

Late summer. The air was warm, but not oppressive. A slight breeze sent a shiver through the poplar trees lining the boulevard. Light and shadow danced together on the sidewalk as the sun's rays filtered down through the leaves. The 'whish' of passing traffic a few streets over underscored the relative silence on the quiet street, marked only by the melodic offerings of a songbird high up in the trees.

*Honk! Honk! "Hey! You're blocking the driveway! Get that rust bucket outta the way!"*

The tranquility was shattered. The impatient driver of the new BMW laid on the horn and craned his head out the window before jamming it into gear and backing up with a screech. Cranking the wheel, he swung past the offending blue pickup and U-haul trailer, coming dangerously close to clipping the front fender of the truck. The parting expletive and accompanying hand signal was not lost on the occupants of the rig.

"What's your rush?" Lester leaned out the window of the dusty truck and shook his fist at the retreating silver sports coupe. With a disgusted grunt he pulled his head back into the cab.

"We are blocking the street," Patsi noted, craning her neck around to watch the now miniscule BMW. "I mean, couldn't we pull around closer to the front doors or something?" She surveyed her brother for a moment and then flopped back against the rather unforgiving bench seat with a sigh. "I forgot. You have everything under control."

Lester Ray Tibbett gave his young sister a withering look. "As a matter of fact, I do. No room to turn around. I don't know how they expect folks to move in and out of these blasted apartments with no room to maneuver a trailer."

The apartment block to which the brother and sister were relocating was a square, four-story structure situated on a narrow tree lined street in an older section of Calgary – if you could call any part of the city 'old'. The prairie city had boomed to such a degree in recent years that it was a miracle they'd found an apartment at all.

Lester inched the vehicle back a few more millimeters then pressed his foot against the brake. He put the truck in park while simultaneously engaging the emergency brake. He slammed out of the vehicle, keys in hand, leaving the tinny reverberations of the door to echo in his sister's ears. "Come on. We haven't got all day." With a sigh, she followed suit.

Lester blocked up the U-haul's tires and unlocked the safety latch on the back doors. With a creak, he swung the doors wide, revealing the contents within. Placing his hands on hips, he surveyed the stacks of boxes and furniture. He took off his ball cap and wiped his brow with the back of his checkered sleeve. His closely cropped brown hair was stuck to his head in a flattened ring where the ball cap had been, curling up at odd angles everywhere else. A day's growth of stubble darkened his jaw line until it merged with well-defined sideburns.

Patsi sidled up to her brother and groaned. "This is going to take forever."

"No complaining. The longer we stand around the longer it'll take."

Patsi let out another dramatic sigh, but extended her arms to receive the first box. Lester piled two more on top before nodding his head for her to get a move on. He watched her for a few seconds as she strode to the building's entrance. Her blonde braid swung in time to her steps, mimicking the sway of her hips in the too-short jean shorts she insisted on wearing that day. She'd grown up right before his eyes, taking on a womanly shape that had him worried. His role as her guardian was sure to get more complicated once she started college. She was a good kid. Contentious as any teenage girl, but a hard worker. Both he and his sister were used to manual labor. Despite her petite figure and pretty face, she was tough as nails from doing chores and could hold her own.

Lester hoisted his own set of boxes and followed his sister. Several trips later they were both puffing from exertion. Lester had worked on the farm all his life and had the muscles to prove it, but so many trips up and down two flights of stairs was taking its toll.

"I need to take a break." Patsi bent over, hands on her thighs as she tried to catch her breath. "Any water in the truck?" Tendrils of hair were coming loose, framing her face with heat induced curls. The siblings had the same naturally curly hair, but Patsi's was a shade lighter than his. 'Dirty blonde' she called it while Lester's was a light brown. He, of course, kept his cropped short, but Patsi insisted on keeping hers long and tried to straighten it each day. It was a chore that made no sense to him, but girls would be girls.

"I think there's some in the cab." Lester strode to the driver's side of the truck and opened the door with a jerk. He rummaged around behind the seat until he came up with

two bottles of water. He tossed one to Patsi on his way around the vehicle and she caught it with the quickness of an infielder.

“It’s warm,” she protested.

“Beggars can’t be choosers.” Lester downed the whole thing then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before crushing the bottle in his fist and tossing it into the box of his truck among the other contents. “Okay, let’s get this trunk out of here next.” Lester jumped into the half empty U-haul trailer and tugged a large trunk toward the doors.

“It’s too heavy for me.” Patsi recapped her water and set it on the bumper of the trailer. She stood up and stretched.

Lester shot her a frown. “Come on Princess. It’s not going to move itself, and I don’t see anybody else around, do you?”

Patsi sighed heavily and moved to take her place at the other end of the trunk. Lester took a hold of one of the corners and lifted, trying to shimmy the heavy burden so that Patsi could better grasp it by the handles. Suddenly the trunk slipped, jamming his finger between it and the open doorway of the trailer. With a yelp he snatched his finger away and squeezed it with his other hand. A few choice words escaped.

“I told you it was too heavy.” Patsi cocked her head to one side in an ‘I told you so’ manner and raised her brows.

“Need a hand?”

Lester looked up sharply. A man was standing on his third floor balcony, overlooking the operation. He was tall and broad and was wearing a worn T-shirt and a dirty ball cap similar to the one Lester had on.

“Um... yeah. That would be great,” Lester called back.

“Be right down.” The man waved and disappeared through his sliding glass doors.

“My lucky day.” Patsi beamed up at her brother. “Your new friend can take over from here.”

“There’s still plenty of small stuff,” Lester said.

Patsi rolled her eyes. “I was joking.”

Lester sighed. Sometimes his sister acted so immature. Okay, she was only seventeen, but she needed to start acting like more grown up. He wasn’t much older when he’d been thrown into more responsibility than most guys his age had ever dreamed of.

“Hi!”

Lester glanced back up at the building. Two small boys were watching from their own balcony two stories up. One had chocolate brown skin, while the other had straight black hair and an olive complexion. He just waved. Those little kids probably had nothing better to do, so let them watch if they wanted. He noticed the curtains moving in another window on the second floor. It was hard to remain anonymous in a place like this. Where everyone was all squished together like sardines in a can. Oh well. It was the best he could do.

The helpful neighbor was approaching so Lester turned his attention back to the matter at hand. “Thanks again for offering to help. Name’s Lester Ray Tibbett.” Lester stretched out his hand.

“Jed Malloy.” Jed had a firm grip and his hand almost dwarfed Lester’s.

“Good to meet you. Me and my sister are just moving in,” Lester said.

Patsi rolled her eyes. “Obviously. Duh.”

Lester pointed a thumb back at Patsi. “My sister Patsi Mae.”

“Just Pat,” Patsi mumbled, looking down.

Jed smiled. “Pleased to meet ya. I got a couple of sisters of my own back ‘ome. You’re mighty lucky to get the place. Ol’ Tucker was ‘ardly even cold when the place was advertised. A real ‘ousing shortage these days.”

“You from out east?” Lester asked. Jed’s short clipped words, extended ‘r’ and lack of ‘h’ quickly betrayed his background.

“Yeah. Newfoundland.”

Lester nodded. “The accent kind of gives you away.”

Jed laughed. “I ain’t the one with the accent. I keeps tellin’ you westerners, but you’s don’t listen too well.” They all laughed. “Well, we’d better get you moved in, neighbor.” He clapped Lester soundly on the back and then went straight for the trunk. “Where’s this beast going?”

With a grunt the two men hoisted the heavy trunk and started lumbering for the entrance.

Jed was taller than Lester by several inches and at six feet Lester wasn’t exactly short. Jed also looked to be broader and very muscular. Lester’s own muscles were

hardened by hard work and fine-tuned by riding broncos – one of his hobbies, but he wouldn't want to meet the other man in a fight. He just might lose.

The threesome had the remainder of the truck and trailer unloaded and into the apartment within half an hour.

“Thanks man,” Lester puffed, winded from the last trek up the stairs with a particularly heavy chest of drawers. “I don't know how I would have managed with only Patsi for help.”

“Hey, I'm no sissy,” Patsi protested. “I could have managed.”

Lester shook his head and snorted his doubts.

“I could have! Mostly...”

“No problem. That's what neighbors are for. I was glad to 'elp. I could use a cold one, though. As a thank you.” Jed winked. He pulled off his ball cap to reveal a shock of dark hair that stood out at odd angles.

“Sorry,” Lester apologized. “We haven't got anything to offer just yet. We could make coffee if we could find the coffee maker.”

“Why don't you come over to my place?” Jed offered. “My fridge is always stocked with the essentials. Like beer, that is.”

“Sounds good to me. I should move that rig out of the way first, though. I'll just be a minute.”

“Sure. I'll just 'elp your sister move some of these boxes around.”

Lester left Patsi and Jed to rearrange the boxes into their respective rooms while he moved the truck and trailer to a better location down the street. He returned in a few minutes to find them already waiting in the hall.

“A beer sounds pretty good about now,” Lester said. “Got anything for my sister?”

Patsi folded her arms and stuck her chin out. “I'm not a baby. I can have a beer if I want.”

Lester just raised a brow. “Only if I say so.”

“It's not like I haven't had a beer before. Besides, I'll be legal in four months.”

“Nineteen?” Jed asked.

Patsi shook her head. “Eighteen.”

“Right. Legal drinking age is eighteen in Alberta.” Jed shook his head. “No wonder the kids in the bar are looking younger and younger these days.”

Lester and Patsi followed Jed down the hall to his apartment, three doors down from their own. It was a typical bachelor’s pad – mismatched furniture arranged for optimal television viewing with dirty dishes and left over food littering every available surface.

“Excuse the mess,” Jed apologized, going straight for the refrigerator and collecting three long necked bottles of beer. The first bottle let out a hiss as he twisted the top off. He handed it to Patsi and winked. “Ladies first.”

“Thanks.” Patsi looked pointedly at her brother and took a sip.

“Guess I can’t say no now that you’ve put your germs on it,” Lester said with a slight grin. “But don’t get any ideas.”

Jed distributed the remaining beer. “Have a seat.” He did a wide sweep of the room with his free arm. Patsi and Lester found seats on the sofa and Jed stretched out in the armchair. “So? What brings you to the city?”

“Work,” Lester replied. “That and my sister going to college.”

“His idea, not mine,” Patsi said with a sullen edge to her voice. She sipped tentatively from her bottle of beer.

“Education is a good thing,” Jed said. “Something that can never be taken away. So my Ma says. Too bad I didn’t listen.” He grinned. “You seem kinda young for college, though.” He squinted at Patsi.

“December baby,” Lester explained. “Moving here should help her adjust.”

“You talk like I’m not even here,” Patsi protested. “Besides, I would have been just fine.” As if to prove it she took a long drink of her beer. Suddenly she sputtered, choking as it went down the wrong way. Her diaphragm jerked as she tried to control the coughing and she glared at Lester, as if it was his fault she was choking.

Jed pointed with his free hand. “Bathroom’s that way, if you want.”

Patsi got up from the couch without looking at either man and headed down the narrow hall. Lester’s eyes followed her.

“Where’d you say you come from again?” Jed took a long swing of his beer.

“Farmed near Coulee Creek,” Lester said.

Jed nodded. “I know it. That’s nice country.”

“It’s home. But there have been a few bad years. Drought. Poor grain prices. It costs about as much to put the crop in as any profits you might get. I figured I’d rent the land out for a bit. Let somebody else have all the headaches and just collect a paycheck for a change.”

Jed took another drink. “You gotta do what you gotta do. I came all the way across the country, so I definitely know.”

“How long have you been here?” Lester asked.

Jed cocked his head to one side. “Let’s see... Four years now? Something like that. Long enough that I ‘ate to give up my job and move back ‘ome. Besides, ‘alf of Newfoundland is out west so’s its not so bad. One of my brothers is coming out soon, too, or so ‘e says.”

“That’s nice. Family is important.”

Jed eyed Lester over the top of his bottle. “So it’s just you and your sister?”

“Since our folks died, yes. Sometimes I feel more like her father than her brother.”

“How long your folks been gone?” Jed asked.

“Nine years. She was only nine, so she’s spent half her life without them.”

“And there was no other family to take care of ‘er?”

“I don’t believe in shirking my duties,” Lester responded quietly. “We had an old aunt in Saskatoon, but it was best for her to stay put in her own home. That’s what my folks would have wanted.”

“You must a been pretty young yourself.”

“Twenty-three.”

Jed let out a soft whistle. “Pretty young to have to take on that kind of responsibility. Took over the farm, too?”

Lester nodded. “I was planning on working along side my folks anyway. It just happened sooner than expected.”

“I see.”

“It was a good life,” Lester said. “On the farm, I mean. Good place to raise a kid.”

“Keeps ‘em out of trouble, I suppose,” Jed agreed. “You might ‘ave your ‘ands full ‘ere.” He grinned.

“Not if I can help it.”

“I know a thing or two about teenage girls. I’ve got sisters of my own and when they put their mind to somethin’ they don’t give in easy. I’d watch ‘er if I were you.”

“I intend to.” Lester let out a sigh – one far too deep for a casual first meeting. “It’s one thing I plan on doing right.”

“Sounds like you’re pretty ‘ard on yourself.”

Lester sat up straighter and tried for a smile. Trust a Newfie to skip small talk and go straight to personal. “So, what do you do for a living?”

“Construction. I know there’s more money in the oil patch, but I don’t care much for camp life. We’re working on some big ‘igh rise building downtown.”

“You don’t say. I’m starting up with a construction outfit myself. What’s the name of yours?”

“Titan,” Jed said.

Lester raised his brows. “Really? That’s who hired me. My cousin put in a good word for me.”

“Always pays to know the right people.” Jed finished his beer and set the bottle on the side table. “Small world, ain’t it?”

“True.” Lester also downed the rest of his beer just as Patsi re-emerged. “Ready to go, Sis?” He stood and stretched.

She glanced at the full bottle of beer sitting where she’d left it. “I’m not done my beer.”

Lester checked his watch. “I gotta get that trailer back before closing.”

Jed winked at Patsi. “You can ‘ave a rain-check sometime.”

“Thanks again for the help, neighbor,” Lester said.

“Anytime. Whenever you two need anything, just ‘oller.”