

Run

Ellie

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by

Dee Shaw

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ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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List of Characters

Ellie Wallace – Main Character

Owen Wolf – Drug Dealer

Joe Wallace – Ellie’s Father

Caroline Wallace – Ellie’s Mother

Kurt McCoy – Owner of Gas Station

Ray Vinson – Employed by Kurt

Maddie Russell – Ellie’s Grandmother

Sam Reynolds – Police Officer

Clara – Housekeeper at Wallace Home

Chapter 1

ELEANOR WALLACE'S EYES remained on her science teacher, but her thoughts were on something that had nothing to do with chemistry or what Mr. Henderson was saying. Attempting to appear as though she were interested in the instructions he was giving for the following day's test, she allowed one hand to dangle below her chair. Her nimble fingers began searching for her cell phone deep inside one pocket of her backpack.

This was the last class of the day, and in mere seconds the bell would ring making this school day history. Ellie wanted to call Brennie before they both climbed on separate buses and headed home for the evening. Once again she had changed her plans and was about to disappoint her most loyal friend.

Yesterday Ellie and Brennie agreed to study together for their chemistry test, but those good intentions would need to be postponed. Early that morning before Ellie had left for school, her father agreed he would take her to the mall to look at the gorgeous, but expensive, jacket she asked the accommodating saleslady to put aside for her. Hopefully, after three days that yummy jacket, her latest must have, had not been purchased and was still safely being held at the store.

It was already Tuesday, and if the jacket had not been sold to another lucky kid by now, she was positive her dad

would buy it after seeing how great it looked on her. Of course, as always, he would check the price before he gave his final approval for the purchase. Even though it was an expensive jacket, marked down only 15 percent off the original price, Ellie just had to have it in spite of the amount. She was prepared to plead or even beg her dad if that was what it took, and Brennie would definitely understand why she was not able to study with her tonight for tomorrow's chemistry test.

Brenda Siegel's dad recently lost his full-time job, and everyone in her family was making an all-out effort to curb their spending on all unnecessary items. They were determined as a family to financially make ends meet. For months Brennie's father had been working two temporary jobs. One was delivering catered lunch meals for six upscale tech corporations in a busy part of town as a full-time day job, and the other was stocking food on shelves at a nearby grocery store during the night hours. Until he could find something suitable that had better employment opportunities, he decided to work hard at both jobs to support his family.

Somehow, Ellie was not able to relate to cutting corners in her spending habits because she had never experienced anything like that in her entire life. Her father was a prominent attorney in the city, and for years his income had been more than sufficient for his family to live quite comfortably. Although both Joe and Caroline Wallace never considered it wise to waste money on foolish purchases or intentionally spoil any of their three children, they were generous, contributing liberally to needy causes, their church and other worthy organizations. They made sure they placed ten percent of their income into a saving account each month and made a few investments.

In spite of all their careful management of household money, Ellie, their youngest, had learned early there was always enough available money for her latest whims. Especially during the past three years she had mastered the skill of persuading her parents to buy almost anything she wanted. Clever manipulation had come easy for Ellie, and her big-hearted parents were proof. Without being aware of what they had done, Joe and Caroline had overindulged their only child still living at home.

The bell sounded, and every student in the class began to stir. Ellie grasped her phone from her backpack and dropped it on her lap. Out of habit, she quickly glanced down at the lighted buttons and was ready to punch in a few numbers the instant Mr. Henderson made his last remarks and released the class.

Once her teacher ended what he was saying, every student stood and was heading for the hall. At that very moment Ellie looked in the direction of Mr. Henderson and caught him looking straight at her.

“Miss Wallace, please stay a few minutes after class. I wish to speak to you.”

“Oh! No!” Ellie muttered under her breath. Attempting to not show disappointment with his request, she slammed her chemistry book shut and looked in the direction of the windows trying not to allow Mr. Henderson to see her bored facial expression or to suspect she was irritated. Hopefully none of the kids thought much about his asking her to stay after class. Gathering her notebook and other items, she jammed them all into her backpack and sullenly walked to the front of the room.

On the way to his desk, she noticed several kids staring at her and became embarrassed. One girl was whispering in another girl’s ear as they left making what must have been a snide remark. Ellie could not hear what had been said, but both girls left with a noticeable grin on

their faces. Ellie's thoughts were less than charitable toward either of them.

"Mr. Henderson, you wanted to see me?" Ellie faked a smile trying to exhibit calmness and a good attitude.

Once every student left the room Mr. Henderson looked at her for a moment and said, "I'm concerned about the homework you've been handing in lately, Ellie. Your tests indicate you understand chemistry quite well, but we both know you could do much better on what you hand in weekly. I'm convinced you have the ability to be one of the best students in this class if you would apply yourself and spend more time on the assignments and study harder for every quiz and test. Tell me, Ellie, am I off track on this?"

"I'm trying Mr. Henderson. Really I am, and I'll definitely study tonight so I can do better on tomorrow's test."

"I'm sure you will Ellie. You're quite capable and always manage to get a better than acceptable grade, but remember what I said about using your ability and spending quality time working on each assignment. I want you to excel in this subject because I know you're more than capable, and we both are fully aware that your parents want you to do as well as you can in this class."

She had heard it all before from Mr. Henderson, and a few other teachers as well. Sensing her teacher wanted to continue scolding her in a gentle manner, she quickly said, "Okay, Mr. Henderson, you're right about my parents. I promise you I'll spend more time on my homework, and tonight I'll study longer so I can do exceptionally well on tomorrow's test. I know this one is really an important one for my grade."

Uncomfortable and trying to escape from discussing any more of her lazy approach toward her weekly assignments, Ellie attempted to speak politely in a meek

manner so she could leave, "Is that all you wished to speak to me about?"

"No, that's not everything I wanted to say, Ellie." Hank Henderson expressed his words with a bit of doubt in his voice. He often wondered if Ellie cared much about what he said. After a moment's delay he continued, hoping to get her full attention. "Doing well in chemistry isn't easy for most of my students, but you have so much potential. All the class work seems to come much easier for you than for others. I wonder if you're experiencing any kind of trouble here at school with any of your other subjects, or could something else be going on that should be corrected?"

"There's no trouble at all, and I'm fine. Really I am. You're absolutely right that I should work harder on my homework. And believe me, I do enjoy your class, and I think you're a great teacher. You make it all seem like such fun. I confess I have been lazy at times and don't always want to do the work."

"I'm here to help all my students, Ellie, but I just wanted to remind you of your above average potential of grasping this subject and to encourage you to do a better job especially on your homework. They're very important too, you know."

"Thanks, Mr. Henderson, and you've got my word. I'll definitely be ready for your test tomorrow. You can count on it." Ellie didn't wish to have him lecture her more, so she gave him a sheepish grin as she stepped back to leave adding, "I'll be more serious about all the homework you assign too. But, Mr. Henderson, please don't talk to my parents about this. I plan to do much better. I promise. Okay?"

Her teacher had said what he wished to say and could only sigh hoping she was serious about her promise.

As Ellie turned and walked away, a satisfied grin crossed her face as she thought about how easily she fooled Mr. Henderson once again when she made that promise. Then for only a brief moment she wondered if he had genuinely bought it because this encounter was almost a repeat of what had happened six weeks ago when she used most of those identical words promising him she would work harder. Certainly nothing had changed since that little talk.

Knowing Mr. Henderson would not be able to hear, she mumbled, "What an absolute dork he is! He seems to believe anything I tell him."

Already walking down the hallway, she quickly headed toward her locker. Ellie considered if it wasn't for Mom and Dad wanting me to take chemistry in the first place, I wouldn't have to make those unintended promises to that lame, dumber than dumb teacher.

Holding her phone, Ellie's face lit up with a huge smile as she reached Brennie. "Hey, it's Ellie. Sorry I'm late, but I had to talk to dear old Mr. H for a few minutes. I'll be at my locker in less than 30 seconds. About tonight, though, my dad agreed to take me to the mall to buy that scrumptious jacket I told you about yesterday. I know this is not what we planned, but my dad always seems to have gobs of work to do every night after he gets home. He usually can't drop it all to take me to the mall, but this morning he said he would."

With disappointment in her voice Brennie answered, "Ellie I was really counting on studying with you tonight for our chemistry test. You understand it so well, and I struggle with it all the time. I'm trying to get a decent grade in the class. English and French may be easy for me, but never chemistry. I can study by myself tonight, but maybe we can go over a few things during lunch time tomorrow. Hey, Ellie, don't feel bad because I understand.

You and I can get together tomorrow sometime before the test, but I seriously need all the help you can give me. Hey, if you don't leave for the mall immediately after you get home from school, please call. We can always meet first thing in the morning too."

"I'll call you when I get home to tell you what I expect will be on the test. We can talk then, Brennie. Gotta run."

Climbing aboard after running to catch her crowded bus, Ellie had the choice of sitting beside either Jim Tankerson or Floyd Decker. Neither spot made her happy, but in less than 20 minutes she would be two blocks from home and jumping off the bus. She sat down beside Floyd, and, as he grinned at her, she returned a little smile. Ellie knew Floyd had always been shy around her, and he quickly turned his blushing face toward the side window so hopefully none of the other guys would notice. For a year he had not been able to hide the crush he had on Ellie. Along with some of the other kids at school, she was aware of the crush, but she was not about to let him know she knew it or was thinking about it now. This evening Ellie's mind was fixed on owning that cool, beautiful jacket. She knew the item had the Juicy label, and was no ordinary jacket, but she had convinced herself she must have it.

After hopping off the bus, she noticed how drastically the weather had changed since early morning, and she pulled her warm coat tighter around her as she felt the chilly wet air. Familiar fluffy white flakes were floating softly down covering especially her hair and nose. After easily walking the short distance of two blocks to her home, Ellie found her house key and unlocked the side door. Hesitating for only a moment, and without hearing any movement inside, she closed and locked the door behind her. She hurried through the kitchen and then up the stairs to her bedroom skipping several steps on her way.

Ellie always seemed to be in a hurry getting ready for school, hurrying to her classes, running to meet friends and almost always running late even after she set definite times to meet someone. Bursting into her room, she tossed her backpack onto the bed and flung her coat down alongside it. Seconds later she was in her bathroom studying her face in the mirror.

She decided to brush on a few layers of eyelash mascara that had faded during her long day at school. Bending forward and looking closely at her bright blue eyes, Ellie frowned slightly. Without taking her eyes off her reflection, she reached into her vanity drawer, and with her fingers, she hunted for the new auburn mascara her mother purchased for her recently. Each time she placed the reddish brown color on her lashes, she could see her brilliant blue eyes and was reminded of the color of her father's eyes because they seemed to be staring back at her now. The blue shade of her eyes was exactly the same shade as his. But she had definitely inherited her mother's strawberry blonde hair color, but the thick strands of her shoulder length hair insisted on curling up on their own, which annoyed her. No one else in her family had any curls, and this peculiarity was something she disliked, but in recent months she had discovered ways to straighten her hair.

"Why do I have to look so much like a Wallace?" She silently asked herself this question with a frown as she continued to glance at her face. This was the same question she often asked as she stood in front of a mirror. "I don't look much like my mom except for this crop of thick, bushy, unmanageable hair, but I sure look like the rest of the family. Ugh!"

With another full brush of makeup, she carefully spread each eyelash till she was satisfied with the coverage. One more gentle lift of the brush on each of her lashes, and

she dropped the tube back into the drawer. With one habitual circular movement, Ellie turned her head enough to view herself. Twisting her head for another quick glance, she caught the profile of her youthful face. Never completely content with her appearance, she screwed up her nose with disapproval. Not only was her hair too thick and curly, her forehead was too high, her lips far too skinny, and her eyes did not have the dramatic impact of Claire's dark brown eyes.

"What a dull face you have!" she said almost in a disgusted tone as she stuck out her tongue at her reflection in the glass. Then almost laughing, she began displaying a more cheerful attitude as she glanced again in the mirror to view her complete reflection before leaving the room. "I'll change into my new jeans, and I absolutely love wearing my new cool hoodie."

Springing into her large closet she opened the bottom drawer of her dresser and grabbed her jeans along with the dark gray sweatshirt. Whipping them both out and tossing them high over her shoulder in the direction of her bed, Ellie turned around to change into them as she hummed a few lines of a recent favorite popular tune that lately had been running through her mind.

With one swift movement of her right foot she kicked the jeans she slipped out of toward the side of her bed. "Thanks Grandma for your generous gift. The check you sent me for Christmas paid for these new sweet jeans and my new fantastic sweatshirt. Together they've been my favorites for weeks."

Her sweater and shirt were swiftly taken off and thrown on top of the jeans now making a larger pile to kick aside as she muttered, "Clara will come tomorrow morning to pick up everything and wash whatever's lying around. She never seems to mind picking up after me. After all, that's what she gets paid to do." Thinking for a

moment about the woman who was their part-time housekeeper and was so kind to her in particular, she added, “She sure has a strange and funny foreign accent.”

Feeling a chill, she climbed into the newer jeans and sweatshirt. Pleasant thoughts ran through her mind of wearing the new jacket to school the following day and seeing the look on the faces of some of her friends. Dad should be ready as soon as he gets home from his office to take me to that store in the mall. I’ve just got to have that super cool jacket! I’m prepared to beg if it’s necessary. When he gets home, he will be starved like always, and I plan to be extra nice by offering to fix him one of his favorite sandwiches.

Glancing at the clock on her bedside table, she guessed her dad would be home in an hour and a half. I’ll please him by studying for my chemistry test. An hour of cramming ought to do, and then I can call Brennie when I get back from the mall.

Ellie shook her hair loose from the sweatshirt neckline and ran her fingers through her hair. Feeling the soft, fuzzy nap of the sweatshirt, her thoughts were again about the jacket as she squealed.

Locating her chemistry notebook in her backpack before leaving her bedroom, she hurriedly ran into her bathroom once again to briefly gaze at herself. Smiling with satisfaction, she slipped down the stairs toward the kitchen table to study. Turning on the radio she tried listening to a couple of recent musical tunes, but because she never had been able to concentrate on her studies and listen to music at the same time, she turned it off and opened her chemistry book.

“I’ll study until Dad arrives,” she chattered to herself, “and then we’ll go get that sweet jacket. Oooh, I tried it on twice while I was in the store. It was incredibly beautiful! Everyone at school will think it’s awesome, and Angle will

be so jealous when she sees it. I'll just die if it's been sold to some other kid! It belongs to me."

Chapter 2

JANUARY DAYS IN MICHIGAN were usually short and dreary, and darkness was quickly arriving in the surrounding suburbs of Detroit making it difficult to see without good lighting. Massive wet snowflakes were rapidly descending, and a moderate collection of the white crystals could be seen covering rooftops of homes, buildings, and even moving objects. Neighborhood lawns had already received a glistening blanket.

Earlier in the day weather stations throughout the city had been forecasting the temperature would continue to drop possibly below the freezing point by evening, and they were expecting several inches of fresh snow to accumulate during the late evening and throughout the early morning hours. By three o'clock meteorologists had changed their predictions as an unexpected wind began forcing the falling flakes into an eastward direction. People knew if the storm continued and the temperature continued to drop, there might be a possible blizzard on its way throughout the huge sprawling metro area. Millions of residents began preparing for a long and bitter cold night ahead. There was bitter coldness lodged in some hearts already.

Owen Wolf had an urgent important matter on his mind, and he had much to think about as he turned his steering wheel guiding his car toward the designated street.

He immediately began looking for a parking spot close to Mike's Pizzeria, but far enough away to not easily be seen.

This small narrow restaurant was set off by itself close to a main interstate highway. During the past two decades the pizzeria had become outdated and slightly run-down. Years ago it had been a popular restaurant and meeting place for the neighborhood, and its fame had spread into parts of the surrounding suburbs about how the owners insisted on preparing their dishes only in the old authentic European method using the same identical recipes favored for centuries by Italian families.

Also clientele who heard about it from friends or somehow happened onto the place soon became loyal. For hungry suburbanites who loved excellent pizza and other old world dishes, and did not mind the décor or driving further, Mike's place continued to draw those patrons as they had for more than 40 years.

During the 1960s and 1970s Mike's Place was mainly visited by people living in the northern sections of the city and by others who wanted a quiet place to relax and talk. It was becoming obvious the Pizzeria's continued success was being hindered as a result of the uninteresting, outdated appearance, but also for the limited parking spaces. Young couples, college students and especially teenagers no longer considered it a place where they wanted to spend their evenings.

By the late 1990s only those who lived nearby or who could not forget how great the pizza had been in previous years continued to frequent the establishment. Today with all the other choices available, only those who craved the old dishes made fresh on the premises ventured into its confining location in the busy suburban community.

Owen Wolf grew up less than a mile from Mike's Place, and he remembered going there often with his three teenage friends to grab some good food before they

climbed in a car to cruise the city streets for the rest of the evening. They referred to the restaurant as The Joint back then because they considered it their own meeting place.

Glancing at The Joint as he drove by, he instantly was reminded of the steaming fresh baked dough, the spicy homemade tomato sauce and the generous amounts of various aged cheeses with the great Italian sausage and his favorite topping of ripe olives. Years ago he had forgotten about those three friends and had never made a single attempt to locate them. Tonight he would not allow himself to think about any trivial memories or about tasty food. Those friends and times were in his distant past. They could not serve his purposes today, and tonight he had to keep his mind on business.

He thought about the job that needed to be cleaned up and believed Ray Vinson would need to do the job for him. After all, Ray was the one who had placed both of them in this difficult situation. Less than an hour ago when he spoke to Ray, he made it clear what must happen at the pizzeria tonight to avoid being under the radar of any law enforcement personnel.

As Owen continued to locate a good parking spot that would offer him a clear view of the restaurant's front entrance, yet far enough away to melt into the neighborhood, he glanced around at the homes on both sides of the street. He grinned broadly when he found an ideal spot more than half way down the block, and slowing his expensive shiny black Mercedes, he expertly maneuvered it into the spot alongside the curb and turned off the motor.

Not wanting to raise any suspicions during any of his secret business transactions, he told his auto mechanic last month to darken his windows enough to prevent anyone from being able to view the interior of his car. And tonight with winter darkness descending, absolutely no one would

recognize him. Because it was icy cold with huge amounts of heavy snow continuing to fall, no one would be taking time to wonder why a stranger was parked on their street at this hour.

He allowed his gaze to momentarily fall on a middle-aged woman walking on the sidewalk in the direction toward his car, and he watched her as she came closer. "Harmless," he mumbled. Reasoning she must be returning from a long day of work, he was reassured of his conclusion when she turned into a nearby walkway and within seconds was inside her home and out of sight.

Warm and feeling safe inside his car, he pulled up the lambskin collar of his designer coat to encircle his neck and rubbed his leather gloved hands together to loosen his muscles and the tenseness he was experiencing throughout his body. Massaging his forehead because of the slight headache that was now becoming obvious, Owen raised his eyebrows several times as he tried to release the dull pain. He shut his eyes and inhaled a couple deep breaths. A minute later he began methodically going over details in his troubled mind, details that needed to be reviewed before Ray's arrival, so that not even a single part of his plan could go wrong.

Owen enjoyed being in full control of every detail in his schemes, and because he considered himself a master at figuring out procedures, he demanded that everything happen according to his plans and his methods. That way he was assured nothing would be left to chance. He did not like what he considered stupid mistakes and had learned the hard way to always make all his own plans from start to finish so the outcome would end up in his favor.



For 13 years Kurt McCoy had worked extra hard and put in long hours to manage his gas station. He saved as much as he could along the way to care for his growing family and be able to generously help those in need. He was a good family man and sending two of his three kids through college. Money was tight at times, and occasionally his wife, Molly, and he had to make necessary sacrifices, but both of them were now thankful they finally were free and clear of their debts. The mortgage on their modest home had recently been paid off, and in the past year they were able to make adequate plans to protect all their investments.

For years they had waited to buy a larger home, and finally they felt confident to make the move. Molly always had been satisfied with her small compact kitchen, but, with a two-year-old grandchild visiting them regularly and another on the way, her dream of a larger kitchen along with another bedroom for guests and bath close to the kitchen finally seemed possible.

Little Brian, their first and only grandchild, was an active happy toddler who always brought joy and excitement to everyone in the family. Crawling no longer, he was now free to walk everywhere and reach everything. Kurt and Molly were looking forward to the enlargement of the family with the addition of more grandchildren in the future.

Laughter in the McCoy home was always present, and on holidays and plenty of other occasions, the entire family enjoyed spending time together. Before each Sunday Morning Worship Service, Molly would rise early enough to begin preparing a meal for a full Sunday dinner. Their entire family would be able to catch up with what had taken place in each other's lives during the recent week and what was planned for the week ahead. Political items were often hot topics, and everyone was free to

present their viewpoint even though all would not agree on every issue. Hashing over subjects of interest and importance was enlightening, but just being together was the lift each wanted and needed.

Both Kurt and Molly made these family gatherings a relaxing time. Often at the last minute some friends and neighbors were invited for the dinners, but Molly then would hurriedly prepare a special dessert for those occasions.

Almost a year ago Kurt had hired Ray Vinson to work at his station and had immediately been impressed with his new employee's attitude toward his customers as well as the man's work ethic. Pleased and thankful for Ray's help at his busy station, that was only becoming busier by the week, Kurt was glad he had hired Ray. Even when the weather was undesirable, he was there with his welcoming smile and willingness to work hard. He instinctively understood how he should serve different types of clients, and Ray often seemed to do the work of two employees.

For months Kurt had been teaching Ray about the business of running a service station, and Ray seemed genuinely interested and was learning rapidly. It was no surprise when one day Ray mentioned he might want to operate a station of his own some day. Kurt told him he would try to help him with an initial start as long as his station was located at least a mile down the road. They both laughed in good humor at that comment but agreed it would be best.

Late in November was when Kurt noticed his gas station had become much busier. There were many new customers, but somehow he was not taking in more money. At first he thought there had to be an easy explanation for this, and he must be missing something.

On closer observation, Kurt noticed a number of these new people were buying small amounts of gas, but, since the price of gasoline was higher than it had been months earlier, many customers seemed to be purchasing only what they needed for a couple of days. Kurt was reluctant to discuss this with Ray, but he became keenly aware that more customers began appearing each week. He reasoned that possibly other stations in the area were charging more or they were coming because Ray was so helpful.

For over a year Kurt had trusted Ray and appreciated the enthusiasm and energy he continually put into every area of his work, but by early December, and almost overnight, Kurt began noticing many new faces at his business. This was extremely unusual. As an attendant he had proven he was an excellent employee, thoroughly interested in being helpful to people, and one who was friendly to anyone who needed assistance when obtaining a fill-up or any other service. Displaying eagerness and a willingness to help his regulars during even the coldest, most disagreeable mornings and evenings, Ray was always available and attentive. He was a great person to have around. There had absolutely been no cause for Kurt to be concerned before, but in spite of all Ray's good qualities, Kurt had recently become wary and concerned.

Then early one evening Kurt simply glanced in Ray's direction when he was helping a man fill his gas tank and noticed Ray as he slipped something inside his pocket. This did not seem right, but he thought perhaps Ray had made change for the man, possibly the man owed Ray money or he was given a tip by the customer for doing a favor. Kurt dismissed the incident that time because he was busy with an urgent repair, but he would talk to Ray when it was convenient and remind him he was not to accept tips for helping any of the patrons.

Kurt was kept busy most of the time with small routine repairs at his station, but years of constantly staying alert and knowing what was going on at his business had become a habit he had acquired along the way. He found no reason to spend valuable time thinking about that one particular incident, but from his good business sense, he would not neglect his inner instincts. Without being overly conscious of what he had first thought, Kurt made a mental note.

Days passed, and Kurt became alarmed that the currency brought in at his station was not rising. He reminded himself again that people were cutting back because of the slow economy, but he reasoned they were definitely driving more in recent weeks because of the approaching Christmas holidays. He noticed that those new customers who seemed to be coming to his station a few times each week were also the same ones who were purchasing only enough gas to top off their tanks. Another reason for his concern was that the newer customers were also the people Ray would frequently be chatting with for less than a minute in inconspicuous, secluded corners always to the side of their cars.

It soon became apparent Ray always stood beside their cars and out of view. Kurt became aware that it was during those private times that transfers of some sort were taking place between Ray and a customer. Troubled by these incidents he had seen for weeks, he decided to face Ray and ask him what was happening. He had to follow through on what he was observing and what he was suspecting.

On an extremely cold morning shortly after the rush hour, Kurt approached Ray to ask him a question. Ray seemed confused and irritated when asked, "What's going on Ray?"

Stumbling over his words, Ray replied, "I was only making change for that man that just left. That's all, Kurt."

Not wishing to answer any more questions Kurt might ask him, Ray quickly stepped away from his boss to wait on another customer who was arriving. For the rest of the day Ray seemed to be rushing around when he was inside the station. Otherwise he would linger outside in the harsh frigid air. For the remainder of the day Ray refused to look in Kurt's direction.

Dismissing his concern because he suspected Ray was embarrassed by that face to face confrontation, Kurt began wondering if he might have made a big mistake by putting his employee on the defensive. It was obvious Ray was avoiding him as much as possible.

One week later without thinking Kurt found himself looking in Ray's direction. He noticed from the far side of a car a tall customer stood smiling at Ray. Unable to see Ray's face or what was taking place, Kurt had clearly seen the man's eyes light up as Ray seemed to be reaching out with his hand with something and then accepting something in return.

Kurt did not have sufficient evidence, but he began putting together his worst suspicion. Within minutes it dawned on him that it was these new customers who preferred paying for their gas purchases with cash only. He knew this was quite an unusual practice in his business even though some of their purchases were never large.

Credit cards were quick and easy for most people, and Kurt was keenly aware that it was especially on these occasions and with those customers paying in cash that Ray began turning his back to the station as he spoke to them. Kurt was unable to clearly see what was happening, but he almost always was able to see the happy expressions on the faces of those car owners. Almost always there was

a big satisfied smile. Kurt made up his mind it was time he needed to ask Ray uncomfortable, hard questions.

Thoughts that Ray might be pushing some illegal drug had been creeping through his mind for days, and he had not been able to shake those suspicions. His worst fears were keeping him from getting a good night's sleep, and at times he had awakened in a sweat with dreadful thoughts about the danger of allowing possible drug deals to persist at his place.

The suspicions were nagging at Kurt, and today he would no longer wait and look on without feeling guilty himself. He had seen enough to be alarmed and was now distrustful of Ray. He must bring up the subject because he was determined he would never tolerate that crime to take place on his property, and he would not in any way be caught assisting the sale of narcotics.

Troubled greatly over his urgent concern, he mumbled, "Not at my place! I will absolutely never allow it here! If Ray's involved in any type of drug dealing whatsoever, I'll soon be in a heap of trouble myself if I stand idly by and only observe."

Inside the station during this extremely bitter cold morning, and after Ray made change for someone, Kurt pulled his employee aside and inquired, "What's going on Ray?"

Caught off guard, Ray stopped what he was doing and annoyed he answered Kurt in an ill-tempered mood, "What? Have I done something wrong here? Have I messed up in some way, Kurt? I'm just doing my job."

"Ray, I just want to know what happened between you and that man who just pulled away."

Displaying irritation, Ray hesitated, "Hey, I've been trying to work hard here for you, and you seem to be accusing me of something. Say what's on your mind, Kurt. What're you driving at?"

"I'll be straight with you, Ray. I've got to ask a serious question, and I want you to be entirely honest with me. Have you been selling or only handing out drugs or even doing anything that's considered illegal here at my station?"

"Hey man, you know I'd never think of doing anything like that here. I work for you, Kurt!"

As Kurt looked at Ray, he wanted to make sure he was not being lied to, "Ray, I really like you, and you know that. I want to trust you, and I'm sorry if I'm making a big mistake, but will you answer my question? I need to be sure you're not in any way involved in peddling drugs here. Have you been distributing any kind of illegal substance to customers?"

Ray began to step away as an undisguised ugly smirk began crossing his face, "I'm done pumping gas and running errands for you. In fact, I'm tired of working for you. You pay me such a pittance, and now you don't even trust me. I can get work elsewhere anytime, you know that. I'm quitting! I'm out of here, and I'm leaving all the work for you to do."

"You've given me reason to distrust you. I believe I saw several transactions between you and customers that caused me to doubt your honesty. I've been here far too long to allow you or anyone else to ruin me by doing something that clearly is against the law. I believe you accepted money from people, and at those times you seemed to be doing it secretly so I couldn't see what was happening. Just now, with that man who drove away, did you give him something? I believe he gave you money in return. Am I right about this Ray?"

Kurt's irritation with Ray was building since he did not receive either a yes or no to his question. It was clear to him Ray wanted to end the discussion, quit and leave. Calming himself as much as possible, Kurt said, "You've

been an excellent worker, Ray, the best I've ever had or ever hope to have, but you've got to understand how I cannot under any circumstances allow you or anyone else to sell drugs at my place. You've got to understand that, Ray. Please answer my question! I'll be happy to help you if I can."

For a long moment Ray fumed with contempt as he stood staring at Kurt. Then he answered with intense hostility, "I'm gone. It's all yours now, BOSS! You can do ALL the menial work yourself. And for my two days of pay for this week, I might let you keep it. Or maybe I'll send you a big fat bill for what's coming to me. How's that? Maybe that's what I'll do, but I don't intend to be back. You can be sure of that!"

Stepping back as he opened the door and turned to leave, Ray added as he began walking away, "I'm out of here! I QUIT! Yeah, I'm completely done working for you Kurt!"

Without saying another word, Kurt looked at Ray and thought he recognized hurt in his eyes as he left. Or perhaps it was belligerence he saw as Ray climbed into his truck. From the short distance between them, Kurt was almost sure Ray was using profane language directed toward him before he slammed his truck door shut. Then with a sneer, Ray quickly drove away waving his hand out the window as he displayed a coarse gesture.

For the remainder of the day Kurt was kept busy with the full load of handling the business alone. He ran out into the freezing, damp air to help people and handle chores his employee had always gladly done. He was not sure he had done the best thing he could for Ray. Then mid-afternoon as larger snowflakes began gliding downward, a man drove up to one of his gas pumps and asked if Kurt had anything for him. That was the best solid proof he needed that Ray had been pushing drugs or

something. Anxious thoughts and future uncertainties hit him. "I've got to do something, and quick!"

Disturbed about how Ray responded, he was certain he had no other option but to get professional help. He must contact someone immediately. Fearful about what he suspected and had observed for weeks, he wondered who might be the best person to talk to and explain his concerns. He would need to mention Ray's responses to his questions and find out what was best to do. He was convinced after the heated conversation with Ray he had probably waited far too long before confronting his employee.

Within a minute, Joe Wallace popped into Kurt's mind. He knew Joe was an attorney, and, although he did not know him well, they both greeted each other every Sunday at church. A good friend at his church had once mentioned that he had received advice from Joe about a legal matter. Now he needed some expert legal advice himself. It was quite late in the day for calling an office if he waited until he returned home, but he could close his station early. He was quite sure he would be able to reach Joe at his office if he called now.

Convinced he needed to act quickly, Kurt reasoned almost silently, "Although Joe might still be working on something important, he might be able to give me a little advice because I desperately need some. Time is of the essence for me, and if I don't get on this crucial matter right away, I might find myself unable to keep the station."

From the bottom drawer of his desk he pulled out an old greasy telephone book and searched in the yellow pages under the long listing of attorneys. Joseph Wallace was easy enough to find, and Kurt hurriedly pushed the numbered buttons to reach the law office.

On the second ring, someone on the other end picked up his call and cheerfully said, "Good afternoon. Gaylord, Wallace and Fines. What can we do for you today?"

When Kurt asked to speak to Joseph Wallace, the well spoken lady told him Mr. Wallace had left the office for the day. Believing his situation needed immediate attention, Kurt mentioned he needed advice on an important matter. He added he was acquainted with Mr. Wallace because both the Wallace family and his attended the same church. He told her the matter should be dealt with that evening if at all possible.

Responding to Kurt the woman said, "Sir, Mr. Wallace can be reached at his home if that is agreeable to you."

"Great! Could you please give me his home number?" Ten numbers were given, and Kurt carefully wrote each down in the margin of the phone book. "Thank you, Miss. You've been very helpful. I'm grateful for this information. Goodbye, and have a good evening."

Hurriedly Kurt punched in the numbers he'd been given, and as he waited for Joe to answer his phone, he faintly heard someone enter through the rear door of the station. He was not surprised to see it was Ray. Kurt noticed immediately that he had been drinking and motioned with a finger to his mouth for him to wait for a moment as he finished the conversation. On the third ring, Kurt received an answer, "Joe Wallace speaking."