



“FORGIVENESS ROAD”

Dana Mansfield



© 2020

SHERMAN AVENUE PUBLISHING

Dana Mansfield

Sam pulled his old gym bag out from the back of the closet. He wouldn't need a big suitcase; his trip would just last three days. He wasn't a fancy person and with the exception of the last day, there was no need for anything more than jeans and a tee for the first two-thirds of his trip. The last day would require his Sunday suit which was already in its suit bag. Instead of the usual Easter, Christmas and occasional wedding, the suit would be put to use for its other activity – a funeral.

“Don't forget your good shoes,” his wife said, walking into their bedroom with a full laundry basket.

“Thanks, hon. I almost forgot,” he replied and pulled the shoebox from the closet. He wore the classic wingtips just as often as



his suit. He took the shoes out of the box and placed them in the gym bag next to his shaving kit. “You're talking to me so does that mean you've cooled off?” Instead of an answer, Sam received a grunt from Frankie. Nope, she hadn't cooled off.

Instead of poking the bear, Sam took his bag and suit out to his truck. He still didn't understand why Frankie was mad at him for taking this trip. She had a tight group of friends. All he was doing was fulfilling a favor for Alex, one of his own friends.

"Daddy, when are you coming back?" Sam's daughter Molly asked as she brushed her dolly's hair on the porch of the farmhouse.



"I'll be back in time for your birthday, sweet pea," he said and crouched down next to her. "I can't miss your party."

"My princess party, Daddy, and you get to be the king," she corrected him with a wag of her finger. With her auburn curls, hazel eyes and wagging finger, she looked just like her mother. At least Molly wasn't busting his butt about the trip.

All he had to promise his youngest child was that he'd be back in time for her birthday which was an easy promise to make. It would be all over the day before her party.

“Are you going to at least wish me safe travels?” Sam asked Frankie when he came back into the bedroom where she was folding clothes.

“I don't know,” she replied, cool as ice. He sighed; he just didn't understand her objection or anyone's for that matter. When someone you've known for thirty years asks you a favor, you come through for them.



“I'm going to go over the chore list with the boys before I go,” he said and walked out to the barn where his two oldest children – Ryan and Aaron – were mucking out one of the horse stalls. Sam went over the list of chores that they would be responsible for while reminding them that their great uncle, Frankie's uncle, would do the chores that required the tractor

or any other farm machinery. The crops were growing so there wouldn't be much to do during the late July days.

“We'll take care of the place,” Ryan said with certainty. Sam had no doubts as the fifteen-year-old was all about the farm and he knew one day that the century farm would one day pass on to him.

“Dad?” Aaron said and leaned against his pitchfork.

“Yes?” Sam replied to his twelve-year-old son.

“Is Mom still mad at you?”

“I think so.”

“Why? You're just going to see your best friend.”

“I know but it's not that simple for her, Aaron.” Simple would definitely not be the right adjective for what was going to happen over the next few days. Sam was going to see Alex, his best friend of thirty years. The circumstances were difficult, however.

Alex was sitting on death row.

“Does she just see him as a bad man?”

“I think that’s probably it,” replied Sam. “I’ve talked myself blue in the face trying to explain myself but she still just doesn’t understand.”

“Maybe it’s a guy thing, Dad,” offered Aaron.

“Maybe. Anyway, you guys know what to do, right?”

“Yes, sir,” both boys answered.

“Good. Call Uncle Ernie if you need anything. See you both in a few days.” He gave each boy a handshake followed by a hug. Sam felt a pride for both his boys; they were growing into fine young gentlemen. But along with that pride was also worry. He and Alex were often told as kids that they were growing into fine young gentlemen, yet Alex now sat on death row for murder.

Sam tried one more time to engage his wife. Frankie was now in the kitchen and was packing a few things into a small cooler. It was the cooler he used when he was planting and harvesting and he recognized the packing of such cooler as a peace offering of sorts from his stubborn wife.

“You’ve got a couple sandwiches and Cokes and some



grapes. No need wasting money at some drive-thru,” she said. Sam came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“I know you don’t understand...”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore, Sam. Let’s just agree to disagree,” she said and pushed his hands away. The action bothered him as it was definitely not a sign of agreeing to disagree.

“I have a few words I want to say, Frankie, and I would like if you just listened to me. Please?” She huffed out her breath but turned around.

“Get it over with,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Alex and I have been friends for thirty years. When my parents died, his parents took me in. We have a lot of history together and when he asked me to come, I had no choice. His parents are gone and his brother disowned him.”

“Which makes total sense, Sam. He murdered his girlfriend.”

“Which he owned up to, Frankie. He never denied what he did.” Frankie put her hands up in frustration.

“Just go, Sam. Drive carefully and let me know when you get to the motel.”

It was a six-hour drive to the town where the prison was. It was a tiny town with only one motel – 40 Winks – with an attached coffee shop. The motel, however, was already full up by the looks of all the various cars and vans. Sam had a



reservation, though, so he would have a place to stay. He picked up his key, parked his truck, and settled in.

As the sun went down, his thoughts were on his long friendship with Alex. They met the summer before fourth grade and when Sam's parents died on an icy road two years later, Alex's parents took him in. They were as close as brothers and would do anything for each other which, sometimes, got them both in trouble. They were boys, though; it was bound to happen.

Alex introduced Frankie to him and Sam stood up for Alex when he eloped just after high school with his first wife. They both drank more than needed the night his wife left him ten years later. And then Alex met Jeannie. He fell hard for her, harder than she fell for him and one night, she told him she didn't want to see him. It was too much and he made a very wrong decision.

And now he was going to pay for that decision. The next day, Sam would witness Alex's execution.



Alex had asked him to come for a final visit and then be a witness to his death. Jeannie's family would be there, of course, and Alex wanted to have at least one person there for him. Sam had not

even thought about it; he had said yes right away during their last phone conversation. No one understood his decision, however. Even though the boys said they understood, Sam felt their understanding was based on their father-son relationship and not on a grasp of the severity of the situation.

But despite what Alex did, he was still Sam's best friend. He kept in communication with Alex over the last seven years while he sat on death row. Too many busybodies in town looked down upon Sam for keeping the friendship going because they thought the friendship meant that Sam was okay

with what Alex did but that wasn't the case. He was shocked and then angry that Alex had committed murder but the last thing Alex needed was another person writing him off. His family no longer acknowledged him and Sam just found that terrible. It wasn't like Alex tried to get away with the murder. He walked into the sheriff's office right after the murder and confessed and then pled guilty when the time came. Sam was the only person who recognized that Alex was willing to pay for what he did even if that meant he would be put to death.

And now the time had come. Alex was allowed one final visit from someone and that would be Sam. He then would get his final meal and at sunrise the day after, he would be executed. Sam was in charge of the cremains and when he visited with Alex the next day, he told him where he wanted his ashes scattered.

“At the swimming hole, Sam,” he said from behind the glass. “We spent so many great times there.”

“That we did,” Sam replied over the telephone.
“Remember when we took our first girlfriends there and tried to act all macho?”

“And we screamed like little girls when we hit that cold water.”



“Yeah, not exactly the place to take girls the beginning of May.” They laughed and then spent the next twenty minutes reminiscing about the more memorable moments of their teenage years. Once they hit their twenties, there weren’t as many moments so they stuck with remembering learning to drive on gravel roads and the scratches they both received when they accidentally rode an ATV into a barbed wire fence.

“Five minutes remaining,” a stern voice said over the telephone. *Five minutes.* That’s all the time Sam had left with his best friend.

“I can’t thank you enough, Sam, for sticking with me over the years,” Alex said. “And thank you for coming. I just wanted to have at least one person I knew here tomorrow. And another thank you for taking care of me afterwards.” Alex’s voice was full of emotion and even Sam was having a hard time.

“You’re my best friend, Sam. You were there for me for so many things from Mom and Dad dying in the car accident to when Frankie miscarried. You made a horrible mistake; you killed a person but... You stood up to that, took the consequences. I know I’m in the minority...”

“Minority? You’re the only one I haven’t lost,” interrupted Alex. “And what I’ve asked you to do is big. I just thank you for agreeing to do it.”

“Time’s up,” said the stern voice and then there was a buzz. That was it for speaking with his best friend.



It didn't take long for the combination of drugs to do their job. Alex died peacefully and Sam felt a part of himself dim. He was the last to leave the viewing room and when he returned to the motel, he called Frankie. Despite her disappointment in him for agreeing to help Alex, she was sympathetic. She had forgiven him which made him feel a little better. Her words helped so much.

“It takes an honest man to agree to do what you did, Sam, and I'm sorry for being such a witch the last couple of weeks. It helped to think of Alex the man, just like you did, instead of Alex the murderer.”

The next day, Sam dressed in his gray suit and drove to the funeral home. There was a brief visitation and funeral attended only by himself. Then it was time to pick up the plain cardboard box with Alex's ashes. He was surprised by the heft



of the box and out of curiosity, he opened it. The ashes were bigger than he expected and contained in a plastic bag. For several moments he looked at them. Twenty-four hours earlier they had been his best friend. Sam felt a numbness spread through him. He hadn't thought how this experience would affect him and for the first time, doubt inched up in him.

Quickly, he shut the box and put it on the passenger seat. He stared at the box. *My best friend...*

Six hours later,
he drove down the
rough road that led to
the swimming hole. He
wasn't sure what he



would do if there were kids around. It was just one of the things he hadn't thought about. It was late July and hot. There would be kids there and as he rounded the last curve, he saw the makeshift parking lot held a half dozen cars.

“Shit,” he muttered and stopped his truck. Sam had a job to do and he wanted to get it done now. Thinking, he remembered the smaller pond that fed into the larger one. It was actually through some heavy brush but he doubted the kids were there; not too many people knew of it. He parked away from the other vehicles and hopped out of his truck. It was a hot day and he slipped off his jacket and tie and headed into the brush with the box. As expected, the smaller pond was empty of teens.

Sam stood on the bank with the box in his hands and remembered when he and Alex found the smaller pond. It was on one of their first visits to the swimming hole and their curiosity got the better of them even though they were under strict orders to stay at the main hole. No one was there to watch them – they were twelve after all – and so when they grew tired of splashing into the water using one of the ropes attached to the sturdy trees, they went exploring. They found the smaller pond but at the end of the day, they had no choice but to tell Alex’s parents they didn’t stay where they were supposed to. There was just no way they could cover up the poison ivy they ended up with from the trek through the brush. Sam was smart this time, remembering the path they eventually found that was free of poison ivy.

“Well, here we are,” he said to the box. “You were a good friend. You made a terrible decision but you owned up to it. You took a life which cost you yours but to the end, you were still my friend.” Sam opened the box and then the plastic bag. With no other words, he slowly emptied the gray bits and



ash into the somewhat murky water. He stayed until there was no evidence that a murderer – Sam’s best friend – had visited the quiet pond one last time.

THE END