

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SMALL, FOLDED PAPER reflected the streetlights, which had already switched on in early winter twilight Tuesday. Wedged behind the mailbox next to the front door, it caught Mario's eye arriving home after school. Curious, he pulled it out, unfolded and held toward the light. The note, in thick, block letters from a stubby pencil, read: "Mario, I saw what happened yesterday. You did the right thing. I'd like to see you again. Come out to the shack today after school. Tom."

The past two days had been full of mysteries. His fat lip from Monday had subsided. Now the swollen soreness shifted to his hand. No one noticed except for Rosalyn, who missed very little. On the way to first hour class this morning she stopped by his locker.

"Hi Mario. What happened to your hand?"

"Oh, nothing. Why?"

"It looks all swollen."

"Didn't you hear what happened yesterday?" Jake approached and had been listening. "Ol' Mario here pounded Frank real good. You should see him. He looks like a truck ran over his face."

"Really? Why'd you do that?" Rosalyn asked.

"He asked for it, he was the one who wanted to fight, not me. Besides, he's been bugging me a lot lately. You know what kind of a bully he is."

"Let me see your hand." She lifted it gently up to her face. She kissed it softly. "There, now it's all better." She patted it lightly and smiled. Her lips touching his hand felt soft and warm, and the scent of her hair as she leaned close sent a shiver through him. He didn't know what to say. He felt embarrassed. He looked around to see if anyone had seen. The memory lingered after he got to class and resurfaced from time to time during the day.

Around school that morning almost everyone noticed Frank's appearance. By the time classes began most of the kids had heard about the fight. Frank slouched in his seat, subdued and angry. No one dared say anything. He had managed to avoid Mr. Albright in the hallway before classes started. But Mrs. Lane, always in tune with the lives of her students, noticed. Frank mumbled something about getting knocked down playing hockey last night and she bought it. Behind her back the kids who knew better made little smirks. They quickly sobered when Frank didn't signal a similar response, which otherwise would have been typical for him.

Throughout the day Mario sensed something different in the way other kids treated him. For some it could have been respect for standing up to Frank. Or it could have been awe for doing such a thing, followed by dread of what might be to come.

Most surprising to Mario, Frank's behavior did not seem like him at all. He had expected Frank to be angry and threatening. He had expected to be called in to Mr. Albright's office to face the consequences whatever they might be. Instead everyone acted as though nothing had happened, especially Frank. Passing in the hall he even nodded slightly to Mario. He seemed to have one of those looks hinting that he knew something more, which added to Mario's worry, like waiting for an attack with no clue where it would come from and in what form.

After school Mario didn't tell anyone about the note, not even Jake. He wondered how he would be able to go out to Tom's shack without anyone finding out. He wondered if he should even go. Would he get back in time to make it to the weekly Boy Scout meeting? How did Tom even know where he lived? What did Tom want? What would they talk about? What

## Good Ice

would Tom say about the fight? Maybe he might have some insight about what the consequences might be, if any. Still unsure about what to do he yielded to impulse, grabbed his skates and headed for the park by the lake.

Clouds had moved in obscuring the late afternoon sun. Mario had no idea, nor did he even think about, how long the visit would take. If it approached suppertime the sun would have already set behind the clouds. They would actually help as the lights from town reflected off the clouds, filtering into the surrounding darkness and suffusing the lake with a dim glow. The kids had skated on the lake many times on winter evenings, although they stayed near the shore by town. No one dared venture farther out toward the dark, distant shore. It was still light when Mario pushed off on his skates from the park.

The few inches of snow that had fallen so far this winter were not uniformly distributed over the lake. The wind blew the snow around like sand in a desert, leaving large areas of bare ice mottled with low dunes of snow. Mario weaved around the patches of snow, gliding on the clear ice near the east shore of the lake. In the calm air the only sound came from his skate edges cutting the frozen surface each time he pushed off, back and forth like a swinging pendulum. Looking across toward the point he could see a small, flickering orange light. Coming closer he could make out a figure sitting by a fire in front of the shack. Tom sat on a stump staring at the flames and scratched Ike behind the ears. The dog's ears perked up. He let out a low growl and then barked.

Mario felt the urge to turn around and retreat back across the lake. Why did I do this? Why did I even come out here? At Ike's bark Tom turned his head and looked toward the lake. Seeing Mario he smiled and waved. Mario hesitated, then started skating slowly toward the shack, drawn to the fire more than anything. The orange flames flickered about two feet in the air casting a glow around the clearing and the shack, replacing the orange glow of the setting sun that was obscured by the dark, gray clouds.

"Hey, Mario! Glad you could make it!" Tom rose from a crouch by the fire and walked toward the shore.

Mario glided up on his skates, still very unsure what he was doing there, although he didn't feel any fear. "Hi. I got your note, so I guess I came out here."

"C'mon up and sit by the fire. Can you walk on your skates?"

Ike yipped like a puppy, jumped and pranced around Mario trying to lick his face almost knocking him off balance. Mario tried to pet him as best he could, bracing his legs as the big dog leaned into him. He jerked his head back when Ike tried to lick his face, but it was too late and his face got smeared with dog slobber.

"He likes you," Tom laughed.

Sometimes Mario wished he'd had a dog again. He hardly remembered the little cocker spaniel they had when he was younger back in California. After moving to Minnesota they never got around to getting another dog. He walked up to the fire and Tom motioned to a stump to sit on. The older man looked like he'd tried to clean up some. His hair had been brushed although still stringy and greasy-looking. He seemed calm, friendly, and not even drunk.

"Good to see you. How was school today?"

"OK, I guess."

"I didn't know if you would come out here again. Glad you did. I wasn't sure if I should have left that note because if somebody else had found it like your mom."

"When did you put it there?"

"This afternoon, just before school let out."

"How did you know where I lived?"

## Good Ice

"I know it don't sound right, but I kind of followed you home from school one day. It took a couple times because you didn't always go home right away. And I didn't want to be seen too much in that part of town if you know what I mean. People would be suspicious."

"Why'd you do it? Why'd you want me to come out here again?"

"Good question. It's pretty lonesome sometimes, even with Ike here. You know I drink too much. And then I have these crazy times, nightmares and dreams. When you guys brought me those sandwiches I really appreciated it. You kind of stuck up for me when those other kids were harassing me. Nobody's ever done that around here. Why'd you do that?"

"I don't know. It just didn't seem right I guess."

"Well thanks for doing that. And then that fight yesterday. What was that all about?"

"I don't know. Frank just stopped me after school and said he wanted to fight. So I did."

"I saw the whole thing. You really took it to him. But be ready if he tries to get you back."

"How'd you see that?"

"I was just making my usual rounds. Just a coincidence I guess."

Mario sat on the stump staring into the fire. Ike sat next to him pressing against Mario's side and savoring the attention of Mario's arm draped over his shoulders and petting him on the side. Tom stoked the fire and added three more pieces of wood, about the same size as the ones on the lean-to back in the woods. They sat by the fire talking, mostly Tom asking questions.

"So how long have you lived here?" Tom asked.

"Well, we moved here when I was about four or five. We used to live in California."

"Why'd you move here?"

"My mom got a job as a teacher. She knows Spanish and I guess they needed someone in the summer to take care of the kids of the migrant workers. They started a summer school or something. Not all the kids... a lot of them still had to work in the fields."

"That's nice of them, the school I mean."

"It wasn't the school. I think it was our church."

"What church is that?"

"We go to Immanuel Lutheran."

THE CHURCH STILL SAT on its original 1873 site near the west side of downtown, but not the same building. Growing with the town over the decades, in 1927 the congregation had built a new, red brick church with tithes from profits of prosperous farmers, merchants, and wages of members who worked on the railroad. In the early 1950s some were moved to apply the Sunday sermons to the rest of the week, and decided to help out the families who came up from the south each summer to work in the fields, mostly Latinos from Texas. The farmers provided housing of sorts, old trailers parked in groves of trees not too close to the main farm house. Running water and plumbing were rare. Most had electricity, which had only been installed in some rural areas around town in the late 1940s.

The Immanuel Lutheran Mission Society, which included a few of the farmers' wives, decided to start a summer program for the migrant workers. The decision wasn't unanimous. A sizeable minority held fast to the notion that missions work meant overseas like in Africa or the Philippines. But Mrs. Bauer's conscience took note whenever she passed by the bean fields, seeing the entire Jimenez family out in the searing heat of midday, large hats shading their unseen faces, hoeing and pulling weeds. The little ones under five hung around the old pickup parked at the edge of the field. The older children, six on up, had to work. The sight reminded her of Jesus' admonition of "suffer the little children to come unto me," and she decided then and there to do something.

## Good Ice

She thought of Vacation Bible School until she realized that was out of the question. That would be asking too much of the congregation and other families in town who sent their kids to Immanuel's VBS, which had a reputation of being one of the best. So she thought of a Vacation Bible School for the migrant kids, only it would have to last more than a week. She didn't give much thought to what Mr. Bauer would say; she knew he would if not support the idea, at least not oppose it even if they had to pay most of the cost. The Bauers farmed 628 acres including pasture. An entire section, the farm site and grove took up about 12 acres, more than Mr. Bauer thought was necessary, but his wife wanted a lot of trees to block the frequent prairie winds. He complained once in awhile, but since the farm had been her inheritance and not his, it was one of those issues on which she prevailed. A big farm compared to most others, it gave the Bauers significant prominence. It required two hired men, so Mr. Bauer was accustomed to paying employees. In return for allowing Mrs. Bauer to go ahead with the plan to hire a Spanish-speaking summer teacher, the Mission Society failed to appropriate the full financial support. The Bauers had to make up the difference, which she didn't mind, and in fact it added to her feeling of satisfaction and sense of purpose.

Although to reduce the cost Mrs. Bauer insisted that Maria and her young son stay with them. The big, square, two-story farmhouse had plenty of room. Mrs. Bauer said she would keep an eye on Mario while his mom was off at the church teaching the migrant kids. Maria hadn't even contemplated where they would stay when she took the job. She thought it was a blessing to have room and board, and earn a small salary all at the same time. And when they arrived at the farm, she was thrilled at the opportunities it offered Mario.

He helped with chores as much as a five-year-old could. Most of the time he just watched when Mr. Bauer milked the cows. He could actually do some good helping feed the chickens. Eventually he was able to collect eggs once he got used to the squawking hens, wings fluttering, futilely beating the air, white feathers shooting all over like the blast from a miniature aerial fireworks rocket.

After a few weeks of fresh air, chores and Mrs. Bauer's cooking, Maria noticed a new exuberance and confidence in her son, a complete turn-around from when they first came to the farm. It was partly her fault. When she got the job she had overlooked telling the Bauers about the boy. Meeting them for the first time at the bus station, a stony look crept across Mrs. Bauer's face when she discovered that Maria was not alone. Mrs. Bauer had little tolerance for surprises. They strained to be cordial and make initial conversation on the way out to the farm. When they finally arrived at the delicate subject of Maria's marital status the explanation, while not entirely convincing, was adequate. The little lie had become so familiar to Maria that she no longer felt much guilt. She would do anything to protect her son, who each year was becoming a fine person. With a child's trust, as long as he could remember Mario believed that his father had been killed in a car crash when he was a baby.

Before too long the Bauers took a liking to Mario. Mrs. Bauer especially, because it took her back to the days when her boys were young. They were all grown now, and their daughter, too. She had married the Mulder boy, which didn't go over too well at first with his family. But everything was fine now and they lived two sections over working the Mulder farm. Two of the Bauer boys moved off the farm to jobs in town. One worked at the elevator in Dakota Falls and the youngest moved to Minneapolis where he worked in a tool and die shop. One stayed on the farm.

"SO THE CHURCH ADVERTISED for somebody who could speak Spanish and be a teacher during the summer. Somehow my mom found out about it and we moved here," Mario said.

## Good Ice

"Well, that's real nice of them. Immanuel Lutheran...nice name. Do you know what it means?"

Mario shook his head.

"It means 'God is with us'. It's an ancient Hebrew word. Later they used it about Jesus." Mario didn't know what to say and just looked at the old man sitting there with his greasy hair, grimy face and worn, stained clothing. "There I go again, saying things that don't fit how I look," Tom said with a laugh. "So, your mom came out here to help out with the migrant kids."

"Yeah, then I guess she got a job as a regular teacher during the school year. That's what she did back in California, but I don't really remember that far back. Do you know Spanish?"

"I used to know a little bit, but it's been so long. I lived in southern California once, too. Say something in Spanish."

*"Algo en Espanol"*

"Now don't be a wisenheimer," Tom laughed.

"OK. *Me gusta Ike. Es un perro muy agradable.*" I like Ike. He's a good dog.

"I like him, too. So you speak Spanish. That's great!"

"I guess I can speak it pretty good. My mom uses it all the time at home, both English and Spanish. Lots of times whenever she says something she says it in Spanish, too. So I kind of learned it that way."

"Hey, that's great! It's really good to know other languages. You're lucky to have a mom like that. What does she look like?"

Mario hesitated before answering. Tom seemed trustworthy, but it was hard to tell.

"She's about 30. Dark hair and brown eyes, pretty I guess."

"That's OK. I was just curious. I didn't mean anything." Tom saw that Mario was feeling uncomfortable. They sat talking for awhile, almost hypnotized by the fire. Mario didn't want to let go of Ike, and the dog basked in the company of his new friend.

"He really likes you," Tom said, smiling at the boy and dog sitting across from him gazing into the fire. "You ever had a dog?"

"We used to, when I was little back in California. I don't remember too much about him. I'd sure like to get one again. Mom says it would be just too hard now with us being gone all day."

Tom asked more questions, staring intently at the young boy. Where did they live in California? Did they have family or relatives back there? How did they like Clareton? Was everything going OK, like did they need anything?

The firelight cast a dim, golden hue on the shack and surrounding trees, behind them shadows deepening in the fading twilight. The shack looked about half the size of a one-car garage, with a mono-slope, tin-covered roof. In late summer or early fall years ago the hunters would cover it with brush and small branches to camouflage the metal. Ten-inch-wide, rough-sawn planks set vertical formed the sides, with narrower one-by-threes covering the seams. Each side had a window with a larger one in front by the door, which was made of planks held together by upper and lower cross-pieces, and one diagonal down the length. A stovepipe protruded from the back left corner of the roof. Any paint there might have been had worn off long ago. A pile of firewood sat to the left of the door about ten feet away. A book leaned against the stump where Tom sat.

Tom reached in his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of Camels. He turned it upside down, tapped the top against his hand and pulled out one that stuck out the farthest. He reached toward the base of the fire for a small branch protruding from the base of the coals, lifted to the cigarette in his mouth and took a deep drag. The cigarette tip glowed a bright reddish-orange.

"Hey, you want a smoke?"

## Good Ice

Mario looked embarrassed and declined.

"Sorry. I should know better. Force of habit mostly. I guess I don't want to be contributing to the delinquency of minors. You ever smoked before?"

Mario felt even more embarrassed and a little guilty. "I tried it once, but I got sick."

"Well, it's just as well you didn't smoke," Tom said stuffing the pack back into his shirt pocket.

"You know, it's getting dark," Tom realized. "You probably should head for home. I hope it's not too late already. Sorry I kept you here so long. I guess I'm just a blabbermouth... not really. I sometimes forget what my own voice sounds like. I talk to Ike here, but it's not the same as talking to a person. Sorry to put you through this."

Mario had lost track of the time awhile ago, captured by the bond of the crackling fire, loyal dog, and attention from Tom. Only when Tom reminded him did he realize that he was starting to get hungry. Then he felt panic. It was getting late, dark and he still had to step out into the darkness on the lake and skate back to town. It was already 6 p.m., and his mom would be getting worried. He might not even make it to Scouts in time.

"Maybe we can talk again," Tom said. "I go to the library now and then. Maybe you could stop by for a bit. We could have lots to talk about... cars, girls, sports, rock 'n roll... what do you think about Elvis? Stuff like that. That okay with you?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Mario wasn't so sure about that idea. "I got to get going. I'm going to be in big trouble."

"Jeez, I'm really sorry." For a moment Tom thought he would never see the boy again. He was angry for losing track of time and putting the boy in jeopardy. He would gladly have defended Mario if he faced punishment. He felt helpless because there would be no opportunity to do so. His heart ached when the young boy stood up to go. He wanted to reach out and embrace him, but still he couldn't be absolutely sure. To say something and then be wrong would be a disaster.

Ike followed Mario on the short walk to the shore, wagging his tail and with a questioning look, seeming to wonder if he would ever see his new friend again. Mario turned to Tom, waved and said goodbye. He reached down and scuffed Ike's thick, furry neck. The sun had set more than an hour ago behind the once gray clouds, now totally dark. The lights from town twinkled along the opposite shore like a miniature Milky Way. For a moment Mario thought about heading straight toward them across the middle of the lake. He knew it probably would have been OK and the ice was thick enough. Then he remembered the stories about the Bergquist boy. A shiver shot down his spine as his imagination created images and feelings of what it would be really like to drown in freezing water, or succumb to hypothermia. He waved once more and pushed off on his skates counterclockwise close to the shore. Of course, even if he were closer to shore, it still might be too deep and hypothermia still could occur if he broke through the ice. He heard Tom shout, urging him to be careful.