Frank was furious. "You have no idea what you are saying or the harm you have caused..."

"Bullshit!," the mayor bellowed, now turning around, facing Frank and shooting a stream of saliva onto Frank's shirt. "You come in here accusing me, putting me on trial for an accident that happened. Roger Triplet was a good worker and a lousy husband and father. I know this! He worked with me at that mill 8 years. I heard the stories from the men. I heard them talking about where and when and with whom they saw him with last night. The building caught on fire. I hated that, I really did. But I had nothing to do with it. Now I think you need to take yourself and your wild theories and leave right now."

On impulse, Frank grabbed Morton by the shirt and pushed him backwards. One of the cardboard boxes Morton was carrying hit the floor, spilling papers and folders across the wooden floors. Morton outweighed Frank by 60 pounds, yet he moved backwards like a rag doll.

"I found that note from 19 and 78 where Harlan gave you the order to fix the system. I found it years ago when I helped the Shea family clean out ol' Harlan's house. Know what I did with it? I gave it to Joann." Frank's cool tone had Morton perplexed.

The mayor's double chins were sagging over the collar of his yellow shirt, and a clear stream of nasal fluid began oozing out of one nostril. "You should have seen that look on her face. Uh, ha. Know what she did with it? She threw that piece away...just like you did to her family. She and Shane ain't never going to be the same. You ain't with them everyday. Their pain is silent and the problems is inside not out."

The wooden door slammed shut behind them. Frank let go of the mayor as he struggled to free himself from Frank's grip and welcome in the visitor.

"Daddy, Mr. Miller." Olivia was standing in the doorway with her empty newspaper delivery bag wadded up in her left hand and her ball cap in the other. The look on her face spoke volumes about what she was thinking. At first, she looked like she was witnessing a crime in progress. Once Olivia realized who was talking to her father, her body relaxed and her shoulders slumped forward. "I must have come in at a bad time. I can leave."

"No, no," begged the mayor, "come right on in. Frank and I were just having a little chat that is all." Morton slid under Frank's armpit and grabbed the old man's rib cage as he went under.

"I...I hope that everything is ok. Really, I can leave daddy that is no problem."

"Nonsense," was her father's response. "Frank was just leaving." Turing back to face the owner of Frank's Drugstore, the mayor's look was demanding a reaction. His eyes widened and his nose wrinkled inward, still running with streams of mucus. Frank was breathing heavily, and his weight was shifted from his left pivot foot to his right foot. This enabled the mayor to realize that Frank Miller would indeed be leaving soon.

Frank scratched his head and walked past Olivia near the front door to the mayor's office.

"One day, their going to understand it all. I hope to George Washington that I'm 'round when it comes. Nice to see you again, Olivia. Frank tipped his sun visor in her direction.

Olivia listened intently and studied the mannerisms of both men. Before she could ask questions or make informed speculations, Frank was gone and Morton wrapped his flabby arms around her waist, squeezing her tightly.

"It is SO good to see you peach cake," uttered Morton calmly and passionately. Olivia leaned her against her father's chest and the smell of Old Spice cologne breached her senses.

"Daddy, are you okay? Mr. Miller looked awfully upset."

"I am going to be just fine sweetheart. I am going to be JUST fine."

XV

Chaz Martinez, Harry Deitzler, Ryan Head, and Shane Triplet loved one thing about Ruth's Diner more than anything else. Since the season started, every Saturday afternoon was dedicated as double cheeseburger day for the three teammates and friends, and Ruth's made the best double cheeseburgers in town. The planned outing worked for the diner as well. Jack Busby always believed that the customers loved seeing the players in there. At least it gave the folks sitting at the counter something to talk about.

The three always sat at the first table by the door. Even though there were always people walking by and the outside heat often crept near their table, the booth was big enough to handle all the empty plates of food.

"Ladies, it looks like my burger was stacked the highest and eaten the quickest, so that will be a pack of cigarettes on you, Trip," smirked Chaz as smidges of mayonnaise covered the corners of his mouth.

"Funny how when you start the countdown from 5, your cheeseburger is half-way stuffed in

your mouth before you reach 2.” Shane tossed a crumpled napkin at Chaz, landing against the base of his neck.”

“I, I, I....do not think that I will e...ever win,” stuttered Ryan as he jockeyed for elbow room sitting next to Shane. “You guys can j...j...just eat more, I guess.”

“Listen,” Shane interjected, “when we started this game back in March, Chaz here could not compete because all he wanted was cheese and mayonnaise on his cheeseburgers. So I had to change the rules and require the winner to have a stacked cheeseburger. With less in between the bun, it is easier to wolf down one in no time flat.”

“As I have proven, Shane, I can still eat mine first. You should have kept the rules from the beginning.” Harry chuckled and exchanged a “high-five” with Chaz. Shane took a gulp of Mountain Dew from his glass mug.

“B..b...I could use some more onion rings. I will be b...back.” Ryan slid out of the table and Shane snickered as he left.

“He eats any more of those things and his dick is going to start stinking like an onion,” predicted Chaz as he finally wiped the mayonnaise away with his napkin.”

“Too late for that. You have not been sitting next to him. He already smells like one.” Harry waved his hand, wafting an imaginary stench of onion in Chaz’s face.

Ryan reappeared and was escorted by Joann Triplet. She had her arm draped over Harry’s shoulder and he was carrying a large plate that was packed with onion rings.”

“Now fellas, all you have to do is ask for something and I can get it for ya. You do not have to make Ryan come up and get.” Joann was feverishly chomping on some gum and her red hair was pulled tightly back into a small bun on the top of her head. She looked tired, but her demeanor was very different from the last time Shane saw her. The pitcher never brought up that night to his mother because she more than likely would not remember it and he did not want to further upset her.

“Thanks, mama.” Shane was grateful that his mom was back to her normal self, for now, and Joann bent down and gave her son a soft kiss on the forehead and rubbed his blond hair, which was wet and parted to the side but was now scattered in disorganized clumps on the top of his head. Joann walked away, not forgetting to wink at the table before she left.

“It is good to see her doing better, Shane,” Chaz said. “From what you told me about the other night, man, she was really cracked.”

Harry took the plate of onion rings and slammed it in front of Chaz. Startled, he quit talking, as did everyone else in the diner, although only for a couple of seconds. The incident achieved its desired effect, however.

“No, no, that is okay,” Shane said. “Frank and Phil pitched in and they know she is suffering. They know mama well. So it is okay to mention it. Mama is going to have this problem for the rest of her life and there is nothing anyone can do except keep an eye on her and make sure she takes her medicine.”

Chaz ate an onion ring and spoke with onion juice dripping from his lips. “I am sorry man, I did not mean to sound insensitive. I guess it is hard for me to imagine what you go through and why someone who is sick does not want to take her medication.”

Shane already had a prepared answer ready for Chaz’s thoughts. “Because, to her, she is not sick. Mama cannot even remember what happens or what she says when she does not take her medicine. That is why I do not mention incidents to her because it may cause her condition to worsen, I just do not know. I’m no shrink”

“W...we are here for you Shane. H...h...h...how did she do after what happened with Mr. Rodney and Mr. Miller?” Ryan asked, obviously concerned.

Shane hesitated at first to tell his friends about what happened after the Loggers came back from Lakewood, New Jersey, but he needed to share it with someone. Frank had informed Shane of the situation with the screams and everything else involving Joann after practice on Thursday. Shocked and upset, Shane thanked Frank and Phil separately for their help.

Shane also deducted that it was Frank and Phil who cleaned up the house and in return for their generosity; he gave both men a signed baseball from the Sheaville Loggers. Harry and Chaz found out about what had happened when they questioned Shane about who the baseball was for, since they too had to sign it.

Shifting his eyes around the room, Shane hesitated before he spoke. It was important that Joann was nowhere close to their table. Chaz was licking the remnants of dried onion crumbs from his finger, not bothering to use a napkin, while Harry sat against the chair backing with the palm of his hand covering his mouth waiting for a response.

“She did okay. When I got home, we had a talk, and she agreed to take her medicine from now on.” Shane stopped speaking and stared down at the white plate sprinkled with bits of lettuce and tomato, which were once the pieces of a gigantic double cheeseburger. As if he had repeated these words before Shane concluded, “she will take her medicine all the time now, I just know it.”

“T..t..that’s good,” chirped Ryan. Ryan scooted his seat to the right because Chaz was re-positioning himself in the chair next to him and stepping on toes. Shane, watching the two jostle for positioning across from him shook his head and smiled.

In between bites of onion rings and slurps of Dr. Pepper, Chaz reentered the conversation. “Olivia tells me she came to see you yesterday.”

Harry’s head shot to the left and then swung back facing Shane. His forehead was wrinkled and he blinked hard twice.

Shane wished that Chaz had said nothing. Rather, Shane wished that Olivia had said nothing to Chaz. It must be a part of her personality, Shane reasoned. He was still quite proud of himself for drawing a disparaging look from the girl when he psychoanalyzed her. But since Chaz lived with Olivia, certain topics were commonplace, and now added to that list apparently included battle royals between Shane Triplet and Olivia Mitchell.

“Don’t jerk yourself, Trip. Personally, I think that you were too easy on her based on some of the things she said,” Chaz hinted.

“Wha..w...what things are those?” questioned Ryan.

“She told you what we talked about? Man, she would sell the devil her soul,” recanted Harry, still surprised that Olivia would share specifics about the encounter at Shane’s house.

“I...it’s not nice to talk about s..s...someone when they are not hear to defend themselves,” noted Ryan, although nobody at the table was really listening to him.

Chaz attempted an explanation for the girl’s actions. “Olivia can do some childish things, mainly because she likes to get you hard, which can be quite amusing I might add.”

“I will remember that the next time you are in the batting cage and I am throwing,” Shane replied, devilishly.

Chaz’s mind was now racing with thoughts of females. “All this talk about women just makes me more excited for some of that fine...”

“P...please don’t say it,” Ryan requested.

“Man, you two are so uptight. I think it’s because that none of you are getting any or have ever gotten any. If you did, then maybe you would not be so uncomfortable with talking about sex.”

Chaz looked in the direction of Ryan. “That’s right-sex, sex, sex. It is perfectly normal for someone to talk about sex, want to have sex, and want to have it all the time. I do and I am

proud of it.”

When Chaz concluded, Shane had left the booth and raced outside the diner to smoke a cigarette. Plumes of smoke rose around him and Harry sneakily got up from the table and made a race to the bathroom.

Chaz wiped his mouth with his sleeve and swiped his greasy fingers against his white cotton shorts, causing spots of grease to soak into the material. When he came back through the doorway, Shane was putting out the cigarette against the sidewalk and throwing the butt away in the ashtray next to the door. “I hope that you are finished,” he said.

Chaz did not reply. Instead, he looked up and down Maple Street. The sunlight had lit up the entire town and the sunrays felt warm and refreshing against his skin. The air was becoming more humid, judging by the beads of sweat meticulously forming on his upper lip. Despite the moisture in the air, the residents of Sheaville were going about their business, conducting another day in the most professional and personal manner possible.

“Shane, you heard about the keg party after the game tomorrow night. I expect you to be there.” Chaz was still watching the street and from the corner of his eye, he noticed that Shane was flipping through the sports page of the Charleston Gazette.

“Reds won yesterday,” Shane answered. “That’s six of their last seven. I think they can win the division, as long as the pitching holds up. Rijo got hurt the other night though, Joe was not sure how serious the injury was.”

Chaz grunted. “You talk about Rijo and Joe Nuxhall like you know both of them personally.”

“Someday, maybe I will. By the way, I will be at the party. Are we still meeting at the old sawmill clearing?”

“Eleven o’clock sharp,” Chaz said poignantly.

“See if you can talk Ryan into going Shane. I have tried, but he just does not want to go.”

“Ah, you know how Ryan is,” Shane said dismissively, while he discarded the sports section into an adjacent trashcan. “He is not much for loudness and libations.”

Chaz patted his teammate on the back. “I know two fellas who are though.”

Shane smiled, unsure whether to be proud or ashamed of agreeing with Chaz. Sometimes, siding with him created more problems than it was worth.

“All right, Martinez. I am going to go tell mama goodbye. Say, who else is coming. I have not heard that yet.

“Well....it’s gonna be you, and me, Ryan, maybe Pat, hopefully Harry and Biggie.”

At the mention of Biggie Rowan’s name, Shane felt his double cheeseburger rising up from the bowels of his freshly bloated stomach.

XVI.

It is impossible to appreciate the culture of Sheaville, West Virginia without first understanding its religion. The popular perception of religion in West Virginia is often condescending, portraying Appalachians as naïve and misguided. However, they are ordinary people living a religious life.

The typical West Virginian church, insofar as there is a typical church, is represented by a wide variety of Protestant Denominations, possessed of smaller congregations, and housed in small buildings. The church is subject to splintering, unlikely to combine with other church groups in any official, permanent way and composed of a congregation the members of which had probably known each other for quite some time. They are, of course, exceptions to this facet of the common Appalachian church. There are large churches with large congregations,

churches that are members of the Southern Baptist Convention or the Catholic faith, and churches that recognize an external hierarchy.

The church in West Virginia provides opportunities to strengthen community ties. Events such as baptisms, church “singings” that last all day, revivals, and even funerals give people a time and place to come together and express a sort of collective friendship. Couples often meet at church. Ties between people who see each other very seldom are renewed at church events. While nominative spiritual, church, as an activity, seems to be equally social.

In Sheaville, Sunday was considered the most important and influential day of the entire week. Regardless of how much work needed to be done at home or in the community, life came to a halt on Sunday. Sheaville was fortunate to have many churches in the town featuring a variety of religious denominations. Two United Methodists churches were located at the end of Central Avenue, closest to Clark Field and one Baptist church along with a Roman Catholic Church could be found at the end of Maple Street, near the old Harlan Shea sawmill. Although the congregations were small, usually around 100 people per church, residents would spend the majority of Sunday afternoons swapping stories about the rich spiritual blessings they received at church, and whose minister, reverend, or father delivered the best sermon.

When the Loggers were in town during the summer months, the perception of Sunday changed. Families of all ages and sizes swarmed to Clark Field every Sunday afternoon for baseball. The Loggers always kept the same Sunday start time of 2:00p.m. so fans had some time between the end of church and the first pitch to eat, change clothes, or spend time with their loved ones.

One tradition that began when Walter Mann became manager of the Loggers was the Sunday morning devotional. Usually around 9:00am, Walter and the players would gather in the locker room of Clark Field and have prayer and a short devotion. Some of the players enjoyed the spiritual service, others did not, and some went just because they were afraid of losing playing time during games if they did not attend. One rule was certain: there were no excuses for missing the team service, absolutely none. Walter told his players he was not spiritual, but believed in God’s ability to determine outcomes in life, especially baseball games-which to Walter-were a large reason for their existence in the first place.

The only time he ever donned a non-managerial outfit that did not consist of blue jeans, boots, and faded collared t-shirts was during the team devotional. During Christmas and Easter, the manager often ventured to Phil Rodney’s department store and bought a brand new suit for the Christian holidays. On most Sundays, he wore a variety of nicely pressed and preserved slacks, starched white button shirts, and mahogany shoes that were polished past the point of glowing.

“Today boys, I wanna talk about our talents, cuz that is why we are here and why we play this here game,” Walter said, colloquially. Always sensitive to the individual religious philosophies of his players, his sermons were usually spiritually linked with a universal theme applicable to all religions.

“Our gifts and talents, they are from up above,” Walter continued. “You know, that is one of the greatest things about being here and being alive. Each one of us is unique. One of ya may have that gift of talking, the other the gift for a tad of that compassion, yet another the gift of music. But remember, all gifts come from God.”

Shane wasn’t interested much in God for some reason, although he could not help but think about Olivia’s opinion on the matter. Sitting on the wobbly wooden bench with one leg drawn up, he started at the one of the peeling painted lockers, counting the cracks and missing chunks and chewing on his fingernails.

When Shane did take his attention away from counting the peeling paint, he observed how the rest of the team was also disinterested.

Biggie Rowan's legs were spread apart with his hands folded behind his head. Ryan was fiddling with tip of a mangled plastic straw while Chaz managed to pull his gray Loggers baseball cap over his eyes in order to take a nap, a trick he probably learned from living with Olivia. The only person actively participating in the sermon was Harry Deitzler. It seemed that Walter was talking to Harry and Harry only. Each word spoken was scribbled on the first baseman's yellow legal pad and some words were even circled or underlined for emphasis. Why this was done was a mystery to Shane, although watching paint peel seemed more enlightening.

"We all have choices in this here life, boys," Walter elaborated. "We all come to a crossroads when we have to choose our savior or ourselves. We should be thankful of the gifts and talents he has given us and use them for his glory. Let us pray."

Whatever Walter was asking for and speaking of in his prayer, Shane did not listen. He managed to mosey his way around his teammates and past his bowling manager and walked out onto the field. The end of the devotion was the same. Walter would excuse the team and tell them to be back at the field at 11:30 to warm ups. Instead of listening to the usual jargon or leaving Clark Field immediately, Shane grabbed a basket of baseballs and a dust-ridden bat on his way up the concrete landing and headed for home plate to practice his hitting.

Although pitchers were never known to be great hitters, Shane desperately wanted to change that stereotype. So far this season, he was hitting a respectable .210, but without any RBI's. He lobbed the balls in the air and swung at them as they descended towards the ground, attempting to simulate a real pitching and hitting situation even though he was alone.

The first two swings generated large whiffs of air. The next two swings established contact with the baseball, but they rolled softly to second base and past the foul line down the first base line. The next few swings were better, as one ball was driven to shallow left field and would have fallen for a hit, provided there was a left fielder and a centerfielder to chase it.

Shane kept tossing and swinging as many of his teammates scattered from the locker room as if it was on fire. Afraid to interrupt his rhythm, Shane did not attempt to talk to Chaz, Harry, or Ryan, electing to continue practicing until the bucket of baseballs was empty.

After what seemed like hours of tossing and swinging, Shane heard the sounds of feet walking in an odd arrangement. The gravel behind home plate was very unforgiving in cleats, and he knew that sound all too well. The footsteps resembled someone wearing cleats, causing Shane to figure it must be Chaz sneaking up on him.

"You suck Martinez, I already know it's you coming up behind me," Shane boasted. "Just come on around here and show yourself."

Without warning, Shane's body froze. He could feel a warm, squishy presence surrounding his eyes, causing him to drop his bat over his shoulder and lean forward. The squishy matter turned hard and firm and he could feel a significant amount of weight on his back as he bent forward.

"Put me down," bellowed Olivia. She slid up Shane's back as her blue dress gradually rose past her thighs, straddling her hips.

The pitcher did as instructed, and Olivia's legs pattered against the ground, one after the other. "What in the world are you doing, trying to assault me?" Shane asked. His stern tone was an indication that he did not find this prank funny. As he turned around, Olivia was moving strands of her straight, black hair away from her face and mouth.

"Sorry, I thought that it would be a more creative way of saying hello, she said soothingly. "Our

first couple of meetings have been creative, but in a bad way.”

Shane wanted to blurt out the phrase I know whose fault that is but he bit the lower corner of his lip instead.

“I guess you are here so that I will have to go to church with you. Okay, a bet is a bet. You want me to go next week? Give me the time so I can get showered and ready.”

Smiling Olivia was impressed with Shane’s sudden glimpse of honesty and integrity.

“I am not here to hold you to that silly bet. Forget about that. I was wondering if by any chance you have seen my golden cross necklace. I think I lost it when I came to your house the other day. I did not know if you had it, so I just decided to come down here to ask you.”

“I am impressed Olivia,” Shane quipped. “You came all this way down here to ask me if I had your cross.” His thumb ran alongside his chin in an investigative gesture as he stared over Olivia. “Yes, I do have your necklace. It would take me a while to go and get it right now, unless you need it for something.”

Olivia began to stammer slightly. “Well, I wanted to wear it to church this morning. I cannot tell you how long it has been since I have gone to church and not had the necklace on. No big deal, though. I can just get it from you tomorrow or something.”

“Okay. That’s cool with me.”

Refusing to be thwarted from his hitting exercise, Shane shivered voluntarily and reached down to pick up his bat and baseballs. He quickly reacquired his rhythm and began hitting the falling baseballs harder and harder with each swing. As he kept swinging and the crack of the bat was bouncing throughout the ballpark, Shane could see a shadow forming behind him as the rising golden sun began its ascent into the skies over Sheaville.

“Look, ah, Olivia, if the necklace is really a big deal, I will be happy to go home and get it.”

“No, it’s not a big deal, really.”

“Ok then.”

Shane Triplet was assuming that Olivia would begin to realize that he did not want her at the ballpark while he was practicing. For the first time, Olivia was not annoying, contrite, brash, or any of the other adjectives Shane conjured up to describe her. Still, the pitcher liked to be alone when he practiced the baseball fundamentals, regardless of who was watching or how they behaved.

Intent on trying to discern why she was still standing behind him, Shane quit, again, his hitting ritual and laid the bat down on its side. He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand and turned around to face the girl. Olivia was standing piously behind him, almost expecting him to verbally explode once he saw her.

“Olivia, no offense, but I need to be alone when I am getting ready for a game. We play this afternoon and I really must work on my hitting. So if you do not mind....” His arm reached outward pointing towards the lower concourse alongside first base. After games, the lower concourse entry ramp was a fan favorite because kids were always invited to run around the bases at the conclusion of every Sheaville Loggers home game.

Unfortunately for Shane, Olivia was not even looking in his direction. She was rummaging through her pockets looking for something. Looking on, she finally snagged a handful of something white, and before Shane could speak or react, Olivia smeared the white tissue over his left eye.

“There, that should stop the bleeding.”

“I’m bleeding?” His tone indicated that he was unfamiliar with the meaning of that word.

“Yes you are. I must have scratched your face with my fingernail when I was trying to startle you. I am sorry, Shane.” He reached up to take control of the pressure being applied to his

eye, but Olivia's hand would not budge. "It should just take a second or two and it will stop. It is a small scratch, but I do not want it to become a larger one."

Shane could feel Olivia's cool breath circumnavigate around his face. Standing on her tip toes, he could smell her perfume-something resembling potpourri- but the fragrance was really unrecognizable. Olivia's brown eyes were hollow today, unlike the last time he saw her, but nevertheless they caught Shane's attention.

On impulse, Shane reached his hands around Olivia and placed them against the back of her dress. At first, the gesture was to help support her body, since standing on your toes for any length of time was not a natural position. Olivia gave no indication that she noticed or cared what the pitcher was doing and so he interlocked his fingers and the grip was slightly tighter.

"There, that should take care of it," Olivia pronounced, removing the tissue. The bloody discharges from the wound resembled small circular droplets, meaning that during the ordeal, she had managed to move the tissue around utilizing every inch of material. Placing the small, wadded up ball into Shane's hand, Olivia hinted, "You may need this later."

Olivia leaned back until she was on the balls of her feet, but Shane did not loosen his grip on her back. For a second, they just looked at each other in silence, although both could sense the other's discomfort.

She looked down, almost starting at Shane's oblique muscles that were stretching the fabric of his white tee-shirt.

For a split second, she wanted to trace the muscles with her hands, but that would be inappropriate. Or would it? This pitcher, this ballplayer for the Sheaville Loggers was holding her close and not letting go. There was something about him, something Olivia Mitchell adored. Maybe it was because she did not know him well. Or maybe it was the fact that his rugged good looks were quite a bit to take in.

Or maybe, just maybe, it was because her father indicated a subtle nervousness when she mentioned the name Shane Triplet during that conversation on the porch. Whatever the reason, Olivia was quite happy with the arrangement.

The moment was not as appeasing for Shane Triplet. He loosened his locked hands and slid them down her sides and pulled them back towards his hips. Olivia smiled and ran a loose strip of hair behind her ear. Shane just exhaled and muffled a slight chuckle and thanked Olivia for noticing the scratch and doing something about it.

Dropping the wadded tissue on the ground, a puff of air formulated around the sticky June morning humidity and blew the tissue across the ground and rested it next to home plate. Shane's next move would surprise him and Olivia as well.

"I know we had that stupid bet, but how would you like to learn how to hit? Since this may be the last time you come here, and you did something for me, maybe I could teach you. Who knows, you may like baseball after this experience."

Giddy with excitement, Olivia spat out a reply. "Yes, yes, I would love to."

Shane grabbed Olivia by the hand and positioned her to the right side of home plate. He had assumed that the mayor's daughter would be right handed and indeed she was. He took his foot and spread her legs apart while he positioned himself around her back. Holding the Louisville Slugger bat in his hand, Shane slid it around her and placed the wooden stick in her hands. Gingerly, Shane guided Olivia's hands towards the handles of the bat and spaced them appropriately. Extending the girl's arms forward, Shane motioned them side-to-side in a clockwise motion.

"See," he whispered, "once you get your arms loose, then you can place the bat in over your shoulder and swing." After a few minutes of movement and counseling, Shane worked with

Olivia until she was able to make an awkward, yet fluid swing with the bat.” The warming sun was causing both of them to perspire. The green mountain seemed to be pleased with what it was observing; at least that is how Shane viewed it as he looked ahead during this rehearsal. The trees waived in the wind and it appeared they resembled a hand flailing vigorously. Lost in thought, Olivia stepped in front of Shane, and her black heel mashed the white tissue.

“That was great. It sure is a lot harder to swing. When you are watching, it looks so easy.”

“Hey!” Shane was startled. “I thought you said that you never come to Loggers games.”

“I do have cable television you know. I get TBS and WGN. I have seen my share of Braves and Cubs games over the years.”

Shane thought before speaking. She was right. Baseball fan or not, anyone and everyone could at least watch a few games a year between those two teams.

Smiling and temporarily forgetting why he was at Clark Field and what she was doing there, Triplet smiled and nodded at Olivia. She, in turn, smiled as well, flashing a ivory white set of perfectly straight teeth. Folding one hand over her first and swinging her arms slightly, mimicking the drill they just rehearsed, she spoke to Shane sweetly.

“I have to go. Daddy is probably worried. Thanks...you know...for the lesson. I will stop by sometime and get that necklace.

As she turned and walked to the lower level concourse, Shane’s voice echoed throughout the empty ballpark.

“I will be looking for you to come.”

XVII

With three weeks to go in the season before the ABA all-star break, players from across the league were working on the important fundamentals of the game in an attempt to draw the attention of the league commissioners, fans, and media members who would be selecting the players for the All-Star team. The Sheaville Loggers were in a good position to have more than one player selected for the honorary game for the first time in three years.

Everyone on the team, including manager Walter Mann, expected Shane Triplet to be the only team representative. With a record of 8-3 and a miniscule 1.87 earned run average, the pitcher had the lowest ERA in the league and was leading all pitchers in strikeouts with 47. Chaz Martinez was also performing exceptionally well. Hitting .313 with 12 home runs and 35 runs batted in was also the best numbers of any shortstop in the Appalachian Baseball Association. Of course, there was always a fair amount of posturing to be done between teams and three entities responsible for selecting players, but everyone in Sheaville was confident that Triplet and Martinez would be present at the mid-summer classic.

Phil Rodney and Frank Miller took their usual seats behind home plate. Both men arrived at the game late and the tardiness was becoming a common protocol throughout the season. Their excuses were basically the same: customers who would not leave when store hours had passed or unexpected telephone calls requiring immediate attention.

Shane Triplet was going for his ninth win of the season, and in the eighth inning, he had retired 10 of the last 12 Charleston, South Carolina RiverDogs batters he faced. He had given up four hits-one of those being to Jose Cruz-who was one of the better hitters on the RiverDogs team. Otherwise, nine strikeouts and a good command of his curveball and placement of his fastball had the Loggers in position to go 10 games over .500 heading into the all-star break.

Offensively, the trio of Pat Sutton, Chaz Martinez, and Biggie Rowan was quickly becoming

the most feared threesome in the ABA. Sutton had three hits on the day along with Rowan, and Martinez's three stolen bases helped Sheaville score three of their five runs in the baseball game.

"Whew, boy oh boy, we are looking good today," bellowed Phil as he clapped his hands. "Shane is pitching fine and we have scored more than four runs. The Gazette said this morning that when we score more than four runs a game, we are 25-8 or something like that." Frank nodded thoughtfully as he sipped his coca-cola. Smacking his lips he replied to his friend. "Yep. It looks like we may have more than one or two players on that all-star team if things keeps up."

"Yes indeedy," chimed Phil.

The velocity of Shane's pitches began to decline as the eighth inning progressed, prompting Walter to bring in Chris Taylor to close the ninth. But as the ninth inning began, Taylor's focus was lost with each passing second.

At first, Taylor's changeup was magnificent, and the Charleston hitters were swinging wildly at each one, regardless of how far out of the strike zone each pitch was. But, with two outs in the top of the ninth, the game began to unravel quickly for the Sheaville Loggers.

A two out double by Tre Thompson followed by a single by Barry Swim cut the lead to 5-2. Taylor walked the next batter and center fielder Curtis Patterson smoked a pitch down the right field line, but the ball was played well by Pat Sutton and runners were at the corners with two outs.

Biggie Rowan emerged from a squatting position and called for time after watching Chris Taylor slowly orchestrate his own collapse on the mound. Phil and Frank watched it all from the stands.

"I do not know what is going on Phil, but he has not pitched well the last month or so," observed Frank Miller from the stands. "He may not be our answer as a closer."

Phil Rodney agreed, but added, "Well, his stuff is REAL good. His pitches may be the best on the team, better than Shane's. If he can't handle the closer job, then I am not sure who can."

Biggie Rowan murmured something unrecognizable to Chris as the drugstore owner looked at the pitchers mound through his binoculars. Everyone at Clark Field was shouting opinions, questions, and concerns about what was taking place. To Phil, it resembled a bunch of cackling hens, but only old farms boys from Wetzel County, West Virginia would understand or recognize that sound, he thought.

"Taylor looks scared on the mound. This might be the ball game right here," observed Phil.

"Hold tight, it ain't over yet."

Taylor's first pitch to Michael Burns was a ball inside, although it looked good enough to be a strike, according to Phil's view through the binocular viewfinder. The closer's second pitch was down and away, but Burns managed to swat the ball lazily into right field for a base hit. Pat Sutton scooped up the ball, and rifled the pitch towards home plate. Fortunately for the Loggers, Tre Thompson got a poor lead from second base and Pat's pinpoint throw landed in Biggie's glove and he applied the tag to Thompson's foot. Much to Biggie's surprise, the umpire called Tre safe at home, cutting the Loggers lead to 5-3.

Walter Mann, who was watching the play develop from the dugout charged out of the Loggers' dugout, even though Shane tried to stop him from doing anymore damage to the once probable victory. Mann resembled a machine that had just been struck by lightning. His arms were waving wildly into the air and he was jumping up and down screaming at the home plate umpire. Biggie Rowan was trying to pull himself up from the ground when Tre slung him into the dirt.

The rest of the Loggers players flooded out of the dugout and onto the playing field. Everyone in Clark Field was on their feet, cheering and chiding Sheaville to do something. Walter Mann was kicking dirt and bellowing profanities at the umpire, using a unique assortment of hand gestures to explain why Tre Johnson was not safe. The umpire, with his mask placed under his armpit and his arms folded in disgust, was not interested in what the Loggers manager had to say.

Meanwhile, Biggie Rowan and Tre Thomas were wrestling with each other on top of home plate. Amidst clouds of brown dust, the obviously stronger Rowan was swinging madly at Thomas's head, neck and shoulders. Tre had managed to reach around and sink his fingernails into Biggie's neck, causing the 6'6" catcher to flinch backwards long enough to receive a punch on the end of the nose.

Shane looked around the field. The entire River Dogs team was inching closer to the field with each passing second, forcing the Loggers to unconsciously gravitate to the action. With Walter arguing and Biggie fighting, the situation had become a crisis.

The second base umpire, a stout, young looking fellow, apparently decided his colleague was helping fuel this fiasco and came to home plate. After demanding that Charleston stay behind the first base line, he sprinted to home plate.

Walter and the home plate umpire were now engaged in an absolute screaming session with each man trying to be louder and use more profanity than the other. The outfield umpire stepped in between them, wrapping his arms around Walter's flabby stomach and trying to drive him away from home plate. Finally fed up with Walter's antics, the home plate umpire threw the manager out of the game.

With both umpires preoccupied, the River Dogs ran for home plate. Shane and his teammates instinctively did the same and some Loggers players managed to stop anyone from getting towards the pitchers mound. Unsure how to respond, Charleston began swinging fists at anything that moved. Shane managed to duck under several battling bunches, and got to home plate first.

"Whoooooeee, a good old fashioned fight at the ballpark. I ain't seen something like this since the was brought here all them years ago!" exclaimed Frank.

"Yes indeed." Those were the only words Phil Rodney could say. Grabbing the binoculars and resting them against his forehead, the palms of his hands began to ache as the pressure exhibited on the plastic grew tighter by the second.

"This looks like a classic," Frank added.

Everyone in the stands were chanting, gasping, and cheering for the fighting players. It did resemble a war battle, but not a sophisticated one. Instead, it resembled an early battle from the Revolutionary War at a time when the American colonists were learning how to stave off the British troops by any means available.

Shane saw Biggie and Tre wrestling again, this time with Biggie slamming Tre's batting helmet into his ribs. The men were grunting and growling. "Stop it Jason!" ordered Shane. Neither man acknowledged Shane's presence.

Tre reached backwards, just shy of the infield grass, scooped up a baseball and smashed into Jason "Bergie" Rowan's jaw, creating a resounding crackling noise and Shane was sure that was Biggie's jaw snapping in two.

For whatever reason, Shane did not care. He did not feel compassion for Biggie. In some twisted, morbid moment of thought, Shane actually hoped Tre would smash the baseball into Biggie again.

Shane's feet froze while trying to gain some forward momentum. He peered forward and

noticed Biggie's face resembling a stomped piece of ground beef. With one right eye swollen shut, Biggie could make out his teammate. Biggie's pupils were hollow and narrow, and for a second, Shane could tell the catcher was scared and waiting for help.

Shane did nothing, until he was clobbered from behind by a River Dogs player. Suddenly, Shane found himself spun backwards and flailing his fists towards the face and body of the attacker. Several sets of hands tugged at Shane's jersey and arms in an attempt to stop him, and finally, after a few moments, Shane was slammed to the ground.

Shane next remember's a sharp stink towards the back of his neck. Pivoting on one hand in a seated position, he launched himself upright and then fell backwards again under a heavy stream of water. Shane could not see anything. Instead, he was trying to get the water away from his eyes and get away from it, wherever it was coming from.

Thanks in large part to Clark Field maintenance staff and their powerful water hoses, the fighting ceased. When the water hoses were shut off, both teams were wet, sore, bleeding, and exhausted. Not taking a chance by resuming the game and risking any more shenanigans, the umpires cancelled the remainder of the game, declared Sheaville the winner and ordered everyone to clear the field and the ballpark, fans included.

Phil and Frank were unhappy to leave, but they understood why it was necessary. Walter Mann, who watched the event unfold after he was ordered to the dugout, new suspensions would be coming for players on both teams.

The Loggers did their best to deal with the injuries themselves. Biggie Rowan did not have a broken jaw, but it was deeply bruised. For his troubles, the veteran catcher also earned a busted lip and two black eyes. Shane Triplet was fine. Even though he was provoked, he discovered that he swiftly knocked the River Dogs player down with one punch and then was flattened by a forceful blast of water. Ryan, Harry, and Chaz did not look injured or dirty at all.

Walter Mann said nothing as the players filed into the locker room it became a chatty, charged place of energy and raw emotion. Walter noticed players recreating what they did and saw with other teammates who may have been away from the center of the field while other players appeared relieved that the whole situation was over.

Walter sauntered through quietly amidst the commotion and came by certain players and whispered something into their ears. When he reached a seated Shane, he whispered very softly. "Check your locker Triplet, there is something in there."

Perplexed, Shane quickly assumed the worst. The pitcher stood up, tepidly opened his locker, snatched the fuchsia colored slip of paper and then plopped down forcefully on the rickety bench, causing it to wobble.

Opening it gently, almost afraid it would crumble in his hand; Shane noticed the locker note was from the commissioner of the Appalachian Baseball Association. The text of the letter congratulated Shane for being selected as a representative for the ABA All-Star game.

XVIII

"The Shennangians at Sheaville", as it was stated in the Charleston Gazette's sports page on Tuesday morning, was the focus of much conversation and debate throughout town. Many of the townspeople were at the game, and they took great pride in providing friends, neighbors and co-workers with an eyewitness account of what happened from their perspective.

After the game, Walter Mann had little to say to his club. Exhausted and hoarse, he was really unable to speak anyway. However, he ensured his players that some suspensions were likely, including a hefty one for Biggie Rowan, since his lack of temperamental control coupled with

Walter's barrage of profanity towards the umpire started the bench-clearing brawl in the first place. The ABA commissioner's office would ultimately decide which course of action to pursue against the Loggers and the River Dogs.

Adding to Sheaville's rehashing of the fight included Several Loggers gingerly walking around town encompassed in bandages and slings, and Pat Sutton was even on crutches. Apparently, someone from the River Dogs successfully stomped on his right foot with his cleats, severely bruising the right-fielder's foot. It was a good thing that Pat was not going to the All-Star game in Savannah, because he would have a few days to rest.

Olivia Mitchell borrowed her father's car and drove Chaz Martinez into town later on Tuesday afternoon. Sheaville was now at the mercy of a furious but typical summer thunderstorm, bringing some relief to the oppressive July heat and humidity. Chaz was wearing a black rubber brace on his ankle. Although he was reluctant to tell anyone about his injury, including his best friend Shane, the pain was relatively intense. Chaz had never missed a game in his baseball career because of an injury. Olivia did not want him walking to town with the injury, so she decided to drive him.

Personally, Chaz was upset the brawl happened. He knew Olivia disapproved of what happened, since she barely spoke to Chaz the entire morning.

"Damn, the Dogs deserved what happened to them, bunch of fucking southern pricks." Chaz looked to his left and saw Olivia's eyes focused solely on the road in front of her.

"I hope Daddy can take me to the bank today," Olivia responded, not inclined to discuss the fight with Chaz at all.

Olivia wanted her father to go with her to the Sheaville Bank and Trust building later in the day to help with her paycheck deposit. The checking account was in Olivia's name, but she always felt comfortable having her dad tag along, primarily because Morton Mitchell knew every single employee at the bank. Olivia knows Sheaville's town accounts are there. The mayor always happily accompanies his daughter because Morton relies on the bank employee's votes during election seasons.

"How is the ankle today?" Olivia asked her housemate, finally addressing the issue. She turned and faced him, making sure to frequently look straight ahead so she did not hit another car. Traffic in Sheaville was unusually heavy for soggy Tuesday afternoon.

"It's fine," Chaz replied, groaning as he shifted his feet on the floorboard. Morton Mitchell always kept the Honda Civic in impeccable condition, and that included having clean floorboards. "In a few days, I will be as good as new. I am just glad it was my ankle and not my..."

"Sheesh," cackled Olivia. "You're always thinking about that."

"Well, it is true. I am a hot package in town, you know."

"Maybe with the older Sheaville ladies," Olivia retorted. "I have not seen any women banging on our door in the last, oh, seven months or so."

"You are not with us on road trips, though," the shortstop inquisitively said, patting Olivia on the knee with his left hand.

When they pulled in to the angular parking space by the mayor's office, Morton Mitchell's desk light was illuminating the entire room. Olivia could see her father's shadow through the window, and from early indications, he was scribbling something on a piece of paper. The boxes of file folders have been organized and placed into file cabinets, at her insistence. The changes made the office appear smaller though. Chaz got out of the car and limped behind Olivia, dragging his right leg slightly.

Changing the subject, Chaz intoned "I am real sorry I missed your dad's tongue lashing about

visiting Shane on Sunday,” Chaz whispered sarcastically. “I do not see what the big deal is. How did he find out you were even there?”

Both Olivia and Chaz stopped in front of the glass door leading to Morton's office. The mayor gave no indications he noticed their arrival. Olivia faced Chaz, her forehead beginning to flat forehead now sweating slightly as a result of the tropical summer humidity.

“I do not know why he was so upset. I told him I was going to get my necklace back. Of course, Shane did not have it, but I had to try. I love that necklace, Chaz. It is a keepsake. I guess I stayed longer than I should have, but....” She looked at the sidewalk briefly and then glared into Chaz's chest. “I wanted to see what you baseball players do when you are not playing.”

Crossing his arms, Chaz responded frankly. “I am just glad you and Shane were able to act civilized this time. Man, from what you tell me and from what he says, you two fight like cats and dogs in heat.”

“It is not that bad,” Olivia said, correcting him. “I actually enjoyed talking with Shane that time. He acknowledged that I was serious about that necklace, we were able to act like two adults.”

“I know that you hold a grudge if someone's earned it,” Chaz included.

As the two young adults continued to discuss the now infamous Sunday morning, people passing by were pleased to see Chaz Martinez in town. Some of the men, most notably Frank Miller, who was on his way to Ruth's Diner for lunch, patted Chaz on the back and smirked, yet he did not speak to Olivia. On the other hand, some of the women walked past Chaz and just stared or nudged someone else, pointed, whispered, and shook their head despairingly

Morton Mitchell came to the door and opened it slightly. “I trust you to did not drive down here just to have a conversation outside my office door,” he said, peering his head around the door frame.

“Actually,” Chaz replied, “I am just here for the ride.”

The mayor was not amused and pointed at Chaz's braced foot. “You should be at home resting that ankle.”

“Nah, I in good shape,” Chaz bounced lightly on both legs, but the ankle pain erased his smile and forced him to bite his lip.

All Olivia could do was put her hands on her hips. “Stubborn like an old mule.”

Morton motioned Olivia and Chaz inside and bolted for the leather chair behind his desk. The mayor's face was flushed several soiled tissues were resting in the trash can alongside his desk. Slipping spectacles over the bridge of his nose, Morton addressed his visitors.

“So let me ask, as I ask everyone who comes through those doors, ‘What can I do for you?’ And I am sure the two of you want something, because nobody comes in here unless that is the case.”

Olivia spoke first. “I just want to know if you will go to the bank with me later this afternoon to deposit my check. That is, if you are not too busy.” That statement made Chaz rolls his eyes.

“That's fine honey,” Olivia's father chirped. “I have not been down there in a couple of weeks, so that is no problem.” Morton then peered over the rims of his glasses. “Okay, Chaz. Let's here it. What do you need?”

“Nothing at all. I am just killing some time since I am not going to Savannah.” Chaz was grinding his teeth in between breaths, and Olivia glanced at him with discretion.

“Speaking of Savannah, I saw where Shane and Biggie made the all star team.” The mayor inhaled a deep breath and exhaled exhaustingly while continuing on. “It is a shame that Biggie cannot go because of the injuries. How is he by the way.”

“Resting comfortably,” Chaz said.

“Good,” replied the mayor, pointing his left index finger in the air. “I want the Loggers to do well Chaz, believe it or not. Their success is important for this town and its people. Not to mention, everything you guys do....” Morton paused, coughing purposefully. “Uh, good and bad, reflects this town and this state. Please do not forget that. Especially consider that the next time you and everyone else beat around on another team.”

“I will remember that, sir.”

Sensing that she was beginning to disappear from the conversation, Olivia crossed her right foot over her left and drove her toes into the ground, waving the heel of the foot back and forth and waiting for the opportunity to remind both men that she was still in the room.

Lifting the sports section of the newspaper from his desk, Morton held the crumpled mass over his head. “Shane Triplet. It amazes me that no matter what happens, the media in Charleston always want to know what he’s doing, how, he is feeling, and on and on. It’s just really amazing.”

Chaz took a step forwards, towards the mayors desk and then stopped.

“With all due respect sir, Shane is the best player on the team right now. We are in second place behind the Alley Cats because Shane has pitched so well. We have done some nice things to offensively, even though we sometimes strand too many runners on base. I was on the team last year sir. We were WAY below .500 and having a guy like Shane around really boosts our morale, you know.”

“I have no problems with that,” Morton quipped. “And I know that you are taking up for your friend, but there is more to baseball and Sheaville than Shane Triplet.”

“You sound like Biggie Rowan,” Chaz mumbled under his breath.

Pouncing on a moment of silence, Olivia stepped forward, in between Chaz and her father. “Daddy, this issue has been dodged long enough. We need to talk about Shane and right now.”

The vanilla ice cream and milk soothingly slid down Shane’s throat. He felt its coolness trickle down his esophagus and settle in his chest cavity.

“Jack, you make the best milkshakes I have ever tasted.”

Rising from behind counter with a faded brown container of dirty glasses, Jack Busby sounded like a pre-recorded radio commercial. “Thank you. We always strive to serve you the highest quality food at the best possible price.”

Shane grinned as he wiped trickling remnants of the milkshake from his upper lip.

In the meantime, Joann Triplet was hovering around the diner like a night owl. As soon as one customer was close to needing a drink refill, the waitress was quickly pouring fresh tea, coffee, milk, cola, or water-those were usually the most popular drinks requested at the diner. When one group vacated a booth, the plates, glasses, and silverware were whisked away instantly. In fact, Joann was bringing dishes to the counter faster than Jack could shove them into the dishwasher, and he had advised her to slow down the cleanup, but her determination rendered his reminders useless. The restaurant glistened.

“Mom, take it easy. I do not think that there is a reward for having all of the tables cleared by 2:00pm.”

“I am glad someone agrees with me,” hollered Jack as he disappeared into the kitchen.

“Don’t worry, sugar, I got plenty of energy today.” Joann walked up to Shane and placed a wet sloppy kiss on his neck, staining his skin with red lipstick. Shane frantically reached for a napkin and began moistening it with his tongue.

Shane rose from the chair at the end of the counter and walked towards Phil Rodney. The

department store owner sitting at the other end of the counter, reading the Gazette and sipping on some coffee.

From the corner of his eye, Phil saw Shane walk towards him. A small radio, presumably Jack's, was resting on the counter next to his cup of coffee. It was the local news from WCHS-580 AM out of Charleston, which normally was fuzzy during the day, but today was chiming from the radio speaker.

"Hey Shane," Phil mentioned, "listen to this, you might like to hear it."

The announcer, with an fraction of pride in his voice, proclaimed that Shane Triplet and Jason "Biggie" Rowan had made it to the ABA All-Star game in Savannah, Georgia. However, the proclamation soon gave way to the details of the brawl that occurred during the RiverDogs and Loggers game.

"Well, we don't need to hear that," Phil said as he clumsily turned the buttons on the radio in an attempt to turn down the volume.

"That's okay, Mr. Rodney. The game is over. It is old news."

"Still though, you do not need to be concerned about that with the all-star game just a few days away. So when are you leaving for Savannah?"

"Tomorrow," Shane said. "I want to get down there a day or so early so I can meet my teammates and all."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Phil inclined, winking at Shane.

"I am going to stop by the hospital in Charleston and see Biggie before I go," Shane added.

"I think that would be good of you," chimed Joann Triplet as she continued to run circles around the diner.

Shane watched his mother for a moment, then shifted his attention back to Phil Rodney. It appeared that Phil was done talking, since the bridge of his nose was buried back in the center of the newspaper.

Shane patted Phil on the back. "Take it easy, Mr. Rodney, I will talk to you soon."

Phil just stuck left hand upwards and continued reading.

"By mamma, see you at home," shouted Shane, over a course of clashing plates, glasses, and knives.

"Ok sweetie!"

Shane decided to walk down Maple Street towards home. The Reds were playing the Houston Astros at 2:10 p.m. and he wanted to be back in plenty of time to listen to the game on radio.

As he passed the storefronts and several townspeople, all of them made remarks concerning the all-star selection announcement. At first, Shane was polite and thanked them all. Barbara Clayson, owner of Barb's Beauty Shop, kissed the pitcher on the forehead. Jim Tolliver, proclaimed his pride in Shane and the rest of the team.

The comments continued, and were short and poignant, yet Shane wasn't sure how to respond. He assumed that since he and Biggie made the all-star roster then that must be it. Or maybe, everyone had read about how he had pitched in the newspaper. Or maybe, just maybe, the people of Sheaville were happy to see a rookie prospect have a positive impact on the home team. It could be a combination of the three or none of the above as far as Shane knew.

Shane was still bothered by an intense and nagging pain in the pit of his stomach. Most of the time, he attributed the pain to diet and smoking. However, this type of pain did not appear to be a form of indigestion. Instead, the pain was beginning to resemble a case of the stomach flu that would not go away. Massaging his abdomen, the pitcher proceeded down the sidewalk. When Shane approached the middle of town, the door to Morton Mitchell's office was ajar. Stopping to see why, Shane halted in front of the door. Inside was Morton Mitchell, with his large frame resting on the end of the desk and his arms flailing around in some grandiose gesture.

Chaz was standing stiffly and he appeared uncomfortable. Olivia was in turn answering her father's grandiose gestures with some of her own. She was tugging at the base of her yellow cotton shirt that hung comfortably around her waste and towards the top of her stonewashed colored jeans shorts. Shane blinked hard, and focused again on the other two conversation participants. Whatever was going on in that room, it was tenuous at best and Shane turned sideways and placed an ear against the crevice in the door way.

"You insist I have something against Shane Triplet, and I do not," barked Morton Mitchell. "Joann Triplet is a fine lady. I am sure he is a nice lad. I am just concerned and curious about why you went to see him." Before Olivia could respond, he explicated further. "The incident before church the other Sunday...you had me scared to death. I had no idea you were even going to Clark Field. I wish you had said something." Morton stopped to wipe the sweat from his upper lip. "Tell me what you are doing...where you are going. That is all I ask. You have not been real open with me since your mom died."

Olivia's forehead formed a scowl as she spoke placidly. "That's not fair daddy." Sensing something was going to happen, Chaz pulled his arms behind his back, interlocked his hands, and took a step backwards.

Morton Mitchell now looked at the ground scratching the back of his neck. He had made a mistake by mentioning Lilia, but his assertions were true. When Lilia died five years ago from a terrible case of pancreatic cancer, Olivia simply closed up. No longer was she apt to share feelings, thoughts, hopes, and fears with him. At first, Morton assumed that it was something Olivia would outgrow. But as Olivia grew older, her knack for speaking about herself dissipated.

"Another thing you do, is when Shane comes up, you shift attention away from him. Why is that? Speaking of being honest, what are you hiding?"

Shane's hearing peaked decisively as he awaited the answer to the question. He was bumped by someone trying to walk around him, but Shane continued listening, unphased.

"Honey, I have known all the Triplet's for a long time. I used to work with Shane's dad, Roger at the sawmill....many, many years ago. Roger was a fine man, Joann is a fine lady and I am sure that Shane is a fine person. But since he has become 'Mr. Sheaville' you have generated an increasing interest in him. I would like to know why." With that, Morton folded his arms and rocked backwards.

Chaz was hoping something or someone would get him away from the family squabble. With the afternoon sun now descending on Sheaville, the shortstop turned to shield the sunrays. Squinting, he noticed a figure standing outside the door. Chaz attempted to speak and say something, but no words resonated from his mouth.

Olivia walked closer towards her father. "You worked with Roger Triplet. And you have known the Triplet's for years, but you have contempt for Shane. That makes no sense."

The mayor stepped alongside Olivia and embraced her in a half-hug. "Sweetheart, let's not fight. If you want to hang out with Shane, that's fine. I will try not to hamper on it if you will just

communicate with me. Whadda say?"

The politician had once again struck a compromise with someone without giving up any information. Impressive... Shane thought as he still continued glancing at the sun-drenched window as he pondered the situation.

Olivia, now more than ever enraged with suspicion, was primed and ready to further push her father. "Wait a second, Mr. Miller was in here several weeks ago and was arguing with you over something. Something about a secret. Something about you are going to pay for it. What was that all about?"

"Nothing darling. I am sorry you had to hear that."

"Baloney. I have a feeling that secret is tied into Shane somehow. Yea, that makes sense. You were shaken by that visit. And Shane's name was mentioned and YOU flinched!" Pulling away from the mayor, Olivia had him flustered.

"Kind of like I am being talked about now," Shane interrupted as he stepped through the doorway."

"Shane!" the mayor declared, facetiously.

"Sir, I have heard the whole discussion. I must admit, your daughter has a great sense of piecing things together. I did not know about any secret, nor did I know about you and Dad working together." Shane ran a hand through his wispy blond hair and waited for Morton to respond.

"Actually Shane, I am glad you are here."

"That makes two of us," Chaz added.

"Tonight, I want you to come to over to our house for dinner... in honor of you making it to the all-star team. I would really like to get to know you. This little, ah, discussion with my daughter has piqued my interest about you. Maybe we can get to know each other and I can tell you some stories about your old man. Chaz here can give you directions if you need them."

Stunned and confused, Olivia flashed her brown eyes at Shane and shrugged her shoulders.

Chaz was blowing air through his parted lips, giving no thought or reaction to the invitation.

Shane Triplet was not sure what to say or do. The mayor of Sheaville, a man he did not really know, other than what Chaz Martinez had told him, asking him to dinner at his house? Now Morton reveals that he knew and even worked with his dad? Unable to quickly think of a reason or excuse for not attending, Shane blurted, "okay."

"Great!," answered the mayor. "See you at our place at 7:00 p.m."

XIX

Chaz watched Shane briskly move around the Triplet home. Joann was sitting at kitchen table, the waitress uniform loosened and eight bare toes dragging against an empty dining room seat.

"Does he always do this?" Chaz asked, hoping to find out what Shane was doing all this running for.

"Actually," Joann replied, sliding up in the chair, "I think this is the first time my son has been on a date. That may have something to do with it."

Chaz nodded slowly, still unsure what a first date had to do with running around like your feet were on fire.

Shane blasted through the kitchen doorway, bumping Chaz slightly into the wall. "Mamma, I cannot find my suit or my tie or my dress shoes. Oh...I should never have agreed to this. Never!

"My goodness sweetheart," the waitress said exhaustingly. "You are making mountains outta

molehills. Joann worked her way out of the chair and flashed a grin at Chaz. "We'll be back in a minute or two."

Guiding Shane through the doorway into the living room with a hand placed between his shoulders, mother and son disappeared into the adjacent dark room.

Chaz surveyed the depressed home. Joann's medicine bottles were sitting in the center of a kitchen table that was stained and splitting from age and overuse. Each of the three bottles proudly displayed the yellow and purple label of "Frank Miller's Drugstore." The kitchen was cleaner than the last time Chaz was there, but it was still in desperate need of attention. Chaz was glad he lived where he did. The mayor was frustrating and Olivia was, at times, overzealous, but his living conditions had to be better than Shane's. Shane did not talk about home very much. Chaz understood why.

Shane came moping through the doorway, with a gray sports coat and maroon tie draped over his arm. "Ok, now let me get ya all fixed up," proposed Joann Triplet.

"Hey Shane, I am going to wait outside. I will see you in a few...."

"That's fine Martinez. I'll be there in a sec."

"I am soooooo proud of you, peaches," chimed Joann sweetly. "My little angel going on his first date with a girl. Not just any girl. Olivia Mitchell. This is just to delicious!"

"Mamma....."

Joann puckered her lips and gave her son a kiss on the mouth. "My baby boy is growing up. Going to Savannah to play as an all-star. And here I thought a mother can only get so proud."

Tightening the necktie around her son's white shirt, expressions of uneasiness flooded Shane's face. It was true, this was his first ever date. Shane always assumed there was time for women. When he was in high school, there was always too much going on. Parties, baseball, sneaking into Pirates games at Three Rivers Stadium....way too many important things for a person to concern themselves with. Girls never fell into that list. Shane was constantly approached by girls looking for sex and to date the high school superstar athlete and Shane always politely refused their overtures.

Shane hocked as Joann secured the knot around the shirt collar. "There ya go. All set!" Looking away to check the clock, Joann made eye contact again with Shane. "Better get going...you don't wanna be late now."

"Thanks mamma...I love you!"

"I love you too. Give me the full story now later. And remember to smile, and say please and thank you."

For a moment, Shane imagined he was ten years old again. "I will mamma." Shane's voice trailed off as the screen door slammed shut and the shadow of the gray coat vanished.

Chaz and Shane did not speak much on the way to the Mitchell house. Morton let Chaz take the Honda over to pick Shane up. The mayor requested that Shane was not too be sweaty when he arrived. That was Chaz's responsibility. In what seemed like seconds, the car pulled into the driveway and Shane gulped mightily.

"By the way, you look totally ridiculous. You must have gotten that suit from the Bob Barker refuse section," chided Chaz, giggling.

Shane smirked and socked the shortstop in the arm with his fist. "Keep talking and I'll put you in the refuse pile."

As they approached the driveway, Shane took inventory of the Mitchell home. It was a multi-level brick and vinyl construction featuring no formal garage, but a driveway with an overhang. The three concrete steps leading to the front porch were a vibrant white, and appeared almost brand new. The front of the house had two rectangular glass windows and one elongated

glass window, similar to the window at the Morton's office in town, but there wasn't much of a yard. The front porch was littered with furniture and the front door protected by too large white Doric columns that connected the roof of the structure.

Chaz slipped in front of Shane and walked to the front door. Waiting for the pitcher to catch up, he carefully turned the door knob and pushed the door back gently. "Come on in," Chaz told Shane, looking back over his shoulder.

Shane was hesitant, but he stepped inside. The house was very spacious, although rooms were in close proximity of each other. Shane noticed the stairwell leading to the second floor within a few feet of the foyer. The kitchen was straight ahead with the living room immediately to the right. One doorway led from the living room to another room, but Shane could not see beyond that point.

Olivia bounced down the stairs and approached Shane in the foyer. "Hey stranger. I was not sure you were going to make it." Her smile was bright and she wore a short, black skirt with a white dress shirt. It looked like something a man would wear, minus the skirt. Her hair was long and strait and Shane could smell Olivia's perfume, which was quickly becoming a favorite smell.

"Hey, Olivia," Shane whispered nervously as his face felt flushed. "I am a little nervous, sorry about that."

In response, Olivia grabbed Shane's hand, massaging her palm around his fingers. "It's okay. I would be nervous too."

The house was eerie and quiet, not the typical sounds Shane expected from a house that was expecting a dinner guest. He looked behind his right shoulder to say something to Chaz, but he had disappeared.

"Well, I am not sure what you want me to do now, Olivia." Shane hesitated briefly before he spoke again. "I can tell a joke or two if you want. Or maybe we can make another bet on something."

Still holding Shane's hand, Olivia's eyes matched Shane's glance and she exhibited another wide smile. She did not speak.

"Shane my boy, you are here. Welcome to our home." The boisterous voice was from Morton Mitchell, who had slipped into the room from the doorway to the living room. "Come on back here, I need to show you something."

Olivia loosened the grip, and Shane sauntered behind the mayor. The living room was not spacious, but quaint. It featured an oak coffee table, two chairs and a couch. The mayor walked into the next room; the room Shane could not see from the foyer. Once inside, the pitcher was inundated with shouts of voices and bright flashes of light.

"I hope you don't mind that I invited a few friends over before we eat. I didn't think you would mind," echoed the mayor over all the commotion. Shane blinked quickly and was greeted by three media reporters and a black microphone inserted inches away from his face.

The first man introduced himself as Larry Kimsome from WQBE radio in Charleston. Larry spoke in a deep, thoughtful voice. "Tell me Shane, you made it to the ABA All-Star game. You and Jason Rowan were the first two players to ever make it from Sheaville. How do you feel about that?"

"Well, uh, great sir, I guess." Shane was unaccustomed to doing interviews. The only media coverage he knew about was the stories from Frank Miller, Phil Rodney, or occasional stories from the Charleston Gazette. Shane wondered why WCHS-580 AM was not there.

"So, what has been the biggest key to your success?" Kimsome asked.

"Well, the success of my fastball and curveball have helped and I have received lots of

defensive help from my teammates, uh Chaz Martinez, Harry Deitzler, and Ryan Head. That's about it."

Larry pulled the microphone away and abdicated a question to a newspaper reporter, presumably from the Charleston Gazette. The reporter was a heavy, balding fellow with a small, inward turning mustache. "Shane, what are your thoughts on the fight with the Charleston RiverDogs? The suspensions have not been handed down yet. Will that affect your teams run to the ABA title?"

"No sir, we are a...a talented team. Walter Mann has already talked to us about it. We will be fine."

"Mayor," inquired the reporter, "you have been instrumental in working with the Loggers and promoting them heavily. How proud are you about the success of this team and of Shane Triplet?"

Morton spoke confidently. "Well, I am delighted in the success of the team." Shane was shocked as his face scowled and he faced the mayor. "The people of Sheaville love and support this team. It is my honor and responsibility as mayor to support this team in anyway I can."

Olivia poked her head around the doorway, opened her mouth, and stuck her finger into the back of her mouth. Shane laughed and Olivia quickly vanished.

"Okay guys that is all for now. We will talk to you later after the All-Star break," directed Morton.

The reporters marched out of the room and out the front door. The mayor patted his stomach with both hands. "Well, that went well, Shane. Let's eat!"

XX

In contrast to the rest of the house, the kitchen was rather plain. The table was round and uneven, but it was decorated with colorful napkins and a beautiful center piece floral arrangement. Shane leaned to Chaz who was beginning to sit down.

Shane sat down next to Chaz and Morton and Olivia slowly made their way into the seats. "Before we begin, Olivia is going to say grace," the mayor said. Chaz bowed and closed his eyes, understanding the normal protocol of the dinner prayer. Shane dipped his head, unsure of what to do next. I have never prayed before eating, he thought to himself.

"Dear heavenly father," Olivia proceeded, "be present at our table lord; be comfort everywhere adored; in comfort's bless we grant to to thee; to feast in paradise with thee; amen."

Morton raced into the kitchen and brought back a pip ling hot pan of pre-sliced lasagna and sat it down in the middle of the table. "Dig in folks!"

Chaz, Olivia, and Morton frantically stuck unraveled the silverware and prodded the lasagna. Shane sat on his hands, not making a sound. Olivia scooped a generous square of the meal and slid it onto Shane's plate.

"You can eat whenever silly," she suggested. Chaz and the mayor had already devoured half of their squares as Shane cut into his, launching droplets of tomato sauce onto his gray sports coat. "Shit!" he exclaimed. Everyone's forks stopped moving and the table fell silent. All eyes were focused on him.

"Uh, sorry about that."

"So Shane," interrupted the mayor. I worked with your dad a long time ago in Harlan Shea's sawmill. Roger was a fine man, one of the best workers at the mill."

Shane sensed that, like Olivia, Morton loved to engage people in a fencing of words contest over a pre-determined topic. Up to the challenge, Shane returned his verbal volley.

“Really? What did you do at the mill?”

“I was an electrician. I was responsible for keeping the power churning up there. It was quite a responsibility, but I loved it. Harlan paid me well too.”

“Then you ended up in politics because....”

“It was...a way to serve the public,” the mayor hedged. “When the mill closed down, I was not willing to leave the area. So, I figured the best way to give something back was to serve the people.”

Now halfway through the meal, Olivia and Chaz essentially had their noses buried in the food. Shane had not eaten, and the smell of the Italian dish was now making his mouth water incessantly.

“My dad loved to work at the mill,” Shane said, slowly cutting the lasagna. “At least that is what mamma says.” Morton Mitchell glanced at Shane through the tops of his eyeballs as the knife drove through the noodles vigorously.

Listening intently to the pandering and rambling of the mayor, Shane continued to mentally mull over the information. The pitcher found it odd that his mother had never mentioned Morton Mitchell’s name when discussing his father.

Chaz and Olivia focused squarely on the plates of lasagna in front of them.

“Shane, you should probably begin eating. Your food is going to get cold,” recommended Olivia, taking advantage of the first moment of silence. Chaz glared at his best friend, seeming relieved that someone had enough courage to change the topic of conversation.

Shane could feel the muscles in his neck tighten as he swallowed. He nodded to Olivia appreciatively, and reached for his silverware, which was encased in a beautiful red cloth napkin, similar to the color of the lasagna sauce.

With his hand quivering, partly because of nervousness, he slowly tugged on one end of the napkin. This motion rolled the silverware towards the end of the table, and eventually the silver fork and knife reached the floor below.

Startled, Chaz stood up and blurted out, “Oh, let me get you some more.” Olivia responded with her own offering. “No, no, Chaz, you keep eating, I’ll get it.” Before either could move, Morton had already pushed his chair backwards against the wall and headed for the kitchen.

All Shane could do was feel droplets of perspiration trickle down his well-defined chest and seep out from his underarms. His face felt hot, yet singed with the common heat associated with embarrassment. Chaz leaned forward and shot a glare directly at Olivia.

“What is going on here?”

“How should I know, and keep your voice down,” she ordered.

“What’s going on here is pretty simple, really,” Shane added. “I am nervous as hell about sitting here in this suit, totally uncomfortable, and I just dumped the nicest looking fork and knife I have ever seen all over the floor.”

Chaz chuckled at Shane’s honesty, prompting Olivia to kick him in the shin underneath the table. She turned to scold Shane for his comments, but Morton Mitchell suddenly reappeared and gave Shane some more silverware, this time resting separately on top of the napkin.

Shane looked away, placed the napkin over his lap, and began diving into the lasagna. Slightly cooled, the piece of Italian cuisine was still soft and gooey. In a manner resembling a wolf consuming a helpless deer, he tore into the meal, shoveling generous helpings of noodles, cheese, and sauce into his mouth. His lips smacked with pleasure as dribbles of food slid down his chin and onto his suit pants, prompting Chaz Martinez to drop his head in disbelief and Olivia to smirk helplessly at her father as he systematically observed every movement Shane was making.

"This is good, really good," Shane managed to say, although a full palate hindered his enunciation.

As Shane continued to eat, the phone rang. The mayor stood up, softly patted his daughter on the arm as he walked past her and went into the living room. From a distance, Chaz tried to discern what the mayor was saying, but all he could recognize was "okay."

Morton left the living room and walked into the foyer of the house. He grabbed a Sheaville Loggers baseball cap and reentered the dining room.

Condescendingly, he stood above the seated guests, informing them that there had been a situation that occurred in town that demanded his attention. "John and Marge McCutcheon wrecked their car into a light pole a little while ago. They are okay but Phil and Frank are concerned that they will not have any power tomorrow for their stores. I will be back in a little while. Boy, old people cannot drive for anything!"

Shane quit binging long enough to hear the announcement. "Say, Chaz, why don't you come with me," inquired the mayor. Frank might need someone small to fit in the crawlspace in the back of the drugstore to check the electric wiring"

"Uh, well, I...."

"Great, I appreciate you volunteering." With that said, the mayor walked around and grabbed the shortstop by the arm and yanked him upright. "Sir, I never really considered myself 'small'...." Chaz's voice faded and the front door slammed shut moments later.

As Shane's attention focused back on the table, Olivia was already engaged with her customary tradition in the Mitchell home: clean up the dishes every night. For Shane, the whole procedure reminded him of what Jack Busby and his mother Joann participated in on a daily basis.

Olivia stacked the plates in one hand, the silverware in the other. The plates nearly covered her mouth. "You can help me if you want, Shane. Or you can sit there. Your choice." Glad the dinner event was somewhat over, Shane followed her into the kitchen.

It was decided by Olivia that Shane would hand her the plates, and she would rinse them with warm water and place them in the dishwasher.

Shane removed his coat and placed it over the chair in the dining room. His shirt was blotched with sweat; an undershirt would have prevented it from happening. Nonetheless, Shane had very little experience washing dishes. Joann did not cook much and Shane normally ate, if and when he ate, at Ruth's Diner.

"Sorry about tonight being such a disaster," Shane said apologetically. "I think that if we ever go to dinner again that we should go to the diner or go to Charleston or something. It just seems that your dad and I do not communicate well."

"You just have to ignore him most of the time," Olivia responded, gently massaging the damp washcloth over a red stained white plate. "He is just who he is. I think that he has too much pride for his own good sometimes. But he is very passionate. He loves this town, loves his job, and..."

"Loves you," Shane added.

"Yea. Some people think that he is overprotective sometimes. But that is the way he is. I am the only child he has. Ever since my mom died, he feels burdened to make sure that I grow up and succeed, and hopefully leave this town someday."

"Being somewhat from here and then moving back, I have seen both sides of that," Shane responded. "Mom was from here, and when dad died, she moved to Pittsburgh. She had always wanted to live there. I know in a lot of ways, it was her worst nightmare when I was selected by the Cincinnati Reds." Shane paused thoughtfully, then continued. "I can remember

her always grimacing when we would hear about news and events going on across West Virginia on the news at night. She hates it here.”

“But she is making sacrifices for you Shane, and that’s difficult to do,” Olivia said soothingly. As she spoke, she began to quickly rinse the glasses and drop them on the dishwasher rack. “It sounds to me like Sheaville is a painful part of her past. Walking back into that past is often difficult.”

Shane shifted the focus of the conversation back to Olivia. “If you do not mind me asking... what happened to your mom?”

Olivia paused the rinsing and turned to face Shane, who was standing directly beside her. “Mom died from pancreatic cancer. When I was five, they took her to the hospital in Charleston for her first diagnosis. I can still remember how frightened she looked.” Tears gradually began to form in the corner of Olivia’s eyes as she reminisced.

“When she got really sick, she couldn’t even breathe on her own, Shane. She was hooked up to all these machines and....daddy was so sad. All he kept saying was that everything would be okay. And then she was gone.”

As if all ounces of air had been squeezed from her body, Olivia collapsed into Shane’s slightly parted arms, sobbing quietly. Her soap drenched fingers reached around his neck and clung tightly into his shirt collar. In response, he embraced Olivia tightly as her tears moistened the right side of his shirt.

“I am so sorry,” Shane whispered, trying to consider something more comforting to say. Olivia pulled away from him and wiped the tears from her eyes, flinging soap bubbles onto the floor. “Sorry, I should not have gotten so emotional.”

“It’s okay, really. We have one thing in common though Olivia Mitchell. We are down one parent and we have to make sure we take care of the one we have left.”

As he winked at Olivia, she grinned. Wisps of auburn hair hung over her eyes and her face never looked more angelic. Clumps of Shane’s wet hair began to bulge outwards from his scalp. Shane pivoted his left foot away from Olivia and he began to step away as something began to swell uncomfortably inside him. Without warning, Shane collapsed to one knee, screaming in agony.

XXI

“Oh my God, Shane!” exclaimed Olivia, who had watched Shane go from confident to crippled in the blink of an eye. “What’s wrong?”

All he could do was wail and clutch his side. “Oh my God, it hurts, make it stop, please make it stop!”

Olivia knelt forward and Shane crawled away from her on his hands and knees to the foyer. His mind was flooded with personal promises and memories about that night a few months ago when he found his mother in a catatonic state; the first instance of this indescribable pain. Someday soon, Shane promised himself, he would go and have a doctor examine him. He did not tell his mother, Walter Mann, or anyone else about the problem. Now, Shane wished he had said something to somebody.

Uncertain and frightened, Olivia hovered over him. Shane lifted his body, now almost completely ravaged in pain, and drug himself across the floor from the kitchen to the foyer. When Olivia arrived behind him in the foyer, Shane was climbing towards the steps, crying and moaning.

In a decisive move, Olivia leaped over Shane, being careful not to trounce him with her heeled

shoes and she turned him over.

Frantic, Olivia found herself screaming at Shane. "Shane, talk to me, what is wrong. Please tell me! I do not know what to do!"

"Oh God...ahhhhhhh, ohhhhhhh!" Those were the only responses he gave. For the first time, Shane needed Olivia to help him, something that seemed senseless when they first met a few months ago.

Olivia began ripping at Shane's dress shirt, first loosening the tie and then pulling apart the buttoned portions. The clear buttons popped off the shirt instantly. She attempted to reposition Shane's arms, since they were clutched to his side. She placed them vertically, and gently slid the shirt down his shoulders.

Noticing that he was not bleeding, she began to take her hands and massage his abdomen and rib cage. Shane continued to writhe in pain. Olivia massaged harder, sliding her hands across Shane's rippled stomach. His skin was warm, moist, and smooth. His skin clothes were tinged with a scent of stale tobacco smoke and semi-sweet cologne.

Slowly, Shane began to relax as the pain subsided. His cries began to soften as he slipped his hands over Olivia's fingers. Opening his eyes, his pupils began to focus on the object in front of him. Determining it was Olivia, he murmured, "Thank you," exasperatingly.

Shane gathered himself and rested on his elbows. His back was now sore after having been driven into the steps by Olivia's weight. Olivia placed her knee in between his legs and leaned forward as Shane stated, "What did I tell you, a disastrous night." His voice was rough and dry. "Looks to me like you ate too fast," Olivia acknowledged laughingly. "As fast as you inhaled that lasagna, I can see why."

Shane was once again embarrassed. Now free from pain, he contemplated what to do and say next. Perhaps, he thought, he should say nothing. Describing or explaining what just happened may not make sense.

Realizing that his shirt had been removed, he felt his face once again burning with embarrassment. Shane took his hand and softly stroked Olivia's face. Her cheekbones were full of color, and silky smooth to the touch. Her hair was soft and straight and her chocolate brown eyes were soft and inviting. Without breathing, Shane rose and met Olivia's gaze and kissed her sensuously.

Olivia did not pull away. Instead, she passionately returned the kiss. Shane's tongue began probing her parted lips, seeking to penetrate the space inside the thin barricades.

The gesture made Olivia kiss harder as Shane slipped his hand around the base of her neck. Soon, their tongues were intertwined in a sprightly joust. The only sound emanating from either individual were deep, inhaled breaths.

Shane could feel a paralysis of fatigue consuming his entire body, particularly in his hips and abdomen from the searing pain that permeated his muscles. Yet having Olivia close to him erased any thoughts of tiredness.

With an effortless motion, Shane dug his heels into the steps and cradled Olivia, still kissing her lips and slowly moving towards her neck and earlobes. Olivia moaned in ecstasy as she slid her fingers through Shane's stringy, blond hair.

Shane proceeded to carry her up the stairway and into a bedroom that veered towards the left side of the hallway at the top of the steps. Substituting his right foot for his hand, Shane flung the door closed and gently laid Olivia down on the soft, elongated bed.

Shane stopped kissing Olivia and stroked his hand along the contours of her face. He knew had to make a decision. For her part, Olivia at first looked a little nervous and then suddenly smiled slyly at Shane. Shane believed there was no way to stop. Olivia appeared to be

thinking the exact same thought. She conveyed her belief by caressing Shane's nipples with her free hand.

In response to the gesture, Shane could feel his penis stiffen and his breathing was once again labored. Hormones and adrenaline had grown to such a high level in the young man's body that for an instant he seriously doubted that he had any blood left in his veins.

Olivia pressed her body against the bed and eased her hands in circular patterns over the entire length of Shane's exposed back. Saying nothing, Shane moved close to Olivia and then paused; their faces mere inches apart. He could smell her sweet breath on his face as time seemed to grind to a complete standstill.

Both could feel as well as hear their own heartbeats. Shane grinned at Olivia and once again, without warning, slipped his tongue into her mouth. Olivia kissed back, powerfully and needful, her tongue feeling around the inside of Shane's mouth and rubbing along the backside of his teeth, tickling Shane slightly.

The two kissed for several minutes, noisily sucking on each other's mouths and then Olivia bit Shane's upper lip slightly, before backing off and smiling once again. Shane took a deep breath and grinned at her sheepishly, knowing that Olivia was completely fine and also knowing that she was well aware of that fact.

Shane was now leaning into the girl when he released the pressure of his weight and started to unbutton her blouse. Olivia watched quietly and cooperated fully as he took the blouse off and checked over her. Her breasts were small, firm, and plump and her nipples resembled small, pink stubs. Apparently satisfied, Shane leaned forward and nibbled on her left tit, while squeezing her leg with his hands. Olivia moaned involuntarily.

Olivia's dress was off in mere seconds. Now resting comfortably on their sides, Olivia was able to stare appreciatively at Shane's chest. All of his muscles from his shoulders to his navel were well defined and his chest was smooth and silky. She kissed her way from Shane's belly button to his neck, and then nibbled on his left earlobe. Shane moved once again, and began to graze on Olivia's ear as he pressed her into the crevices of the mattress.

Olivia giggled as he tickled her ear; the sound was nearly musical to him. Olivia grabbed Shane's neck and began kissing him again. Her technique altered from needful and intense to soft and sensual. Shane had he ever been with a girl, more importantly, a girl sexually, nor been with one as radiant and passionate as Olivia Mitchell.

Soon Shane felt Olivia's hands at his belt and while she opened it, Shane kicked off his shoes. Olivia had his pants off in one fluid motion, as though they had been practiced lovers for years rather than minutes. His underwear was gone a moment later, and Olivia's mouth was breathing on Shane's penis a fraction of a second later. She wasted little time with formality.

Neither Shane nor Olivia had said a word since arriving in the bedroom, and she decided to be first. "I love you," she said calmly, smirking since there was a brief pause. Shane leaned forward, sloppily kissed Olivia, and after a fumbled attempt on his part, was able to position himself properly in between her magnificent nude body.

XXII

The US Airways Canada Air Regional Jet airplane to Savannah, Georgia via Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, pulled away from the tarmac at Charleston's Yeager Airport around 7:40a.m. Since Shane was the only player to make the All-Star team representing the Sheaville Loggers, the residents of Sheaville, encouraged by Frank Miller and Jack Busby specifically, collected enough money for Shane to fly south roundtrip. Although Shane had skipped out of

the Mitchell home late the night before to avoid being discovered by Chaz Martinez and the mayor, the last forty-eight hours had been erratic and incomprehensible. From growing closer to deciphering the connection between Morton Mitchell and Roger Triplet to another acute attack of abdominal pain combined with being intimate with the daughter of Sheaville's mayor, Shane was actually looking forward to getting back to what he loved most-baseball.

Prior to arriving at the airport, Shane had asked the cab driver from C&H Taxi Company to take Shane to Charleston Area Medical Center in downtown Charleston. Biggie Rowan had been in the hospital since the brawl with the South Carolina RiverDogs. No word had been received from the commissioner's office concerning suspensions that undoubtedly would be given out as soon as the league office had a chance to review the incident. Yet Jason "Biggie" Rowan was at one time thought to be a candidate to make the Appalachian Baseball Association All-Star team, and now, there were no guarantees that he would even make it through the rest of the regular season.

Sheaville was in second place in the South Division of the ABA, only four games behind the Hickory Crawdads at the season's midpoint. Conversely, the Charleston Alley Cats had opened a commanding ten game lead over the Delmarva Shorebirds in the North Division, which was essentially expected by almost everyone. Before leaving for the game, Shane felt a certain responsibility to visit his teammate-a person responsible for helping him achieve excellence. Shane had every intention of starting over and hopefully putting the past behind him.

After being dropped off at the south entrance to CAMC, Shane sprinted past patients being escorted inside the hospital by staff and others with looks of sadness on their faces.

Inside, the hospital smelled like fresh plastic and chemical disinfectant. After wandering through several narrow, curvy hallways, Shane stumbled upon the information station and located Biggie Rowan's room. As Shane traversed down another hallway, he noticed three people African-Americans, one woman and two men, sitting outside of his room on cushioned seats in a small waiting area. Neither of the three bothered to acknowledge Shane regarding his sudden appearance or intentions.

Biggie Rowan was lying upright in the hospital bed. Next to him was a brown tray on wheels that was filled with several cups and straws. His face, although slightly healed following the fight, still was a mangled mess of bruises and swollen flesh. The catcher noticed Shane approaching and launched a cup filled with tea at his teammate, coating his dark short-sleeved tee shirt with water and sending the cup ricocheting around the room.

"Get out!" shouted the catcher through clenched teeth. As Shane's eyes focused on Biggie, it was apparent that his jaws were wired shut.

"I...I, just came to say hello," responded Shane, anxious to say anything that would keep another object from being hurled in his direction.

"You have every right to be mad at me," he continued. "I know I should have helped you when Tre was smashing you with that baseball, but I just got caught up in the moment."

Biggie's eyes narrowed and his pearly white teeth shined through the metal apparatus holding his jaws in place. "Damn you. You were just hoping that it would happen. Now look at you, pretty boy. You are going to the All-Star game. You are going to represent the Loggers. Three freakin' years I have been here and I have never gone. NEVER! And you, well, you come to town and then all of the sudden we are going to win the league. Shane Triplet, the kid that is going to finally put us ahead of Charleston in the standings. Well, you know something. You ain't shit without me. I do not care what Coach Mann says about your talent."

"That is what I came to talk to you about, Biggie. I realize that the reason I am being sent to

this game is because of you. I owe you a lot. And for that, I am grateful.” Shane felt his voice quivering and rejected the impulse to go over and finish the job that Tre Thomas started.

“I was hoping that we would put everything behind us. I mean, I do not know if you have heard, but we are only four games behind Hickory. We have a chance to win this thing. And if we do, I need you... the whole team is going to need you. Biggie, you are the veteran. Besides, if we do not win another game the rest of the season, I want you to get better. Fast.” The sudden sound of feet sliding against the tile floor behind him startled Shane, causing him to look over his shoulder. He was greeted by one tall, lean man and another stout, chubby fellow accompanied by a young nurse in a green sweat suit outfit.

“You paged us, Mr. Rowan?” asked the taller man in a light blue uniform.

Pointing at Shane, Biggie responded, “Yes, get this maggot out of here. I need some rest!” Shane could feel the roots of his hair tingle with frustration as his blue eyes filled with moisture at the spectacle Biggie was making.

“Come with us sir,” offered the nurse, outstretching his right hand. “If Mr. Rowan needs his rest, you will have to leave.”

Reluctantly, Shane obliged the request. “Just remember Biggie, misery breeds contempt.”

Suddenly, another extended hand touched Shane’s right elbow.

“Sir, can I get you something to drink?” asked the flight attendant. The plane had left the airport and was already in route to Pittsburgh. Shane had fallen asleep, dreaming about Biggie and what had transpired earlier in the day.

Shane declined her offer and opened up his bag and took out a yellow legal pad that had been placed inside.

On the front page was a message: Good luck Shane! Love, Olivia.

Shane smiled and stuffed the bag under his seat.

Walter Mann meandered around home plate at Clark Field eagerly checking his wristwatch. He desperately wanted to go home, to Ruth’s Diner, or anywhere else where the radio signal from Charleston would be coming in clearly. Usually, that meant Ruth’s Diner. Since the restaurant was located in the valley between the mountains and the decrepit sawmill, the signal traveled down the interstate and into the small radio in the diner, free from commonplace radio static. The skipper knew the diner would be crowded, so he had hoped the meeting would begin and end promptly.

The manager had received a letter from ABA Commissioner Tim Morrison about a meeting concerning the incident between the Loggers and the Charleston RiverDogs. To make sure the information was correct, Walter pulled the crumpled piece of paper from his right pants pocket and reread a highlighted passage of text again.

Two o’clock p.m. Clark Field. Be prepared to offer a full account and explanation for the events that took place that day.

In the distance, almost emerging from the first base bullpen, Walter noticed two elongated shadows widening under the soupy mid-summer sky. As they approached, the manager placed his hands in his pockets and was rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. Throughout his entire career as a player and manager, Walter Mann had never received a visit by a commissioner of any baseball league.

The two men, both wearing identical dark suits with white starch shirts and dark solid ties walked in stride and stopped in front of Walter. The one man resembled a wimp; the kind of person that any school bully would love to harass. He was short and wiry, and Walter could not help but compare this person to a bowling ball.

In contrast, the other gentleman was broad shouldered and handsome, with thinning silver hair and a dark mustache. Sewn into the fabric of the jacket breast pocket was the initials "T.M." The commissioner spoke first.

"Walter Mann, I am Tim Morrison, commissioner of the Appalachian Baseball Association. This is my press secretary Joel Myers."

The wiry man did not speak, but instead nodded his head.

The commissioner continued. "Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Mann You have a, uh, nice park here. It's a little old-fashioned, but traditional nonetheless."

"Uh, same to ya," replied Walter, as he continued rocking back and forth with more vigor.

Joel began scribbling on a small notepad. With him, he carried a large briefcase, comparable in size to what a lawyer presenting a case before the United States Supreme Court would tote. The commissioner displayed a very somber manner, and Walter could not help but wonder the severity of the penalties that were surely going to be imposed.

"Mr. Mann, I assume you know why are here. We have investigated the incident that took place between your team and the Charleston team some days ago. Before we continue, we would like to hear your side of the issue."

"Well, there ain't much that I can add sir. I mean, you all know all about it. It was just a thing that happens sometimes when you have young men playing this game and the action gets a little hot."

Tim Morrison's eyes shifted towards his press secretary and then back onto the manager. "Mr. Mann, from what understand, you were instrumental in promoting this altercation by arguing with one of our umpires during a close play at home plate. Is that correct?"

"Sir, I don't think I'm sure what use getting at," responded the manager. "My boy was safe...he was safe I tell ya. I could see from that dugout platform right over there." Walter made a slight gesture in that direction, but the commissioner and Joel Myers glared at the manager. "I just did what any manager would do. I was protecting my player."

"I see," muttered the commissioner wryly. "Mr. Mann, as you know, the incident forced several players to seek medical attention and the game had to be called. Now, you know that is lost revenue for our association."

"With all do respect, I do not know much about money. I don't make much and neither does anyone else around here. I just figure them accountant boys in your office take care of most of that." Walter could feel his tongue swell in his mouth and his thick, southern drawl slur some of easily understandable words.

Tim stepped forward, now merely inches away from Walter's nose. The skipper could feel warm air rushing out of the commissioner's nose and mouth.

"Based on what we know, I have spoken with officials from the River Dogs and officials with your major league affiliate, the Cincinnati Reds. Together, we have decided to issue several suspensions."

Walter responded by digging his foot into the hard, dusty infield and staring intently into the ground.

"Your pitcher, Shane Triplet will be suspended as well as your catcher Jason Rowan. You sir, will not be suspended, but will be asked to pay a \$2,000 fine for your actions. I certainly hope this is a lesson to you and your team Mr. Mann. The association will not tolerate any type of

embarrassing behavior, do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir, yep."

"Good," piped in Joel. "Come commissioner, we need to be going."

Both men turned counterclockwise simultaneously and began walking towards the bullpen. As they left, they could hear Walter's faint voice in the distance.

"Hey, how many games my boys got to miss?"

"The remainder of the season," bellowed Joel Myers.

XXIII

The Appalachian Baseball Association All-Star Game at Grayson Stadium in Savannah, Georgia is one of the most anticipated events of the year. In anticipation of a large crowd, the Savannah Sand Gnats, the team that normally plays at Grayson Stadium, created a Thirsty Thursday event with dollar drinks throughout the entire game. The fans who flocked to the game were treated to a terrific game involving the best players from each team in the ABA.

Shane Triplet was named the starting pitcher for the game and fans roared with applause when his name was announced. Many fans from Savannah and surrounding states were beginning to hear about the immeasurable talent possessed by the young pitcher, and a one-page biography in the game program provided them with a personal history of how Shane came to Sheaville, West Virginia and why he was the reason that fans in the town were so excited about baseball this season.

The teams in the North Division, which included: the Charleston Alley Cats, Delmarva Shorebirds, Greensboro Bats, Hagerstown Suns, Kannapolis Intimidators, Lake County Captains, Lakewood Blue Claws, and Lexington Legends played against the South Division, which featured: the Asheville Tourists, Augusta Greenjackets, Capital City Bombers, Charleston Riverdogs, Hickory Crawdads, Rome Braves, Savannah Sand Gnats, South Georgia Waves and the Sheaville Loggers. By league rule, each team must have at least one player represented. However, some teams such as Lexington, Lakewood, and South Georgia had more than one athlete selected for the all-star team.

Throughout his brief performance, Shane Triplet was dominating on the mound, although he did not manage to get a hit in two at bats. With his performance during the all-star game, Shane Triplet moved into impressive company. In more than three innings of work, the right-hander scattered 3 hits and limited the South all-stars to one earned run during that span. Due to his overpowering fastball and sweeping curveball, Shane helped the South triumph over the North 4-2.

Shane did receive some help in the field and at the plate from his teammates. Shortstop Michael Burns from the RiverDogs made several outstanding plays, highlighted by bare handing a ground ball that took a bad hop and throwing Kenny Nantz, a speedy left fielder from the Capital City Bombers team, out at first base on a close play.

Offensively, the South took a 2-0 lead in the second inning when second baseman Carlton Rogers opened with a walk before scoring on third baseman Tito Camerillo's double. Camerillo plated the South's second run two batters later when an errant throw by the Delmarva Shorebirds' George Haskins hit the dirt and skirted away from home plate.

The rest of the South scoring came in the fourth inning. Jose Rodriguez of the Rome Braves started the rally with a two-out double and scored when Rogers hit a long home run to center field. Rogers, who was named the South's Offensive Most Valuable Player after the game, lead the ABA with 16 home runs heading into the all-star game.

As for Shane Triplet, who allowed only three balls to leave the infield, yet one of those pitches was a home run to left center field. Despite allowing the run, Shane struck out six batters and was selected as the South's Most Valuable Pitcher for his excellent command and control on the mound. He was later informed that the pitching award was the first one given to a Sheaville Loggers player since 1984.

The majority of Shane's time before, during, and after the game consisted of drinking in all the accolades and prestige that comes with being a minor league baseball player being selected to the All-Star game. Representatives from the Cincinnati Reds organization were attending the game, anxiously scouting and analyzing every move and mannerism made by their prospects. Team officials from the Atlanta Braves, Montreal Expos, Toronto Blue Jays, and a host of other Major League Baseball clubs were also present to perform the same routine.

In a show of sportsmanship, the players from both teams swapped stories, memories about the first half of the season. Shane was surprised with how many players from around the association had been keeping track of what was happening with the baseball team from Sheaville, West Virginia. Shane even managed to catch some constructive criticism concerning his performance during the first half of the season as well as some thoughts for Chaz Martinez and Harry Deitzler, two other players from the Loggers.

As the return flight landed at Charleston's Yeager Airport three days later, the sky was murky and humid. Remnants of shredded red, white, and blue streamers littered the baggage terminal, a sure sign that the Fourth of July holiday had passed. Clutching his MVP plaque tightly under his arm, Shane stepped inside another taxi in front of the airport terminal and prepared for his return to Sheaville.

Shane had so questions dancing through his mind. What did the rest of the Loggers think about the South's victory? Were any of them able to listen to it on radio? What did Walter think? How was his mama doing? And Olivia. After dinner at her house, Shane did not have a chance to talk to her.

Now, three days later, Shane wondered what he was going to say to her, and more importantly, how she was going to react to his return. But one thought was certain: the Sheaville Loggers had another half of a season to play and the goal remained unchanged: win the Appalachian Baseball Association championship.

XXIV

Frank Miller stared over the itemized inventory of supplies and could do no more than remove his reading glasses and rub his eyes. Not even a fresh, steamy cup of Jack Busby's special coffee in the morning could remove the dread that swarmed over the drugstore owner's entire body like rushing water over a rocky mountain dam.

The list was a consistent source of frustration and expense. Each year, Sheaville hosted an annual fall festival in September. It was an opportunity for the town to gather together at the old sawmill distribution warehouse and bask in the delight of the seasonal change. For over twenty years, Frank was responsible for organizing committees to assist with the planning, fundraising, and implementation of the festival. This year though, twenty years of festival coordination were wearing on him some reason.

"You going to start this meeting or what Frank?" questioned Morton Mitchell from the left side of the counter at Ruth's Diner. "I have a lot to do today. You know, the business of the people. I cannot afford to be sitting here counting minutes with you."

"Stuff it mayor!" proclaimed Phil Rodney. Fortunately for Morton Mitchell, Phil was sitting in between the two men. Otherwise, his comments might have caused Frank to throw something,

anything, in the mayor's general direction.

"Someone is probably going to have to go door to door this year and solicit some money," Phil suggested. "I do not want to have to deal with that stupid mail-in idea that was done last year. Some people sent the money to the wrong address and we never got it and others sent an addressed envelope with nothing at all. This year, we ought to go door to door. It is good public relations for the festival too."

Morton balked at the notion. "Phil, you don't know the first thing about public relations. It is very complicated and intricate."

You can't spell them words," Frank mumbled, still focusing on the list in front of him. "We have the usual people. The Loggers always give us \$1,000. If we go to Charleston for a day, we can get WCHS and WQBE radio stations to donate some money and provide a disc jockey for the ball. And if memory serves me, Dow Chemical gave us a nice donation too."

A suddenly inspired Phil Rodney straightened up his slumped posture. "I think that if we do that, and have an aggressive fundraising campaign here in Sheaville, we can raise the money right fast."

Frank agreed. "Speaking of the Loggers, why don't we have them show up someplace in town. If some of them players will come, the kids can get autographs and their pictures taken with the players and maybe we can have a raffle drawn for free tickets to a game or something. That could work."

"It will work," Phil said, completing the clause.

The mayor raised his index finger and twirled in the air, unimpressed. "Maybe we can have Shane Triplet come and throw some fastballs against a tarp too...that might give the crowd a thrill. You know something, speaking of him, that boy came over to my house for dinner and did not even say thank you. I cannot believe that."

"Good idea!" exclaimed Frank. "And leave Shane alone. He is a fine lad!"

"Why don't we just split up," Phil offered, ignoring Frank's suggestion and pivoting his chair so that he could read the expressions of the other committee members. "That way, we each can do our part, do what we like to do, and in a couple of weeks, report back here and see what we come up with."

A moment of silence fell on the committee and Frank and Morton nodded in agreement. "Suits me, but I need to tell Olivia about this," noted Frank.

"What on earth for?" asked the puzzled Sheaville mayor.

"Because, she will hold your feet to the fire on this," answered Frank as he slowly slurped his coffee. Phil giggled as he walked away from the counter.

"More coffee, sweetheart?" Frank looked up to see Joann Triplet hunched over the counter. She looked very tired, and dark, bulging circles permeated the skin underneath her eyelids. At first glance, Joann resembled a boxer with two black eyes. In addition, she did not have her usual allotment of makeup, revealing a true complexion that was rough and greasy.

"Just a little more'd be fine," replied Frank, smiling and offering a wink in her direction.

Sprinting from the doorway in front of the diner, and almost colliding into Phil, was Olivia. In her usual summertime newspaper delivery attire, she waddled to the front, carrying a sack of Charleston Gazette newspaper over her left shoulder.

"Hi daddy, hi Mr. Miller." Her demeanor was always upbeat and cheerful. "I brought you your paper Mr. Miller. It looked like you were not home this morning, and I remember daddy saying you all were meeting today. So, here you go."

"Thank you angel," Frank said soothingly. He began to slide the tight rubber band over the wadded mass of paper and ink and saw the newspaper unfold right before him."

“How was the meeting daddy? Did you get everything accomplished?”

Reluctantly, the mayor answered, “Uh, yes, we made some good progress.”

“Good, I am glad to hear that. The festival is my favorite part of the whole year. Even though I will be at Marshall in September, I plan on coming back for it.”

“Great to hear, kiddo,” Frank said surveying the headlines in the newspaper.

“I bet Shane would like the festival too. He has never been to the fall festival in Sheaville before, and I know that he would love it. I will have to invite him,” Olivia stated, making a mental note not to forget.

Joann walked out from the kitchen and scanned the diner to make sure she had not missed any customers. When she saw Olivia talking to Morton and Phil, she approached her. “Can I get you something?”

Startled, Olivia stuttered and denied the request. The bells jingled once again on the door to the diner and Shane, Harry, Ryan, and Chaz walked into the diner. Fresh off of an eight game, ten-day road trip, the players looked tired, restless, and famished.

“Time to eat!” proclaimed Harry, prancing towards the counter, ready to place his order.

“Did the trip go well,” questioned Frank Miller, as he rested his hand on Harry’s forearm.

“Went pretty well, Mr. M,” Harry said plainly. “We won three and lost five, but the good news is we are only five games out of first place. I think that we will be fine, but some of them are already worried.” Ryan motioned towards Chaz, Shane, and Ryan as Frank looked back at them, and then shifted his focus again on Ryan.

“What’ll it be, pumpkin?” asked Joann, waiting patiently behind the counter.

“Hi Mrs. T. I think me and the rest of the crew just want burgers with all the trimmings and chocolate shakes.”

“I will get that order started. And tell that son of mine to come up here and give his mother a hug.”

Harry smiled and glanced at Olivia, Frank, and Morton while responding appropriately. “Sure thing, Mrs. T.”

“I had best be taking my newspaper back to work. I got some prescriptions to fill and some shelves to stock.” Patting the countertop with his hand, he waved, spoke to the other Loggers players and left the diner.

The teammates seated themselves at their usual booth beside the door, in plain view of the elongated window that ran the length of the right side of the diner.

“Man, we surely spanked those pussies in Kannapolis the other night,” suggested Chaz, despite little interest from the rest of the group in talking baseball.

“T...t...t...hanks to Pat,” reminded Ryan. “If it hadn’...t been for his three h...h...hits in the that g...g...game, we would have l...lost by three r...r...runs.”

“Yea, well we can’t get too confident,” Shane interjected. His comment drew some disconcerting looks from everyone sitting in the booth. “I just think we need to win as many games as we can so that we can get a lead in the division and focus on taking down the Alley Cats in September.”

“I still wonder why Walter skipped over me in the rotation at Kannapolis. It was my turn to pitch game two.”

“There has to be some rewards for being invited to the all-star team,” suggested Harry.

“A...all I know is t...t...that everyone is c...counting on us to t...t...take the title away from C...c...Charleston this year,” Ryan said. “I h...hear that e...everyw...where I go.”

Chaz used the moment to voice his perspective on the matter.

“From what I hear, we are the most talented team Sheaville has had in years. I think that as

long as we can play well at home and get some wins on the road, we will be fine. That is, as long as some of you douche bags aren't so negative about things."

The comment was meant specifically for Shane, but he was busy staring at the counter. Observing Morton and Olivia Mitchell sitting at the counter with his mama was resembled a portrait frozen in time. The thought of Morton Mitchell having anything to do with his family made the hairs on Shane's neck stand up.

Everything made little sense to Shane. The conversation in the mayor's office, the sudden invitation to dinner at the Mitchell house...none of it seemed to fit. The thought did serve as a reminder that he would somehow find out the connection Morton Mitchell had with his father.

For a split second, Shane thought about going down the street to the mayor's office and looking at that picture on the wall of Roger and Morton. But that would not be prudent, especially with the main person in question sitting a mere ten yards away.

"Hey, numbnuts, you on planet earth?" chided Chaz. "Earth to cock nuts, come in cock nuts..."

"Knock it off!" responded Shane. "I was just thinking."

"You might want to be thinking about Augusta there chief. They are coming to town tomorrow. You are scheduled to start game one," Chaz added. The comment did not register with Shane immediately.

"Relax, Martinez, Trip's got his mind on some pune tang, that's all." Harry flashed a wide smile.

"W...w...what are you t...talking about?" questioned Ryan, who now reentered the conversation after several seconds of silence.

"I guess blabbermouth here told you that I came over to the mayor's house the other night for dinner," Shane said.

"Well, it was more like making a total fool of yourself, but it does count as a visit," Chaz teasingly added.

"I had a nice time," Shane concluded. "There were some rough spots, but it is not everyday that I get asked to go to someone's house for dinner."

Ryan looked up at the counter, made eye contact with Olivia as she looked back towards the booth, then settled his glance back on Shane.

"Y...y...y...you must have l...left a g...g...good impression on his daughter. She is s...s...staring at you right n...now."

Shane turned sideways and noticed that Olivia was fixated on him, watching his every move. Olivia, dressed in a light blue tank top with black shorts shined like a beacon against the dim, smoky backdrop of the diner's kitchen. With a swift motion, she smiled and waved at Shane. He felt horrible for not speaking to her when he came in.

In an instant, Olivia skipped over to the booth and introduced herself to the Ryan and Harry, and patted Chaz on the shoulder. After some pleasantries were exchanged, Olivia asked to speak with Shane outside.

From the front of the diner, Joann Triplet was assembling four chocolate milkshakes. From the hissing sound emanating from the kitchen, it would be a matter of time until the cheeseburgers were ready. Joann stared forward intently as she watched Shane lean against the glass window in front of the diner. His head was leaning forward and it appeared that he was listening as Olivia was speaking.

"Who is that person my boy is talking to mayor?" questioned the waitress. "I have seen her in here before but I do not know her name."

In a gesture typical of a politician, the mayor puffed up his chest and shoulders and spoke confidently, "That is my daughter Olivia."

"My, my, land sakes alive. When Roger and I lived here before I do not think you even had a

daughter. Olivia must have been born later,” Joann said.

“Yea, she is my pride and joy. I just do not know what her relationship is to your son, that’s all.”

“Good question,” offered Joann.

Outside the diner, it was nearing noon and the lunch crowd was beginning to filter in slowly and steadily. Olivia stuck her hands underneath Shane’s tattered Loggers tee-shirt and was pressing him into the window.

“I have missed you,” she said sweetly. “I am glad that you made it back home safe. I did not get a chance to tell you how proud everyone in town is about your award from the game a few weeks back.”

Unsure of what to do, Shane thanked Olivia for the compliment.

“Shane, I was hoping that we could talk. A lot of things happened that night you came over, and I...”

“Look,” Shane interrupted. “It is my fault that I have not gotten in touch with you.” Shane was shifting his weight from one foot to the other as Olivia was tickling his chest with her hands. “I should have come by, or called, and I left town and said nothing.”

“I am just as much at fault,” Olivia added. “Leaving you twisting was bad.” Embarrassed and somewhat flattered, the pitcher could feel his cheeks sizzling under the hazy sunshine. “You helped me with my...uh...incident. Had you not been there, I am not sure what might have happened.”

Shane attempted to slip away and walk back into the diner, but was impeded by Olivia. Struggling to get free, Shane lips were locked into a tender, warm kiss. In response, Shane placed his hands on Olivia’s hips and submissively accepted the kiss.

Pulling away, Olivia placed her index finger on one of Shane’s dimples flashing a brilliant smile. “See ya soon.”

From the diner, Morton Mitchell felt like he needed a shovel to pull his jaw from the floor. Joann Triplet stood erect, and could only muster enough air to postulate a few words.

“I think I know their relationship now.”

XXV

The news of the suspensions mandated by Tim Morrison and the Appalachian Baseball Association coincided with Biggie Rowan returning to the Loggers team in early August. In haste, Walter Mann had failed to inform Shane that a discussion with the commissioner concerning the brawl with Charleston had even taken place, opting to convince Shane and Biggie that skipping three starts was partly a reward and otherwise a preservation effort to keep them fresh for the end of the regular season.

When Walter confessed the truth, Shane and Biggie were less than pleased. He gathered them near home plate at Clark Field, near the identical location where the fight took place.

“So boys, that is how this here whole thing went down and I am sorry to tell ya that your season’s is over.” Walter was careful in choosing his words-choosing to be optimistic and encouraging but serious and determined.

“This is bullshit, that is all it is, full and complete bullshit,” barked Biggie as he slammed his glove into the ground following practice before the Capital City Bombers came to Sheaville for a three game weekend series. Biggie’s words hissed and slurred as he spoke.

For once, Shane agreed with Biggie. “The fight was even. As many of their players were involved with it as we were, coach. This IS shit, plain and simple.”

Biggie Rowan stood piously and listened to the banter between pitcher and manager. With his

jaw still wired shut and sore, incessant arguing was not a realistic way of communicating his thoughts.

"I know what your saying, and there is some of them that has been suspended also," the manager argued, diplomatically. "But you have to know that we were the home team and it was our job to keep it going by fighting more."

Shane approached Walter, standing only inches from his face, prohibited from getting closer by the skipper's bulging stomach. From a distance, Shane could see two dark hairs creeping out from under the manager's left nostril.

"There were scouts from the Cincinnati Reds there, coach. That is the only place I have ever wanted to play. I want to be like Tom Browning, or Jose Rijo. I want to have the chance to pitch in a World Series like they did. Didn't you protest their decision? I mean, a whole season, why coach?"

Biggie inhaled quickly and grimaced at Shane's comment.

Truthfully, Walter did not object to the commissioner's ruling. Arguing with the commissioner was certainly a one-way ticket to unemployment as a manager in the ABA. Walter tried to hide his guilt over not speaking up for his players, yet Shane could sense the manager was being inaccurate.

"I did, yep, I did, but he was certain this was how it was going to go. I am sorry for you and for Biggie. But the best thing you can do is support your teammates and stay in shape for next season." Walter knew Shane and Biggie would not accept the righteous piety of the situation.

"How am I going to break the news to my mother that us relocating here from Pittsburgh is for nothing. She hates it here. The only reason she was willing to move here is because I had a chance to play in the major league's someday. Now you are telling me because I participated in a fight to protect my teammates that the dream is over. Well, I am not giving up coach. Not without a fight."

Biggie Rowan stepped in between Walter and Shane and faced the pitcher. Speaking with clichéd teeth, the catcher was not satisfied with what was being said.

"You sniveling prick!" he hissed. "All you can think about is you. How about me? I have been here three years. This was my year to leave this god-awful town and move on. Now, I am going to be here for another year. That's four years. You talk about moving from Pittsburgh? Try coming from New Jersey. The projects! Try having six kids and a mother and no loot. That is why I am here, so they will have a better life. Something you know dick about."

Enraged, Shane shoved the Biggie, knocking the 6'6 catcher backwards.

"Don't you pretend to know me. You don't know shit!" Shane shoved him again. Walter made an inaudible sound that did nothing to diffuse the developing situation.

"My mother is sick, mentally sick. My father's gone, like yours. My mother works hard to put clothes on my back and a roof over my head. And you know something. I have about had it with your sour ass attitude. You haven't liked me since I came to town. Well bubba, I am going to be here, like it or not. While were at it, the next time you open that shit hole you call a mouth, I will..."

"You'll do what, pretty boy?" questioned Biggie, curling his lips inside the steel cage holding the jawbone together.

" I WILL KILL YOU!" screamed Shane. "YOU HERE ME!" He grabbed Biggie's throat and began squeezing tightly.

With jaws locked, Biggie struggled for air. He went down on one knee and his face changed shades like a threatened chameleon. Choking and gagging, Biggie tried to pry Shane's hands from his neck. Walter grabbed Shane from behind by the waist, and began tugging Shane

backwards.

The manager and his pitcher rolled to the ground. Biggie was busily grabbing his Adam's apple, tugging and stretching the muscle and gulping in the hot, moist August air. Shane managed to slide away but Walter tripped him, and the Walter rose up and stood between both players.

"That's it!" Walter demanded. He rushed over to tend to Biggie while Shane dusted himself off and stood watching.

"Triplet, what in the hell was you thinking? You coulda killed this boy."

Stern and steadfast, Shane growled at both of them. "I meant what I said. The next time that he comes close to me or says one moresmart ass comment... I won't lose my grip next time."

Before Walter could collect some thoughts, Shane marched towards the locker room.

The loss of Shane Triplet and Biggie Rowan was the beginning of a seven-day nightmare for the Sheaville Loggers and its fans. A three game weekend series with the Lake County ended in disaster, with Sheaville being swept at home. The story in the Charleston Gazette on Monday described, precisely, how bad the final game was for Sheaville. In game three of the series, the Captains rallied for four runs in the last five innings, overcoming an early six run deficit in a 7-4 loss.

The Loggers plated four runs in the first two innings and two more tallies in the fifth frame to build a 6-0 advantage. Chaz Martinez continued his torrid hitting at the plate, pounding a fastball to left center field for a home run and accounting for three runs batted in. Ryan Head also played very well, going 2-2 with an RBI. Although Harry Deitzler was unable to attain any RBI's, his three stolen bases helped the Loggers build their lead. Shane and Biggie were helpless to do anything about the loss.

Lake County received six-plus strong innings from starter Tim Spencer, who allowed three earned runs and eight hits to earn his ninth win of the season. However, at 9-7, he remained tied for the most losses in the ABA South Division. The Captains started their rally in the fifth inning when second baseman Zander Madison crushed his fourteenth home run of the season off of starting pitcher Jose Trujillo. Trujillo, a native Panamanian, was called up from the Cincinnati Reds rookie league team in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to replace Shane Triplet. Despite obvious dejection, Shane was supportive and tried to offer some encouraging advice and support for the eighteen-year old left-hander. The Captains added two more runs in the bottom of the seventh inning in the rubber game of the series and finally two more runs in the eighth when Trujillo was pulled for closer Chris Taylor.

The Loggers did not quit, even as Walter Mann began berating his players. Sheaville mustered two more runs in the bottom of the seventh when Harry Deitzler opened with a single before scoring on Pat Sutton's fourth triple of the season. Sutton then scored when Chaz Martinez singled one out later.

Sheaville's last run came in the eighth inning when backup catcher Mike Matlock, filling in for the suspended Biggie Rowan, hit a long solo home run to right field. Matlock had ten home runs last season in the Cincinnati Reds Rookie League.

The loss dropped Sheaville to ___ and ___ on the season, putting dropping them to third place in the ABA South Division, and now they were eight games behind the Charleston Alley Cats. Charleston continued their torrid hitting, leading the league with a team batting average of .298, combined with a six game winning streak, and the hopes of Sheaville playing the Alley Cats in the championship series in September were slowly dissipating.

When the Capital City Bombers came to Sheaville, Walter Mann was hoping that strong pitching and good defense would help the Loggers triumph over the losses, but pitching and

defense continued to be glaring weaknesses. Capital City received five hits and seven RBI's from right fielder R.C. Fitzwater throughout the four game series and Zane Crockett scattered nine hits over six innings in game four to lead the Bombers to consecutive wins of 7-2, 6-4, and 4-1 over Sheaville.

The Loggers did not help themselves in either loss. Three errors in game one lead to two runs for Capital City and four errors in game three netted three runs for the Bombers. Chris Taylor, a reliable closer, blew two saves in two separate games. With only six weeks left in the regular season, the Loggers are limping into the final stretch of the season, and without the service of rookie pitching sensation Shane Triplet or veteran catcher Jason "Biggie" Rowan, both suspended by the league, it appears that the Loggers will have to win soon and often and receive some help inside and outside of the division in order to reach the championship series.

XXVI

Walking up along Maple Street and Central Avenue before dawn was a constant surreal experience for Olivia. In the summertime, droplets of morning dew hung like freckles on the lawns of nearly every home in Sheaville, and she could feel the atmospheric stickiness increase as the sun rose from behind the sawmill.

After possessing the newspaper route for several years, Olivia was able to discharge newspapers from her satchel with pinpoint accuracy almost without looking. She personally prided herself on always placing the newspaper within close proximity to the front door, so elderly customers would not strain and shuffle their feet very far to get the newspaper.

As with most mornings, the end of the route brought weariness throughout her entire body. However, early this morning, she was greeted with a horrible stomachache, followed by several minutes of vomiting before the route began. Since she and Morton had eaten chicken fingers for dinner the night before, the second taste of the meal was very unsavory.

Olivia was not running a temperature, yet she had problems convincing her father that she was physically incapable of delivering newspapers. As a result, Olivia quickly developed a headache to compliment the stomachache.

When she reached the end of Maple Street, she began to walk up the hollow to where Shane lived. In all the time spent trouncing up and down the dusty, dirt road, the Triplet home always looked the same. Eerily silent, the home always appeared abandoned. On this morning, Shane was standing in the large flatfield next to the house firing pitches at a piece of flat plywood propped up against two small rusted steel beams.

After tossing the newspaper on the front porch where it would undoubtedly rest for several days, Olivia pranced to the field.

"You are out here awfully early," Olivia said, speaking in between catching small breaths.

"Hey Olivia." Shane observed as Olivia was approaching that even though she was wearing a white shirt and black shorts, she still maintains are stark, yet unassuming beauty and elegance.

When she reached Shane, she threw her arms around his neck, causing Shane to turn around. When he did, Olivia looked up and gave him a small, pecking kiss. Smiling, Shane hoisted her off the ground and kissed her, and it lasted longer than a split second.

"Ah, that is the best good morning in the world," Shane said, satisfied.

"I take it that you are trying to relive some tension by throwing the ball out here all by yourself. It sounded like you were trying to throw the ball through that board, not into it."

"Yea, it keeps my mind off of the fact that I cannot pitch, at least not for a while. But Coach

Mann said that he and the Reds have sent a letter asking for a reduction in the suspension for Biggie and me. So, time will tell, I suppose.”

“Hey, that is great Shane,” Olivia responded cheerfully. “From what I read in the newspaper, you all could really use you and Biggie.”

“I just want to pitch you know. That is what I am here for. That is what I do. I pitch and when I cannot do that, I am pretty useless to anyone.”

“That is a matter of opinion,” Olivia added.

“Oh really? Says who?”

“Says me, and your mom. And God. Did you ever consider that he has brought you here for a reason? You have a purpose here Shane.

Rolling his eyes, Shane faced back towards the makeshift bullpen and reached for another baseball.

“I have not really considered much about purpose, or destiny, or any other of that crap. But if you say so.”

“All I am saying is that things happen for a reason that is all. And that you should be thankful for what you have instead of chasing what you want.”

“What I want to know is this, Olivia. How did this discussion go from being about pitching to a philosophical discussion about destiny?”

Shane huffed but Olivia froze. She ceased breathing and was quiet for several seconds, causing Shane to throw another pitch at the plywood and then turn around again.

“Hey, you look freaked.”

“Nothing. I am sure it is nothing,” she replied. Olivia could feel the bowls of her stomach vibrate. “Listen I have to go. Will you be in town today?”

“Yea, I have to go to the drugstore and get some things and say hey to mama. The team is leaving for Augusta in a couple of days.”

“Ok.”

Before Shane could say anything else, Olivia sprinted down the hollow, got on her bike, and peddled as fast as she could down Maple Street and back to her home.

Barging through the front door, she whisked past Morton, who was reading the editorial section of the newspaper. Ignoring him completely, she ran to her room upstairs and began looking at the desk calendar.

“So far, that is \$3,127.65 for the festival. At this point, we are approximately \$2,397.18 short of funds raised at this point last year,” quoted Phil Rodney during the Sheaville Fall Festival Committee meeting being held in the break room of Rodney’s Department Store.

“The way I see it, our door to door donations are going to have to be spectacular in order to raise the \$7,000 dollars we need for the event. Boys, that is going to be quite an undertaking.”

The four-member committee, comprised of Phil Rodney, Frank Miller, Morton Mitchell, and Ryan Head commenced at 2:00pm. For over thirty minutes, the group had been sitting under a dim halogen light in a crowded, stuffy room attempting to consider ways to raise money for the fund raising event.

“See, what did I tell you about this? Our sponsors may not have the cash this year to help us. Maybe I should prepare a statement informing everyone in town that there will be no festival this year,” quipped the major.

“Now, just hold them horses,” chimed Frank, sitting directly across the table from the mayor.

“We still have some time and some ways to raise money here. That is why Ryan is here. Ryan my lad is going to help us figure a way to raise money by including the Loggers in the

fundraising.”

Patting Ryan on the back, the second baseman smiled childishly. Shane was supposed to be on the committee, but Ryan lost a rock, paper, scissors contest, with and thus took the seat on the committee.

“Someone please tell me what in the world this boy knows about this festival and raising money. I mean, this whole thing takes leadership, responsibility, and integrity.”

“So what are you doing here then,” chided Frank, eliciting a laugh from Phil and leaving Ryan further confused. The mayor fumed.

“I...I...I...was t...thinking.....”

“And just when have I failed to be a leader, Frank?” asked Morton. “You seem to have all of the answers, so let’s here some examples.”

“If you want me to go back and discuss them days in the saw mill I can, and if Roger were here, he could throw in some things too.”

The mayor was flabbergasted. Roger Triplet’s name was the equivalent of picking an old scab and Morton could not help but remember Shane’s inquisitiveness on the matter.

Waving his finger in agitation, the mayor fired back.

“That was a long time ago in a different period. We have all changed since then. That was in the past and it is best to leave it that way.”

“Leopards don’t change their spots mayor,” Phil remarked.

Gazing into the center of the table, the small room grew idle of speech and movement. Determined to break the silence and finish his thought, Ryan spoke next.

“I...I think that we need to have an af...af...afternoon where the Loggers c...come to town for autographs and pictures. I...I...Instead of g...g...going door to d...door, we can h...h...have them make d...donations then.”

“Say, that would be a great idea. And maybe we could see if the team would mind if we auctioned off some autographed baseballs and such and maybe some tickets to the next game.”

“I...I...I...can ask Coach Mann and see what h...h...h...says about it.”

“Works for me Frank,” Phil noted. “How about you mayor?”

Morton waived his hand in ambivalence.

“Then it’s done!” proclaimed Frank. “Harry, you can gather some of the players and get some Loggers stuff from Phil here to sign. Work on those tickets to if you can, okay?”

“W...will do.”

“Come with me Ryan,” motioned Phil. “Let’s go see what we can round up for signing.”

As two of the committee members walked out of the room, they were almost plowed over by Olivia who was running through the doorway. “Daddy, I need to speak with you, it is an emergency.”

Stoic and calm, the mayor continued staring at the center of the table. “Not now Olivia, not now.”

Frank noticed the look of duress on Olivia’s face and nodded at the Morton, almost encouraging him to speak with his daughter. “Go on, talk to her Mort. We are finished here.”

Looking up through the tops of his eye sockets, the mayor met the glare coming from Frank’s spectacles, hanging on the brim of his nose. “No Frank, WE are not finished!”

Kicking the chair back forcefully with his buttocks, Morton Mitchell stood up and stormed out of the room with Olivia tagging along behind him. When they reached the sidewalk in front of the department store, several elderly ladies were bustling down the sidewalk and one of them bumped into the mayor, dropping her grocery bag on the ground.

“Daddy, please this is important,” Olivia pleaded. Her father continued walking down the sidewalk and into his office, never acknowledging Olivia’s presence.

When Olivia turned away in disgust, she saw Shane approaching her.

“Olivia, have you seen mama?”

“Actually Shane, I have not really had time to go anyplace. Hey, we need to talk about something...”

Shane began rambling quickly, shooting specks of saliva into the air. “Well, I cannot find her. She is not at the diner, Jack is off sick...I do not know what to do. Look, I am going home... I’ll see ya.”

“Shane, wait...”

Olivia blinked and Shane was gone.

XXVII

Thanks to the assistance of Mabel Hugart, one of the sweetest yet prudish ladies in Sheaville, Shane was able to ride home instead of running. Mabel was coming out of Sally’s Beauty Shop when Shane almost knocked her down on the sidewalk. Noticing that he was not in the mood to exchange pleasantries, Mabel asked Shane where he was going in such a hurry. Luckily, Mabel was heading in the same direction and dropped Shane off at the mouth of the hollow.

By the time Shane reached the back door of the house and entered into the kitchen, Joann had managed to take off her apron and waitress uniform and tossed it into the floor next to the sink. The house had a very staunch smell of rotten food, which was validated when Shane noticed that the kitchen trash had not been taken outside for several days.

Joann was sitting in the living room in her undergarments, digging her white sneakers repeatedly into the carpet. Equipped with a bottle of Vodka and a coffee cup, Joann was generously pouring a glass of the clear liquid and drinking it quickly.

Appalled, Shane stepped in front of her and made an attempt to pull the bottle away from his mother. “Mama, stop! The doctor said that alcohol causes problems with your medicine. Do not do this to yourself or to me.”

Joann calmly took the toe of her right foot and kicked Shane in the groin.

A blast of pain dropped Shane on the floor. Lying motionless in the floor, Shane groaned in pain as he gently massaged his genitals.

“That’ll teach you to take some comfort away from an unemployed woman,” Joann grumbled, badly slurring her words.

Shane managed to sit upright and squint threw tear-soaked eyes. “Unemployed? What are you talking about Mama?”

“It means I am done...finished, over. Jack fired me today. The son of a bitch had the flu and yet he came all the way to the diner to let me know I am fired. Pretty sad when all you do is show up for work everyday and you get let go.”

“Mama, I thought everything was fine. I mean, I know that you have been struggling with things from time to time, but everything seemed to be going so well for you.”

“And how would you know,” commanded Joann as another glass of vodka was poured. “All you do is play baseball. Every day, every night, you’re here sometimes and sometimes you ain’t. Now you cannot even play anymore. Some hope for the future you are.”

“Baseball is our hope for the future,” Shane replied. “I have a real chance here... a real chance to someday pitch in the major leagues. I cannot imagine anything else that would be better for both of us.”

“You aren’t playing. And the longer you don’t, the longer I am going to be stuck in this god forsaken town.” Joann’s words continued to slur and her voice was becoming exasperated and faint. With one half of the vodka gone, Joann Triplet was willing and able to continue the argument.

“They are appealing the decision mama. It is only going to be a matter of time before I can pitch again. And we will find you another job. I can talk to Mr. Miller or Mr. Rodney about you being a clerk in one of their stores.”

In a decisive move, Joann squeezed the neck of the bottle and launched it past Shane’s face and into the wall next to the front door. Small bits of glass ricocheted across the living room, some landing just inches from Shane’s knees.

Speechless and motionless, Shane did not know what to do next. To try to uncover the real truth, he changed the subject back to Jack Busby and the diner.

“Why did you get fired, mama? I mean, Jack had to say something about why he let you go. Most people do not get fired without good reason.”

Joann’s eyes darted back and forth across the room. “He said that I was too unstable to be a good employee. He, he said that sometimes I look fine and happy and other times I look like the grim reaper, or something like that.”

“It’s because you have some sickness mama, he knows that.”

“DO NOT CALL ME SICK! Sickness is for old people and people with, with disease. I am fine. I would be better if I could get off this damn medicine that I take sometimes.”

“The medicine is to help you,” reminded Shane. “I know that you would like to be off of it, but it keeps you well.”

“Ha,” Joann yelped. “I haven’t been well since I came back to this hellhole.”

Sliding down into the seat cushion of the chair, Joann’s eyes began to flicker and then with a slight role, her head tipped sideways and she was fast asleep.

Shane reached for a faded blue blanket from his bedroom and returned and covered Joann. While picking up large pieces of glass, Shane slowly went into the kitchen where he noticed his mother’s prescription bottles sitting on the table. Two of the three bottles were almost completely full and Shane deduced that his mother had not been taking the medicine regularly, leading to the “unstable” remark suggested by Jack Busby.

He locked the kitchen door, tossed the newspaper further towards the porch, and raced down the hollow and down Maple Street. Shane zoomed past the same familiar houses. When he reached the Mitchell home, he trotted along, looking for any signs that Chaz might be there. This was certainly a moment that he would like to see and talk with him, but the house appeared deserted

Shane got closer to town, and when he did, he observed Olivia approaching on her bicycle. She was wearing a red baseball cap and a pink short sleeve shirt and stonewashed colored shorts.

“Hey, I need to talk to you,” hollered Shane, drawing Olivia’s attention.

“Good, me to.”

“Well, I need to go first,” the pitcher insisted, panting heavily.

“I am not so sure about that,” she implied.

“All right, you first and make it fast.”

“Uh, I am not sure how to begin this story. I guess I could tell it, or just say it...”

“Just talk.”

“Okay.” Blowing air through her cheeks and making them flap against her face, Olivia looked into Shane’s frosty blue eyes and spoke shamefully. “Shane, I am pregnant.”

“Okay everybody, o...o...one at a t...time,” instructed Ryan as he motioned the Sheaville Loggers players down the line of memorabilia. “And p...p...please sign n...n...neatly, this is g...going to f...fans.”

The crowd gathered at Rodney’s Department Store was creating a frenzy of activity inside and outside the store. Town gossip about the players’ reason for being in the store all at once varied, but everyone in town that day seemed content to stop by, say hello, or just observe what was happening.

The line began with manager Walter Mann and continued with Ryan Head, Chaz Martinez, and so on until everyone on the roster had a chance to autograph each piece. The plan was to auction those items off during a gathering next week to raise money for the Sheaville Fall Festival in September.

Phil Rodney had donated two shirts, a baseball cap, and two towels with an embroidered “Sheaville Loggers” logo as items suitable for raffling off. Resting behind the counter, his eyes were wide and bright as the players walked past.

“This blows,” remarked Chaz as he signed one of the white towels. “I feel like an idiot doing this.”

“Just keep moving forward, you are holding up the line,” reminded Harry.

“I...I...I hear some d...d...discontent here boys,” noted Ryan who was busily making sure every player signed everything. “T...t...this is g...g...going to a g...good cause

Chaz was unfazed. “Yea, yea, it still blows.” Chaz noticed that Biggie Rowan, who was standing near the end of the line, was having trouble keeping the ink from the Sharpie marker off of his hands.

Morton Mitchell appeared at the back of the gathering crowd and darted his way towards the front. “Phillip, Phillip, we’re all set. Next Wednesday at 1:00 p.m. all of the media will be here and I am having flyers put up all over town.”

“Excellent work mayor!” Phil complimented.

“Where in the world is Trip, he should have been here by now. His signature is probably the only one anybody wants anyway,” Chaz said, stepping aside from the makeshift signature assembly line.

“I do not know, I have not seen him all day,” remarked Harry, although he wondered why nobody else was asking about Shane’s absence.

“N...now r...r...remember, Pat is taking some of you to clean up this distributing warehouse at the sawmill this a...a...afternoon, and c...c...coach said that curfew is t...t...ten for t...the road trip t...t...tomorrow,” Ryan reminded.

Chaz leaned in towards Harry and grunted, “He is having way too much fun with this.” Harry chuckled and shook his head in agreement.

XXVIII

Olivia slammed the front door shut behind her after suggesting Shane follow her home. Both said very little since Olivia announced that she was pregnant. It was Olivia’s recommendation that they go inside her house to discuss the issue, rather than discuss the matter in the middle of the street.

She managed to take off her baseball cap and let her rich, auburn hair fall just past her shoulders. Olivia turned and faced Shane who was standing with his arms folded, trembling.

“I know that was not the best way to tell you, but you needed to know as soon as possible.”

“Damn right!” Shane fired back. “I cannot believe this happened. I am not ready to be a father. Good lord, I can hardly take care of my mother and myself.”

“We still have some time,” reminded Olivia. “I will not start showing for a couple of more months and the baby will not be here for several months after that.”

Shane spun and faced the closed door, his blue eyes fiery and his cheeks full of color. “That is supposed to be some sort of consolation! Olivia, we are going to be parents. Has this thought set in your brain yet?”

“Well Shane, what do you want me to do? Pretend it did not happen? It’s a little late for that.”

“Are you sure that you are pregnant. Are you absolutely positive?”

“Yes I am,” Olivia responded dryly as she replayed the series of events in her mind. “I was fine for a few weeks. Then, I started having frequent stomach aches and lightheadedness. When I checked my desk calendar, I was two weeks late on my period. I went to the drugstore and got a pregnancy test. It was pink. So yes, I am sure.”

“Damn it!” Shane exclaimed. “How are we going to explain this to everyone? Most people do not even know about that night. Why did that night even have to take place?”

“Shane we made love that night, does that not mean anything to you?” “We did not make love, we had sex. There is a difference.”

Amazed, Olivia placed a hand over her mouth as her eyes filled with tears. “Shane, I love you. I have loved you since that night. I cannot believe that what happened that night was so trivial to you.”

“Sorry, Olivia, but if I had known that what happened would have created this mess, then I would have stayed away.”

Olivia began sobbing quietly. She turned away from Shane, now her back facing his back, separated physically by only a few inches and by a great distance of opinion.

Shane pivoted forcefully, spun around, and grabbed her shoulders and turned her around. “You cannot be like this, all mushy and weepy. We are in the mess together and it is going to be our responsibility to get ourselves out of it.”

“Something tells me because of this, you are going to leave. You will have nothing to do with me or the baby.”

Shane dropped his gaze and meet eye level with Olivia. “I will not leave you. But Olivia, we cannot possibly have this child. We can go to Charleston. There is an abortion clinic near where Mamma goes to the hospital. Chaz knows a nurse there.

“Shane!” Olivia shrieked. “I am going to have this baby, our baby. An abortion is out of the question.” She lightly placed her hand on Shane’s smooth, muscular forearm, lifted it, and placed it on her own stomach. “A baby is a gift from God. It is not right to kill an innocent life like that.”

“Rest assured my dear, you will have the baby.”

The statement came from Morton Mitchell, who had been standing in the kitchen off from the main foyer listening to every word. Morton’s voice hung in the air like a thick fog. “My daughter is pregnant. By a boy she barely knows.”

Astonished and befuddled, all Olivia could do was whisper “Daddy?”

Shane, although shocked, remained resolute, waiting for what the mayor had to say.

“Get out you bastard, get out of my house!” barked the mayor, stepping closer and closer to Shane. Shane could feel the mayor icy gaze directed straight at him.

Olivia attempted to intervene, but instead the mayor shoved her aside. “I will not have white trash like you ruin my life or my daughter’s. You are to stay away from her!”

Shane’s lip quivered and he could feel the muscles in his neck tighten.

“Let me make this abundantly clear,” Morton continued in hushed, forced tones. “You are never to see my daughter. She and I will take care of everything. But you had better hope you make it big in baseball son. Because regardless, I am going to make sure that you financially support this child until the day you die.”

Shane brushed Olivia aside and approached Morton and stood in front of him. His chiseled physique resembled a sculpture standing next to a bloated marsh mellow. Shane was not going to back down-not this time. Whatever power and influence Morton thought he could wield over Shane was having no effect on this situation.

“You know nothing about me, or about the relationship Olivia and I have,” Shane said, placidly. “This baby will know me and will grow to love me as its father. There is nothing you can do about it. Absolutely nothing!”

“Stop it! Both of you!” demanded Olivia as she stood next to the two men. Morton could feel Shane’s hot breath tickle his chin, and the feeling just continued to seethe him.

“What is it about people like you, huh Triplet. You come to town, you can play baseball and you think you can reek havoc while you are here. We have already seen your propensity for poor judgment. You got yourself suspended for some worthless fight. You are a great example for this child.”

“The real issue here sir is that you have not liked me since I came to town and I want to know why. One minute, you do not speak to me. The next, you are inviting me to your home for lasagna. Your attitude was crap, and now I am going to be a part of your life for a long time to come. The Triplets will be involved with the Mitchells for years. The thought makes you sick.” Writhing with frustration the mayor swung a fist in Shane’s direction. In a quick reflexive motion, Shane grabbed Morton’s hand and squeezed it tightly, holding the fist inches from their faces.

Shane began to feel sweat beads form on his brow and wisps of his blond hair dangled over both ears. The mayor’s eyes were polarized and foggy, almost suggesting that anger had totally possessed him.

“Daddy, Shane, stop! Please!” pleaded Olivia. “This is not solving or helping in any way.”

Shane flipped his fingers back, releasing the grip on the knuckled fist. Furious, Shane spoke, his voice resolute with a rush of adrenaline. “I need to be going. I have got to sign some things for the festival auction and check on my reinstatement.” Shane turned toward Olivia.

“I will talk to you soon okay?”

“Okay,” she responded, faintly.

Once Shane had slammed the door upon leaving, Olivia faced her father, who was still writhing in disgust at what transpired only a few moments earlier.

“You had no right to do that!” shouted Olivia. “You had no right to listen in on our conversation or give us your opinion.”

Pointing to Olivia’s stomach, the mayor vehemently fired back. “That child was conceived in this house. You are still under my roof! Just because you are getting ready to go to Marshall does not mean that all bets are off around here. As long as you are under this roof, you will play by my rules, plain and simple. This is a jungle sweetheart and I am King Kong. And you know my thoughts on dating.”

Olivia walked away and dropped her head. This time, the mayor approached her and displayed more tenderly mannerisms.

“Honey, look what you have done. Your life has changed forever. Things are never going to be the same now. You and I have a baby to raise and support. What happened in one night is going to change the way the rest of your living days are spent.”

“We’ also includes Shane, daddy,” Olivia said. “I love him and he loves me. This child is as much his as it is mine. I will not let you forbid him to see the baby or keep us apart. I promise that we will raise this baby together and he or she will grow up to be a wonderful person. We will raise him up in the church and make God the focal point of its life. And Shane and I will make it, even if he doesn’t make it to professional baseball. If we have to leave Sheaville and West Virginia, we will do that. So spare me the lectures about not fully understanding what has happened. I am fully aware. I have thought a lot about this.”

Morton placed his hands on his daughter’s petite shoulders and leaned next to her left ear. Whispering softly, he concluded, “I certainly hope so. Things are never going to be the same. Not for Shane, not for you, and not for anyone. By the way, do not share a word of this to anyone. Nobody needs to know about this. Primary elections are in November and I do not want everyone in Sheaville to know that my daughter is a whore.”

Olivia smacked her father squarely across the face and jolted upstairs crying. In response, the mayor massaged his cheek and smiled devilishly.

XXIX

Sitting in the spacious, plush dugout in Augusta, Georgia was anything but comforting for the Sheaville Loggers. High organizational expectations combined with swarms of media publicity inside and outside of West Virginia weighed heavily on the minds of the Loggers players, especially manager Walter Mann. This was supposed to be the year that Sheaville proved to the rest of the teams in the Appalachian Baseball Association that the Loggers were going to be a competitive, dominant team in the near future. But several close losses combined with the suspensions of Biggie Rowan and Shane Triplet put the team at a painful crossroads. And for most of the players, whose competitive spirit was their sole motivation, watching the season collapse in the blazing August summer was worse than miserable.

Walter Mann had tried everything to change the fortunes of his team. Changing the lineup seemed to be the only successful remedy to stop the losing. By shifting the roster, the team batting average had improved almost twenty points. Even though Walter’s team was built around pitching and defense, lineup changes needed to be made. Essentially, the changes were simple. First baseman Harry Deitzler was placed at the top of the lineup, since he was one of the fastest players on the team and a legitimate threat to steal bases. Pat Sutton and Ryan Head were placed second and third respectively behind Harry. Pat and Ryan were essentially the same type of hitter: smart, aggressive, and they forced opposing pitchers to work all areas of the strike zone, resulting in deep pitching counts. Chaz Martinez batted fourth, appropriately named the “cleanup spot,” because the Dominican was one of the best hitters in the league and led all hitters in runs batted in for the season. Therefore, a pitcher could not “pitch around” or intentionally walk Pat and Ryan because Chaz was likely to bring those runners home with his clutch hitting.

The manager was also careful not to chastise his players. Years of experience as a manager and player taught the skipper that the psyches of eighteen to twenty-three year olds could not handle being continuously berated like a toddler who had mistakenly soiled the bed sheets. Instead, subtle changes and motivational techniques along with traditional tactile practices emphasizing the fundamentals of the game normally was very successful pulling a team from a perilous valley of losing.

The third game of the series between the Loggers and the Augusta Greenjackets finally saw some of the Walter’s implementations come to fruition. For the second consecutive game in the series, the Loggers were in the midst of an impressive pitching performance. Left-hander

Michael McBride, the fourth pitcher in the starting rotation, scattered six hits over five shutout innings to help Sheaville build a 4-0 lead over Augusta.

During the first five frames, McBride registered six strikeouts and recorded only two fly ball outs. The lefthander also coaxed the Greenjackets into 12 ground ball outs, leading to three double plays.

Walter stood rigidly in the dugout, charting the pitching and hitting performances of his players. As he glanced down the checker-boxed page, the manager was amazed at the productivity generated from the first four hitters in the Loggers' lineup.

Harry Detizler had singled once, struck out once, and walked twice. During his two appearances on first, Harry stole two bases, one on a passed ball and the other on a close throw from home plate to second base. Once Harry was on second, Pat, Ryan and Chaz did the rest. Chaz was the main offensive catalyst for the Loggers. The shortstop had three singles and three RBI's, which comprised three of the Sheaville's seven hits. Pat Sutton and Ryan Head crossed the plate twice as a result.

During the seventh inning stretch, with Sheaville still leading 4-0, Walter asked his players to squeeze together tightly on the bench, and to listen.

"Men, we gotten us a lead here, and in the past few weeks we have lost leads, so tonight, let's not continue it."

The team nodded in agreement, having experienced enough close losses throughout the season to know the feeling without having to say one word.

On one hand, Chaz Martinez was pounding his fist into the glove, loosening the tight leather and prepping it for the fury of soft and fast ground balls and potential fly balls that would occur over the next several innings. Ryan and Pat listened to Walter intently, while Shane was sitting on the left end of the bench, dressed in the visiting gray uniform with the blue embroidered "Loggers" logo, starting off into the darkening sky in center field.

Walter focused on McBride, and the sandy-hair, fair skinned pitcher with freckles and a stout nose blinked eagerly at his manager.

"Mike, you are out. I am going to put Chris in and see how he does." Walter's eyes narrowed on closer Chris Taylor. "I need you to throw some good stuff out there, lad. I need Martinez and Head to play smart, stay in front of the ball, and Pat, you need to make sure the outfielders talk to each other. This can be the series that we get this thing here turned around boys. So let's do it."

Emotionally refreshed from the reminders, the team scurried out of the dugout and took their positions in between the chalk. Shane looked up, watching them leave one by one but maintained an expressionless face.

Over the next three innings, the Loggers followed the instructions of Walter's prescription for success. With Biggie leaning on the handrail next to the steps, arms folded, gnawing on a toothpick and Shane occasionally watching the action, the Loggers overcame a solo Greenjackets home run to win the game 4-1.

Chris Taylor was in total control. By using a variety of off-speed pitches, particularly a cutting slider and sinking changeup, Chris was able to keep the Augusta hitters from anticipating the pitch sequence. Except for Augusta left-fielder Curtis Johnson, who managed to jump ahead of the slider before it sliced to the inside of home plate and crush it to right field, Taylor forced several ground ball outs and only to balls left the infield.

Two walks and a slow rolling ground ball to second base could have been trouble in the ninth inning, but Chaz dove to his left, barehanded the baseball and flung it to Ryan who was able to spin sideways to his left and make a perfect throw into the out-stretched right arm of first

baseball player Harry Deitzler for the final two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning. Walter said after the game that it was the best double play in a clutch situation he has witnessed in a long time. Walter's demands were met and the Sheaville Loggers had a 4-1 win and, more importantly, a four game sweep of Augusta. The four victories put Sheaville at 62-47 heading into the final three weeks of the season.

The wins and turnaround was going to make news in Sheaville; most of the players were sure of that. But the team was committed to earning a chance to play Charleston in the championship game, even though nobody made that assertion public knowledge.

As most of the players were heading towards the motor coach bus for the long ride back to Sheaville, Harry lagged behind and skipped along side Shane, who was walking with his bats and glove in tote with his head down.

Shane told Harry, Ryan, and Chaz about the situation with Olivia. However, each teammate heard the news separately. As expected, Shane received a variety of responses and reactions. Harry believed the news was fantastic and that a baby would be a great way to give Shane and Joann a reason to become closer, since the distance between them resembled the deep, cavernous valley between two rolling Appalachian mountains. The flippant Chaz laughed and praised Shane for finally ending his tenuous years of virginity and shrugged off the baby as an unimportant consequence. But Ryan had said nothing, and that worried Shane. Usually, when Ryan was silent on any issue, it normally indicated dissatisfaction. Ryan Head was the only person Shane knew who utilized analytical thought to its fullest extreme. Contrary to what Ryan might believe, Shane always valued his opinion.

Ryan spoke up, interrupting the crackling sound of sneakers grinding against the loose gravel and asphalt of the parking lot.

"B...b...buddy, I know that y...you wished you could h...h...help us win, but your p...p...presence in the clubhouse has a t...tremendous impact."

"Huh, that's the least of my concerns right now," Shane scoffed, seeing the outline of the bus in the distance.

"I s...saw you look...look...looking into the s...sky and all. Y...you should know t...t...that the season is not over and you ap...appeal still has to be r...r...reviewed. W...w...we all appreciate what you have done to h...h...help the team."

Shane faced his friend, who was intently looking ahead matching Shane's walking pace step for step. Shane looked away from Ryan but knew the comments had the best intentions.

"Sometimes Harry, I think that I cannot help myself. I mean, mama and now Olivia and this baby." Looking upwards into the milky, moonlit summer sky, Shane asked, "My God, what have I done to deserve this."

"Y...you have d...done nothing. M...m...made some mistakes, but that is okay. W...we all do. B...but the important thing i...i...is not to let them ov...overtake your life. S...Shane, you are going to be a star, a g...g...great baseball player. Not t...to mention, a f...f...fantastic father. Th...things are opening up for you p...pal."

The thought made Shane grin with disbelief. "I guess that depends on who you talk to." The pitcher inhaled and exhaled a deep breath, and was frantically looking in his shorts pockets for a pack of cigarettes, but they were empty.

"It just seems like everything was going so well for me, for us, for Sheaville. Then, after that fight, it was like a snowball that just got bigger and bigger. Now Mama is out of a job, I am not pitching, Olivia is knocked up, her father hates me...and for that matter, I hate him. Ryan, let me ask you something.

"S...sure buddy." Both players stopped walking, now residing inches from the buses' flat

boarding platform.

“When those kids made fun of you a few years ago, for your stuttering, I know that you weren’t playing good baseball then. How in Christ’s name did you manage to keep going out there, playing hard, practicing, and standing side by side with those assholes?”

Ryan’s eyes started intently at Shane. His dim pupils were pulsating and his nose twitched, indicating to Shane that the infielder was recollecting and trying to remember a painful part of his past.

“I...I...I received a...a lot of support from my parents, f...from my t...t...teachers and f...from my coach. I depended on them t...t...to help me get through the t...tough times.”

Shane looked over his shoulder, startled by a noise. It was Biggie Rowan, tossing a bag of bats onto one of the loading cabins under the bus. When Biggie saw Shane, he pressed his lips tightly against his face, although Shane could still make out the silver metal wiring glistening in the moonlight, holding the catcher’s repaired jaw in place.

Ryan had shifted weight onto his back leg and was now leaning away from Shane. Pausing thoughtfully, he spoke melodically.

“Y...y...you do not have to do th...this alone. I...I...am here for you. S...s...so is Chaz and H...Harry. I th...think you need to tell W...Walter about this. Olivia w...would be cr...cr...crushed to see you like this. S...she needs you to be st...strong and c...capable. Y...you can be. A...And you will.”

Exhaust from the bus’s parking brake hissed into the increasingly damp night air. Lake Olmstead Stadium fell silent now, with most of the fans and Greenjackets players having vacated the area.

Shane patted Ryan on the shoulder and thanked him for the advice. Even though it resembled a pep talk, Ryan showed concern and interest, real interest in what was going to happen to Shane.

For this first time in a while, heading back to Sheaville did not seem quite so strenuous for Shane or the Loggers. Winning and sound advice are the perfect cure for an ailing team, complete with an emotionally bruised starting pitcher.

XXX

Sitting in the back room of Phil Rodney’s Department Store was the only place in town where Shane could simply escape from the rigors of small town life. Thanks in part to The Charleston Gazette and some town gossip, news of the Loggers’ appeal to league commissioner Bud Parker on behalf of Shane Triplet and Jason Rowan made front page news. Phil told Shane earlier that morning that many people in town figured that Walter Mann was resting Shane and Biggie for the championship game, in case the Loggers made it to the championship series. Instead, from what Phil heard from the locals in town, the news of two suspensions was something that did not sit well with many fans.

Sheaville was a community where everyone depended on each other for all types of support. That support included backing the Loggers team and its players. The thought of two players being suspended for conduct detrimental to the team was in essence, a proverbial scarlet letter on the town. One ideology remained true over time: if anyone in Sheaville disapproved of something someone else did or said that guilty person was sure to hear about it. That is what made the seclusion of Phil Rodney’s back room that much more appealing for Shane.

With the phone receiver draped over his shoulder, all Shane could do was agitate his face with his fingers. Listening to a doctor dictate the mingled, mirthless intricacies of borderline personality disorder made the small, musty back room expand under the emotion of the

conversation.

“Mr. Triplet, most personality stricken adults move back and forth between depressions and highs in cycles that can stretch over months. During the depressive phase, they experience hopelessness, loss of interest in work and family, and loss of libido-the same symptoms as in major depression, with which bipolar is often confused.”

The terms were flowing through the receiver from Dr. Robert Caliban, a clinical psychiatrist at CAMC General Hospital in Charleston, like rushing river water. For his part, Dr. Caliban was very knowledgeable about all aspects of mental illness, and he relished the chance to prattle his scholarship to patients. The doctor came highly recommended from Frank Miller. Frank met Dr. Calibran during those days when his wife was sick, often doing mental health screenings on her to make sure she was emotionally strong enough to handle the rigorous of chemotherapy and surgery. So far, Shane was pleased with the doctor’s treatment of his Mamma, but the dreaded progress report phone calls had become burdensome.

Shane was reduced to occasional groaning. At least the doctor would no that he was still alive and listening.

“The depressive curtain can descend with no apparent cause or can be triggered by a traumatic event such as an accident, illness, or the loss of a job. But in borderline personality disorder, there is also a manic phase. It usually begins with a sort of caffeinated, can-do buzz. As the emotional engine revs higher, however, that energy can become too much. The individual quickly grows aggressive and impulsive. The patient becomes grandiose, picking fights, driving too fast, engaging in indiscriminate sex, spending money wildly. They may ultimately become delusional and mad.”

“Sounds rather bleak to me,” Shane interrupted.

“Mr. Triplet, your mother has a very serious illness. It is important for you to makes sure she is receiving treatment.” The doctor’s inquisition suggested that Shane was somehow responsible for his mother digression.

“Sir, I cannot make her take the medicine. I do my best to make sure she does, but when I am playing baseball or I am out of town, there is nobody to watch her.”

Dr. Caliban paused. “Is there anyone who can check on her?”

Shane, in turn, paused and was reminded of Phil and Frank’s generosity in watching and checking on Joann, with no questions asked, anytime he asked them to do it. But Shane was reserved in making more than sporadic requests, because Shane did not have any money to amply compensate them for their time. As a result, Shane placed a sizable amount of good faith in his mother’s ability to treat herself, regardless of how irresponsible that decision might be.

“No sir, it is pretty much up to me.”

“Well, you can bring your mother in anytime for treatment. We can give the medicine intravenously and monitor her condition.”

“Getting her to voluntarily come could be a problem,” Shane reminded the doctor.

“You have my number, Mr. Triplet. I am available anytime, day or night. Why don’t you see if her condition improves, and if it continues to worsen, then bring her to us, okay?”

The offer sounded sensible, it least in the short term. “Okay, Dr. Caliban.”

“Good,” he responded. Shane could sense the doctor preparing to hang up the telephone receiver. Before he did, Shane asked one more question.

“Doctor, I need one more thing.”

Dr. Caliban seemed bothered by the request. “Yes, Mr. Triplet?”

“My, um...girlfriend and I are having a baby...”

“Congratulations!” the doctor replied feigning excitement

“Thanks. I was wondering about the facilities there for child care. I mean, in case we need to come to Charleston for treatment.

“We have one of the best neo-natal units in the state of West Virginia, Mr. Triplet,” the doctor said, proudly.

“Uh, okay. Thanks doctor.” The last thought on Shane’s mind was Olivia and fatherhood but he knew eventually the thought would become a harsh reality. Amidst those thoughts were his feelings for Olivia. Why did his feelings for her change so much so often over time? Then there was Morton Mitchell. Dealing with him was going to make the pregnancy ordeal much more tenuous.

Phil Rodney popped his head around the door of the back room. “Shane, we are ready for you and the guys to go with us to the mill.”

“Okay, Mr. Rodney, I will be right there.

Shane reached for a cigarette and a lighter. For a hot, lazy Wednesday afternoon, life in Sheaville was becoming more exciting by the minute.

XXXI

Frank Miller packaged two bottles of pills and wrapped them in a white plastic bag. Frank’ hair was slick and rigid, although his sun visor briefly distorted the face across the counter. Olivia was looking angelic with her soft hair sprightly dangling below her shoulders emanating a sweet, fragrant perfume that enhanced the smell of the entire drugstore.

“There you go my dear. That will be \$22.77.”

Olivia stuck both hands in her pockets, feverishly looking for cash. “You know Mr. Miller, daddy would not have to take these pills he would not eat so much.” She passed thirty dollars across the counter.

“We all get into trouble because of our mouths. Just think, because of our lips and our mouths, we do more harm than good. We eat too much of that unhealthy food, we smoke too much, we say nasty words back and forth. Yes indeedy. Too much bad comes from the mouth.”

Olivia smiled at Frank’s good nature. No matter the situation, Frank Miller always could see both sides of an issue. Deep down, Olivia new that Frank probably was glad her father ate too much. After all, the drugstore depends on dozens of people like Morton Mitchell each day.

“So, how have you been Olivia? I know that college is right around the corner for you. Use going to Marshall too. That is a big step. Huntington is the big city you know... lots of people and lots of things to do.”

“I am looking forward to it though.” Olivia’s reply was slightly disingenuous and Frank picked up on it.

He leaned over the counter and swiped her round chin with his finger. “So why you so drab about it, kiddo.”

Olivia hesitated. She desperately wanted to tell someone about the pregnancy but she was afraid of defying her father. The consequences could be exorbitant. Yet so far, she had kept it a secret. Nobody knew, as far as she knew. Olivia was confident that Shane remained silent on the issue as well. But in the next few months, her stomach would expand and the secret would be exposed.

“I will just miss being here. I have always spent my time here. And I will miss the people. You know you, and Mr. Rodney and Jack Busby and...”

“Shane.” Frank knew the pitcher’s name was on that list somewhere.

“Yes, even Shane.” Olivia blushed just from mentioning him. “I just feel so good when I am

around Shane. I just cannot explain it. I mean, I've had crushes on other people in school and things. Johnny Gunnoe is an example, even though he ended up being a real creep. But with Shane, it's different. It just feels right."

Frank's eyes softened while he wetted his lips. "Sounds like true romance to me."

The drugstore owner reached for his keys. "Well, if you will excuse me Olivia, I have to go to the saw mill."

"Why are you going to the saw mill?"

"We have some cleaning to do for the Fall Festival dance. You know how it is in Sheaville, the Fall Festival is important for the town."

This Thursday afternoon was going to be busy for the town of Sheaville and her residents. It was also a momentous day for the Sheaville Loggers, who were eager to improve their image following the public disclosure of Shane and Biggie Rowan's suspensions. The Loggers players would be helping the Fall Festival Committee clean and prepare the saw mill storage warehouse for the Fall Festival dance and then they were going to participate in the afternoon auction to raise money for the rest of the event.

Armed with mops, buckets, sponges, and gloves, a team of Loggers players along with the Fall Festival Committee rode in Phil Rodney's pickup truck along Central Avenue through the heart of town. The early afternoon sun had crept from behind thin cloud cover, further blanketing the earth and evaporating the dew drops on the blades of grass. Most of the stores in Sheaville featured sweating windows; an indication that the scorching heat and relatively dry conditions were too much for air conditioned panes of glass.

The road to the saw mill was seldom traveled. Although the road itself was paved, years of changing seasonal climates and human neglect left the thin and narrow concrete strip cracked and crumbling. Phil's truck bobbed and weaved on the road as the town of Sheaville grew smaller as the men climbed the ridge under the thick umbrella of the forest. Some trees managed to grow back following the closure of the mill, but the forest floor was covered with flat, round stumps. Years of deforestation had turned the once deciduous woodland into a desolate space.

Harlan Shea's sawmill was laid out in a triangular formation, with three large, obtusely shaped buildings dotting the landscape. Each building was ostensibly hoary and unilluminated. The warehouse, where the festival dance was to be held next month, was located to the right of the entrance.

The outstretched building was wedged next to a lifeless maple tree and four small loading dock doors were covered with steel plates and padlocked. The brick exterior superceded authority to cloves of ivy which ran down the length on the building. Once the men were inside, the building revealed its true character and ominous past.

"Ah yes," inhaled Frank Miller. "This place brings back memories."

The rest of the group, consisting of Ryan, Shane, Morton, Harry, and Phil were befuddled at the pronouncement.

"Edgers, trim saws, conveyors, greenchains, this place use to have it all," Frank elaborated. "All of the machine integration and lumber and log handling equipment, and waste disposal systems were placed here in this here building. Seems like only yesterday to me."

Shane could hear Harry swallow hard and felt Ryan breathing heavily down his neck as the men stood packed tightly in a group, each one hesitant to take a first step.

"L...l...lets get to work," Ryan suggested, a suggestion nobody was willing to disagree with.

For the next three hours, the men washed, scrubbed, moped, and cleaned every square inch of the warehouse. It had been one year since the warehouse was cleaned, and the dust, grit, and grime appeared to have grown worse over the last twelve months. The sloped roof of the warehouse resembled a folded piece of lunch meat, and the cavernous space between the floor and ceiling led to hollow, ricocheting echoes.

"It won't echo when we get the decorations up and more people in here," Frank said, reassuringly.

Even with a good cleansing, the workers could make out imprints where several hefty machines had exerted their weight on the cement floor. Small reddish brown circles dotted the floor and permanently stained, jagged puddles of dark residue gave a clear indication of machine oil and fluid that seemed to mark the territory accurately.

Shane and Ryan were wiping down the windowsill when Shane stumbled across an engraving on a faded red brick.

As he leaned in closer, Shane noticed some letters and names carved into the brick. The letter combinations of "RT" "HS" and "MM" were fronting one another.

Amidst dim light, Shane saw the letters. Frustrated by a lack of help, Chaz stopped wiping and stood next to Shane.

"Trip, I would like to get this done today," Chaz said, reprovably.

"Just a sec," Shane said, motioning him to quit speaking. The letters were initials, initials that were very familiar. "RT," "HS," and "MM," what did those letters mean? Faintly hearing the mayor and Phil arguing across the warehouse floor over sponges helped Shane piece together the pattern.

"Trip, what is going on?" questioned Chaz. Shane continued to stare off into space with his mind reeling.

It all started to sense. These initials were connected in some way, Shane thought. Shane looked up and surveyed the walls. The wall featured raven colored predominately throughout the east wall of the building. Shane assumed that these types of spots had not and possibly could not be cleaned.

Shane recalled the early road trip to Columbus where he glanced at the yellow note given to him by Frank. From what Shane could recall, the note featured the some of the same letter patterns that appeared on the wall, although he had no idea where he placed the piece of paper.

Shane dropped his soap sopping sponge and dashed across the warehouse floor. Chaz could not gather a thought quickly enough as he observed Shane's long strides brimming with ire.

The mayor and Phil Rodney were still arguing when Shane lowered his shoulder and speared the mayor from behind. Rolling him over on his back, Shane socked the mayor squarely in the nose, cracking some bones and sending blood spewing across the freshly cleaned floor.

Ryan and Frank scampered over to the scene while Phil tried to pull Shane away. Shane was mumbling a variety of explicatives that could not be determined. The mayor was flailing on the ground, frenziedly trying to fend off the attack.

"Son of a bitch, what do you know!" Shane screamed in a fit of rage. Why are there initials on the wall and on notes? Tell me! Tell me!"

Harry managed to grab one of Shane's arms while Frank nabbed the other one. Phil was positioning his body in between Shane and Morton, but all Phil received for the trouble was the drumming of fists.

"S...Shane, s...s....stop this n..now," Ryan pleaded.

"Land sakes, what has gotten into you lad," groaned Frank as he frenetically attempted to stop

the fight.”

“Get off of me you little punk,” snarled the mayor, wiping up dribbling blood with a clean shirtsleeve.

Shane finally rescinded, only because he was experiencing another pestering pain near his ribs. The sensation stopped Shane’s forward momentum. Frank and Ryan loosened their grip just as Chaz reached the scene.

“Shane, man, what has gotten into you. You cannot just attack the mayor like that,” Chaz said. Shane did not move, instead gawking at the mayor, his blue eyes gaping at the reclined porcine figure laying on the floor.

“He knows something. Something about me and my family. Something happened here. People don’t go carving letters into things unless it’s got importance.” Shane spun his head around and made eye contact with Frank Miller, who was wiping a bead of sweat from his chin. Frank did not notice Shane looking at him

“Mr. Miller, I saw a slip the slip paper a few months ago. The slip you gave me. Some of the letters on that note match those letters on that far wall.” Chaz and Ryan took a step back as Shane jabbed his finger into the air in an arbitrary motion.

“At my father’s funeral, we couldn’t see the body. Mama said it was because she did not want to upset me. Dad’s body was burned beyond recognition. That is why the casket was closed for the funeral.”

Morton managed to prop himself up on his elbows, exhibiting a maddened look at Shane as he continued.

“You were an electrician here, mayor. How are you connected to all of this?”

Defiant, the mayor shot back. “I do not know what you are talking about. This is ridiculous. I told you, your father was a good man.”

Shane’s white undershirt was seething with perspiration, and pain continued to internally ricochet throughout his body. But adrenaline and anger expunged the pain. Shane wanted the truth, and this time, the mayor was going to tell it.

Frank looked at Phil flabbergasted. Phil’s responded with a blank stare. Harry and Ryan stood motionless.

The entire warehouse suddenly became a courtroom. Morton Mitchell was on trial and Shane Triplet was the district attorney, hell-bent on getting the truth, once and for all.

XXXII

Olivia made sure the silver plastic folding chairs were in position and able to support the weight of the heaviest individuals. Jack Busby had asked for Biggie Rowan’s help setting up a small stage and placing some chairs for some of the town’s dignitaries.

Biggie elected to bake in the summer sun without a shirt on. As Olivia stared at him, she compared Biggie’s physique with Shane’s. She felt that Biggie’s was smallish in comparison to Shane’s chiseled body. Although Biggie’s skin was much darker and his head clean-shaven, Shane had manila perfect skin and when Olivia saw Shane, his build was enough to drive her into an ardor of sexual desire.

Sheaville residents were beginning to arrive and gather around the stage closest to the podium. From there, in a few moments, the auction would begin. The signed items, which included a baseball, team picture, and jersey, were Biggie’s responsibility. Without them, there would be no auction and probably no Fall Festival.

Members of the media were gathering as well. Reporters from The Charleston Gazette, and

reporters from WCHS and WQBE radio stations in Charleston were busily preparing for a live broadcast of the event. A photographer and a reporter from WSAZ News Channel 3 in Charleston also arrived as the crowd continued to grow.

As the preparations were taking place, on the ridge above Sheaville, the tensions at Harlan Shea's sawmill warehouse were maturing.

"Answer me! Answer my question. What does this all mean? This is some type of fucking puzzle and you are a big piece of it!"

"Nothing," said the mayor, now standing up, trying to remain reserved in an increasing tenuous situation.

Phil tried to diffuse the situation. "Guys, look, we need to get going. We are going to be late for that there auction. Sheaville is filling up even as we sit here."

Morton was rubbing his swollen nose. "I cannot wait to get back to Sheaville, because I am going to file assault chargers against you Shane! And then you'll have plenty of time to play detective in jail!"

"Assault? Really mayor..." Phil's voice trailed away.

"None of your business Phillip," Morton quipped.

Shane pivoted sideways and faced Frank. "Mr. Miller, you know what happened here. I stumbled upon you and the mayor talking several weeks ago about something. When I walked into the room, you warned him. Said it would be a matter of time before it came out. What is it? Please, tell me."

Calmly and dejectedly, Frank responded, although the disparaging glance from Phil Rodney suggested otherwise.

"It would be best if Morton told ya son, not me. I ain't in any position to tell you."

Shane again faced the mayor. This time, the mayor was trembling, toting hand with knuckles covered in dry, crusted blood.

Morton surveyed the room. The spacious warehouse seemed to expand as the moment of silence progressed. Facing a host of motley looks from everyone, Morton spoke in a detached tone.

"I was the electrician at the mill. I was the electrician responsible for maintaining the wiring of all the buildings at the mill. Roger had the most seniority of anyone that worked in the warehouse so I always trusted and valued his opinion. I noticed that most of the wiring in here needed replaced. I mean, it had not been touched since the place opened. At the time, Harlan Shea, the mill's owner, was terminally sick. Everyone knew it. Production at the mill was in steep decline and we had already lost most of our good men to out of state or overseas jobs. I took Roger for some support when I spoke with Harlan. We both tried to convince him that the wiring was going to cause an accident; you know something serious. He wouldn't listen. He said it was an expense that the company just could not afford."

"Go on," Shane said, disimpassioned.

"One night, the night before Christmas Eve, your dad came up here after a night out with the boys. I don't know what you know or have heard, but your daddy wasn't always a faithful husband. He liked the ladies, and they liked him. Roger was a good-looking fellow, and he loved to womanize."

Trying to paint Roger as a rogue lowlife did nothing to remedy Shane's contempt. Shane's eyes narrowed and his lips were pressed flat against his face.

"He came back up here because he forgot his paycheck. The men were sent home early cause it was Christmas Eve. Harlan always did that. When your daddy got here, he smelt smoke. He rushed in to see what was happening. Fire had engulfed the building. When Roger came in, he tried to put the fire out. He went and got a hose and tried to fight the fire himself. I was in town leaving the diner and I saw plumes of black smoke shooting from the mill. I rushed up here. When I got inside, Roger was there with the hose. He tried to fight it but the flames were too hot." Morton paused, swallowed hard as he felt his heart sink into the pit of his stomach.

"He began gasping for breath and wheezing. I screamed for him to get outta there, but he refused. Totally shocked, I fled to go and get help. As soon as I ran, the building exploded. Flames shot out of the building at all angles. I never saw Roger again. Later, Harlan wanted to cover it up. He convinced the media into staying quiet. I was going to lose my job if I talked. I couldn't risk that. Olivia was on the way. We tried to ignore it. In fact, Harlan rebuilt the building to try and make everyone forget about what happened here. That wall with the letters was the

only wall that was spared. The fire had consumed most of the building, but the east wall was barely burned. Those initials over there were a reminder. It was a memorial the men that worked here, to myself, and your father.”

Shane stood, his eyes awash in tears. He backtracked slowly, and Ryan stepped away. Shane did not speak, he did not breathe. All he did was stare at the mayor, lifeless, listless, with two tightly clenched fists.

“And the message,” Shane mentioned as his voice quivered. “The yellow piece of paper with the initials that Mr. Miller gave me a while back.....”

Morton’s glance met Frank’s for a moment and Morton was hoping Frank would contribute something. Frank’s head lowered slowly, and he spoke in a soft, measured tone.

“It was a note to me, telling me what had happened, lad,” Frank replied, finishing the thought. “I served all the men at the mill their medicine and the medicine for their families. It was a slip to remind me to clear your daddy’s account from Harlan Shea’s register book.”

Relieved, the mayor reached for a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his face. After a few moments, Shane broke the silence.

“You could have done more to get Dad out of that building. Instead, you fled. You are a coward! An absolute coward! Do you know what it is like to be without a father? Huh! DO YOU!” Shane’s voice boomed and bounced off the rafters and throughout the warehouse.

“Thanks to you, I’m dealing with an emotionally unstable mother. We do not having enough money for anything. Baseball is our only hope...”

“Huh, your only love? What about my daughter? Does Olivia not fit into your world?” Morton scoffed.

“GOD! You stole the future away from my mother and I that night. So now I know why you hate me. I am a constant reminder of that night; a constant reminder of the biggest mistake you ever made!”

“Let me tell you something son. We all make mistakes. The purpose in life is to learn and grow from those. I will never forget that night. But you weren’t there.” The mayor’s tone was becoming patronizing with each passing word.

“Yea, but you were, and you did nothing,” fizzled Shane.

“There was nothing I could do!” The mayor’s face was beat red, and the ridge of his nose was displaying a horrific mix of metallic blue and purple tones. “The fire was too great and had I been able to get some help, this damn thing would have blown up anyhow.”

“Hindsight is always twenty-twenty,” Shane reminded Morton, although the phrase appeared to be intended for everyone.

Feeling audacious, Morton Mitchell was determined to have the final word.

“Now you have a decision to make. What are you going to do? Can you stay in this town knowing that I am going to be in your child’s life forever? That’s just the way it is. I cannot redo or repay for what happened here, and your hatred for me will not change anything.”

“Mr. M...Mitchell, p...p...please, this i...is not helping,” stuttered Ryan, trying to begin a peaceful settlement to this crisis. Morton did not heed the advice.

“Common, Shane. You always have all the answers. Now choose. If you want to be with Olivia and your child, then I am going to be involved. If not, then that would suit me fine. But you and here are not going to run off to Huntington or Charleston or New York and leave me alone. I will always be her dad and will always be the child’s grandfather.”

“Is Olivia...pregnant?” The question came from Frank Miller, who knew nothing about the conception, but was stunned and wanted somebody, anybody to answer him.

Shane looked at everyone in the room, judging their expressions. It was truly a mixed bag of

representations.

“She is pregnant. Olivia and I are having a baby.” Shane seemed exhausted at the possibility of having to explain the entire ordeal. “We are committed to this child and we are going to be good parents. But mayor, you are wrong about your daughter. She is strong, she is courageous, and she loves me. That’s right, loves me! And if we decide to kick your fat ass to the curb, then we will and there isn’t a damn thing you can do about it!”

The mayor lunged forward, trying to reach any part of Shane’s body with his hands. This time, Phil Rodney grabbed hold of Morton’s waist, and held on for dear life. Chaz and Ryan stood in front of their friend, prepared to defend an attack if necessary.

“Enough! All of ya!” Frank screamed, finally calming everyone down. “Listen, we have something important to do this afternoon. Nobody is to discuss these here topics outside of this place, here me? I mean it too. We are here to help the Fall Festival not grind axes.”

In the midst of the speech, Shane had darted out of the warehouse entrance, marching towards town.

As the blistering afternoon sun began to set behind the dry, rolling Appalachian Mountains, the gathering crowd in downtown Sheaville was cheering and clapping. Today, the town was coming to see their Loggers and help raise money for an event the entire town relished. Not only was the auction important, but also Sheaville was preparing for a three-game series with the Delmarva Shorebirds, a series that could earn the Loggers a chance to play the Charleston Alley Cats for the Appalachian Baseball Championship.

As Olivia prepped the microphone by tapping the end of it with her finger, Jack Busby was hauling out large bowls of red punch and soft drinks, along with some hamburgers and hot dogs. The refreshments proceeds helped support the Fall Festival event, and Jack’s infamous mouth-watering hot dogs and plump, juicy hamburgers were on full display.

“I sure hope those fuckers get here soon,” Biggie noted, standing next to Olivia and observing the television and radio reporters performing final equipment checks below the stage. “It may be time to get this party started REAL soon.”

Olivia stopped what she was doing, and glanced at her watch. It was five minutes until two o’clock. When she turned around, Shane skipped effortlessly onto the stage.

With his hair ringing wet and tee shirt soaked with sweat and tinged at the top with blood, the pitcher seductively slipped his arms around Olivia’s waist.

“Shane, not here,” Olivia demanded, hearing some stammering from members of the audience.

“I should be able to hug my girl anytime I want to.” Shane pulled backwards on Olivia, raising her legs off the stage platform and causing her to yelp. He was content to say nothing about what happened at the sawmill moments ago.

A reporter from WCHS radio pressed play on his tape recorder and hoisted his microphone high into the air. As far as he was concerned, Shane and Olivia’s tussle meant the beginning of the auction.

Biggie approached Shane. “When your peter goes down in your shorts, you’re to speak first, pussy. We need to get this started. These people are going to get hot and grouchy soon, Romeo.”

Olivia rested her hand on Shane’s forearm for a moment before as he loosened his grip and sprang to the podium. Shane hated public speeches. In fact, when he was a pitcher in high school, he dreaded the thought of speaking to anyone about anything related to baseball. Now, he was assigned the task of speaking to a multitude of supporters AND members of the

media. Shane reached into an empty box sitting near the stage and slipped on a Loggers tee-shirt over his undershirt.

Stuttering, Shane managed a hello. The crowd responded in appreciation.

“Uh, I am Shane Triplet and I am, or was...or am still a starting pitcher on the Sheaville Loggers baseball team.”

The crowd once again whistled and cheered.

“Welcome them. Welcome them. Tell them the name of this event and what we are raising money for,” Olivia whispered forcefully.

“What are we here for?”

“To raise money for the Fall Festival, dumbass!” replied Biggie, whispering into Shane’s left ear.

From the corner of his eye, Shane saw Phil, Frank, Chaz, Ryan, and the mayor scramble to various positions in the audience. Frank and Phil stood in the back row, Chaz and Harry were cautiously looking for a route on-stage, and the mayor was inching his way closer to the reporters in attendance.

“We are glad you are here today to, uh, help us raise a little cash for the Fall Festival to be held...uh....real soon!”

Olivia rested her hand on her chin, rolling her eyes as she continued to squat near the stage floor.

Women and men of all ages began rummaging through their pockets, wallets, and purses, in anticipation of the auctioned baseball items to come.

Olivia slyly slipped a baseball onto the flat portion of the podium. “Here, go ahead and auction this.”

“Auction? I have never auctioned anything before,” he fired back.

“Chicken,” mumbled Chaz, who was now standing shoulder alongside Shane after making it onstage.

“Well folks, our first item is a baseball autographed by the entire team. We will start the bidding at \$50.00.”

The chatter in the crowd ceased. Everyone looked around in disbelief.

During the moment of confusion, Walter Mann approached the stage and made his way to the platform, politely shoved Shane aside. Slipping a pink envelope into the pitcher’s hand, the manager rested squarely in front of the microphone.

“Sorry for that here delay folks. I am Walter Mann, the manager of this here ballclub. We’ll start pawning this baby at five bucks. Who will give me five?”

As the crowd refocused their attention to the stage, now occupied with four confused people, Sheaville’s residents began raising their hands in unison. The manager turned auctioneer leaned over to Shane. “you just gotta have an old pro do this thing, son.” He winked at Shane, who was still not sure what had just happened.

The baseball sold for more than \$5.00. In fact, Mildred Thompson, a woman who lived in Sheaville her entire life and positively knew nothing about baseball, spent \$35.00 on the ball.

Father Keith Francisco of the Sheaville Catholic Church pledged \$40.00 for the next item, an autographed team jersey. Father Francisco had promised Olivia to buy something, since her family was faithful members of the church.

One by one, the auctioned items disappeared from the table and the money was pouring in. Walter was running the auction smoothly, leaving Olivia and Chaz to collect the money and Jack Busby to sell the concessions.

Shane spent the afternoon waiving at some individuals in the crowd, and hopping onto and off

the stage to pose for pictures with kids and zealous elderly women who found his rugged good looks too enticing to ignore.

As the afternoon wore on, Sheaville citizens filled the platform jar with tons of dollar bills in all denominations. The grand prize, a set of tickets for the Sheaville-Delmarva series was still being auctioned.

Phil Rodney purchased the Delmarva series tickets, even though he and Frank Miller shared season tickets anyway. It was Phil's intention to give the tickets to some of his loyal department store customers as a promotion.

Olivia was pleased and could not wait to tell her father, who suspiciously did not show up for his scheduled public appearance.

After Olivia and Shane quietly slipped off stage, holding hands as the half of the crowd lined up at Jack's table to purchase some cold drinks and food. As Olivia lightly kissed Shane on the cheek, the pitcher detected lights and noise approaching just on the outskirts of town. Olivia followed his gaze and detected swirling lights coming towards them. No noise was made, but Shane felt his heart leap into his throat.

S...s...Shane, you and O...O...Olivia n...n....." The stammering was coming from Ryan, who had exhaustingly sprinted towards them. Before he could finish, Phil Rodney emerged from the audience, completing the sentence.

"Shane, you need to leave. Go! Take Olivia with you. Frank and I are going to try and clear the street. Go! Now!"

Befuddled, Shane did not move. Olivia was looking around, silently demanding an explanation as the lights were now approaching the center of town.

Based on the Phil's look of dubiety, something serious was happening.

A crackling, squaking voice beamed from the automobile. The individual demanded Shane to not move. Shane shifted his body, facing the direction of the oncoming message and was greeted with a gold and blue West Virginia State Police car stopping right in front of the podium.

With nowhere to run or hide, Shane's body was unalterable.

"Shane Triplet. Please put your hands up."

XXXIII

Shane felt a rush of adrenaline zip throughout every inch of his body. Simultaneously, that irritating vibration near his stomach and ribs rekindled, firing a blast of pain that was thick, heavy, and altered Shane's unflappable position.

The pitcher grimaced slightly, then looked Olivia and Phil. Each was silent, perplexed, and stoic. Shane noticed two state police officers exiting the vehicle, with their guns drawn and Morton Reynolds cautiously emerged from the left door of the police cruiser.

Mayor Reynolds smirked at Shane as the developments unfolded. Shane responded by slowly raising his hands into an upright position.

By now, the event caught the attention of Jack Busby, who stopped flipping hamburgers and pouring drinks. He looked outward, and the people standing in line followed his lead. People began whispering and pointing, but not reacting negatively to what was taking place.

The state troopers darted towards Shane. Both men were dressed in the moss green uniforms, although it was tough to discern facial characteristics because each officer had a green hat covering their foreheads and sunglasses disguising their eyes. However, Shane noticed that one officer was much older than the other one, based on movements and physical appearance. The younger officer was more physically toned and moved quicker than the older

trooper.

The older trooper reached for a pair of glistening silver handcuffs while the younger trooper began reading Shane his Miranda rights. Powerless to do anything about the situation, Olivia grabbed onto to Shane's arm, squeezing it tightly with one hand while affectionately patting his arm with the other hand.

Morton walked around the troopers and stood alongside them, addressing the entourage and the young pitcher, his shirt tarnished with crimson blood and the bridge of his nose shattered and bruised due to Shane's right fist.

"I told you that I would have you arrested for assault. It is time you learned to be responsible for your actions, unlike what you did with my daughter.

"A...assault. Please, sir, d...d...do not do this," Ryan pleaded as the mayor directed his attention at Shane.

"This punk has caused my family too much trouble since he came here. Officers, I want to press charges. I want this kid punished to the fullest extent of the law."

Watching everything, Phil Rodney knew he had been quiet long enough.

"Morton Reynolds, I have seen some low things in my time, but I cannot believe that you are doing this. Especially today! This is supposed to be a great day for our community, and you are ruining it."

"Do not lecture me, Phillip," recanted the mayor. "I am a big boy and I can make my own decisions. Besides, I know what is best for Sheaville and removing this younger Triplet generation from this town will be better for all of us."

Pushing in between the mayor and the state troopers was Walter Mann and Biggie Rowan.

"Mayor, I demand that you drop them here statements use been making, here?" the manager demanded.

The constant chatter was causing a hush to fall over the remaining audience who gathered for the auction.

"Under whose authority?"

Biggie leaned around the mayor's portly body and peeked at his face. The catcher looked like a large, dark Goliath ready to pounce on the smaller and older man.

"Since you haven't heard, pretty boy here and I were reinstated yesterday by the ABA. We plan on beating Delmarva this week and going on to play the Alley Cats for the championship. Therefore, you ain't sending one of our starting pitchers to jail for popping you a good one, which is probably something you deserved in the first place."

Shane attempted to speak on his own behalf, but as he opened his mouth, no words flowed from his lips. Instead, he tore open the envelope Walter handed him at the microphone. All Shane could focus on was the words Shane Triplet and reinstated. The letter was printed on stationary from Appalachian Baseball Association Commissioner Tim Morrison's office.

"Why doesn't someone first tell me why daddy's face looks like it has been put through a meat grinder and why Shane is being charged with assault and what this has to do with the baseball team and this fundraiser." Olivia was puzzled, and the angst in her voice reflected that feeling.

"W...w....we were at the sawm...mill cleaning up," Ryan began, almost as if he was sharing a fairy tale.

"That's right," affirmed the mayor. "And friend here and I got into a fight over something that was really none of his business in the first place. So, Mr. Temper here decided to resolve the matter by popping me in the face."

"It had everything to do with me!" barked Shane. Phil Rodney attempted to get Shane to calm down stepped behind Shane, laying a hand on his back, but he felt the muscles in Shane's

shoulders tighten.

Shane flailed his index finger at the state troopers. "If anything, you should arrest Morton Reynolds. He is a murderer...he killed my father."

A gasp overcame the crowd. Some of Sheaville's older residents began shaking their heads disdainfully. Others were blankly looking to each other for answers.

"Yea, that's right!" Shane shouted. "Morton Reynolds is a murderer. He has blood on his hands!" My father died because of him!" He dropped his voice and stood inches away from the Morton's fractured nose. "You are a joke!"

"I tried to save your father," the mayor hollered defensively. "The building was on fire...I was by myself. I did the best I could. Your father, he wasn't a man. He was a lush and a womanizer. He drove your mother to madness. Every wonder why she is the way she is? It's because of your father. His drunken stupors, the endless affairs...it was all too much for her. You are just like him; reckless and a philanderer. You just had to have my daughter too. Well you have her. And now, a baby is on the way because of it!"

"I love Shane," champed Olivia. Shane blinked hard, not expecting her to say anything.

"You know nothing about my mother. Don't you EVER speak her name." Shane warned.

"Holy Shit! You got the mayor's daughter pregnant? Way to go pretty boy!" chided Biggie Rowan as he crept into the group.

"Fuck you Rowan," Shane retorted.

Walter finally spoke. "This has been a big misunderstanding here's all. You don't need him in jail. Period. So you can call of this here deal and we can all go home and do that," Walter reminded everyone, unsure of how the statement would be handled by the group.

"I am afraid we cannot do that sir," remarked the younger state trooper.

"Daddy?" asked Olivia, sweetly and innocently as she stood next to Shane. "Is this all correct? Is Shane's dad gone because of something you could have helped? Tell me daddy. I want you to be honest with me. This is not the time to say nothing just to try and protect me. I can handle this. You and I have been through so much together already with Mom passing away. Just talk to me. It is me...Olivia. Just please be honest and tell me."

Olivia could see large wet tears swell up in the mayor's eyes, even though he remained defiant. "There was nothing I could do."

Olivia reared back and spit in her father's face, spewing a generous amount of saliva that began dripping down his cheeks and chin.

"I do not want to hear one more word come out of your lying mouth daddy. I cannot believe you. When were you going to tell me about this? And the way you have treated Shane? God, I cannot believe this."

"Ok folks," said the older West Virginia state police trooper with a slight lisp. "We need to take care of business here. Mr. Triplet, I am going to need you to place both arms behind your back. Everyone else needs to step back."

Phil Rodney broke away from the group and shouted towards the crowd. "Show's over people. Thanks for coming to the auction but it's time to go home."

As Shane turned around, his wrists clamped together preparing for the handcuffs to be slapped on them, a loud noise reverberated throughout downtown Sheaville.

The wooden stage collapsed. Jack Busby decided to begin taking it down amidst all the commotion, but the wobbly structure collapsed.

The sudden noise startled everyone, including the state troopers. Shane looked up as well, but instead of watching he began running.

"Hey! Come back here!" shouted the younger officer. You are under arrest!"

Morton nudged Walter Mann and the older trooper. "Don't just stand there. That brat is a fugitive."

Shane began running through the dispersing crowd, dodging his way around and between crowds of people. Nobody seemed to hear the troopers shouting for Shane to stop. Shane ran hard and fast, up Central Avenue and then onto Maple Street. He had to make it home; to the small, decrepit hollow that was home. It was his only chance to escape.

Downtown, the officers scrambled to the police cruiser. Morton Reynolds ran and flopped into his pewter Honda Accord and followed the police, as the piercing sounds of cruiser sirens bounced off the mountains and echoed throughout Sheaville.

Shane turned and continued trekking home. The late-afternoon sky began to grow dark. Once he got closer home, Shane saw that the acres of grassy field next to the house had shriveled under the unrelenting summer heat. Shane kept running, past the house and all the way to a rolling hillside accented by an old, leaning oak tree.

He flopped under the tree, panting and nauseas. He dug into his pocket and lit a cigarette. The pain under his ribs had temporarily subsided, but was flaring up once again.

The sudden patter of footsteps led Shane to dive over the small hill and reach for a handful of small stones. As the steps became louder, he began heaving stones over the hill. As a pitcher, throwing stones was like throwing a baseball, except the object was smaller and could travel faster.

The footsteps stopped. Shane peered over the hill. It was Olivia.

XXXIV

"Olivia! Olivia are you okay?"

The smell of freshly burning cigarette tar trickled over the hillside as the pitcher tried to coax a response from her.

Shane scrambled from under the hill and swept up Olivia, cradling her legs using his powerful upper-body strength while maneuvering her over the hillside and under a flat patch of decayed grass under a long tree branch.

Placing her back against the tree trunk, Shane grabbed Olivia's hand and began patting it forcefully. "Olivia, Olivia! Are you okay?" he asked. Her eyes were closed and she seemed so peaceful, almost angelic.

Olivia gradually opened her eyes and grinned. She leaped from under the tree and fell onto Shane, launching him onto his back as she engaged him in a long, passionate kiss.

Olivia wiggled her fingers under Shane's drenched shirt and pulled it over his head. In return, Shane pulled Olivia's shirt off and jerked her shorts and panties off.

As Olivia began kissing and nibbling Shane's chest and nipples, he wiggled out of his shorts and boxers and lowered Olivia near his crotch. Olivia collapsed onto Shane, while his hands moved around her back.

Olivia moaned passionately and she continued to kiss Shane and caress his moist, tan face. As the passion ensued, Shane could hear the grinding sound of brakes and pattering feet near the Triplet home. It was his belief that the state police and Morton had arrived, looking for his whereabouts. And yet, all Shane could care about was pleasing himself and enjoying the moment.

Shane knew that nobody was home. After all, Mamma was in Charleston receiving treatment for her mental disorder. Frank Miller had arranged for a mutual friend to pick Joann up at Charleston Area Medical Center and drive her back to Sheaville at the end of the day.

Once the two cars sped off, Olivia collapsed onto Shane for a final time, and the young pitcher moved against the trunk of the tree once again.

"I figured that you would come here and be around here someplace. Those rocks you threw really hurt," whispered Olivia, exhausted but satisfied.

"Anytime," Shane winked in response.

Shane and Olivia spent the rest of the day watching the fading yellow sun slip behind the mountain, with just a few golden rays illuminating the ground in a brilliant dull orange.

"...I am really sorry about my father. If I had known the story, I would have told you. He never said anything to me about your family or your father. I sure wish he would have."

"That's okay," Shane whispered, kissing Olivia on the back of the head, inhaling a large amount of her soggy thick hair while situating his interlocked hands under her voluptuous breasts near the base of her stomach.

"I just needed to know the truth. And there have been clues. I just did not face them. But when we were at the mill and I began looking around...I sensed things. It was almost like my dad was speaking to me there. He was telling me that something happened there. Something I needed to know about."

Olivia jerked her neck around for a split second, looking into Shane's eyes. They were soft and relaxed, but concealing a dull pain that was eating away at his always fiery intensity.

"Where are we going to go from here Olivia?" Shane asked rhetorically.

"Exactly where God wants us to go," Olivia responded. "He has a plan for us. Right now, we are going to be family." Her speech began to resemble toddler speech. "It is going to be you, and me, and our little one. Then I can begin to tell him or her about its daddy, and what a good man and a good baseball player he is."

Shane snorted. "Yea, and how he runs from the law, is hated by its grandfather, as well as Biggie Rowan and probably half of everyone else in this town."

"No way," Olivia refuted. "We're together." She flipped over and faced Shane.

"I love you so much Shane. We are going to be okay. My dad is going to have to get used to you. But God is watching out for us. He always does." She leaned up and kissed Shane lightly on the lips. Shane pulled away after the first kiss and then again softly tickled Olivia's lips with his own.

"And what about Marshall? You have been accepted. I mean, it will be okay for a while, but when I play again...I may not be in Sheaville for the whole year. There is going to be times where you and the baby will be alone and I won't be there. The thought of me missing the baby growing and crying...I just don't know how I will feel about that."

"It will be okay."

"I wish that I had not pulled you into the mess that is my life. Everything in my life is one big screw up. First, mamma and her problems, and the next thing I know, you are pregnant. Mamma loses her job, I get into it with Biggie. Then, we are suspended, and reinstated. Now this with the fundraiser and your father...it's like everyone in my life is doomed. I am so afraid that I am going to lose everyone in my life that cares about me."

"Hey, hey..." replied Olivia, obviously concerned by Shane's doomsday tone. "You are not going to lose anyone. We all love you Shane. Maybe you are having a hard time believing that, but everyone does. I do, your mamma does. Mr. Miller, Mr. Rodney, Ryan, Chaz, Harry, your manager...everyone does. You are not in this world alone. God puts people in our life to influence and inspire us, and to make us better, stronger people."

“That is where Biggie and your father fit in, right?”

“Yes, even them,” Olivia reminded him. “Even if those people leave you, I will always be there. I will always be therefore you because I love you. And love is something that baseball, or my father, or mental illness, or the police, or anything else cannot take away or tame.”

“You are the love of my life,” she continued. “I always dreamed about meeting someone like you. Daddy believed or hoped that it would not happen until I was at Marshall, but it happened now. If you had not been so mean to me when I was delivering newspapers or when Chaz introduced us.....” Olivia’s voice trailed off and then reemerged. “My life would be empty. When we are apart, there is a whole in my heart. But when we are together, I am complete.”

Shane slid himself up the front of the tree, interrupting the conversation. “Listen, you had probably better be going. I do not want your dad any more upset at me than he probably already is.”

“Don’t you worry, I can handle him.” Shane helped Olivia stand up. She looked at Shane, almost disappointed that the moment had to end.

“Night,” whispered Shane. Olivia embraced him tightly as Shane rested his chin on her head.

“I love you,” she said and Shane watched her climb over the hillside into the impending darkness.

On her way past the Triplet house, Olivia noticed the back door was open. Her initial thought was that the police left it open when they were looking for Shane earlier. Puzzled, Olivia decided to investigate and at least close the door.

She walked up the chipped concrete steps sandwiched into the ground and stepped onto the sagging porch. Peering around the open door, she noticed a small light beaming from an adjacent room. In the shadows, she determined the entry room was the kitchen. She stepped into the room and reached for the handle when suddenly two hands grabbed her wrist.

Olivia screamed. The hands nearly pulled her into the adjoining room while nearly pulling the left arm out of socket, sending pain shooting up her elbow into her shoulder. Olivia stumbled, and when she regained her balance, Joann Triplet was standing in front of her, with a grimace on her face.

“Hey! What’s that for? Who are you?” Olivia shrieked.

An open hand smacked Olivia across the face, almost causing her to lose her balance once again.

“I’ll do the talking missy,” ordered Joann. Her voice was rigid. Shane’s mother appeared none to pleased to have a visitor.

Joann was still wearing her blue hospital gown. Olivia could determine that much from the small light on the floor of the room. Joann’s dark red hair was pulled tightly in a bun. With no evidence of makeup, the markings and indentations of wrinkles were evident.

“You must be the tramp that suckered my son into getting her pregnant!”

Pressing her fingers against her swollen lip checking for blood, Olivia obliged. “Yes, I am Olivia. Shane’s girlfriend.”

“Shane’s whore is more like it! Trash like you ought to be taken out with the rest of the garbage.”

“Mrs. Triplet, with all do respect...”

Joann grabbed Olivia by the shoulders and sandwiched her against the wall. Joann was husky and stronger than she looked, and her strength overpowered Olivia’s attempts to squirm and get away.

“Let me tell you something, Ooolivvvvia,” offered Joann, hissing through gritted teeth. “I have had Mitchell blood ruin my life once, and I will be damned if I let it happen again. You two are

the talk of the town, just like your dad and Roger were all those years ago. Think I do not know anything? I heard the entire story on the radio when I was coming back to Sheaville tonight. You dad said it all started at the mill warehouse. I know what's up there...what happened there. I then went to convince Jack Busby to give me my job back. Everyone in town was still talking about it, asking me where I was. Now, I am going to settle the score."

Joann was whisked around violently and shoved away from Olivia. In the darkness, Olivia could not determine who the individual was, but she could discern the voice.

"Mamma, that is it!" Shane demanded. "Leave her alone. Get away from her and me. You are sick and have not taken your medicine!"

Angered and yet disappointed, Joann faded into the darkness of the next room.

"Shane..." Olivia called, relived and excited to see him. She attempted to throw her arms over his neck, but he waived them away.

"Olivia, you need to leave! Now!"

"But Shane, we need to talk about this..."

"We can talk later!"

"But..."

"Out Olivia! Damnit! Just get out!"

Olivia paused. Her face began to quiver as her mouth fell forward. She bolted from the room, out the kitchen door, and away from the house.

Shane stood in the small room, placed his hands behind his head, closed his eyes and exhaled deeply.

Once again, Shane thought, another mess.

XXXV

The Sheaville Loggers versus the Delmarva Shorebirds: a three game series that would determine the fate of both of these teams. The series winner was going to face the Charleston Alley Cats for the Appalachian Baseball Association championship and the loser was going to have a long winter to think about the series in preparation for next season.

Clark Field in Sheaville was a sellout. Over 5,000 fans packed the small, rickety ballpark to witness the return of Sheaville's best player prospect, Shane Triplet. His return had been the topic of discussion at Miller's Drugstore, Ruth's Diner, Rodney's Department Store and anywhere else that a large contingent of Loggers fans gathered on a daily basis.

The reinstatement of Shane and teammate Biggie Rowan made front page news in The Charleston Gazette. Over the past several weeks, the sports stories regarding the loggers featured embedded pessimism regarding the Logger's chances of championship success without Shane and Biggie.

Bud Parker, commissioner of the ABA, when grilled about the suspensions in a feature story in the Gazette did not believe that his punishment of the Loggers' or River Dogs players was extremely harsh, but he did eventually bow to public outrage from fans all across the association as well as sports writers and broadcasters. Many of the journalists accused the commissioner of being "short sighted" and losing relevance as commissioner of the baseball league. When these stories and fan letters crossed his desk, Parker was compelled to reinstate those players or face a further barrage of fan and media disdain.

Parker was not the only man who managed to escape anarchy. Morton Mitchell also survived being thrown out of office for his antics during the fundraiser for the Sheaville Fall Festival. After the Thursday afternoon fiasco, the mayor's office was besieged with telephone calls and threatening visits demanding him to drop the charges against Shane. At the same time, they

were congratulating him on becoming a grandfather. Facing ouster from office, something Frank Miller promised would happen if a town hall meeting was conveyed, the mayor dropped the charges against Shane and decided to let his smashed nose heal peacefully.

Amidst the turmoil, manager Walter Mann never lost control of his team. He remained positive, tweaked the starting lineup and starting rotation, and made some effective managerial moves before, during, and after games, and his team was coming into the series with a 75-63 record. However, the team was 11-26 in games without Shane and Biggie in the lineup.

Delmarva also was 75-63, so the winner of the three game series would win the ABA South Division crown and face the Alley Cats for the ABA title. Sheaville had not enjoyed a championship for years, and this team was expected to erase that trend.

Shane Triplet was the game one starter. Despite his excellent physical condition and strength, the extensive layoff hindered his effectiveness on the hill.

Only once in Shane's last eight starts had he surrendered more than four earned runs, including four appearances with one earned run or less.

That was the case against Delmarva. Shane allowed only four hits, one unearned run and no walks while striking out seven batters in seven innings, but earned a no-decision. Meanwhile, The Shorebirds wound up tying the game in the top of the eighth inning before losing the game in the bottom of the ninth on a throwing error from third to first base that allowed Ryan Head to score, earning a 3-2 triumph for the Loggers.

Delmarva jumped out to a 1-0 lead in the top of the first when Ian Dennis stole home after initially reaching base on an error by shortstop Chaz Martinez. Sheaville responded in the bottom of the frame when Harry Deitzler singled and later scored on a sacrifice fly by Pat Sutton.

The game remained scoreless until Deitzler homered to left field to give the Loggers a 2-1 lead. The Shorebirds tied the game two innings later when Skyler Gaskins tripled and scored on an error by Biggie Rowan. Sheaville eventually pulled out the victory after a single and two walks off of Delmarva closer Ronnie Neal, and a throwing error by third baseman Manuel Rincon allowed Ryan Head to trot down the diamond from third base, ninety feet for the win.

The second game of the series was very similar. For the second time in as many nights, the Loggers employed an impressive pitching performance to post another win. Loggers closer Chris Taylor was moved to the starting rotation because Mason Gobbell was ill, and Taylor was impressive, scattering six hits over eight shutout innings leading the Loggers to a 4-0 win over Delmarva. Taylor registered six strikeouts and recorded only two fly ball outs. The lefthander also coaxed the visitors into 12 ground ball outs, leading to three double plays.

The Shorebirds did put together two threats against Taylor. Delmarva put together back-to-back one-out singles by left fielder Ashley Worthy and right fielder Lewis Legg in the third before posting a double play. In the eighth, third baseman Spencer Adkins reached first on an uncharacteristic error before Worthy singled, but Delmarva failed to capitalize.

Biggie Rowan was the lone offensive catalyst for the Loggers. The catcher had three singles, comprising four of the team's seven hits.

Walter Mann decided in the third and final game of the series to let the baby-faced, freckled right-hander Mike McBride be the starting pitcher in the deciding game. Even though the Loggers managed to win the first two games and were almost assured of playing Charleston for the league championship, the manager did not want to take a chance-especially after one of the most tumultuous seasons he had ever experienced as a manager.

Moreover, Walter knew that Shane could be called upon to pitch in the championship game against Charleston. The manager's decision proved to be the correct one. The right-handed

pitcher silenced the Shorebirds for most of Saturday evening, allowing just three hits and one run in eight innings of work to lead the Loggers to a 5-1 triumph over Delmarva.

McBride improved his record to 8-8 on the season by striking out three Shorebirds while retiring 13 on fly balls and seven on grounders. He had a no-hitter until Ian Dennis opened the sixth inning on a double. Dennis scored one out later when Skyler Gaskins singled to center field.

The Loggers manufactured single runs in the second, third and seventh innings and plated two tallies in the sixth. Chaz Martinez had three hits and an RBI while Harry Deitzler had two hits and a run scored.

The victory improved the Sheaville Loggers to 78-63 for the year and earned them a birth in the Appalachian Baseball Association Championship game to be played in Charleston in two days.

After the game, manager Walter Mann gathered the team in the sultry and stifling locker room to talk to the players.

As usual, some players situated themselves on the wobbly wooden benches while others stood up or sat on the stained concrete floor. In a reversal of fortune, Biggie and Shane ended up sharing a bench, although Shane faced Walter with one leg bent and drawn to his chest, purposely refusing to look at or speak to Biggie.

“Men, today I am as proud of you as I have ever been.” Walter’s voice was full and round, sprinkled with pride and admiration for his team.

“We have all been through it this year. On the field and off it. But it ain’t like we have no talent on this club. I want you to know, I am proud of each of ya. Now let’s get ready to go to Charleston and kick some Alley Cats’ ass!”

The players roared with excitement and smacked each other on the arms, legs, and buttocks for a job well done. Harry, Ryan, and Chaz all came over to Shane to show their excitement. Shane returned the gestures, smiling widely.

As most of the team rushed into the showers while others hurriedly changed out of their uniforms, Shane walked around one long row of lockers to the very end and began undressing. Biggie Rowan walked the other direction and this time meticulously approached Shane while he was looking down at his cleats.

“Pretty boy,” mumbled Biggie, expecting an adrenaline-laced rise from his teammate.

“Don’t start Biggie. I do not want to ruin our victory by having to listen to your shit.”

Biggie placed his hands on his hips, content to stand there and wait for Shane to actually look at him and speak to him.

Shane dropped his untied cleats and slammed the locker door shut. “What do you want Rowan? I swear, do not mess with me....”

Biggie rocked his head backwards and forwards, retreating slowly and visually sizing up the pitcher. “Nothing pretty boy... nothing.”

Shane rubbed his left eye with one finger and began unbuttoning his uniform. “Rowan, wait a second. There is something I want to say.”

Jason inched closer, crossing his massive arms across his chest.

“Why did you stand next to me the other day? I mean, when the police were going to arrest me, you could have told them about you and me and the fights and arguments. It would have made the case against me stronger. I figured you were going to encourage them to cuff me sooner.”

Calm and resolute, Biggie replied placidly. “Because, seeing what was happening to you reminded me of when my own father was arrested in New Jersey for cocaine possession

when I was eight years old. I never my old man ever again after that night. I did not want to see someone else I depend upon go to jail. So I figured you needed teammates to support your ass, and that's what I did."

Shane's eyes rolled from side to side as his brain began calculating and dissecting the information. When he looked forward again, Biggie Rowan was walking away, his shoulder blades protruding from the tight sleeveless shirt slipped over his body.

"Your welcome, pretty boy."

XXXVI

Shane held the telephone receiver and swiveled the circular ring on Phil Rodney's back room telephone trying to reach Olivia. The department store was not open on Sunday, but Phil had to go and balance the store's accounting books, so he agreed to let Shane use the phone in the meantime.

"Any luck?" Phil questioned from an adjacent room in the department store.

The only response Phil heard was Shane slamming the receiver against the telephone base in disgust.

"Guess not."

Shane fired from the back room and plopped down on a stool behind the counter. Reaching for a cigarette, Phil turned towards Shane, indicating with a frozen stare that no smoking in the department store would be tolerated.

Another real mess, Shane thought to himself.

"You want to talk about it, Shane? I know that you have been through quite an ordeal the last couple of weeks...finding out what happened to your dad and all."

"No thanks Mr. Rodney, but thanks for letting me use the phone. I have to get to the ballpark anyway and practice."

"Suit yourself."

Shane grabbed a glove and a draw string laundry bag containing baseballs and a couple of wooden bats and headed for Clark Field. Even though Sunday was not a traditional practice day, aside from warm-ups before a Sunday afternoon game, Shane wanted to be ready for the title game against Charleston.

Downtown Sheaville on an early Sunday afternoon was always desolate. Practically everyone in town was at church, which suddenly explained where Olivia was. For all Shane knew, she was listening with bated breath to another sermon from Father Francisco and snuggled under the arm of her father, Morton Mitchell.

The whole scenario was enough to make Shane want to smoke, which finally he did. As the nicotine passed through his lungs and the smoke filtered out from his nose, Clark Field seemed to grow smaller in the distance. The farther Shane walked, the smaller the ballpark appeared.

Once inside, Ryan, Chaz, and Harry were working on fielding drills. This included fielding ground balls, turning double plays, and catching pop flies under the blinding, intense early morning August sun. Shane walked around them and headed to the bullpen along first base, prepared to work on the movement of his fastball and breaking ball pitches.

Walter Mann was sitting in the first row of stands behind home plate. Finally noticing that Shane had arrived Walter scurried from the stands. Shane heard someone with a heavy gait coming closer, but did not react. Instead, the velocity on the fastballs increased with each pitch.

"Triplet, you all right? I mean you ain't been saying much to me or your teammates here

lately.”

“I have been busy,” Shane replied, as he continued slamming balls into the aqua blue bullpen tarp.

“Triplet, why did you not tell me or your team about Olivia and the baby or about what happened to your daddy?”

Putting some top spin on a curveball, Shane at first ignored the inquiry. Yet eventually the pitcher responded to his manager.

Stepping off the pitching rubber in the simulated bullpen mound, Shane walked over to him.

“I had to find out about everything from everyone ‘round town. That just ain’t right”

“Sounds like you didn’t consider the source,” responded Shane, exasperatingly.

Looking away and then back at Walter, Shane elaborated. “A lot has been going on. I do not know why I did not tell you about Olivia and the baby, or my father, or why my mother is so sick, or anything else. I just do not know. I guess part of me just shuts down when I am not playing baseball. I mean, Olivia wants this kid so much and she has so much faith and belief in me.”

“And you do not know how’s to take it?”

“It’s not that,” Shane snipped back. “I just feel like everyone around me doesn’t really believe in me. Everyone wants me to be what they want me to be. Olivia wants me to be some type of Richard Gere movie character, you and Sheaville wants me to win a championship for them, Morton Mitchell...well, he wants me gone. Mamma needs me to help her get better. Nobody seems to want me to be me.”

“Well, that may be cause you don’t really know yourself.”

Shane raised his eyebrows and stepped off the rubber pitching mound strip, then continued throwing.

“Son, your teammates believe in ya. They did before that fight and you getting put off the team and they do now. But if you don’t take time to talk to ‘em, then you don’t have the talks necessary to be a winner. And that goes for all of you. Remember, when you’re on that mound, the action revolves around you. The game doesn’t move, progresses, or finish until you deliver that ball to the plate. Yer life is the same way. Until you make a move, or several moves, things don’t happen. Just like you depend on them guys to back you up behind you in a game, you need them to back you up in life too.”

Shane cast a quick glance at Ryan, Harry, and Chaz as they were still working on fielding drills. He looked back at Walter. “So I need to talk to them and apologize, that is what you are saying?”

“Nope,” replied the manager. “You have three friends out in that field right now that want to know what’s going on in ya life. Talk to ‘em. Ask them to help ya...I don’t know...even pray for ya if you want ‘em too. But do not turn yer back on the people that’s been good to you in this game. These guys ain’t just yer teammates, you’re your family.”

“Another thing,” Walter continued, raising his index finger in a moment of pontification. “I need to be able to count on ya in the title game. I want you to start it. But I need ya to be strong in the mind, not just that body of yours.”

“I will be ready if called on,” Shane said.

“Good. Now why don’t ya go over and talk to yer teammates and tell him what has been going on in ya life. Don’t shut them out...let them help ya.”

Shane flashed a determined smile and tossed his glove aside and leaped over the bullpen railing. Chaz, Harry, and Ryan hardly noticed Shane approaching. Once they did, Ryan and Harry stopped moving. Chaz offered his traditional high five and flashed a traditional million

dollar Hispanic smile. Shane looked over the entire group.

“Guys, can we talk?”

Harry spoke first. “We thought you were never going to ask.”

XXXVII

In preparation for the Sheaville Fall Festival, Ryan Head managed to organize a party of volunteers to decorate the sawmill warehouse and put the finishing touches on the various celebratory intricacies.

The worker party included the four-member Fall Festival committee: Morton Mitchell, Frank Miller, Phil Rodney, and Ryan Head. Other recruits were forcefully asked to join. Jack Busby was selected along with Olivia Mitchell and Chaz Martinez. It was Ryan’s goal to find enough capable workers that could complete the job and not bring any personal baggage to the event, as was the case with the warehouse cleaning episode involving Shane and the mayor.

On Sunday afternoon, Harry and Chaz were the last to arrive on the sawmill property. Harry and Chaz had spent the last hour or so listening to Shane, being privy to so many emotions within one conversation and hearing profuse apologies about his secretive nature.

Frank Miller and Jack Busby were outside of the warehouse and Frank was designing a large box with his arms and breathing deeply the West Virginia mountain air.

Frank tipped his dark sun visor in their direction, smiling and revealing a massive pile of unorganized bushy white hair as Ryan checked on them. “We are just going over the parking situation!” he proudly proclaimed.

Ryan and Chaz went inside and noticed the rest of the committee working hard. Olivia was standing on a ladder at the far right corner of the warehouse hanging brown streams and red balloons. Phil Rodney had ascertained some old white, plastic foldout chairs and tables from the basement of his department store and he and Morton were unfolding them placing them in various locations throughout the warehouse floor.

“Looks like it is coming together,” Chaz assumed.

“D...d....don’t count your c...chickens before they hatch.”

Chaz walked away from Ryan and headed for Olivia and the step ladder. He managed to play more attention to the length and tightness of Olivia’s white shorts than anything else. “Can I give a pretty lady a hand?”

Dropping her lead under her left arm, Olivia grinned at her family adopted roommate. “I could use all the help I can get.”

“Well, let’s start with you coming off of that ladder and letting me hang those decorations. You need to rest with the little one and all.” Chaz winced, realizing what he had just mentioned. Olivia did not seem to notice or care.

“Thanks Chaz!” Olivia sounded fatigued and weary, but looked fine.

Olivia and Chaz began to trade spaces and places. Before Chaz stepped onto the ladder, he noticed the engraved initials on the warehouse wall; the same marks Shane had alluded to earlier at Clark Field.

“Take a look at these,” he said, motioning for Olivia to follow his lead. They both walked up to the markings and Olivia ran over the initials with her fingers.

“I can see why Shane was so upset. It really did happen here.”

“How are you doing with all of this?” asked Chaz. Olivia looked stumped, an indication that she did not fully understand the question. “I mean, Shane has been dealing with all of this and

everything else the past couple of weeks. How have you been handling it? I think that someone needs to ask you about how you are doing.”

“That is very sweet,” Olivia noted. “I am coping pretty well. I mean, Shane is a complicated guy sometimes and he certainly has a complicated life. It’s more complicated than I ever imagined. Of course, my father and I have helped add to those complications.”

“If you mean the baby, do not worry about it. It may have been a mistake, but it is one of the best mistakes two people can make, I think.”

“Really?”

“Yea,” Chaz added. “I mean, I am the youngest of three brothers. I was a mistake. My parents did not intend to have me. But my oldest brother died several years ago in a car wreck. If I had not been born, my parents would only have one son left. Sometimes mistakes have a way of working themselves out in the long run. How are things between you and your dad?”

“We aren’t speaking. It is probably better that way. Since all of the news about Shane’s dad came out at the auction, I cannot really deal with him. It’s like he lived a secret life before I came along, and yet he did not trust me enough to tell me. Especially when he knew that Shane and I knew each other.

Chaz nodded in agreement. “If there is one thing I have learned over the last few years, it is that adults get harder to figure out the older we get and the longer we know them.

“Daddy will come around,” Olivia continued. “It is just going to take some time. I mean, when my Mom died, Daddy took it really hard. I guess he feels that Shane is going to take me away from him too. I have tried to tell him that won’t be the case but.....and with me already completing a couple of weeks of classes at Marshall this week. Maybe it’s loneliness. I don’t know.”

Chaz smirked and climbed up the ladder. “ I will just spot you, if that is all right,” Olivia announced as Chaz reached the top of the ladder.

“Fine with me,” he responded.

As Olivia looked around, Harry was mopping the floor and Phil and her father were placing chairs around the tables and encasing the tables with paper tablecloths. Slowly but surely, the Sheaville Fall Festival was coming together.

“Ryan said we raised over \$5,000 for the festival from the auction the other day,” Olivia stated. Chaz was standing on his tip toes taping a sagging brown steamer to one of the beam and truss leggings on the warehouse roof.

“Is that right? That is not bad, considering the police showed up.”

Olivia laughed, obviously forgetting about that little detail of the day.

“O...o...Olivia, do you h...have any m...m...more sponges?” Ryan asked, approaching the two from the far side of the warehouse.

“Yea, in the car Ryan. I will go and get them.” Olivia walked across the floor, noticing a glaze surrounding her peripheral vision. Before taking a fifth step, Olivia collapsed onto the floor.

At first, Phil and Morton did not realize what happened and continued unfolding chairs, griping with one another over the placement of each one. Morton wanted to use a square and space counting system, while Phil did not care as long as the chairs were in close proximity to the tables.

When Olivia’s body hit the ground, Chaz skipped a couple of ladder steps and leaped onto the floor. By the time he reached Olivia, she was wallowing on the ground, trying to pull herself up. Morton interjected, slurring his words as he came to the aid of his daughter. “Sweetheart, are you okay? My God! What happened? Speak to me, tell me something!”

“I....I...” Olivia was dazed and confused. Chaz sat her upright and motioned for her to sit

Indian-style on the cold, prickly hardwood floor. Olivia obliged as the mayor began prying open Olivia's eyelids with his thumbs.

"It's okay darling, daddy is here, right here."

"Whew, you took a nasty tumble," Phil remarked, finally reaching the scene with Harry after a few enduring seconds.

"I...I feel better now," Olivia chirped. "I was just a little dizzy there for a second."

The mayor surveyed the crowd and made an uneducated diagnosis. "She has not been eating right or getting enough rest. She tends to forget that she has two people to take care of instead of one."

"You would not know that!" Olivia fired back in her own defense. "Part of the reason is because you have been causing so much trouble for me and Shane that I have had little time to consider the health of this baby."

"So now it is my fault that you fainted?"

"Q...q...quit it!" Ryan demanded. "I...I am not g...going through this again. C...C...Chaz, would you take O...Olivia home please? M...maybe take her to the diner f...f...for something to eat?"

The shortstop was happy to follow orders. "Sure...common Olivia." He grabbed the black Honda Accord car keys from Morton's outstretched arm.

Chaz lifted Olivia effortlessly onto her feet and then cradled her as they both left the warehouse. Everyone in the room waited until they heard Morton's car door close before they began work.

As the car sped away, down the rolling hillside into the paved ravine road that led to town, Olivia leaned over to Chaz.

"For everyone's sake, do not tell Shane about this."

Chaz did not say a word. Instead, he pressed harder on the car accelerator pad.

XXXVIII

Championship Tuesday: September 8. For the final two teams left in the Appalachian Baseball Association, it was the day that was the culmination of several events.

All of the diligence and long hours spent practicing, sweating, traveling, and playing finally translated into another game. But the game was more special than any other regular season game. When this game was concluded, there would be no more long bus rides, interminable fatigue, or the promise of another start, another victory, another hit, another defeat.

The Sheaville Loggers were prepared to meet their rivals, the Charleston Alley Cats in Charleston in the game that would decide the association champion. This was the way the season was expected to conclude.

Shane Triplet would get the start for the Loggers. His final numbers were amazing, considering the pitcher missed over six weeks because of the suspension enforced by Commissioner Bud Morrison. But Shane posted a 12-3 record, with a 1.88 earned run average. He struck out 89 batters while only walking 13. Many players, coaches, and fans throughout the league believed those numbers were worthy of Shane being considered MVP of the league. However, nobody would find out until the league champion was crowned.

The bus ride to Charleston seemed unending. The bus rolled past the state capitol complex in Charleston, the late summer sun heightening the golden domed capital like jewels on a gold crown. The AT&T building, the Bank One Building and several other large structures were the largest any Logger player had ever seen in West Virginia, despite the fact the some of the

players came from larger cities all over America Descending across the 35th Street Bridge into the Charleston suburb known as Kanawha City highlighted several Charleston businesses and local landmarks. Risk's Market and Murad's restaurant dotted the landscape on both sides of the street. The street itself was a flurry of activity, with many people shuffling across the busy intersection, zipping in between lanes of traffic heading to Watt Powell Park, home of the Charleston Alley Cats.

As the bus approached Watt Powell Park, Walter encouraged his team to be professional, especially when speaking to the press as well as the fans from both teams. Furthermore, everything taking place before, during, and after the game was a reflection on them and on Sheaville as well.

Over 1,500 Loggers fans were expected to make the commute from the small lumber town to the capital city of West Virginia. Upon entrance to Watt Powell Park, the parking lot was awash in a mixed sea of blues, grays, reds, and blacks, dividing the constituency of fans.

Shane hobbled off the bus, although he quickly regained a confident, businesslike strut that carried him across the skinny parking lot near the fenced gate designated as the players' entrance. Not more than four steps into his walking stride, Shane was approached by the Charleston Alley Cats Radio Network play-by-play man Jim Thomas. The announcer had one objective and Shane knew it: what is the internal resolve of Shane Triplet, considering this game was going to be his first championship game as a pitcher.

"So, Shane, how does it feel to pitch in such a large game after such a tumultuous season?" Thomas asked scribbling pen marks onto a mangled notepad splotted with stains.

Shane nonchalantly shrugged off the question. "Pitching in this game is like pitching in any other game. The only difference is there is no next game."

Thomas seized on the opportunity to ask another question as the pitcher lengthened his steps. "This is a big game for you also because you are going to be a father soon? Is your wife here to support you in the game?"

Shane stopped walking and looked first at Thomas, then at his notepad. "She is not my wife and my personal life is not open for your interpretation. This interview is over."

Shane disappeared behind the checkered metal gate leading onto the Watt Powell Park before Jim Thomas could manage to ask another question.

For Shane, the moment was frustrating and invigorating. He now understood what it must have been like to be Pete Rose, Chris Sabo, Rob Dibble, and many other Cincinnati Reds players prior to the 1990 World Series. They must have been besieged with questions Shane thought. The boldness of Jim Thomas just emboldened Shane to immediately race out onto the pitchers mound and begin striking out Alley Cats hitters.

Walter Mann gave a curt, but magisterial speech to the Sheaville Loggers before they took the field for the championship game. The manager, facing a disquieted group of youthful baseball players, was not overzealous in his approach to the speech.

"Boys, this ain't the end of our baseball season. No sir." Walter's accent was as thick as southern molasses. "But it could be the beginning of something special. Remember this, there's gonna be some scouts from major clubs here with us tonight, so you got a chance to make a good feeling with 'em. Yet, I want you to play good, play smart, and whatever happens out there I want you to play like champs."

The team rallied around the words of their manager and huddled close to the cramped locker room exit. They all began to chant Loggers, Loggers, Loggers over and over until they discharged from the room, resembling a cannon launching its cache into the open air.

As both players spilled onto the field, a mixture of cheers and jeers echoed from the crowd.

Shane could always tell the cheers of the Loggers fans. They were unique; loud but not overcompensating cheers that featured screaming voices full of admiration and support, not pride and arrogance. However, pride and arrogance was the disposition of the Alley Cats fans, and Shane knew it-even if he could not prove it.

After the national anthem, Shane gathered with Biggie Rowan, Ryan Head, Chaz Martinez, Harry Deitzler, and Pat Sutton in order to strategize over the best way to handle the Charleston Alley Cats offense. Walter Mann joined in the meeting, which oddly resembled a group of men preparing to establish the rules of a card game on an idle Wednesday night.

“These guys can hit, they got speed, so you all infielders need to be on your toes for nine innings,” Walter reminded them. Walter’s eyes were clear and his dark pupils swollen with a blend of adrenaline and anticipation while his fingers twitched with a touch of nervousness. Even though Walter would never admit it, he was extremely nervous about the upcoming events.

“Now remember boys, there eight and nine fellas hit into plenty twin killings...so Ryan use and Chaz here be ready.”

Both Ryan and Chaz nodded in unison, in total agreement with the instructions provided by the manager.

Walter looked away from everyone else and concentrated on Shane. A lump filled his throat and his palms featured dime sized puddles of sweat. “Stick with fast balls and then follow with off-speed stuff. If they start hittin’ the fast one, then we will mix it up. Okay boys, let’s win a title.”

The teammates dispersed. Shane looked up into the early evening sky. It resembled a crushed rainbow; palates of color scattered across the Charleston skyline as the white florescent lights began to shine a ghostly white glow onto the diamond below. Gusts of stiff breeze blew wisps of blond hair into Shane’s field of vision, which he brushed away with the stroke of his hand. With little time to notice anything else, aside from Frank Miller and Phil Rodney taking their seats along the first base side of the ballpark, the umpire signaled to Shane that it was time for the game to begin.

The season for the Sheaville Loggers had arrived.

The first pitch of the championship game was a Shane Triplet fastball that broke down and away from Alley Cats second baseman Juan Polanco. Then a slider was thrown that Polanco was unable to reach with a lower swing and extension of the wrists and arms. Finally, a knee buckling breaking ball froze the center fielder for the Charleston Alley Cats. In just three pitches, the first out of the game was recorded.

The Alley Cats fans were silenced. Their opening taunts and jokes about Shane’s problems with suspensions and his recent clashes with the West Virginia State Police provided plenty of fodder for the Charleston fans to muster up enough appropriate and sometimes inappropriate cheers to try and shatter the concentration of one of the most dominating pitchers in the Appalachian Baseball Association.

Yet Shane nixed any of those outbursts. Polanco’s strikeout brought the Sheaville fans to their feet and left the Alley Cats fans looking for their seats.

When second baseman Taylor Allen confidently crossed the chalk into the the batter’s box, he, like his teammate, faced the same arsenal of pitches that sliced the strike zone and Shane’s pinpoint control made the baseball change speeds and appear to change from a rather hittable approaching object into a aerial dancing marble.

Allen swung at every pitch and came up considerably short each time. The last pitch, a curveball on the outside corner broke away from the plate at the last possible second, sending Allen's bat into the ground a cloud of dusts settling over the space between Biggie Rowan and the home plate umpire.

Billy Rose was the next Alley Cats batter. He was a rather short, squirmy hitter with a round face and thin lips that tightly ripped across his face. His hands were rather large, but he looked more like a water boy than a minor league baseball hitter.

Shane, already perspiring, wiped the sweat from his brow with the shoulder sleeve of his ash gray jersey and looked around. The rest of the Loggers were pounding their fists into their gloves, meshing the leather into a softer, more manageable object that swallowed one hand and wrist. Chaz gave a slight wink, while Harry and Ryan managed to crack a slight grin.

Shane's first pitch to Billy Rose was meant to be an overpowering fastball that would chart a path for the entire at bat. Instead, Billy received an early sign from Charleston manager Bob Beggs indicating the first pitch may be a fastball. Rose reacted accordingly, moving the bat in a clockwise motion forward with amazing speed and strength and slamming into the ball with brute force.

The sound of a bat hitting a fastball was very distinct. The sound resembled a firecracker explosion; one that caused every person at Watt Powell Park to hold their breath collectively with all eyes watching to see the baseball's next move.

The ball kept moving and all right fielder Pat Sutton could do was watch as the baseball barely carried over the right field wall, decorated with advertisements, onto the train tracks slammed against the wall.

Walter Mann began pacing in the crowded, plainly furnished dugout with his hands folded behind his head, elbows jutting to the side. He drew his lips tightly against his face, watching as some of the bench players looked toward the fields featuring expressions that revealed uncertainty.

Biggie Rowan prepared to squat once again behind home plate and readjust the catcher's mask on his face. He noticed Shane shouting and slamming his glove into the ground as Rose confidently trotted around third base amidst a roar of thunderous applause from the crowd.

Chaz raced behind Shane and patted him on the hip. "Don't worry about it man, its just one run."

Shane looked away. Chaz was never someone who could falsely exude reassurance or praise, so Shane did not even bother looking at him.

Instead, Shane went back to the patented fastball, once again dancing the baseball inside, outside, up and away from the strike zone, forcing third baseman Nefrio Dotel to helplessly swing and stare as the ball zipped into Biggie Rowan's glove.

Only one hit and one run in the Alley Cats first, but it was a big run. Shane remembered Reds broadcaster Joe Nuxhall, the "ol' lefthander," talking about how psychologically important scoring the first run in a championship game was for a baseball team. Charleston managed to score first, although Shane made the two out of three hitters look overmatched at the plate; swinging at nothing and moving their necks around like the victims of whiplash.

Shane's counterpart on the mound, pitcher Todd Wright, was a formidable opponent for Sheaville. Wright was 15-7 on the regular season, and was regarded as one of the best pitcher in the ABA.

Wright, who led the ABA in earned run average, was the first pitcher to record an ERA under two since Guy Normand for the Asheville Tourists in the 1987 season.

But Todd Wright spent some time in July on the disabled list because of tightness in his

pitching shoulder. The tightness was not severe, but just a nagging, acute pain that rendered his throwing arm useless and could only be healed with the proverbial recommendation of "plenty of rest and relaxation."

Wright silenced the Loggers for the first three innings of the game, allowing just one hit, a single by Ryan Head. Wright managed to two Loggers hitters, including some of the best hitters on the team including Biggie Rowan and Chaz Martinez.

Shane took the mound in the fourth inning, feeling sluggish and debilitated. Perhaps it was the long layoff between starts or the sudden burst of energy that shot through his entire body at the beginning of the game. Whatever the reason, Shane had never experienced this type of lassitude.

Yet Shane would never tell anyone. Not Chaz, not Walter, not anybody. He was here to prove a point. To prove to the Charleston fans, the media, and the professional scouts that he belonged, that pitching was the one constant in his life. Despite his mama's illness, Olivia's pregnancy, Morton Mitchell's vendetta...pitching in a ballpark, in the biggest game of the season, with a championship at stake, was the reason he was here. If Olivia was right (and Shane hated to admit that she was) then God's plan was for him to be a pitcher, and a darn good one.

Shane waited for the sign from Biggie Rowan: the index and pinky fingers, extended and slid against the catcher's muscular pulsating left thigh. A curveball. Shane looked off towards first, towards a crouching Harry Deitzler who was ready to make a play should the ball roll or be thrown to him.

The hitter was Diego Hernandez. Hernandez had the reputation as being one of the most consistent hitters in the ABA. He had the strength to pull any pitch towards any part of the ballpark and the speed to outrun even the best defensive arms at all positions. For all his talent, Hernandez was loathed by the media for his enigmatic persona. Moreover, Diego was not someone liked or even respected in the clubhouse. According to all the stories in The Charleston Gazette, Diego was very dexterous on the field and very prentice off it.

Diego stood and watched the first curveball sail high. Biggie Rowan used every inch of his 6'6 frame to keep the baseball from sailing over his head and ricocheting against the backstop.

The next signal from the catcher to the pitcher: a fastball.

Three fingers pointed away from Biggie's left thigh was the sign. Shane's shoulder was now tingling, with restive muscles ready to violently shrink and expand to propel the ball with savage force towards the batter.

The next pitch was perfect; right on the outside corner for a strike. However, Shane would throw three straight balls before Hernandez smacked a slider into the gap in left center field. The outfield had been playing at "home run depth" because Walter Mann instructed them to respect Diego's power. The move caused large gaps to be created between left, center, and right field and Diego Hernandez exploited the holes to his advantage.

By the time Chaz Martinez cutoff the throw from the outfield, Diego slid into second base with a standup double.

The next Alley Cats hitter, Brock Yancey smacked a soft ground ball near Ryan Head at second base after a four pitch, two balls, two strikes count, but Ryan took his eye off the ball for one moment. Ryan's split second decision caused him to bobble the ball, and the toss to Harry Deitzler at first base was late. Now Shane faced runners at the corners with no out as Diego Hernandez now stood on third base.

The inning did end, but not before Todd Wright managed to rip a 0-2 curveball down the right field line, scoring Hernandez. Pat Sutton played the ball perfectly, only allowing Wright to

reach first base. Nevertheless, Sheaville was down to the Charleston Alley Cats 2-0 on the road, with the game almost half over.

Charleston's strategy was to ride Todd Wright's arm to the championship. With a mostly home crowd of 5,319 fans at Watt Powell Park, the fans could sense end was near for the Sheaville Loggers.

Sheaville had other intentions. Chaz Martinez ended the hitless and scoreless streak for the Loggers with a solo home run in the top of the fifth inning. Harry Deitzler sent a one ball, two strike changeup pitch into the spacious left field corner of Watt Powell Park, scoring Shane Triplet, who had managed to get on base thanks to a six minute display of patience at the plate.

The game was tied 2-2. Shane, meanwhile, did settle down. An appropriate mix of fastballs and off-speed pitches, as prescribed by Walter Mann and relayed by Biggie Rowan, confused the Alley Cats hitters for the rest of the game.

Billy Rose struck out twice. Brock Yancey was limited to two fly ball outs and Diego Hernandez walked once and hit into an inning-ending double play in the seventh inning.

Alley Cats starter Todd Wright eventually left the game after 8 innings in his seventh home start of the season allowing just two runs while scattering five hits. Wright had managed to consistently work at least 6 innings all season long, so Walter Mann and the Loggers knew that he would be in the ball game for quite some time.

In the top of the eighth, Lee Ramsey replaced Todd Wright. Ramsey was a pitcher that did not feature an overpowering arm like Shane and Todd, but relied more on pitch control and accuracy to regulate hitters. He was prone to making some mistakes, especially when he got behind hitters. At times, his slider would be left in the middle of the plate, a deadly mistake for good hitters which allowed them to amass plenty of hits and runs.

Ramsey's responsibility was keeping second baseman Ryan Head, third baseman Rex Cooper, and catcher Biggie Rowan off the bases. Since August, the bottom of the order for Walter Mann's Loggers had been a pleasant surprise. Although the manager did not like to tinker with the lineup, when this combination and batting order was put together, Sheaville finally had some power and speed at the bottom of the lineup. This gave the Loggers the potential to score runs frequently, instead of every few innings.

Ryan Head swung at two bad pitches in the dirt and then totally missed one of Lee Ramsey's sliders that placed in the middle of the strike zone. Rex Cooper did not miss, however. Ramsey made the mistake of trying to slide a breaking ball over the inside corner of the plate, which Cooper pulled and dropped into left field for a base hit.

When Biggie Rowan came to the plate, Ramsey's demeanor on the mound changed. Lee was a wiry, lanky pitcher with long legs and protruding knees and skinny arms with relatively large hands. His jet black hair hung underneath the back of his baseball cap and bounced across the base of his neck every time he moved in a specific direction.

Biggie sensed fear on the faceless expression of the pitcher. Ramsey spent several seconds on the mound climbing and dismounting from the rubber and causally flipping a chalk bag around his wrist. When the umpire forced Ramsey to step onto the mound and deliver the first pitch, the pitcher responded by drilling Rowan in the arm with a sailing fastball that sliced inward like a golf ball caught in a stiff breeze.

The umpire immediately stepped between Biggie and Bill. Both umpires had received specific instructions from ABA Commissioner Tim Morrison not to allow any type of distraction or fighting between players and managers, players and players, or players and fans. Walter Mann skipped onto the infield watching to see what was going to happen. The home plate

umpire warned Ramsey that another hit batsman would lead to an ejection.

With two men on and nobody out, Ryan Head proved that he has a flair for the dramatic. The first baseman, the chairman of the Sheaville Fall Festival Committee, drilled a Lee Ramsey change up into center field, deep enough that Rex Cooper was able to score from second, just under the outstretched hand of Alley Cats catcher Kelly Asbury. The single gave the Sheaville Loggers a 3-2 lead, heading into the ninth inning.

In the bottom of the ninth, Shane once again began to lose control on the mound. His fastball had clearly lost some of its overpowering velocity, which drew the ire of the Loggers fans and the joyous applause of Alley Cats fans. In addition, his curveball was not moving right to left across the strike zone, and Alley Cats hitters were either watching the baseball miss the strike zone entirely or waiting for one to linger down the middle of the plate and smashing the ball all over the ball park.

Shane managed to get two hitters, Taylor Allen and Billy Rose, to hit two consecutive shallow fly ball outs but the bases were loaded. Two straight singles and one walk, Shane's fifth of the game, figuratively "set the table" as Walter Mann called it, for Diego Hernandez. Hernandez, now beginning his fourth appearance at the plate, was 3-4 with 2 hits, 1 RBI, and one walk. Both hits came off of Shane Triplet's curveball and slider, so this presented a unique quandary for Walter Mann. With Diego being able to hit Shane's off speed pitches, the only pitch Shane had left in his repertoire was the fastball. But after 92 pitches, Shane's arm was wearing down, and the tingling in his elbow and shoulder reminded the pitcher of just how hard and how long he had spent on the mound.

Walter Mann approached the umpire and asked for Biggie, Rex, Harry, Ryan, and Chaz to join him. Shane saw them converge on the mound like they were prepared to lead a coup to remove him. Shane glanced for a moment at the press box above Watt Powell Park. The long, rectangular brick-red press box was filled with faces, albeit unrecognizable ones. Shane could not help but wonder where was the scout for the Cincinnati Reds? Where was he sitting? Was he pleased with Shane's performance? Instead, all Shane noticed was an endless array of expressionless faces and large heads, looking towards the diamond, scribbling and typing feverishly.

"How much you got left Shane?" asked Walter, his voice hoarse but certain.

"I can get him out," Shane said calmly, although he did not look Walter in the eye because he was watching Biggie Rowan's round eyes staring at him, almost silently daring him to stay and throw to Diego Hernandez.

Biggie took his eyes off of Shane and surveyed the rest of the infield. Rex's mouth was drawn to one side as he tapped his left foot. Chaz shifted his weight to one foot and stood with his arms folded. Ryan and Chaz were rubbing shoulders, and their faces held two blank expressions that could not be discerned without some sort of telepathic maneuvering.

"He's done, skip," Biggie interjected. "Pretty boy has been losing it for a while now."

"Wait a minute!" Shane refuted in protest.

"We are trying to win a championship fucker and we do not have time for you to try and be Superman and cost us the game."

Shane tried to gauge a reaction from Walter, but the manager was prepared to let the debate continue.

"Granted, I may not have overpowering stuff like I did three innings ago, but I can get him out. Trust me. Let me do this."

"Why, so some scout sitting upstairs will give you a free pass to double-A ball?" Biggie asked. Ryan inhaled and exhaled deeply, and Harry groaned indiscreetly.

Shane noticed an urgent, whiny tone was overtaking his voice.

“Coach, Just let me get him out. I can do this. I really can.”

“That is bullshit and you know it!” exclaimed Biggie, his tall frame now wobbling under the weight of the catching equipment and standing on the right slope of the pitcher’s mound. Biggie shot a glance at Walter. “I have been catching all your pitches. I know when a guy has the stuff and when a guy does not. He doesn’t have it. Now we can sit here or we can win this damn game and go home.”

The veins in Shane’s neck and arms pulsated with fury. “I think what is really at work here is this bastard doesn’t want me being the feature story in this game.” Shane looked back at his teammates for confirmation of the statement, but they continued to display deadpan expressions; silent, motionless.

“Christ, I want to win this game as much as you do! I swear! I really do!”

Those words resounded in Shane’s ears like fingernails to a chalkboard. The face of Olivia popped into his mind for a brief moment.

All Shane had to do was defend her that night when Mama was out of control, when she slapped Olivia. And yet, he sent her away. No explanation, no justification. In fact, Shane had not spoken to or heard from Olivia since the incident. Shane called, dropped by her house, waited for her at Ruth’s Diner, or Phil Rodney’s department store, but she was nowhere to be seen. Even more discouraging, nobody had seen or spoken to her. By now, she was probably at Marshall, taking classes and meeting new people. Finally away from her father...

The home plate umpire came to the mound and broke up the conference, jolting Shane’s thoughts back into the present. Walter had to make a decision. He looked at Shane; sweating, dirty, dusty, fatigued and wondered what to do or say. Biggie Rowan once again towered above the group, but his look was more distant, more serene. Clearly, the catcher wanted Chris Taylor to warm up, come out, and end the scoring threat.

Shane’s blue eyes crystallized under the clear white light. The early evening moon had asserted itself in the high sky brilliantly and was illuminating the ballpark, revealing all the intricacies of the Watt Powell’s architectural design.

Shane was silently pleading with one beseeching glance for Walter to let him stay, but knew it was the manager’s decision, and Walter was the manager; he would make the final decision.

Walter fiddled with the tan buttons on his uniform and surveyed the entire circle gathered around the pitchers mound. These players had carried the team. Even when Biggie and Shane were suspended and feared to be lost indefinitely, everyone played beyond their abilities, beyond their potential.

“This bunch started it, and use going to finish it. I’m gonna get Taylor loose...just in case. And Triplet’s gonna finish it. Not a peep from you Biggie. My mind is made up.”

And with that, Walter jogged away from the assembly, back into the dugout. Chaz smacked Shane on the back with his arm and Harry quietly hissed “yes!” as he ran to first base. Walter motioned for Chris Taylor to go to the bullpen and begin warming up, but the statement had been made. This game was Shane’s game to win or lose.

The first pitch to Diego Hernandez was a ball, followed by two more balls, running the count to 3-0. Biggie Rowan was seething quietly behind home plate and the looks he was shooting towards Shane at the mound could kill if they carried any type of ammunition.

The next decision by Diego Hernandez was controversial. Diego received instructions from Alley Cats manager Dave Cortez to take the next pitch. The instructions were clear: do not swing; stand and watch the pitch no matter what. Hernandez did as instructed, and Shane mustered up enough strength to pump a fastball down the middle for one strike.

Walter Mann knew that pitch changed the entire at bat. If he was going to take one pitch, perhaps he was going to take another. Watching Dave Cortez from the dugout, Walter saw the identical sign. In turn, the Loggers skipper signaled to Biggie to have Shane throw another down the middle fastball. Biggie turned his head away and back towards the visitor dugout, making sure he saw the right signal. Walter motioned again, and Biggie relayed the sign.

By now, Shane's arm was afflictive. Every muscle, tendon, and strand of cartilage throbbed. For a moment, it felt like Shane's arms were going unhinge from the ball and socket joint in his shoulder. Shane got the sign. As he leaned back and prepared to discharge the baseball, he noticed a motioning shadow to his left. Normally, Shane paid no attention to anyone in the stands, at least until the game was over. But this time, he could not help but look to see who was catching his attention. When he looked, he saw Olivia, more noticeably pregnant, waddling towards a seat in front of Phil Rodney and Frank Miller near the first base stands. She did not waive or motion towards Shane, but took her seat quietly and politely.

Shane's mind was awash in thoughts and emotions. Maybe Olivia came to tell me that she got my messages; heard that I was looking for her. Why was she not at Marshall? Was something wrong with the baby? Does her father know she is here? Whatever the reason for her appearance, Shane felt a calming reassurance sweep over him, unlike any feeling he had ever experienced as a baseball player. With Diego Hernandez standing in the batter's box, digging his cleats into the dirt and spitting profusely, Shane unleashed another fastball right down the middle of the plate for strike two.

Now the Alley Cats base runners would be moving on a 3-2 count with two outs. Walter again watched Cortez's signal and the Loggers manager called for another fastball, knowing that Diego would be "taking" all the way.

When Biggie signaled for the fastball, Shane nodded in approval, not risking another conference at the mound. Shane reared back, peered at Olivia and Walter, both sitting and standing respectively, piously watching, waiting, anticipating. The pitch instead was a slider.

From behind home plate, Biggie Rowan noticed the pitch was moving, sharply down and away from the strike zone. Judging by the rotating laces on the baseball, it was going to be a slider. But Biggie had positioned himself for a fastball, and awkwardly managed to reposition himself to fetch the slider with his glove. He managed to catch the ball, and hold the glove in place, but an inch off of the inside corner of the plate.

The home plate umpire felt the pitch was good enough. He yelled "strike three!" and flailed his arm, indicating Diego Hernandez was out of strikes, ending the inning.

Shane quickly left the mound, totally spent of any and all energy. Everyone in the field and in the dugout congratulated Shane, some people with verbal approval, some with physical contact such as hugs or forceful pats.

The Sheaville Loggers fans leaped over the concrete wall separating the stands and home plate and ran to embrace the champions of the Appalachian Baseball Association. It was customary for the winning team to be presented the trophy by Commissioner Bud Morrison, but the presentation was an afterthought for everyone involved.

Most of the Charleston Alley Cats fans were stunned sitting in the stands. Mouths open, tears forming in the eyes of some of the wives, girlfriends, friends and family members of the players arranged like an assembly line of disappointment. Others stormed out of the stadium, eerily similar to the Loggers fans charging out of Clark Field after Sheaville's opening day loss. This time, Jim Thomas' voice was blared over the loudspeakers after the game in a tone that was cavalier, but dispirited. He painfully recapped the game, obviously not expecting the Charleston Alley Cats to leave Watt Powell Park without the championship trophy.

Walter approached Shane, chewing on his lower lip. "Son, the next time I give use a sign, dog gonnit you'd better do it!"

Shane grinned and noticed the wrinkles in Walter's forehead subsiding, a sure sign that anger was not his predominant emotion.

"Yes sir!" Shane replied, saluting the manager mockingly.

XXXIX

Shane did not see Olivia after the championship trophy presentation. As soon as the final out was recorded, it was almost as if Olivia just vanished from her seat. There was very little evidence that she had even been at the ballpark other than Shane's memory and Phil Rodney and Frank Miller's assurances.

Commissioner Bud Morrison presented the Sheaville Loggers with the Appalachian Baseball Association Championship trophy. It was a great moment for the little dormant lumber town of Sheaville, West Virginia. Commissioner Morrison awarded Shane Triplet with the Most Valuable Player of the Game award. It was the first time that a player from Sheaville ever received the award.

The bus ride back to Sheaville was one of the most pleasant experiences of Shane's life. Everyone was talking and congratulating one another, except Biggie Rowan who took his normal seat near the back of the bus, closest to the bathroom.

When the bus arrived on Central Avenue, it pulled up alongside Ruth's Diner close to midnight. Even though many parents and children would be going back to work and school the next day, the town gathered to welcome the victorious Loggers home.

One by one the players crept down the steps of the bus and were greeted by cheers, congratulatory remarks, and even some confetti provided by Frank Miller. Shane did not see Olivia though. He surveyed the entire street, looking in storefront windows, behind parked cars, and in between crowds of people but there was no sign of her.

Shane's body was listless. It ached, literally from his enervated right arm to the tips of his toes. In addition to the aches and pains, Shane was continuing to suffer from shots of unblunted pain under the rib cage, although it was not as intense as before. It was Shane's intention to be examined by a physician the next time that Mama had to be taken to Charleston Area Medical Center for psychiatric treatment.

The next evening was the annual Sheaville Fall Festival. The event was the crowning achievement for the town; an event that residents waited the entire year to attend. The festival this year was filled with controversy. Everyone in town heard about the situation involving Shane and Morton Mitchell, both during the warehouse cleanup process and the auction.

Despite the setbacks, Ryan Head had the entire Fall Festival Committee at the warehouse two hours before the first guests would arrive. The goal was to make sure everyone knew their responsibilities heading into the evening.

The group sat down at one of the peach cloth-covered tables at the front of the warehouse, near the entrance. The warehouse had magically been transformed. The stained floor glistened under the polish and wax applied by Morton and Phil during the past week. The entire warehouse was full of bouquets of fresh flowers covering all shapes, sizes, and colors. Olivia was responsible for selecting the floral arrangements, and each small and large basket of flowers produced a fresh aroma that erased the typical repugnant, stale warehouse odor of old machine parts and burnt oil.

The tables were arranged in a figure-8 pattern with the middle of the floor reserved for dancing. Olivia also took the initiative and suggested hanging peach, orange, and brown colored streamers across the walls and interconnect them with the trusses hanging from the warehouse ceiling. Hanging those streamers was quite an undertaking; it could not have been accomplished without Phil and Frank volunteering to scale a ladder and hang them.

“S...s...so F...Frank, y...you are going to t...t...take care of p...parking. M...m...mayor, I want you to man...manage the refreshments t...t...table and Phil y...y...you can take care of the m...m...music and I will h...handle any p...problems.” Ryan’s cheeks were fuchsia and his lips quivered as he spoke.

“Why do I have to manage the refreshments table?” asked the mayor in a shocked and pitiful tone of voice.

Frank Miller leaned back and peered under the table at Morton’s protruding stomach. “Sounds to me like a good pick,” he chuckled, drawing a sinister laugh from Phil Rodney as well.

The mayor scowled and looked away from the group.

Olivia sat in a seat on the far side of the table, just away from the rest of the group. Leaning forward, wringing her hands, she barely heard any of the discussion or Ryan’s instructions. All she could think about was Shane and how stately he looked during the championship game.

She knew that Shane had tried to reach her. Phil Rodney admitted that Shane had tried to call her house on several occasions using the telephone in the back room of the department store. Olivia would also peer out of the living room window, watching Shane as he purposefully approached her house, ring the doorbell, banging on the door, and call out her name.

Now, Olivia sat without Shane close by. Olivia’s black sequin dress was low-cut in the front and a bit snug around her waist. However, the dress was cool on her skin, and even though September had arrived in Sheaville, the heat and humidity always lingered well into the middle of the month.

Frank saw Olivia sitting in a sullen, slumbered position in the chair and walked over to greet her. “You’re the prettiest lady and you look so sad.”

Olivia let a strangled smile fall from her face. “Thanks, Mr. Miller. It feels funny being surrounded by everything and soon everyone in town and yet feel lonely.”

“Well, I bet I can figure who’s causing that empty feeling in your stomach. He will come your way. Be ready for it.”

She rolled her shoulders. “We had a fight. Or rather, Shane’s mom and I did. When I thought I was doing the right thing and he defended her and told me to leave his house. That hurt. That really hurt. He did not apologize for anything or say anything to me other than leave.”

Frank scratched a thatch of his hair while pulling up a seat next to Olivia.

“Ah, gotta be easy on him. It was a good season for him and the Loggers, the best one this town has seen in a while. You know, Shane did what he was supposed to do. He came here to help the team win, and by golly, he did it. Through it all, he did it. And you know something... he’s gonna do it for you too.”

Frank softly placed his left hand on Olivia’s dress, near her abdomen. Smiling warmly, he added, “and this one too.”

“It’s just so hard.”

“Anything in life worth having’s that way.”

“Well, that doesn’t make it any easier.”

Frank bobbed his head in agreement. “There’s not shortcuts in life neither. Sometimes we’d like them, but then a choice is needed. Which path do you choose? Both of your paths had different turns, but they came together.”

Olivia listened, but her brow furrowed at Frank's last statement. "That sounds like a sentence from a Hallmark card."

"We have them on sale, two for a dollar this week."

Olivia chuckled. Frank stood up. "I'd better get a movin.' Chin up. He will come when he's ready for you. Remember, be ready."

As time passed, the guests began filing into the warehouse. Some Sheaville residents came in couples, others decided coming along was fine. Immediately, all sets of eyes fixated on the decorations and how the warehouse resembled a grand ballroom. The instrumental music in the background was a light and sprightly, and some immediately took to the dance floor in the center of the warehouse.

Morton relished another opportunity as the mayor of Sheaville to exhibit the perfect mix of graciousness and candor in greeting guests. Having been a Sheaville public figure during an election year before taught the mayor that every interaction with constituents was helpful.

Soon chatter, laughter, and a dull hum engulfed the Sheaville Fall Festival had commenced. Before the guests become fragmented into different social circles throughout the warehouse, Phil Rodney glided his way through the crowds to the microphone located at the north end of the building.

Dressed in a tan sports coat with navy slacks, Phil pecked the microphone lightly with his left index finger. The microphone emanated a loud thump that reverberated throughout the warehouse.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen," he said proudly. "Welcome to the annual Sheaville Fall Fesitval."

The crowd, now turning their attention forward to the microphone, clapped and cheered loudly. "Before we continue, we need to recognize the hard work of some folks who made this event possible."

One by one, Ryan, Morton, Olivia, Frank, Chaz, and Jack Busby were called to the microphone. Greeted by soft applause, they all grinned and posed for a picture.

Phil once again spoke. "Now, I would like to call up the manager of your Sheaville Loggers, Walter Mann."

The audience roared with applause. Walter sauntered his way to the front of the room, blushing slightly. His aqua blue dress shirt and white slacks with tennis shoes exemplified comfort over casual dress. Since Walter was never comfortable speaking in front of groups of people, he spoke softly and timidly, while giving Phil a frustrated glance.

"Thank ya. I just want to say how proud I am of our kids and what they did this year. It ain't easy, a baseball season. But, the ABA baseball title belongs to you, Sheaville. Thank ya!"

Walter quickly looked for the fastest escape from the microphone as the cheers and applause made the steel trusses in the warehouse waiver slightly. Phil patted Walter on the back and the manager exchanged handshakes with Ryan and Chaz before disappearing into the audience.

In one swift pivot, Phil wrapped right cheek around the microphone handle. "Thank you again for coming. Enjoy the evening."

As the music once again began playing, Olivia dispersed from the group and was frantically looking for Shane. One side of the room featured a few townspeople enjoying Jack Busby's appetizers. On the far right side of the room, near the microphone and speaker sound system, Mabel Hugart was whispering something into another woman's ear as she listened intently. Her father was still standing in the middle of the room greeting the guests. But Shane was no where to be seen.

XXXX

Shane clumsily slipped a set of brown Allen-Edmonds shoes over his feet, while balancing himself along the hillside leading to the warehouse.

Grunting and cursing under his breath, he could feel the soles of his feet damp with sweat.

“Damn shoes,” he groaned.

“Those shoes are name brand honey and Phil Rodney gave those to you as a present for winning that award. You should be appreciative of the gift,” Joann Triplet said, walking alongside her son.

“I am grateful mamma, but God, these shoes are tight and heavy.”

“Compared to what you wear to play baseball, I’m sure they are. I am just glad that you invited me as your date tonight. I do not get out too much anymore.”

Shane finally got both shoes on and he cradled the replaced tennis shoes under his arm.

“Mamma, Jack’s going to be here tonight. I think you two should talk about your job.”

Joann bit her lower lip. “He will not hire me back. I know Jack. He’s loyal but he can hold a grudge if you’ve earned it.”

Shane and Joann reached a small plateau just outside of the warehouse. Shane stopped walking. Joann took a few more steps before realizing Shane was behind her. She stopped walking forward and backpedaled. She looked astonishing. Joann’s thick red hair was lying softly past her back while her light pink skirt and top revealed an hourglass figure that was often hidden under a waitress uniform. Joann’s skin was bright and full of color.

Shane’s eyes expressed concern. They resembled a still blue lake that had just been disturbed by the wind. “Mamma, that job gave you purpose, gave you something to do. I know you liked it, even though you say you didn’t. What’s the worst Jack can say if you ask?”

“No,” Joann replied tersely.

Shane felt his heart flutter as he began walking towards the warehouse.

“I do not know if I can go back here, Shane, your father...”

“I know Mamma. We talked about this, remember. We cannot let what happened to dad here bog us down. Dad would not want that for us. So let’s go in and have a good time, okay?”

Frank Miller and Ryan Head approached the couple. “S...s...Shane, g...good to see you and hello M...M...Mrs. Triplet.”

Joann did a slight curtsey maneuver towards Ryan. Joann smirked at Frank.

“Frank, I never thanked you for making sure I got the help I needed in Charleston and for checking on me and just doing everything out of your way to help me.” Her eyes softened as she spoke.

Frank raised the trademark sun visor over his forehead. “Well, that’s what you do for people you care about.” Frank looked at Shane and winked.

“She’s doing better guys, really.” Shane reached out and softly touched Joann’s shoulder.

“Mamma is going to take her medicine everyday and follow the doctor’s orders everyday. Right Mamma?”

Joann widened her stance and placed her right hand on her hip. “Yes, and I am not going to let mental illness ruin my life.”

“Good for both of ya,” Frank said, approvingly.

“B...better get inside...t...t...party’s already s...started.” Ryan’s stuttering appeared very problematic for him this evening. Shane knew that meant that Ryan was probably nervous.

Shane wrapped his arm around Joann and proceeded inside. When they entered the warehouse, their senses were awash in fragrances, fresh food, music and dancing. Pockets

of people doing different things were scattered throughout the floor, resembling ink blotches on a sheet of paper.

“Honey, I’m thirsty. Want something to drink?”

“No, Mamma. I’m fine.”

Shane surveyed the floor. Frank Miller was dancing with Mabel Hugart, Phil Rodney was talking with Ruth Busby, and Chaz was pacing in circles throughout the warehouse. During one loop, he stepped on Shane’s foot, placing a faded, dusty print on the toe of the Allen-Edmonds shoes.

“Watch it Chaz. Those shoes are expensive!” Shane yelled, feeling a pain run through his right toe.

“Ah, don’t worry about it. There is no pune-tang here anyway, unless you like old women.” Chaz’s voice was downtrodden and disappointed. “Hey, there is someone hear that has been looking for you.”

“Olivia?” Shane asked curiously.

“Bingo,” Chaz replied.

Shane’s mouth twisted as he ran his hand through his hair. “Common Trip, go and talk to her,” Chaz said emphatically.

“She does not want to talk to me. If she did, she would have done it by now.”

“That’s the thing about people and relationships. Nobody wants the job of speaking first. Take it from someone who has seen plenty of relationships, communication is the key.”

Shane smiled. “Is that why you main unconditionally single?”

“That and for other reasons.”

Olivia was standing near the refreshments table when Shane noticed her. She looked back as Shane’s eyes peeled away. Olivia did not react. Instead, she turned her head around.

Chaz began walking another circle around the dance floor. Without warning, the background music changed. Bryan Adams’s ballad “Do I Have to Say the Words” melodically echoed through the speakers. Shane’s went over to Olivia and grabbed her. She gasped and he pulled her close to him.

“Let’s dance.”

XXXI

Holding Olivia by the wrists, Shane dragged them onto the dance floor. Shane awkwardly positioned his left hand on her waist and then held his right hand tightly around her right hand. He carefully negotiated his proximity around her now swollen stomach.

“Whoa,” Olivia gasped.

“You came to Charleston to see the championship game,” Shane said, talking in the middle of his thought. “Why didn’t you see me after the game or talk to me before it started?”

Dodging the question, Olivia replied “Shane, you were terrific. I was really proud of you.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me that yourself.”

Shane leaned closer towards Olivia. He remembered how good it felt being in Olivia’s arms. She smelled sweet and her skin was always so soft. Shane nuzzled his cheek in her hair and breathed deeply.

“Shane, I am sorry that I made you choose between you and your mother.” Shane pulled back and he could hear Bryan Adams begin the chorus of the song.

“You didn’t. I did not have to choose. I chose you both. I will always choose you both.”

Olivia rested her head on Shane’s chest. The shirt was a bit moist, but Shane smelled like lye

soap. "I was so afraid that you were going to abandon me after I got pregnant. I have been so afraid all along." Olivia felt tears flood the corners of her eyes. "I just do not want that fear anymore."

Shane placed his hands on Olivia cheeks. From a distance, Morton Mitchell looked on with a disdainful expression. Frank Miller walked up behind the mayor and observed Shane and Olivia's tender moment.

"Leave it 'lone mayor. She's ready."

Morton scoffed and folded his arms. Meanwhile, Shane leaned in and gave Olivia a passionate kiss. Olivia interlocked her fingers in-between Shane's while they kissed.

Bryan Adams song was echoing the phrase "how good we are together" when Shane pulled away from the kiss. "I thought maybe you had met someone at Marshall."

Olivia flashed a bright, wide smile. "Strike one."

Shane reached into the inside shirt pocket of his yellow Pollo shirt, another gift from Phil Rodney. "Hey, I have something for you."

Shane opened his palm and unlocked his fingers. Olivia placed her hands together. From Shane's fingertips fell Olivia's necklace, the necklace she lost several months ago when delivering the newspaper bill.

Olivia's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. She fixated a stunned look that met Shane's gaze instantly. "I thought I had lost this. You had it this whole time?"

Shane felt like a little boy keeping a secret from his mother. "Yea, honestly, I had forgotten about it until just the other day."

"I love you, Shane" Olivia said softly and sweetly.

Shane and Olivia's fingers tangled around the chain as they kissed once again.

Olivia suddenly felt Shane's body weight collapse. She secured her hands around Shane's back, but he fell to one knee and began coughing.

Shane felt a coarse, unrelenting pain burst through his entire body. To him, it felt like his stomach exploded. Gasping for air, he looked up and reached for Olivia, who stood stunned. A crowd of spectators rushed over, including Joann, Chaz, and Ryan.

"S...somebody call 9..911! Ryan screamed repeatedly.

In a fit of physical shock and emotional stress, Shane began coughing harshly. Phil took a handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to Shane.

"Just breathe, Shane. Take deep breaths."

Shane coughed into the napkin repeatedly. Olivia looked at her father, who displayed an inquisitive look on his face.

"What's wrong with Shane, daddy?"

"Please, someone do something!" Joann screamed hysterically.

When Shane pulled the handkerchief away from his mouth, still gasping for air and holding his ribs, he noticed several splotches of fresh blood covering the cloth surface.

As the Sheaville Fall Festival concluded back in Sheaville, Frank Miller brought Olivia, Chaz, and Joann with him directly from the saw mill warehouse to the hospital in Charleston. Joann was insistent that Frank follow the ambulance to Charleston, which proved a daunting task because the ambulance was weaving in and out of traffic at frighteningly dangerous speeds and Frank, not accustomed to driving the Interstate, was overwhelmed with the task.

The ambulance was in route to Charleston Area Medical Center in downtown Charleston. By time Frank's car reached the hospital, Shane's ambulance had disappeared. Joann jumped

out of the car, burst through the sliding glass doors outside of the CAMC Emergency Room and found herself in a sea of chaos and confusion. Children crying, phones ringing, and people flying past her peripheral vision was an altogether different, over stimulating experience from her time spent in the facility seeking counseling and treatment for borderline personality disorder.

She approached the information desk with Frank, Olivia, and Chaz right behind her. The square-jawed, chubby receptionist instructed them to Shane's room.

The group had not spoken much since leaving Sheaville. As they passed the winding hallway on the fifth floor of the hospital, Joann noticed the pale, white phosphorescent light permeating throughout the hallway that made everyone, staff, patients, and visitors appear ill. Shane's room was the last room on the end of the hallway.

Joann paused before walking through it. With tears streaming down her face, she gulped and faced the group; all of them nervously anticipating the next step.

"I can't go in there and see him, I just can't." Her hands covered her face as she sobbed heavily.

Frank approached Joann to console her. Wrapping his arm around her, he motioned for Chaz and Olivia to go in first.

Chaz nodded, placed his hand on Olivia's back, and nudged her gently through the door. When they arrived in the room, Shane did not resemble himself.

The room was small, with generically painted white walls with an aroma of plastic. Shane was reclined in the hospital bed with tubes jutting outward from all over his body. A small screen monitor beeped in the background with green and blue lines dancing quickly across it. Shane's mouth was open but crowded with a breathing tube and his arms were laying by his side.

"Oh God!" Olivia screeched. "Shane!!!"

Chaz stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around Olivia's waist. "We don't have to see this. Let's go outside until you're ready."

Olivia flung Chaz's arms away. "No, I am not leaving him!" Afraid she might awaken Shane, she lowered her voice to a stern whisper and faced Chaz.

"I am not leaving him. Not now. Go and find out when he can come home...please."

"Olivia, I am not sure it's a good idea leaving you in here alone. You're upset, let me stay."

"Go!" With that, she pointed towards the door.

Alone with Shane for the first time, under the most adverse circumstances, Olivia reached for his hand. Squeezing it tightly, she massaged his fingers.

"Hey! It's me." Olivia wiped a tear from her cheek as her lip quivered. "I...I am sorry that our perfect moment ended not so perfectly. But its okay and you are going to be okay. You remember when you asked me about seeing someone at Marshall. Well, there is nobody else. There is not anyone in my life more perfect than you. I do not care about my father or anybody else thinks of us, I am in love with you and we are going to have a future together...all three of us. You are going to be the best dad and our child is going to grow up in a home full of love." Olivia saw Shane inhale and exhale, but he remained motionless.

"I am so glad you came back to Sheaville and walked into my life. I do not want to think about anything now but getting you better and getting you home so that you can pitch next season, play the game you love, and you know what, the baby and I will be there for every game we can and for every practice.

Olivia heard a creaking sound over her shoulder. She abruptly stood up as Chaz, Frank, and Joann limped into the room. Frank gently closed the door behind them.

Joann walked towards Olivia. Her pristine makeup had faded and smeared and her once finely

pressed dress was now a disheveled mass of cloth stuck on her skin.

"I am so sorry...so very sorry." She wiped her nose. Olivia looked at Frank, who was staring at the floor and Chaz, with his arms held piously by his side, saying nothing and showing no emotions.

"I don't know how to tell you, but the doctor told us in the hall that Shane....see he...he had, or has cancer. The doctor said the tumor started in his liver, it grew and quick and it's spread to his ribs and other....other organs...and...." Joann could not finish the thought. She began whaling and covering her face with her hands. Olivia also began sobbing heavily.

Frank completed the thought, in an extremely low voice, devoid of emotion. "There is nothing they can do for him."

XXXII

Bradeon Morton Triplet was born in March, nearly two weeks before the start of another Sheaville Loggers baseball season.

Olivia's first day back in Sheaville after the birth of Bradeon in Charleston in early March was an exhausting occasion, physically and emotionally. In Charleston, Olivia endured eleven hours of labor before delivering a stocky eight-pound baby boy with several tufts of black hair. The timing of the birth also made it impossible for Olivia to finish the semester at Marshall University, so she withdrew, and decided to reenroll in the fall.

News of Olivia's return spread throughout Sheaville. Her first day back in town featured a bevy of phone calls and home visits from neighbors as well as unopened cards that needed reading. The entire experience was overwhelming.

After making sure Olivia and Bradeon were at home and comfortable, Morton went into town, but returned home that afternoon. Morton's arrival which followed with a visit by Jack Busby, who brought several platters of sandwiches and french fries.

As Jack was leaving, Frank Miller slid slyly into the door frame behind him. Frank and Jack exchanged smiles, with Frank patting Jack on the shoulder.

Morton walked over, kissed his daughter lightly on the cheek and then secured his hands around Bradeon and lifted him from Olivia's lap. Bradeon was asleep, and his chubby, square face was light pink and his cheeks bright red.

"Hello Olivia," Frank greeted affectionately. "Congratulations!"

Olivia stood up and gave Frank a half hug as her expression met his grandfatherly gaze. "It's good to be home. I'm a bit tired, and sore." She glanced back at her father, who was cooing with Bradeon and swinging the baby gently.

Frank leaned towards Olivia. Whispering, he asked "can you come to town with me...to the Clark Field?"

Olivia scowled, confused, but she agreed after getting reassurances that her father and Bradeon were okay.

As Frank and Olivia walked closer towards the ballpark, Olivia noticed that Clark Field stood like an old, faded steel monument. The ballpark was silent and the crisp, biting early March air sliced through the crevasses of the ballpark like a saw blade through a firm piece of wood and shot spurts of bitter air into Olivia and Frank's faces.

Frank approached the partially rusted player's entrance gate near the main concourse. Olivia, still uncertain of what she was doing at the ballpark, began crying.

"Mr. Miller, I...I do not think I am able...."

"It's all right, this will not take long," Frank replied, reassuringly.

As they stepped inside the ballpark, the field was covered in small patches of melting snow.

The dirt infield was ruffled and the empty stands created an overwhelming sense of emptiness that forced Olivia's spirits to swoon.

To the left of the pitchers mound was Walter Mann, along with Chaz, Ohil Rodney, and Joann Triplet. Situated between them was a large, rectangular object covered with a cloth sheet.

Olivia looked left, noticing Frank limping quickly behind her. Olivia licked her lips and wanted another reassuring look from Frank. Instead, his eyes narrowed, focused on reaching the rest of the group.

Once inside the infield, Frank's arm slid around Olivia's waist. The rest of the group said nothing and remained relatively motionless, except for Chaz shifting his weight from one leg to another. Phil Rodney spoke first.

"Well um, Olivia, let me be the first to say how glad we are to have you with us again. Phil feigned a smile as Olivia's hair was tossed around by the wind. Olivia forced a courteous grin, although it was difficult.

Phil turned to face Walter, who stood with his arms folded tightly around his ribs. While wearing his Sheaville Loggers uniform, the manager spoke slowly; his thick, southern dialect clearly evident.

"We have something that we want ya to get, er to have. We hope that you will like it. Well, we think you will. And it means a great deal to us to give it to ya."

Olivia looked down as Frank Miller reached forward, removing the cloth.

XXXIII

The rolling, rock-filled Sheaville cemetery at the end of town was full of jutting, jagged tombstones and plaques, naming generations of loved ones whose life intersected with the old logging town in some way.

Olivia clumsily scaled the steep mountainside, balancing her hand against the ground when she felt unbalanced and holding her backpack firmly over her right shoulder.

As she approached the top of the mountain, the mountaintop broadened at the tip, revealing an acre of open, flat space littered with tombstones and grave markers.

Olivia felt her calf muscles burning as she began scouring the field.

Towards the end of the last row of tombstones, Olivia came across two flat brown plaques featuring copper lettering. She carefully slid the backpack down her right arm and laid it softly on the grass.

In front of her were the plaque grave markers of two of the Triplet family: Roger and Shane. Olivia began crying violently as she reached forward and stroked her hand over the lettering of both tombstones.

After a few minutes of repetitive stroking, Olivia turned her attentions towards Shane's gravestone. Shane's date of death was October 14 and Olivia remembered that he was in a coma for nearly six weeks after collapsing at the Sheaville Fall Festival.

Olivia wiped the streaming tears from her cheeks and leaned back while shifting her legs together.

"Hey. Hey Shane, its me, Olivia." She laughed. "Somehow, I probably think you know that. I just wanted to tell you that Bradeon is doing so well. He is such a happy baby. Oh, and he sleeps real well at night. Chaz says he takes after you in terms of being able to sleep a lot." Olivia grinned while she wiggled to get herself closer to the grave marker.

"You know, he looks like you too. He's got your blue eyes and your smooth skin." Olivia reached into the backpack and pulled out a picture of Braedon that was taken at the hospital after he was born. "I brought you a picture and I am going to put it here Shane so you can see

your son.”

Olivia grabbed some masking tape from the backpack, tore off a generous piece, and then taped the lower right corner of the picture onto the plaque. Tears began streaming down her face once again.

“Mr. Rodney, Mr. Miller, Daddy, Jack Busby, you manager, and some other people in town bought you your nice grave plaque. I think you would like it. Shane, I have tried to figure out what I miss most about you. I really miss everything. I am going to miss even more. Your son is going to miss out on so many things too.” Olivia sighed deeply. “I miss the way you hold me and the way your hair laid on your head when you sweat, and the feeling of you pressed against me. I wanted to take Braedon to Clark Field or wherever and watch you play.”

Olivia heard the wind and watched as it stirred the trees into a collective vertical dance as the mostly barren branches waived sideways in unison.

By this time, Olivia could feel her chest tighten and her stomach quiver.

“Most of all Shane, I wanted to build a life with you. You know how I know that? When you and I were together and when we were apart, I knew it. My heart felt it. It felt that emptiness. When you were with me, my heart knew that you were the missing piece in my life. But I know now that we cannot have that life together. I can have that life with Braedon...our son. I know that as long he is here, you will never die.”

As the howling wind increased, Olivia was now brushing locks of hair away from her eyes. She leaned down and lightly kissed Shane’s grave plaque.

Olivia rose to her feet, gathered her backpack and began backpeddling away from Shane’s grave. Focusing intently at Roger Triplet’s grave marker, Olivia whispered “I will take care of your grandson too.”

“ I am certainly glad to hear that.”

The voice startled Olivia, but then Joann Triplet emerged from behind Olivia. Joann’s red hair was pulled back and she was wearing a Sheaville Loggers baseball cap along with a brown sweatshirt and jeans.

Joann’s mind was scrambling while choosing her words carefully. “I did not mean to scare you. Your daddy told me you were here. I just wanted you to know that I got a letter yesterday from the Cincinnati Reds. Shane was going to be called up to Chattanooga, Tennessee. The letter said he would be a member of the two-A Chattanooga Lookouts.” Joann’s head lowered. She looked at Olivia with a deeply saddened face.

“My boy did what he said he was going to do. He told me a few months back that we would leave Sheaville and he would play baseball someplace else. He did it. The Reds said he was the best prospect in their farm system. I guess that’s a good thing.”

Olivia smirked, while extending her hands, palms upright, towards Joann. Joann stepped forward and obliged the gesture, interlocking her fingers around Olivia’s.

“Someone named Biggie or something like that also made it to that Tennessee team and so were Ryan Head and your, well....Chaz.. Imagine that. All of those boys would be teammates again and all for the same team. Shane loved them all like brothers, even though I hear that Big person gave my boy some trouble.”

“What will you do now, Mrs. Triplet?” Olivia’s voice sounded reedy.

“I don’t know. I think I will stay. I hope to tell my grandson about his daddy and his grandpa and what they meant to Sheaville...and what Sheaville meant to them.”

Olivia’s eyes gazed forward, over Joann’s hair. Faintly, Olivia could see the outlining of Sheaville at the base of the cemetery.

Without warning, the light at Clark Field flashed on. The back portion of Sheaville’s downtown

was illuminated in a faint white glow that radiated under the cloudy sky.
Olivia knew that somehow Shane was there too, ready and willing to support another Sheaville baseball prospect.

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