

# ESCAPE BEFORE BENEDICTION

Russ Avery wanted to stay until the end of the service. Doug Tule had done a killer job with his video of Mr. Generic Ball Cap, Brian Bailey—too killer, in fact. That docudrama was like a shiny pinball bouncing against the dark recesses of his mind, lighting up all of his mean-spirited acts of wrongdoing over and over with all of the bells, dings and whistles. Only the bells, dings and whistles in Russ's mind sounded like constipated ducks and whoopee cushions. He couldn't take it for another second.

"Excuse me," he said, scooting by the people next to him in the pew. It was pretty easy to slip out without notice—nobody had seen him at St. Peter's before, so nobody would miss him when he left. And if Doug turned around the moment he stepped in the aisle and caught a glimpse, which Russ thought would be highly unlikely at best, he could just say he wasn't feeling well.

Actually, there was no lying there—Russ wasn't feeling well—but it wasn't because of a sudden bug. He couldn't believe how proudly—not to mention how shamelessly, ruthlessly and selfishly—he'd stolen from Brian Bailey.

All he had to see was that man Mr. Generic Ball Cap nailing and hammering and hammering and nailing on that house—on the outside walls, inside walls, wherever and whenever Mr. Bailey swung away, Russell Avery's conscience was pierced. It was skewered when that little boy STEPHAN was riding his shoulders. And that cut to the basketball hoop he donated—boy oh buddy, did that ever do it. The guy was even working on the roof, even though he could barely walk after he was shot how many times—three times? Russ noticed several wincing from Mr. Bailey while he worked, but that didn't stop his progress, no way.

## —THIS JUST BREAKING—NOVEL FOUR BY JOHN PARISI—

Russell Avery, the official kleptomaniac of Bailey's Sporting Goods. That's what he was—to a man who was contributing, despite being ripped apart by, yes, three bullets. Russ didn't see the news clip thank God, but he didn't have to—he'd seen more than enough *KNews* coverage to know that their anchorman, the one that looked like a Ken doll with a fresh coat of sealant—Russ had seen enough to know he probably just raced though the story like it was as meaningful to him as drying paint.

Russ shifted his Raleigh ten speed into sixth gear, trying to stay on the sidewalk. For crying out loud, his ten speed was one of the few things he hadn't stolen. How much had he swiped in his meager 13 years on the planet—from Mr. Bailey alone, Mr. Generic Ball Cap—this kinder, gentler disciplinarian who was a rare giver instead of a dime-a-dozen taker? Russ tallied. That would be two lacrosse balls, three of those mini rubber footballs (yes, they were called Pixies), two sleeves of Slazenger golf balls (he was caught trying to take the Titleist sleeves), three Rawlings baseballs (the official balls of Major League Baseball), a pair of Adidas running shoes—Russ hoped he wouldn't upchuck. And that was just a quick inventory of the things he'd swiped from one place of business. There were also all the things from the other stores—Kliney's Toys, J.C. Penny's, Pops Records and Tapes, The Garden Toolshed—now he couldn't believe that one. He'd actually stolen two 50-pound bags of limestone to set the boundaries on a makeshift football field in his backyard—what the whim-wham? And never mind all the trouble it took to set up that heist with Al Beacham. That was frightening.

The street light was turning; the DON'T WALK palm was flashing at him and Russ was only three pedals into the intersection. A Porsche pulled forward into the crosswalk, forcing Russ to swerve. He couldn't help but look at the hood to see if the shield emblem was still there, mounted between the recessed headlights. That was another

item on his lengthy list of offenses—Russ had stolen a half-dozen Porsche shields; they were hiding out in a closet shoe box. He'd pried them off with an X-acto Knife and a Phillips-head screwdriver, taking chips of paint along for the ride.

Russ was fascinated with the Porsche shield—the rearing horse nestled between alternating bars of black and red, with STUTTGART, or Porsche headquarters, stamped on top. It was totally awesomely regal, like a medieval crest. But Russ didn't feel totally awesomely noble. He felt like a scurvy serf, a slave with dirt under his fingernails and between his ears, a slave with dirt clogging all of his plumbing—veins, arteries and heart.

A Mercedes passed on the left just after Russ crossed the street, giving him ample room on the shoulder before it turned right on Townsend. A Mercedes—of course. How many hood ornaments had he stolen from those fine automobiles? Almost a dozen. They were yanked up and cut off with a pair of pliers in shopping-mall parking lots while their hardworking owners were probably taking in a movie at the multiplex. But the idea that chomped his conscience like a shark was this: The Mercedes ornament looked like a peace sign. Peacemaker Russell Avery. Hah! Now that's a corker for the ages. Russ saw one of those sitcom laughing tracks running on and endless loop.

He downshifted into second gear as he climbed up Mendle Street, now standing on his pedals. In a neighboring yard Mr. Randall was playing catch with his son Kyle, the boy he'd given a black eye for not coughing up both pocketfuls of change so Russ could get two extra packs of chocolate-chip cookies at lunch. One pack wasn't good enough, was it? And he wasn't getting the second pack for a bullying buddy, no sir-ree-bob. Russ had to have both for himself.

Add petty greed to his list of credentials!

Russ wanted to wave to Kyle but found he didn't have the strength. His classmate's face was bruise-free and smile-wide as he

wound up and threw a pitch to dad. Russ exhaled, trying to steady himself over the handlebars.

How many classmates had he beaten black and blue at every extremity? Russell Avery didn't just stop at the kisser, no he didn't—everything counted, wherever he could get a shot in—arms, legs, shoulders, the small of the back, the nape of the neck—he attacked anywhere, not one square inch of the body was off limits, even the crotch. What a psychopath! Russ lifted the front of his ten speed, popped a wheelie and slammed the tire down on a sidewalk crack. He wanted to make himself wipe out, but somehow God allowed him to keep his balance this time—Russ knew he didn't deserve it.

He'd beat up Kyle Randall, Stan Barnett, Wayne Adams and Matt Saterlie; he'd hurt at least a half-dozen others, bruising arms, necks and ribs, burning hair with assorted illegal fireworks—not to mention the fact that he'd given the man of the hour, Doug Tule, enough black eyes to make him look like king of the raccoons for weeks on end.

So, let's review, Russ said to himself as the fire pokers poked and skewered. He was a klepto guilty of at least two-dozen robberies; he was a thug responsible for at least a dozen assault-and-battery charges or more.

Russ reared his head back and opened his mouth as wide as it would stretch, taking his eyes off the sidewalk. If he spilled, he spilled—and if somebody in the strip-mall parking lot he was passing heard his scream, so be it.

"I'm sorry!"

A man on a crutch wheeled. He was trying to make it to what must have been his hatchback in the handicapped space, carefully plodding and poking. Russ couldn't see any wincing on his face, like the wincing he saw on Mr. Bailey's face when he took his seat three rows up from him at church. Generic Ball Cap didn't even have a crutch, or a

cane for that matter—although he had a brand-new hip, just three weeks old!

Okay, so maybe Russ hadn't put him in the hospital, but boy oh buddy—he'd inflicted enough wounds on others to fill a half-dozen emergency rooms all by himself. His pride wasn't just a roadblock. It was Mount Everest times ten, as wide as it was high. It's a good thing indeed that God is so patient with my delinquent load, he told himself.

Wait a second—he was more than a juvenile delinquent—he'd graduated from that designation with flying colors. Russell Avery was a criminal, a crook, a convict. That's the brass tacks of the whole thing. The only reason he wasn't behind bars was because he was never caught. Maybe I should confess everything, he muttered to himself.

Russ swallowed and eased his hand on the brake, gently rolling down the hill in front of the very predictable line of shops—liquors, drug store, supermarket and barber complete with swirling pole. How could he atone? He had to make amends before his mind took anymore full-bore piercings and deflated into a glob of jelly that would leave him mumbling and messing himself in an institution.

Russ liked the idea of helping folks build houses—that made a major difference for sure. He knew he could ask Tule if they needed another set of willing and able hands on the weekends—but wait.

He saw Brian Bailey handing him a nail apron and a hammer, with that placid, forgiving smile on his face, the same expression he'd had the day Russ was trying to steal that Baiden football right from under his nose. Russ's stomach turned over. He stopped his bike and propped it against one of those glitzy new lampposts the town had just installed for the big anniversary or whatever it was.

Russ staggered, woozy. His head felt like a ball of wax against a blowtorch. Something had to be done. He bent with hands on knees and took a deep breath. When his eyes came back to street level he knew what it was.

## —THIS JUST BREAKING—NOVEL FOUR BY JOHN PARISI—

The Goodwill sign for the local donation center was straight ahead, alight and glowing, a beaming three-dimensional headline set against the graying afternoon sky. Yes, that was the answer. He could sit quietly behind a desk and happily accept pants, shirts, coats, shoes, slacks, sweatshirts, sweaters—they could cover him with layers and layers of it and he wouldn't have to withstand one single attack of guilt or remorse. Of course there would be suspect looks; there would be condescending sneers; there would be grimaces of disbelief—I mean his reputation as the junior high's model citizen preceded him by a country mile—but at least he wouldn't have to see Mr. Generic Ball Cap, Brian Bailey. He couldn't handle that.

Russ looked up at the sky again, trying to find a break in the clouds, which had started to take on a purple tinge. There wasn't a patch of blue anywhere, so he chose an arbitrary point above a colonial house on the hillside. "I'm sorry," he said, hoping Doug Tule was there to throw out a golden nugget from the Good Book.

Nevertheless, God had shown him the way to the Goodwill. Russ nodded, thinking he should break out his bike lock, walk in, and volunteer at that very moment.

Yes, the Goodwill was open on Sunday; he could see a couple of people milling about inside. But today wasn't the day. Russ took his bike by the seat, got back on and pedaled for home. The last thing he wanted was his guilt tidal-waving over, drowning the Goodwill's manager in self-pity. He'd stop by after school on Monday, or maybe Tuesday—that would be better.

### 2.

When Russ pulled into his driveway there was another ten speed leaning against its kickstand. It was Will Moxley's stolen Fuji, as if Russ needed another reminder of the stellar company he kept.

Russ suspected this was going to be payback for missing the last fireworks frenzy, the one he'd boycotted just three days earlier. He expected retribution, but at least only one bike was in the driveway—there wasn't going to be a gang assault this afternoon. Besides, he was on his home turf, and both cars were there, meaning everybody was home. Will wasn't dumb enough to kick up the dickens under such circumstances, was he? There was only one way to find out. Russ reached into his pocket for his key.

"That must be our eating machine," he heard his mom Tracy Avery say from the other side of the door as he turned his key in the lock—"right on schedule."

Mom had a full tray of burgers, hot dogs and bratwursts, ready for the backyard grill, with two bowls of salt and pepper that grandpa Curt liked to administer at his discretion while cooking. It was all about moderation; he always said. On the other hand dad insisted on grinding a tablespoon full of salt and pepper into each and every patty, no exceptions. When mom said that was too much, don't overdo it Adam—it's a hamburger not a saltine—he just waved her off.

Mom clicked her tongs like a pair of maracas, accidentally catching a heart-shaped leaf from her long-standing philodendron. Yes, there were indeed hearts inside the Avery household, Russ would assure himself on the days dad had lightning in his eyes.

That never-say-die plant had been standing tall in the corner of their den for years, in the exact spot where Russ thought a television should have taken up permanent residence. But mom wouldn't have any of it. The only place for a television was the basement; she insisted. It didn't belong anywhere where light was shining through windows. Russ never figured that one out, but once dad backed her up with "that thing between your ears is supposed to be a brain, not a sopping sleaze sponge" Russ dropped the argument in a heartbeat.

It looked like there were at least two or three extra burgers and

brats on the serving tray, even considering how much Russ could pack it away. Mom had obviously accounted for the guest who must have been downstairs sitting in the dark, in front of their quarantined TV. “We weren’t expecting your friend Will,” mom said, “but adapting and adjusting is in our blood, is it not?”

Maybe it was in mom’s blood, but not dad’s. The world had to adapt to Adam Avery, or else. Or else he would fall off the roof.

“Thanks mom,” Russ said. “He’s downstairs?”

Mom nodded. “I told him you’d be home in a few minutes. How was church?”

Russ saw Brian Bailey with that little boy on his shoulders again—STEPHAN, that’s what that strip of duct tape said on the front of his mini hard hat. Generic Ball Cap was holding the boy’s hands; both were waving at Russ, just like they had in the video. Russ felt a pinch in the middle of his throat. “It was fine,” he managed, making way for the kitchen. “Give me a shout when it’s chow time.”

Mom didn’t stop him; she wasn’t going to pursue the conversation—good. His quick change of subject did the trick.

“Will do,” she simply concluded from behind, opening the sliding-glass door to the backyard. Grandpa Curt must have been out there already, making sure the grill temperature was just right. Russ knew he was manning the lid of their gas-powered tanker diligently, opening it and closing it every few minutes so the meat would be cooked perfectly. He couldn’t stand it when the meat was seared on the outside and raw on the inside. But that’s the way dad liked it. Now that was perhaps the one thing that didn’t fit the bill with Adam Avery—raw, burnt, bloody hamburgers? Yet nobody argued, not even grandpa Curt, who was probably the only one who could make dad submit to authority.

Russ opened the basement door. Strange—he could swear he was hearing sizzling down the stairs, but the grill was in the backyard.



## —THIS JUST BREAKING—NOVEL FOUR BY JOHN PARISI—

Will Moxley was holding the giant firecracker with a lit fuse between his thumb and forefinger. It must have been one of those mammoth M-80s or M-60s, what were those things, like quarter sticks of dynamite? Was the kid insane?

“You missed the war so I’m bringing it to you,” Will said with a sadistic smile. He was no longer sporting the wool hat he’d had to wear for weeks on end after Russ burned his hair like a pile of hay with that Roman candle. But Will’s hair hadn’t grown back evenly—there were awkward puffs and tufts sticking out here and there, and other areas where there was only a soft film of peach fuzz. His head looked like a giant Q-Tip that had been run through by a weed wacker with dull blades.

Russ licked his fingers and flailed for the fuse. “Put that thing out you lunatic!”

Will grabbed Russ by the belt and jammed the firecracker into his front pocket.

“Ka-boom ka-boom ka-ka-boom BOOM!” Will yelled.

Russ knew there wasn’t time to pull it out. He might lose a finger, or maybe two. The best he could do was slap his pocket three times. When the hissing didn’t stop, he yanked at the denim of his jeans frantically, trying to create as much separation as possible from the front of his leg. He did manage to shift the firecracker around to his hip at least.

Will was actually slapping him on the back during all of this, doing a little dance that strangely resembled his hippity-hop jig on the day his head was flaming like a torch.

WHUUUD!

The popping of a hot-air balloon made of elephant hide could not have been any louder, Russ knew. And that wouldn’t feature the reverb of a basement’s concrete walls.

“WEEEOWW!”

## —THIS JUST BREAKING—NOVEL FOUR BY JOHN PARISI—

Russ pogo-sticked on his left leg, fearing he might be have to be outfitted with a wooden peg like Captain Ahab for his other limb. Fortunately, his right leg and hip were still attached, although there was a bloody, seared welt of black, blue and red where his pocket used to be that appeared to be smoking. It felt like somebody had hit him with a molten anvil. His ears were ringing; the hole in the front of his pants was as big as the lid of a pickle jar.

Will shoved Russ across the room into a stack of empty boxes.

Tears were streaking down his face before Russ even realized he was crying—it wasn't really the pain; it was the shame of the evil, out-of-control lunacy he'd created—and what he'd have to endure and survive if he was going to move forward. "You could have blown my leg off!" He wailed, trying to push himself up on a half-flattened box.

"That's better than your head!" Will shouted, pushing Russ back to the ground before punching him over and over and over on his new wound with jackhammer repetition.

Will's laughter was shrill and bassy, accelerating and rising what seemed like two octaves with every single breath. It made Don Ryland's guffaws over his burning head sound as normal, everyday and boring as a statistical manual. And still Will kept punching.

Russ grabbed him in a bear hug and rolled him over, going for the throat. Beyond reason—that's how far Will had gone, not to mention all of his other friends. Will was not seeking retaliation here—that would have actually made sense. He was doing this for the fun of it, for pure sport.

Russ grabbed hold of his neck and squeezed with both hands, too scared to feel sick this time. "STOP!"

Will tried to spit on him, but only ended up splatting his own nose and mouth.

"What's the meaning of this!"

Curt Avery commanded from two steps up, towering over both boys with hands on hips. He grabbed his grandson by the scruff of the neck and lifted him off his feet.

Russ couldn't move. But Will Moxley was already up and standing in a defensive position, ready to take on grandpa Curt?

Russ wanted to shout sorry to the heavens once again—he was responsible for this downward spiral of crazy heinousness and it would only spin faster and faster, pulling, tearing and ripping skin and muscle and tendon.

Grandpa Curt clenched a knobby-square fist. His class ring jutted out like the rung of a brass knuckle, casting a reflection from its lone ruby into Will's right eye, forcing him to squint and turn his head.

"You better leave right now Will Moxley." Grandpa bellowed, pointing to the back stairs under the bulkhead.

Will's eyes appeared to stretch sideways. No, that definitely wasn't sanity entering his body. It was fear.

He backpedaled, appearing to be somewhat mesmerized by grandpa Curt, his fist, or that peculiar glint coming from his ring. When his heels hit the first step he turned and started climbing. Russ didn't exhale until he heard the squeaky bulkhead opening and the slam of its metal doors clanging shut.

"Don't come back!" Russ shouted at nobody, almost losing his balance and pogo-ing on his good leg, sucking in a breath between clenched teeth.

The pain was probably unbearable, yet the boy refused to yell. Curt knew the reaction all too well—it was all part of the Adam Avery tough-guy routine, the one his son had forced down Russ's throat. Adam Avery, the man who thought brick walls were made of tissue paper. Curt wouldn't have a problem if the boy screamed at the top of his lungs—that actually would have been much healthier. "How bad is it?" He asked.

**—THIS JUST BREAKING—NOVEL FOUR BY JOHN PARISI—**

Russ pivoted and pointed to his wound.

Grandpa took a knee and studied the swelling mass of black, blue and red. “You’re spending your time with the wrong people.”

Grandpa didn’t need to tell him; Russ knew it was time to make some radical changes—simply canceling a date with explosives and explosions was only step one. But at least grandpa was taking the time to think about somebody besides himself.

“You dodged a major bullet son,” grandpa said. “We can take care of this with some antiseptic.”

“It wasn’t a bullet grandpa,” Russ said. “It was one of those monster firecrackers.”

Grandpa nodded twice. “I’d be able to smell the powder even if I was born without a nose.”

Russ pumped his leg up and down, bending at the knee. No, he hadn’t lost any flexibility, but the bruise was already impeding things for sure. He sucked more air between his teeth, biting his lip.

“If you need to yell, yell.” Grandpa said.

Russ pulled at the burnt tatters of his pocket. Where was he going with this?

“You have to face your trouble and pay the price. Want me to shout for you?”

Shout? Dad never told him to shout when he caught him in the act. The only time dad really did anything was when he saw Russ taking his Marlboro Reds. Unless it cost him precious puffs of nicotine dad never had the time, even when he was standing right there. The best he could do was push Russ out of the way; he had work to do, didn’t his stupid kid know any better?

“Want me to shout for you?” Grandpa insisted.

“What are you talking about?”

Grandpa rolled up his sleeves, exhaling. “Trouble is loud. Everybody tries to silence it these days, like they’re in a library. It

should scream, boom and crash every time it happens, so people will see it for what it is and be forced to deal with it!"

Grandpa slammed his ring fist into his opposing palm. Russ noticed his calluses—it made him think of Brian Bailey again, setting off another avalanche of guilt.

"Are you going to take your punishment, or are you going to cause us more TROUBLE!" Grandpa shouted at the ceiling. "Want to test me? I'm not going anywhere," he said, pointing between his grandson's eyes.

Russ noticed how straight grandpa's finger was—it didn't bow in the slightest bit to the left or right, not one millimeter. It was a straight arrow, pointing straight ahead—not going every which way at warp speed. Thank God.

"I'm sorry," Russ said, palms up. "I'll take my medicine. I'll take it like a man."

"That's the right answer." Grandpa said. "You're grounded for two weeks. I want you home by 4 p.m. every day, hitting the books behind the closed door of your room. No music, no phone or TV, no friends—got it?"

Russ nodded with a smile.

"Are you laughing at me boy?"

Russ held up open palms again. "No sir."

Grandpa nodded. "It starts tomorrow. Now let's take care of that injury."

Grandpa couldn't find the antiseptic or a can of Bactine in the medicine cabinet, but there was a bottle of rubbing alcohol and a pack of cotton swabs.

Russ rinsed off the soapy residue in the tub then sat on the edge of it, blotting the bloody wound that was shaped like the state of New Jersey in miniature.

## —THIS JUST BREAKING—NOVEL FOUR BY JOHN PARISI—

"Here we go son," grandpa said, dunking three cotton swabs into the bottle of rubbing alcohol. "This is going to sting a bit."

Russ sucked in another breath through clenched teeth.

Grandpa shook his head. "You can still scream you know."

Russ chuckled.

"All right, that should do it," grandpa said, reaching for two Band-Aids. "Let's get you a bag of ice."

Russ wanted to explain—grandpa deserved an explanation; so did mom. They both were going to get one, the sooner the better. "I didn't even invite him over grandpa—he just came."

Grandpa applied a Band-Aid, pressing on the edges so he wouldn't irritate the broken skin. "So he just came over to play buddy buddy with a lit stick of dynamite in his hands?"

Russ thought it would be best to leave the details out of his explanation. The big picture was enough for now.

"That's the way Will is—he's always been a pyro—"

"Sure. That's why when you go over to his house you leave with a knapsack full of bottle rockets and cherry bombs. Do you think I'm an idiot?"

How'd he know that? Grandpa had only moved in a couple of weeks ago—after the last fireworks frenzy.

"Your mother told me Russell," grandpa said. "You're going to respect her. And you're going to respect me. Come on, spill it right now. Fill in the blanks."

Grandpa helped him up and led him out of the bathroom.

"They wanted me to be part of a fireworks war the other day and I cancelled. So Will said he was bringing the war to me."

Grandpa groaned. "You've created a two-headed monster—do you understand that? A man reaps what he sows."

Russ thought Doug Tule would probably have a reference point for that nugget. That one had to be in the Good Book for sure. He

## —THIS JUST BREAKING—NOVEL FOUR BY JOHN PARISI—

turned the knob on the basement door and pushed it all the way open for grandpa.

“Let’s hope he’s the only vindictive one,” grandpa said. “The world is full of people who get high as a kite on trouble—it’s like a drug to them. I want you to cut that boy off like wheat. Don’t have anything to do with him—you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” Russ said, noticing mom wasn’t in the kitchen. And the ample serving platter of grilled meats had yet to make an appearance on the table.

“Your mother didn’t hear anything,” grandpa said. “She was tending the grill when your little bomb went off. Get upstairs and change your pants. I’ll smooth things over with her so you don’t have to explain again.”

Russ picked up the already-prepared plate of toppings: leaves of lettuce, slices of tomato, pickle and onion. “I want to tell her,” he said. “I’m sick of sneaking around behind her back.”

Grandpa slapped him on the shoulder. “Spoken like a man who takes responsibility for his actions.” He held Russ by the arms and squeezed. “I know things have been tough on you. After all, I was the one who raised your father—or at least tried to. Don’t worry—we’re not going to leave you hanging.”

Russ nodded and the two walked outside together.

When Tracy saw Curt and Russ coming toward her without that Will Moxley boy in tow, she knew—oh wonderful, that bandaged hole where her son’s front pocket used to be was as big as the moon.

Russ extended the plate of toppings carefully and mom took it without a single word, unable to make eye contact. She’d given up on asking for explanations a long time ago.

“Will stuffed an M-80 in my pocket and it blew up. I choked him and grandpa broke it up. Then he kicked Will out.” Russ said.

“Oh Russell,” mom said, clanging the spatula against the grill. Two tears skidded down her cheek. “You know I just can’t handle much more of this,” her voice cracked.

Grandpa rubbed Russ’s back and finished with a two-finger nudge, pushing him forward.

“I know you don’t deserve this,” Russ said. “I’m turning my back on Will and the others. They never were friends anyway. They’re addicted to my trouble—it gives them some kind of twisted rush.”

Tracy sniffed and flipped two burgers over to the right kind of sizzling sound. “And why should I believe you this time?”

“He’s going to cut them off like a farmer behind the wheel of a tractor-trailer combine,” grandpa said, slapping Russ on the back. “Isn’t that right?”

“Absolutely,” Russ said. “I won’t go to their houses or invite them over or even join them at the lunch table—I’ll sit on the other side of the cafeteria. I won’t get chummy in the halls or compare girl stories—I won’t start anything either. And if they invite themselves over, like Will did today—I won’t open the door.”

Tracy rolled over two bratwursts and a hot dog—all were well browned. “Are you sure that’s what you’re going to do?” She asked, knowing from her own experiences that there wasn’t a more powerful tractor beam than teenage peer pressure. “There’s going to be more trouble—it will only get worse. Now that you’ve alienated one of them, they’re all going to jump on your back.”

Russ reached out for her hand. “I deserve it mom,” he said, knowing it was God’s way of setting things straight. “I need to get on the right road—sometimes you have to pay a heavy toll first.”

Tracy gaped at Curt.

Grandpa shrugged, not realizing both eyebrows were almost touching his receding hairline. “Maybe he picked up a few pointers at church—what do you think?”



**—THIS JUST BREAKING—NOVEL FOUR BY JOHN PARISI—**

Tracy put down the spatula and turned to face her son. He didn't break eye contact, even when she wiped both tear tracks.

Russ reached out again and they embraced. When she pulled back he was holding out a napkin. "Here," he said.

Tracy took it and dabbed her cheeks.