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The Real Summer

a novel by
W. Dave Free

Chapter 1

October 21, 1856, Platte River Crossing.--

I write because I'm too cold to sleep and too tired to keep remembering. I used to think it was a dream. If it is, I'm on the verge of never waking up. My brain hurts. Memories of my "past life" disappear now as fast as the cup of flour that I eat each day. I'm done struggling with the memories; there is too much to struggle with here and now. So I write. If I don't survive, I hope someone will find what I have written and benefit. If I do survive, maybe in a warmer more comfortable time, it will all make sense.

Snowed again this morning. I used to love the snow--it's amazing what a difference a warm ski parka makes. Last night we were so

tired and the ground so frozen we couldn't set up our tents, we just slept under the frozen canvas. There is little to keep us warm. We left most of our heavy blankets on the trail a few weeks back to lighten our loads. Each time some one else dies, we bury them in another of our few remaining blankets. This morning we buried thirteen.

Those times that I was warm still burn the brightest in my memory. The names and faces of those that were closest are all that remains.

"Twenty-one to twenty," gasped Steve "My favor. Game point." He crouched low dropped the little blue ball with his left hand, took two quick steps forward and smashed it towards the front left corner of the racquetball court. It hit the front of the court a few feet from the side wall, ricocheted off the wall and shot diagonally back towards the corner. Steve moved to the middle of the court and kept his eyes glued on the front wall. The ball bounced off the floor and then hit the right wall just inches from the back of the court. It came off the wall at a right angle, perfectly parallel to the rear wall. Hank slammed it up against the back of the court with a backhand and hoped for a friendly bounce.

"Wimp Shot!" yelled Steve as he moved towards the back of the court to receive the high bouncing ball.

"Better a wimp than a loser." replied Hank taking his position in the middle of the court. Steve launched the ball high towards the front wall and Hank backpedaled to get to it.

"Now who's the wimp?" he yelled as he again shot for the top of the front wall himself. He wasn't as lucky with this shot and knew he was a goner as soon as it came off his racquet. Not nearly high enough and going much too fast, the ball hit the front wall, bounced on the floor near the back, and then ricocheted off the back wall in a nice high arch.

Steve was in perfect position: he had Hank trapped against the back wall and the ball was heading straight towards him and the front wall. Looking backwards, he waited for it to reach him, took a quick step with it and then smashed it into the front corner opposite Hank. The perfect shot--it literally rolled out of the corner without even a bounce. It left Hank standing flatfooted.

Steve dropped to his knees with his arms stretched up and his fists clenched in the Wimbledon Champion position. "Yes! Yes! Yes! The superior athlete again dominates. I ask you: will there ever be another with such natural talent, extensive knowledge, and rugged good looks?"

"I hope not." replied Hank, crumpling to the floor against the back wall. "These courts aren't big enough for two heads the size of yours."

"Aw, don't be sore Hank. You shouldn't feel bad when you lose to the best racquetball player in the world. In fact, you should feel privileged to be learning from me. I've been thinking about charging you to have the opportunity to be whipped by me."

"That's what I like about you Steve," replied Hank between gasps, the sweat dripping from his face to his chest, "You're such a gracious winner. It's a good thing you only win once a year or it would really get to me."

"Once a year?" exclaimed Steve pretending to be exasperated "I've whipped you three times this week alone!"

"In your dreams buddy, in your dreams. Come on let's go see if we can get that head of yours through the door to the jacuzzi." Hank pulled open the door and ducked out into the hall just before Steve could hit him with the ball.

The two friends gathered up their equipment and walked down the hall towards the locker room. Hank was the older by almost a year, but at six feet two inches Steve was taller by a good four inches and never let Hank forget it. What Hank gave away in height, he made up for in bulk. For the past ten months, since his graduation from high school, he had been working as the supply-hauling member of a construction crew. This constant physical exertion combined with the four to five hours a week he and Steve spent in the weight room had worked wonders on his five foot, eight inch physique.

"Yeow! I swear this smudge pot gets hotter every day." Steve shouted over the laughter of the children playing in the swimming pool as he dipped his toe into the jacuzzi.

"You're such a baby!" Hank called back stepping down into the bubbling waters. "Does your mom, still fill the tub for you?"

"No, but she washes behind my ears, why do ask?" replied Steve with a sarcastic grin. Hank laughed as he sat down in the jacuzzi, laid his head back, and closed his eyes.

Despite the teasing, Steve couldn't bring himself to get down into the hot water so he sat on the edge with only his feet in the water. A few years ago, he never would have dreamed of sitting out on the deck without a shirt on--too many girls around and his arms were too thin--but the hours he had spent in the weight room had had their effect. Now he kind of enjoyed showing off. Clearly, he wasn't ready for the cover of Muscle and Fitness--like Hank--but he had long since lost his lankiness and was well-defined through the chest and shoulders. He amused himself for a few moments flexing his pectorals and watching the water drops run down his chest before Hank interrupted his thoughts.

"Bill took a sick day yesterday and went skiing. Said it was great. Skied without his shirt all afternoon. I'm thinking we ought a go tomorrow."

Steve shrugged. "I've got school."

"I know you have school!" Hank tried to sound exasperated to help Steve realize that sluffing school was a normal and common thing to do. "Don't go to school, go skiing!"

Steve shrugged again. "It's not that easy, dude."

Hank sat up, opened his eyes and looked at Steve. "Dude, sooner or later you're going to have to start living your own life and making your own decisions. Don't get me wrong--I like your parents, I really do. I've told you a hundred times I used to dream of having the 'perfect' family like you. I mean your Dad is pretty cool and he's a big-wig in the ward and all, and your mom, she's always smiling and we both know she's the best cook in town, but sometimes I get the feeling they think you're still a 'scrub' scout."

"It's not that bad, man." Steve looked up from the water drops he had been pretending to study. "They don't make me go to Pack meeting anymore."

Hank didn't even smile, he was determined to make his point. "It's like the missionary thing, dude. Have you told 'em you're not going yet?"

The smile left Steve's face as he shook his head. "See, that's what I mean!" Hank took his hand out the water long enough to point it at Steve. "You've got to be your own person and tell them how you really feel! You're the one that's going to be sent who-knows-where preaching something you don't even believe in, not them!"

Steve had heard this sermon a number of times before, he couldn't argue with the philosophy, but it bugged him when Hank acted so high and mighty telling him what to do. "Yeah, you're right. If my mom hung at the bowling alley on Sundays and I'd never met my

dad, it would probably be just as easy for me to tell my parents as it was for you to tell yours."

Even before the words were completely past his lips, Steve wished he had them back. Hank pretended not to mind and mumbled something about it not mattering what his parents thought he still had to tell them, but Steve could see the hurt in his eyes. The conversation died and Hank laid back and closed his eyes again.

The heat of the jacuzzi combined with the discomfort at having offended Hank, made Steve feel more and more like a lobster in a huge pot of water slowly cooking to death. The silence grew heavier and heavier as the two friends showered, dressed and climbed in Hank's jeep for the ride home. By the time they pulled up in front of his house, Steve couldn't take it any more. "Better pick me up at eight if we want to get up there by the time the lifts open."

Hank looked at Steve with a smile and nodded. "Ok dude. Eight o'clock." Steve climbed out and Hank pulled away like he was late for his own funeral. Gravel sprayed everywhere and Steve watched in glowing admiration as the little four-wheeler leaned to one side under the torque of the 304 and then shot away into traffic. For a moment he forgot about telling his parents anything. Someday he'd have a machine like that himself. He had about \$3,000 in his missionary fund already--missionary!--the word yanked him back to reality.

Maybe Hank was right. Maybe he should just have it out with his parents and get it over with. The thoughts sloshed around in his mind as he picked his way through the slush puddles to the back door. His little sister Jessica greeted him as he dropped his bag on the washroom floor.

"Hey Stevie! What'd you bring me?" Steve smiled at the five year old toe-head--the only one in the world allowed to call him Stevie. He bent over and unzipped his bag.

“Let’s see, I know I’ve got something in here for you.” He pretended to be searching in his bag. “Come over here and help me look, would you?”

“No way, Jose!”

“Why not? Don’t you want to see what I brought you?” Steve straightened up hiding his sweaty socks behind him.

“I don’t want to get socked!”

“Socked? Have I ever socked you?” Before Jess could answer, he jumped over the bag, and stuck his smelly socks in her face. Squealing, she ran for the kitchen like a stuck pig. Steve smiled and tossed the socks on top of the hamper. They’d played that little game almost every day for the last six months and Jess never seemed to get tired of it. In fact, she seemed to enjoy it more every day.

Steve found the rest of his sisters and his brother watching TV in the family room. “Hey, does anyone know where mom and dad are?”

Brian, his younger brother by 3 years, responded without taking his eyes off the set. “They went to the temple. Your dinner is in the microwave. Mom said to tell you it’s your turn to do the dishes.”

“My turn? I just did ‘em on Monday!”

“Sorry dude. I’m just telling you what mom said. I’m taking care of the girls and you have to do the dishes.” Brian’s eyes still hadn’t left the TV.

“Watching TV with the girls, that’s a pretty big job for you Bri. Are you sure you can handle it?”

Brian just grunted and Steve walked back into the kitchen.

After consuming the feast his mom had left for him in the microwave--no doubt about it, his mom was an excellent cook--Steve started on the dishes in the sink. He’d never admit it to anyone, but he kind of enjoyed doing the dishes. He seemed to think best when he was working on something with his hands. As he loaded the cups in the top rack of the dishwasher his mind returned to his parents and the mission.

It wasn’t that he wanted to hurt his parents. He didn’t. He’d got over the rebellious thing a few years ago. It wasn’t that he was scared either. Oh sure, going off to some strange place for a few years made him a little nervous, but he knew he could handle that. The real problem was that he didn’t believe there was any need to try to convince the world to think the way he thought. No--not the way he thought--what the church taught. When it came right down to it, he didn’t completely believe everything the church taught and even if he did, he didn’t think it was right to go impose those views on the rest of the world. With that thought in mind, he slid the racks back into the dishwasher, poured soap into the little box, and shut the door.

As the sink filled with soapy water, Steve thought of his parents commitment to the church. A lot like Jessica and their little game, he thought, they go through the same routine week after week after week just because that’s what they’ve always done. But is it really necessary? Sure, he believed in God and that it was wrong to be unkind to others. But organized religion and the need to get people to join, somehow it didn’t seem necessary or even right. Surely God wouldn’t reject a person that had never hurt anyone and was always kind to others just because he wasn’t a Mormon, or a Methodist, or even a Catholic for that matter. Steve rinsed the last casserole dish and laid it on the drying rack. Hank was right, he needed to tell his parents he wasn’t going to go and why. Maybe if he explained it logically, the way he had just thought about it they would understand.

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