

Chapter One:

Skulking in the Shadows of a Giant Spaceman's Legs

“Hell of a thing.” As he peered through the fractional slit between the curtains of the darkened hotel room, Bill Durmer spoke a little too loudly. The situation demanded more of an under-the-breath delivery, but he made a habit of never speaking in a manner that could be described as a murmur. He knew it unlikely, but on the off chance that someone should ever write a book about him, he would find it utterly embarrassing to read the phrase “Durmer murmured.” Moreover, being overly empathetic (he could never bring himself to darken the doors of a karaoke bar without becoming physically ill), Bill could not bear the shame on behalf of the writer. Therefore, he always spoke loudly and distinctly out of an abundance of caution. He breathed deeply and tried to pierce the pitch to spot even the slightest hint of movement outside.

“Hell of a thing.” Bill cast a sideways glance toward the small figure crouching next to him in the dark. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have chided his daughter for repeating his mild profanity. After all, for most of her nine years, “stupid” and “shut up” were deemed the foulest of language. These, however, were clearly not ordinary circumstances. “I don’t think Mama’s going to be very happy with us.”

Bill sighed. “No, Cleary, I suspect she isn’t.” He half expected his wife to come bursting through the door at any moment: first, to scold them both for their pie-eyed foolishness, and second, to save them from their current predicament. The more he considered the former, the less he wanted the latter. He hoped he wouldn’t see her for quite some time — at least not until he had found a way to explain his actions of the previous two weeks.

It wasn't that Bill was afraid of his wife. She wasn't shrewish or harsh in any way. He simply hated to disappoint her. By his estimation, he had disappointed her in grand fashion at least seven times in their marriage. All of those missteps combined now paled in comparison to this most recent adventure. He wondered if she would ever forgive him. Could she? Could anyone? He thought it best to start the process of making amends with the closest of his victims. "I'm sorry I got you into this, Sweetie."

"It's okay, Daddy. I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

Bill could hear the bittersweet smile in her voice. It reminded him of the time she voluntarily gave up her spot in the party scene in the Decent Chance Ballet Company's annual production of *The Nutcracker*. Although winning that role had been the proudest moment of her young life, she willingly, out of compassion and a preternatural selflessness, gave it up to her best friend, Dara Thompson.

Thompsons had been friends with Durmers for generations, dating back to the founding of Decent Chance as a Utopian experiment in the mid-1800s. At least the families told it that way. In truth, the Thompsons and Durmers were bitter rivals for decades, feuding over the privilege to serve as the town's official Jubilee Masters. The title was far more regal than the responsibility. In earlier generations, Jubilee Masters were little more than unpaid fishmongers, tasked with scooping up all the shrimp, blue crabs and fish that would mysteriously, spontaneously migrate into the shallows during a Jubilee and then distributing them to all the families in town. As the saying in Decent Chance went, "If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then fishy fingers are its rafters." Bill often joked that the town's poetic license was revoked before anyone could bother to define the metaphoric roof those pungent rafters supported.

It was only after 1900, when the city of Bay Minette stole the county seat under cover of darkness, that the rift was healed. Bay Minette's men had affected the state-mandated move by staging a murder. The idea was to lure the sheriff and his deputies away from the old county seat of Daphne so the county files could be smuggled out while they were away. According to the murder yarn weaved by the Bay Minette leaders, a Durmer was the victim and a Thompson the perpetrator. When the patriarchs of the two

families got wind of the hoax, informed by an embarrassed and dead sleepy Sheriff wearing only pink, one-piece pajamas and a Colt revolver, they resolved to put the feud behind them and unite in defense against a common enemy: everyone not from Decent Chance.

Always more prosperous than neighboring towns, Decent Chance had failed to realize its full potential due to the bitter acrimony of the feud. From that fateful night, however, with the two wealthiest and most powerful of the founding families united in common cause, the town resolved to convince the world what they had long held as fact themselves: that the people of Decent Chance were vastly superior to everyone else. Recent polling data showed that as many as 14 people outside the city actually believed them.

Bill had known Dara's father, Kenny, since birth. They were inseparable throughout grade school, once declaring themselves blood brothers after watching an episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*. They tried to recite the exact oath sworn by Andy and Opie, but could never get past the part about Boojum Snark. The name would send them into peals of laughter every time they said it until they couldn't utter more than "Boo" without rolling on the ground, convulsing together in fits of silent guffaws. Their friendship waned for a time in high school when Kenny joined the football team and Bill the marching band. Shortly after graduation, Bill left the state for college, but they picked up where they had left off when Bill moved back home. In the meantime, Kenny had married Bill's sister.

Cousins and best friends, Cleary Durmer and Dara Thompson were born only 16 hours apart in adjacent birthing suites at Mobile Infirmary. They took their first steps on the same day. Always the more verbal of the two, Cleary spoke her first words several months prior to her friend, but her first word was "Dara." Sure, it sounded like "Dada," but Cleary made her meaning known by always patting her friend on the head like a dog when she said it. In fact, she also said "Dada" when petting the family dog, but everyone wrote that off as coincidence. At three, the girls started pre-ballet classes under the tutelage of Nancy Durmer Thompson, Dara's mother and Bill's sister.

Nancy had taken the reins of the Decent Chance Ballet Company from

her mother, who had founded it in the mid-1960s. From the girls' first lesson, it was clear to everyone Nancy was grooming Dara for future stardom. Maybe it was the way she glided into the studio the first day of class, picked up her daughter, spun the girl around and announced to all present, "and I'm grooming this one for future stardom." Nancy was renowned for her subtlety.

Once the girls were old enough to audition for roles in the company's productions, everyone assumed Nancy would simply wield her power to put Dara in a featured role. Then something unexpected happened. Dara froze up in her spurious audition. Though she eventually danced well, her initial trepidation cast doubts in the minds of the casting committee. For the first two minutes of her allotted five, Dara simply walked in circles, chewing her nails and murmuring to herself. (As a Thompson freed from the curse of her mother's maiden name, Dara was allowed to murmur with abandon.)

The audition disaster put Nancy in an untenable position. If she allowed the committee to have their way, come Christmas her only daughter would be watching from the audience while, as Nancy described them to her husband, "fatties and the spawn of mechanics" stole the spotlight. On the other hand, casting Dara would make Nancy look even worse. If there were one thing less appealing to Nancy than her daughter's humiliation, it was damage to her own reputation. So Nancy did the only thing a self-loving, image conscious Junior Leaguer could do: she resolved to treat her daughter as a pariah.

Mere hours after the cast list had been posted, Nancy sat on the deck at Bill's house, high atop the bluff overlooking Mobile Bay, sipping a mint julep and making a show of her disappointment. She alternately cried and fumed and dramatically reassured her daughter that it was okay to be un-talented. Plenty of unremarkable people have led fulfilling lives, Nancy reminded her, though she couldn't name any off hand. For her part, Dara couldn't fathom the sudden flip-flop of her mother's affections. In all of her seven years, her mother had never uttered even the slightest criticism, forgiving mistakes and justifying failures with half-baked excuses and cleverly worded euphemisms: "she possesses so much beauty, it couldn't be contained in a normal-sized head," or "why should she use a potty when a planter is a more natural choice?" But this day, Nancy's euphemisms were wearing thin and occasionally giving way to unshielded insults. Dara could

bear it no more. She ran weeping into the house and hid under Cleary's bed.

Cleary found her there, huddled up with a menagerie of bean-bag animals. She brushed her cousin's hair back with her fingers and simply said, "Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

Bill suspected something was up when he heard his daughter's call for help. The tone of her cry didn't quite ring true, but he ran for her nonetheless. He found her sprawled at the bottom of the stairs, clutching her ankle. He scooped her up and carried her to the sofa.

"Katherine!" Calling his wife was unnecessary, as she had already handed off the baby to Kenny and was collecting ice cubes in a dish towel. Before she could reach the sofa with the cold compress, Nancy had identified the loophole that would restore her dignity.

"Dara, dear! You're back in the show!" She called upstairs. "Isn't that wonderful news?"

"Your niece is in pain, here," Bill snapped at his sister. "Can't you save your gloating for later?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." Nancy feigned concern for Cleary, shoving her brother aside and taking the girl's hand with a well-rehearsed look of compassion. "But it's really a blessing this happened now, because as clumsy as you are this was just as likely to happen on stage. But you can't help it. You simply have too much of your mother in you."

"I don't think it's that serious," Katherine interrupted, ignoring the insult. She may have left her job as a nurse to focus on raising her children, but she had never stopped nursing. "Cleary, are you sure this hurts? I think this will heal up before you have to start rehearsals."

Cleary let out a pitiful moan and squeezed out a few tears. "I don't think so, Mama." She spied Dara sheepishly entering the room. "It's okay. I would want Dara to take my place." She smiled at her cousin. Real tears mixed with false ones.

Sitting there in the dark of the hotel room, Bill realized this was the first time he had thought about "The Nutcracker Business," as it came to be known in the Durmer household, without his blood boiling a little. Perhaps the bizarre events of the past two weeks had brought him to a place

of forgiveness toward his sister. Or maybe it was simply that the rush of adrenalin and the pounding of his pulse in his ears prevented him from feeling anything else.

"I can't see a thing," Bill said, peeking under the curtain. "You think they're still out there?"

"They're still out there."

"How do *you* know?" he asked with an incredulous tone.

"Because these situations never just end. They always come to a head."

Bill snickered, "And you've been in these situations how many times before?"

"Never," Cleary demurred. "But I watch a lot of TV."

"That's okay," he replied. "So do I. I am just a glorified TV repairman after all."

"No, you're not. You're a genius." Had Cleary been able to see her father's reaction, she would have seen a man humbled and grateful. At that moment, Bill felt at least one person in the world truly understood him. She didn't offer her praise with conditions or with scorn as his sister often did, nor did she temper it with talk of contentment and acceptance of one's circumstances, as would her mother. There was no talk of prophecies or destiny or secret councils or "word bearers" — words he had heard all too often over the last two weeks. She stated it simply as fact. For that, Bill would be eternally grateful.

Suddenly, it began to rain the hard rain of a central Florida summer thunderstorm. Now came the *tink-tink-tink* of tiny hailstones rapping on the window. Bill felt sorry for those outside in this mess, and for a moment he considered inviting them inside to get dry. He knew that would be a mistake. A flash of lightning illuminated the courtyard. In that instant, Bill could make out the shapes of men crouching behind huge alphabet blocks or skulking in the shadows of a giant spaceman's legs. Thunder rumbled and shook the window so hard that both Bill and Cleary jumped back clear of the glass, just in case.

They slowly crept back to their vantage point. With each flash of lightning, Bill tried to discern if any of the figures on the roof were actual snipers or only metal cutouts of toy soldiers. He saw one of the figures move slightly. Another flinched at a particularly bright flash of light. The lightning glinted off the front element of another's rifle scope.

Cleary sighed, "Yep. They're still out there."

“Yep.” Bill tried to count them. Thanks to the lightning, he had made out at least two dozen, but he suspected many more. He and Cleary both started at the sound of footsteps from the roof above. Bill shifted his weight and collapsed back against the bed. They were surrounded. How had it come to this? All he wanted was a fresh start, to embrace a new dream — albeit a profoundly stupid one. How had he let it spin so far out of control? He wanted to offer his daughter words of comfort. He wanted to reassure her that it would all be okay, but he couldn’t. When he tried to speak, the lies caught in his throat and would go no further.

All he could muster was this: “As God is my witness, I never knew Disney World had its own S.W.A.T. team.”

Chapter Two:

The Mystery of the Towel Baby Couple

A white ibis glided down, snagged a chunk of leftover croissant from an abandoned tray of breakfast and swooped within arm's reach of Bill as he stumbled toward the food court. At home, Bill would routinely quip to his family that one should not be expected to do something so complex and essential as making coffee before they've actually *had* a cup of coffee. Katherine and Cleary would chastise him, reminding Bill that, of the four coffee pots they owned, only the French press wasn't programmable, and each time, Bill would resolve to use the feature. He never did. Instead, most late evenings found him dozing off in his workshop, trying to keep awake long enough to install one more actuator or servo, or fine-tune the control system on his geek project *du jour*.

To his left, splashes and squeals and giggles emanated from the resort's swimming pool. Without hearing a single accent, Bill knew instinctively every one of those guests was from the North. No Southerner would be caught dead swimming in 70-degree temperatures. Northerners may have considered the weather balmy, but Bill had lived through many a warmer Christmas than this back home in Decent Chance. The very thought shifted his mood from bad to worse, and his face reflected the change. No number of classic holiday songs by mid-century crooners booming over ingeniously camouflaged speakers, no cleverly themed trees decorated with motion picture film as garland and strands of tiny studio lights, no talk of "the magic of the holidays" could convince him that this was any way to spend his Christmas.

He muttered to himself, "Humbug," as he pushed open the door to

the food court. He slipped deeper into his funk when he saw the line at the coffee dispenser. For years, he and Katherine had told the children, “You decide your mood.” Today, he decided his mood would be Crabby Old Man. Without fail, he was less successful at following his own advice than were his children. He was just grateful they hadn’t come along to call him out on it.

“Merry Christmas!” bellowed a voice ahead of Bill in the coffee line. Surely, this guy was not queuing up for his first cup. Bill, who had been lost in complete lack of thought, reacted slowly. His eyes followed the pale, pudgy legs up from their fleshy bases wrapped in black rubber garden togs, to emerald green Bermuda shorts whose waistband was straining and groaning under the burden of too many all-you-can-eat buffets, and beyond to a triple-extra-large Hawaiian shirt printed with Santa hat-wearing hula girls dancing under palm trees bedecked with Christmas lights. His eyes settled on a massive, grinning head topped with a lighted, foam Christmas tree masquerading as a hat. “Of course, it’s not Christmas Day yet,” the big man belted out jovially, “but every day’s like Christmas when you’re here, huh?”

Bill wondered what manner of escapist holiday fervor could reduce a man to this level of buffoonery. Just because people were on vacation didn’t mean they had taken leave of their sense of sight. Or taste. But this man had seemingly taken leave of both. And of his sense of shame to boot.

Bill nodded politely. He had a rule against making small talk. Nevertheless, he felt compelled to indulge people’s desire to make meaningless conversation ever since he was a boy, when he had heard Father Macerney speak on a verse in Philippians that said you should consider others better than yourself. Since that fateful day — a day marked by one of those embarrassing, life-altering nothings of a moment that only happen in childhood — Bill had tried his best to do exactly that. He mostly failed.

That being said, he simply couldn’t bring himself to talk about nothing. Instead, when confronted with a bout of small talk, he would shoot for an inappropriately profound response, backing the person into a conversational corner.

A simple, “Some weather we’re having” would yield a response like, “And to think one stray bit of space rock could rip away our atmosphere, leaving us gasping, helpless, metaphorically naked as the day we were born. We are so fragile, you and I. Let us silently revel in our fragility.” This usually

led to the other person backing away slowly and avoiding eye contact.

He tried to assuage his guilt over his tendency to ambush people in conversation by telling himself it was his way of being salt and light in a dark, flavorless world. But he was simply killing the conversation as quickly as possible. Surely, Paul would have reconsidered the idea of considering others more important than yourself had he lived today. There was no way any of the Philippians were as annoying as your average American.

In this instance, desperately in need of coffee and wanting to avoid deeper dialogue, he opted for the easy way out. "It is quite lovely," Bill replied.

"Yes, it is. Yes, *it is.*" The big man with the Christmas tree on his head seemed satisfied, justified even, by Bill's response. Just then, the person at the head of the line finished preparing his coffee. It was the big man's turn to fuel up. Offering a parting bon mot to Bill, the man bellowed, "Enjoy your trip!"

Bill nodded and smiled. He glanced around and studied the room as Christmas Tree Head filled his oversized travel mug with Nescafé. World Premiere Food Court was, as with everything at Walt Disney World, themed to the hilt. Bill noted the design influences of early 20th century movie theatres: velvet ropes strung between brass stanchions, marquees above the service counters, posters for seemingly every Disney film ever created and an old single-reel projector on display amidst the tables. Bill thought the design overused the filmstrip motif. *Okay, we get it. It's a movie theme. Ease up on the sprocket holes.* Otherwise, he found it a whimsical delight. His mood lightened as he took it all in. The big man popped the top on his mug and gave Bill a mock salute.

"Have fun today," Bill offered. *Have fun today?* Like it or not, he was better at blather than he'd care to admit. Dispensing coffee into the first of his mugs, Bill thought again about Father Macerny's sermon some 27 years earlier.

That morning, when he was 12, he and Kenny had been laughing and teasing a girl named Jenny Tillman. She was a year their junior and going through an awkward phase. Her hair was chopped a little too short. She was skinny with arms and legs that seemed too long for her body. A mouth