

Chapter 14

“I want to show you my secret place.” My father’s invitation piqued my childhood curiosity. “You can’t tell anyone.”

I gulped and slipped my six-year-old hand into my father’s. As we left his office, both exhilaration and apprehension churned inside me. We didn’t cross the wobbly catwalk that perched over the back room of his grocery store. Instead, we tiptoed across the mezzanine through mountains of cardboard boxes. When we reached the end, Dad hoisted boxes labeled “Cash Paid Outs”, “Statements”, and “Ledgers” away from the wall and removed a large piece of plywood that concealed a hole.

He put his index finger to his lips and whispered, “Shhhh,” as he bent down and crawled through the opening, motioning me to follow. Assaulted by a suffocating, gritty odor, I coughed. Again, Dad murmured, “Shhh,” as he retrieved a flashlight tucked just inside the secret place.

He pointed the light into the blackness, revealing a grid of wooden two-by-fours spaced two feet apart. Planks of wood stretched across the two-by-fours, creating a pathway across the attic.

I bent down to feel the white fluff lining the grid. “What is this?”

“Don’t touch it. It’s insulation. It will irritate your skin,” Dad said, taking my hand and leading me carefully across the planks.

When we had crossed the length of the mysterious darkness, he murmured, “This is it. My secret place.” Two pieces of plywood had been strategically situated on the wooden grid. He laid down on the plywood and motioned me to do the same, showing me where a peep hole had been poked through the ceiling.

“Look through the hole.”

Much like a bird watching the hubbub hovering beneath its flight, I gawked downward. “I see the check stands where our customers pay for their groceries.” In the background, I could hear my mother, brother, and a few employees talking as they stocked shelves.

“When cash is missing, I come up here and watch to see which of our cashiers is stealing from the registers.”

“What happens if someone steals?”

“I get them to confess and then fire them.”

“Does it happen a lot, Daddy?”

“More than it should.”

A suffocating silence permeated the attic. I remembered my favorite checker who suddenly seemed to disappear. “Did Mr. Johnson steal?”

“Yes.”

“I liked Mr. Johnson.”

“I liked him too.”

“Come on, now. I’ll show you another secret.”

After we had replaced the boxes, ensuring the hole had been properly camouflaged, we crossed the catwalk that connected the office to the stairs. “Crossing this bridge scares me,” I said.

“Why?”

“It’s so shaky. I’m afraid it will fall down.”

My father laughed, “Don’t worry, Carol Ann. It’s perfectly safe.”

Once on the main level, we meandered through the backroom, a grocer’s Stonehenge, where stacks and stacks of boxes created a maze leading to the backdoor. My father reached into

his pocket and took out his keys, unlocking the backroom door. The stench of discarded produce wafted from the garbage cans.

“Why are we in the alley, Daddy?”

“I want you to see how I get to my secret place. See the telephone pole. Do you see the metal prongs?”

“Yes.”

“I tell the employees I am going home for dinner so they think I’m gone. But, instead, I duck into the alley; and, when no one is watching, I climb up this pole,” he hoisted himself up a few of the prongs so I understood the process. “This takes me to the roof, where I enter the store through a heating unit. And, just like that, I’m in my secret place.”

“That looks scary. What if you fall?”

“Nonsense. Now, remember. You can’t tell anyone.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die. Why do your employees take money?”

“Some of them have fallen on hard times and are desperate. Some of them are just plain dishonest or greedy.”

“If they are having a hard time, shouldn’t you help them?”

“I do if they ask me..” He knelt down on the pavement and retrieved a stack of torn, jagged papers from the pocket of his white shirt. “These are IOUs from the people I’ve helped. See, they all say IOU. They all have a date, an amount, and a signature.”

“You’ve helped a lot of people. Do they pay you back?”

“Most of the time,” he said, as he put the IOUs back in his pocket and stood up. “You see the sign up there?” My father pointed to the green lettering that had been painted in all capital letters on the side of the building. “That’s our motto: **LOWEST AVERAGE PRICE**

EVERYDAY. We don't mark our prices up as much as our competition. We're lucky if we make one or two cents for every \$20 worth of groceries we sell. If someone steals \$20, we have to sell \$1,000 just to replace it. Theft can put us out of business."

"It's naughty to steal, Daddy?"

"Yes. It's very naughty."

A profound sadness stained my father's face.

"Do you have other secrets, Daddy?"

He ruffled my hair. "Most grownups have their share of secrets."

This was my first exposure to the overwhelming damage theft can wreak on a business. I wish it had been my last. At the tender age of six my father began teaching me the ins-and-outs of his world, but I would remain oblivious to the enormity of the legacy I would one day inherit.

