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Once again Armpit was holding a shovel, only now he was getting paid for it, seven dollars and sixty-five cents an hour. He worked for Raincreek Irrigation and Landscaping. He was in the process of digging a trench along the side yard of a house that belonged to the mayor of Austin, a woman with the unusual name of Cherry Lane. As his shovel knifed through the dirt, he carefully kept the sod intact so that it could be replaced later. His shovel was short and had a rectangular blade, unlike the five-foot shovels with pointed blades he had used when he was at Camp Green Lake Juvenile Correctional Facility.

Beads of perspiration rolled out from under his red RAINCREEK cap. His shirt was drenched in sweat. Yet none of this had anything to do with how he got his name.

During his first week at Camp Green Lake, close to three years before, a scorpion had stung him on the arm, and the pain had traveled upward and settled in his armpit. It had felt like there was a hot needle twisting around inside him. He'd made the mistake of complaining about how much his armpit hurt. The pain eventually went away, but the name stuck.

"Theodore!" called his boss, Jack Dunlevy, a white man in his late thirties. "There's someone who would like to meet you."

Armpit stopped digging as his boss and a woman approached. The woman wore blue jeans and a loose-fitting white shirt. Her long silver hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Austin had a reputation for being a little weird, and the mayor fit right in.

"This is Theodore Johnson," said his boss.

Cherry Lane extended her hand. "How ya doin', Theodore?"

Armpit stood a head taller than the mayor. He had broad shoulders and thick muscular arms. At one time in his life he had been a little overweight, but all his digging and sweating had long since burned away any excess fat.

"Just fine," he said as he wiped his dirty hand on his shorts. "Sorry, I'm kind of sweaty."

"That's all right," the mayor said, and shook his hand.

Afraid of his own strength, Armpit tried not to grip the elderly woman's hand too hard, and was a little taken aback by the firmness of her handshake.

“I read all about the terrible things that went on at Camp Green Lake,” she told him. “I want you to know that I admire you for getting through it and turning your life around.”

Armpit wasn’t sure what to say. “I admire what you’ve done for Austin.”

He really had no idea what she’d done for the city. He knew she was supposed to be a strong environmentalist, but he’d heard his dad complain on several occasions that the “tree-huggers” only seemed to care about west Austin, an area well known for its rolling hills, nature preserves, and hike and bike trails. Most African Americans, including Armpit’s family, lived in the flatlands of east Austin.

A mosquito buzzed by his ear, and he swatted at it. At least there hadn’t been mosquitoes at Green Lake. It was too dry.

He had been sent to Camp Green Lake because of a bucket of popcorn. He had been trying to ease his way along a row of seats at the movies. He was only fourteen at the time, and was making his way past a couple of high school seniors when one of them stuck out his foot. They yelled at him for spilling popcorn on them, and he demanded that they pay for the popcorn, and by the time it was all over, the two older boys were in the hospital, and he was on his way to Camp Green Lake Juvenile Correctional Facility.

The name Green Lake was a cruel joke. He spent fourteen months in a dried-up lake bed, where he did nothing except dig holes. Later, when he applied for a job at Raincreek,

Jack Dunlevy warned him the job would require a fair bit of digging. Armpit just smiled and said, “No sweat.”

After leaving Camp Green Lake, he first spent six months at a halfway house in San Antonio, where he attended school and received counseling. There were sixteen boys at the halfway house. The counselor there told them that the recidivism rate for African American boys was seventy-three percent. That meant, according to the statistics, that eleven or twelve of them would be arrested again before they turned eighteen. The counselor said the rate was even higher if you didn’t finish high school.

“If you think life was unfair before you went to prison,” she told Armpit, “it’s going to be twice as bad when you go back. People are going to expect the worst from you, and will treat you that way.”

She said his life would be like walking upstream in a rushing river. The secret was to take small steps and just keep moving forward. If he tried to take too big a step, the current would knock him off his feet and carry him back downstream.

Upon returning to Austin, he set five goals for himself. Five small steps. 1. Graduate from high school. 2. Get a job. 3. Save his money. 4. Avoid situations that might turn violent. And 5. Lose the name Armpit.

He picked up his shovel and went back to his trench.

Jack Dunlevy always brought a radio to the work site, and it was now playing a song by Kaira DeLeon.

*I'm gonna take you for a ride,
And we're gonna have some fun!*

The mayor, who had started to walk away, came hurrying back. "Oh, I love this song!" she exclaimed.

*I'm gonna take you for a ride,
Ooh, and we're gonna have some fun!*

Cherry Lane raised her arms in the air as she wiggled to the music. Armpit tried not to laugh. At least there was music. There had been no radios to listen to when he was digging holes at Camp Green Lake.

*I'm gonna take you someplace
you never been before,
And you'll never be the same again!*