

# **PRAIRIE SUNSET**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

This is the story of Attie and John. I never actually met John, but feel I knew him and Attie well. Their memories remain fresh in my mind as the fateful day the old man left home in a snowstorm.

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It was a blue afternoon, snow beginning to fall before sunset. Cynthia Warren didn't notice. She was deep in thought as she sorted through rows of expensive clothes draped together in her walk-in closet. Her anxiety did little to help her decide which dress to wear.

Cynthia was young, attractive and klutzy. After selecting a pale blue gown, she bumped into a stool and grabbed her leg in pain. Too pressed for time to give the accident much attention, she hurried to her dressing table, this time colliding with her husband and knocking the drink out of his hand.

John Warren daubed at the wet spot on his tuxedo pants - too busy reading a newspaper article to worry about the slight spill.

"Hurry, John," Cynthia said. "The sitter will be here any minute."

When she got no reaction, she glanced at her husband in the mirror.

"Jake Thompson died last night," he said.

Cynthia slipped the dress over her head and sat on the edge of the bed to straighten her hose. "Who is Jake Thompson?"

"Dad's best friend," he said, smoothing thick brown hair with his long fingers. "War buddies."

"Have you told him?"

John shook his head, his expression revealing momentary pain just behind his pale blue eyes.

"I can't talk to him any more. He just vegetates in his room in that old chair, staring out the window."

"Don't be so hard on him," Cynthia said. "He's lonely."

"Senile is more like it. However, you are right, and now is a good time to tell him about Jake. And break the news about Crestview."

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, Cynthia frantically brushed her hair. "I'm still not sure we're doing the right thing. Anyway, can't it wait until tomorrow?"

John fixed himself another drink and started upstairs to his father's room. "Not on your life. I've already put this off long enough."

Cynthia Warren stopped brushing her hair and stared at her husband as he hurried upstairs. He rapped on the old man's door, not expecting an answer, and entered without waiting for one. Sitting in an Afghan-draped rocking chair, staring listlessly out the window, was his father. Pale skin on the old man's neck seemed to coalesce with the faded orange Afghan.

"Dad, let's have a talk." The older man didn't answer, or even bother turning around. John continued anyway. "Mom died three years ago. The girls start school next year and Cyn's doing more charity work. My caseload with the firm has increased and I'm in line for partnership this year. Understand what I'm saying?"

The older man answered in a low, almost inaudible voice. "Son, I'm proud of you. If your mother were still alive I know she would also be proud."

John tried breathing deeply and almost choked on

his frustration. Instead, he lowered his head, clenched his teeth and toyed with a strand of hair. The book in the old man's hand dropped to the floor and neither father nor son seemed to notice the dull thud it made when it struck the carpet. John opened his eyes and continued in low, measured words.

"That's not what I'm talking about."

As if in a trance, the old man seemed to pay no attention to the severity of his son's tone. He kept staring out the window at slow falling snow and that simple act was more than John could take. Grabbing the chair, he wheeled it violently around.

"Damn it! Look at me when I'm talking to you."

Pressing even further against the Afghan, the old man thought for a moment his angry son might strike him and his voice cracked when he said, "I'm sorry."

John let go of the chair. Again, he tried breathing deeply, but his efforts prevented veins of erupting redness from deserting his face. Pacing to the opposite wall, he banged his hand against it and tossed the newspaper, wadded like a club, to the floor. This time a paperback Western, on the nightstand beside the bed, tumbled to the carpet, and John kicked at it as if it were a hapless mouse trying to escape.

With face red and puffed, John continued. "Cynthia and I want you to be with people your own age. You have stagnated in this room since you broke your hip. You don't talk. You don't come downstairs to eat, and frankly I'm fed up to here with your bullshit." Touching his throat to show just how fed up he was, he added, "Come Monday, like it or not, we're taking you to Crestview."

"Son-"

"No! That's it. Damn it to hell! I'm so mad right now I can't see straight. You're going Monday and that's that."

John Warren, tumbling yet a third book to the floor as he abandoned his father to stare out the window, backed out the door and slammed it behind him.

When he returned to the bedroom Cynthia said, "Is he all right?"

"Yeah," he mumbled, still frowning as he buttoned his shirt.

"Is who all right, Mama?"

Trish and Emily, identical twins, entered the room, already dressed for bed. As beautiful as their mother, both little girls also had blue eyes and raven hair. Unlike their mother's close-cropped, sophisticated cut, long dark braids tied with bright red bows framed their pretty faces.

Cynthia had trouble telling them apart. John could not. Sparky, their ever-present cocker puppy, padded along behind them. Like the girls, his hair was also black, and he had his own red bow tied jauntily around his neck. Emily handed the puppy to her mother and it promptly licked a warm swath across her nose.

Insistently, Trish said, "Is who all right?"

"Nothing, Dear," Cynthia said, rushing to the dressing table to repair her make-up. "Is Julie here yet?"

"She helped us with our pajamas," Emily said. "We came to kiss you goodnight."

After hugging and kissing their mother, the two little girls quickly wriggled away from her. Grabbing John's elbows, they tugged his arm until he stopped straightening his tie and bent over to return their hugs.

"Goodnight you two rug rats," he said.

"Sorry, Mrs. Warren," the sitter said, poking her head into the room.

"That's all right, Julie. We'll be home late, if it's no problem for you."

"No problem. Come on, girls. Let's go say goodnight to Grandpa."

Cynthia continued combing her hair until the combined stairway clatter of dog and little girls dissipated. She glanced apprehensively at John and said, "Sure about this?"

John grabbed her elbow and pulled her toward the door, again smiling smugly. "The only thing I'm sure about, my dear, is we're late."

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Trish and Emily rushed into their grandfather's room, unannounced, as their parents hurried out the front door. They found the old man on his knees, gazing at the paper John had tossed to the floor. Trish handed him the squirming puppy and it promptly licked a warm swath across his mouth.

"What are you doing?"

"Reading the paper, Trishy," he said, petting the dog.

"How do you know I'm not Emily?"

"Cause grandpas know everything."

"We came to say goodnight," Emily said, joining them.

John Warren dropped the paper to the floor, placed the wiggling puppy beside it, and hugged the two little girls. "Pleasant dreams little sweethearts."

Emily wiped her hand across his craggy face. "Grandpa, are you crying?"

"No, Emily. It is just something in my eye."

Turning away, he quickly rubbed his eyes with his shirtsleeve before turning back and kissing them. "Sleep well my pretties,"

"Please tell us a bedtime story before we go to sleep," Emily pleaded. "Please?"

With a nod, the old man shrugged his scrawny shoulders. He smiled and said, "Old men like their arms twisted."

Both little girls grabbed his arms, squealed and said, "Please, please."

"Go to your room and get ready. I'll be along to tell you a short one."

"Oh boy!" they said, rushing out the door. "Please hurry. We'll be waiting."

They didn't bother shutting the door and once their scurrying footsteps evaporated down the hallway silence quickly engulfed the dark little room. John Warren pulled himself stiffly to his feet with the bedpost and for a long moment stood staring at the newspaper he had retrieved from the floor.

"Jake Thompson, you old gutter-snipe," he said, shaking his head.

Jutting away from his craggy cheeks and sloping abruptly downward, the old man's prominent nose dominated his face. This, along with dark, closely spaced eyes, caused him to resemble a hawk, or maybe a bald eagle. Feathery gray hair heightened this illusion. Wiping another tear from his nose, he shuffled through clothes in his dresser drawer, searching for a hidden bottle of bourbon. Finding it, he tipped up the container and drank until amber liquid dribbled out his thin lips, down the loose skin on his neck.

"Here's to you, Jake."

After taking another long pull from the bottle, he grabbed an overnight bag from the closet's upper shelf and began filling it with clothes from the dresser. Before shutting the bag, he removed his wife's picture from his nightstand and placed it on top of the clothes. Finally finished, he limped down the hall to his granddaughter's bedroom where he found the

babysitter, waiting at the door.

"I'll be downstairs if you need me," she said.

"Thanks, Julie," he said, subconsciously resenting her implication, although knowing she meant well.

Already in their beds, the two little girls waited anxiously as the old man sat in the chair between them. He couldn't help smiling at their rapt anticipation.

"What story do you want to hear tonight?"

"A new one," Emily said.

"Something we haven't heard before," Trish said.

Scratching his head, he thought a moment. "I have a new story about Otter and the Salamander. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes," both little girls shouted.

As they stared dreamily at the ceiling, he leaned back in the chair and began, "Once upon a time an otter lived in a small pond in the woods. The otter was old, like your grandfather, his children grown. So old, in fact, almost all his friends except his best friend, Salamander had passed away. Mr. Salamander's children had moved him far away to a much smaller pond. Otter missed their chess games and swapping of tales, but Salamander kept in contact. They talked every day on the wildlife telephone. One day Salamander didn't call."

Trish asked, "What happened?"

"Stop squirming, young lady and I'll tell you," he said with a wink. "Otter worried about his friend. He wanted to call but had caught his toe in a trap the previous spring. Otter was old and the sore toe didn't heal fast as it might. Feeling sorry for himself because of his loneliness, he somehow blamed everyone except himself. When he learned his old friend had passed away, he felt very, very sad."

"What did he do?" the twins caroled.

"Like I said, Otter was old, but not that old. He decided to leave the pond for one last trip. Visit the Magic Fountain before he died."

Trish asked, "What's that?"

John Warren raised his hand toward the ceiling. "The Magic Fountain is a place in our minds. Crystal water pours from its mouth, revitalizing body and spirit. Otter had visited it once in his youth. Now, on a whim, he decided to go there, one last time. Packing his otter luggage, he set out on an odyssey."

"Grandpa, what's an odyssey?"

Smiling and gently brushing Emily's long hair back away from her sleepy eyes, the old man explained. "It's a journey to a place far away and not easy to reach. Nevertheless, Otter had a good heart and strong desire. He left the pond in quest of the fountain."

"Did he find it?"

After kissing both little girls, John Warren tucked the covers around their necks. "Tell you next time. Just remember," he said, stopping before exiting the door. "It's not always so important we find the Magic Fountain, only that we never stop looking."

With that, he turned off the lights and closed the door behind him. Rock music vibrated the hallway walls as he returned to his room. After a frustrating moment spent rummaging through his closet, he realized he no longer had a heavy coat to wear. He took one last look at the wrinkled newspaper lying on the bed, switched off the lights and crept downstairs to the hall closet.

Both avid skiers, Cynthia and John Jr. had all the expensive trappings of the sport. John had once tried on his son's goose-down ski jacket.

"Sorry, Son," he said, slipping the jacket over his bony shoulders.

John Warren drew the hood tightly around his neck. With a stubborn smile and only a momentary backward glance, he entered the snowstorm, plodding the icy sidewalk toward a beckoning glimmer of distant streetlights.