

Chapter One

The Eraser

“Larkin Palmer, quit your daydreaming and pay attention,” shouted the elderly Mrs. Hall. The white-haired teacher at Five Corners Elementary School had seen this kind of behavior from many students in the past, not to mention Larkin’s own father, Lawtin. Larkin, a fair haired boy of 12 years, sat up straight, inching up in the wooden desk seat and said softly with more than a bit of remorse, “I’m sorry, Mrs. Hall.”

The school was on the same land that John Hoxie Jr. had given to the town for the first school house in 1797. In fact, Mrs. Hall, hired by the board in 1920, was a distant kin to Asa Carrier, the very first teacher there. It was a small world. But really, people never moved too far away from Madison County, New York. It was just too- nice. Sometimes though, and in times like this, Mrs. Hall wished she had. The Palmers had never moved away- the crazy ones, that is. They still had the same Homestead. Besides, the people all knew there was *something* about the Palmer men, but they just couldn’t explain it. All the town of Brookfield knew, and spoke of it much like it was a matter of fact, not gossip, even though that was what it was.

Larkin’s ancestors, the Lawtin Palmer family, had sailed aboard the *Fortune*, suffering severely. They moved to The Homestead in 1792, like many of the early settlers moving west. Due to his Christian beliefs, much like those of the Quakers who lived around him, Lawtin Sr. had fought, somewhat reluctantly, but more than bravely in the Revolutionary War. Afterwards though, he never really became a Quaker, but he was sympathetic to their thinking, especially separatism from the world. He was a quiet, patient man, who loved the Lord and was a keeper of the Sabbath as a Seventh Day Baptist. He died on The Homestead and is buried right there with many of his family. These Palmers never wanted to move away and be involved with the rest of the world, never craved the big city and all its frills, and instead were happy and content to be isolated there in their own little world, and safe from its temptations, trappings, and titillations, as well.

Although mature for his age, Larkin was prone to such an “attention deficit” at the end of the day during Mrs. Hall’s history class. It wasn’t that he didn’t like history. On the contrary, he loved it so much that his mind would drift to the time of his great grandparents, the patriarchs of the family, Lawtin Sr. and his wife Nancy. They had settled the farm right after the War for Independence, and he wondered what they were like. He was even named after a friend of the family, Mr. James Larkin, a Quaker who lived in the county

and whom Lawtin Senior admired because of his strong beliefs and diligence in remaining a pacifist during the war.

The last time Larkin was on the farm with his Grandfather Elias was just a month before he died. Elias Palmer was a devoted father, arborist, and to Larkin, the best grandfather a kid could have. Named after his Great Grandfather Elias, who was born there as well, he ran the farm and marketed the apples from the orchard planted in the early 1800's. Now, Elias was dead. Just before Mrs. Hall woke him from his daydream, Larkin remembered how Elias had given him a gift on that last visit and he pulled the box out of the desk slot. He had never seen an eraser in its own special box before. The top inscription said, "Nairne Erasers, 20 Cornhill, London." Opening the top carefully, he pulled the fragile note he had found out of the box, cautious not to tear the crisp, obviously old paper and read once again the words written so neatly with feather pen and ink:

Dear Sons,
In the course of a lifetime are many mistakes.
To remove the mark, *this* is all it takes.
With malice it never take away,
For with consequences you must pay.
Use it sparingly. Strive for perfection.
If you do, you shall receive God's election.
Destroy it not for you all shall be
the object of its hostility.

Lawtin Palmer Esq. - 1770 A.D.

'Pretty cryptic,' he thought, 'why did people talk like that in olden times?' He treasured it. His grandfather had explained to him how Lawtin Palmer Senior had given his son, Lawtin Jr., this same eraser almost 200 years before. The small, almost square, opaque gum eraser looked like new and almost pristine, in fact. It bore the marks of use on but one corner, a mere rub at that. Larkin wondered about that. Why would anyone not use an eraser? It was just an eraser! Sure it may have been the first one in the country in 1770, but why pass it down from son to son, generation to generation? 'I guess it was just a keepsake and a way to connect each generation to the one before. Interesting,' he thought, 'but why to me and not Dad?' When Mrs. Hall woke him, he quickly put it all back in his desk.

“All right class, you will want to listen to this as many of our town’s founding fathers fought in this battle, including Larkin’s ancestors. And now that Mr. Palmer is done daydreaming, let’s read all about the Battle of Lexington. Virginia, please begin reading for the class on page 47 of our book.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hall,” replied the young Miss Berry in her ever present sing-song voice most of the boys hated. She began the task as the clock struck its first chime announcing the four o’clock hour, “Bong, bong, bong, and bong.” Virginia looked forward to get instructions from her teacher and stopped after only one line.

Mrs. Hall looked up and glared at Larkin in frustration, knowing she did not complete the lesson plans of the day. “We will pick up where we left off on Monday. Class dismissed. Mr. Palmer, please see me before you leave.” The class chuckled at her remarks as they put their things away, jumped out of their desks, and ran toward the door for home and the long awaited weekend. The last to go out was Bill Clarke and his tennis shoe made an irritating squeak on the tile floor as he turned going into the hall.

“Yes, Mrs. Hall?” quizzed the boy, wondering why she had called him to the front after his apology as he approached the huge oak desk which held all of the teacher’s resources of forty-nine years of teaching.

“Larkin, this is the third time this week I’ve had to disrupt the class due to your incessant daydreaming. The next time I have to reprimand you, I’ll be forced to speak with your father.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hall. It won’t happen again,” he said, eyes looking straight at her as if he were more than a mere teacher, but a parental figure, because they had known each other ever since he had come to school.

Looking into the boys eyes, she could tell he meant it. “That’s good. You may go.”

“Goodbye, Mrs. Hall. Have a good weekend.”

“You too, Larkin!” she said with an ever growing smile. She just couldn’t stay upset with him. Pulling on his Yankee ball cap over his full head of light brown hair, the blue-eyed boy leapt into a run and headed for the ball fields.

Unfortunately, a dark band of clouds was looming overhead, just waiting for the boys to begin their game and drop beads of liquid life on the rain parched earth. It had been a dry spring. Larkin’s father would be glad to see the rain as he had planted all the crops just weeks earlier. Larkin hung his head and thought about how his father would need help with the cows and as it was raining, he should start towards home anyways. Virginia had lagged behind the rest of the girls and observed the boy’s disappointment in God’s sudden release of rain on his day. Smiling, she came up behind him on her

Schwinn almost scaring the pants off of him by singing out, "Want to ride home together?"

"Man, Ginny, you scared me! Sure, I may as well."

Ginny, as they called her, was much taller than many of the boys, having sprouted as girls do, earlier than most. She had blond hair, blue eyes, and dimples which cut her face deeply when she smiled. "Cute as a bug", said many of her teachers.

Larkin picked up his bike with the banana seat and hopped on. They started out towards home just in time to make it to the big oak tree on Church Street before the rain came down in buckets, the first drops hitting the dust and splashing out creating mini-mud craters. They hopped off their bikes and huddled under the expanse of the majestic oak that was older than their grandparents and maybe even their great grandparents. Suddenly, there was a loud "crack" and lightening shot across the sky seeming to disappear into the creek down the road. Then as quickly as the rain began, it stopped.

The two kids looked at each other in amazement, shrugged their shoulders and got back on their bikes. Before they peddled off however, someone yelled, "What do you think you are doing in my yard, Palmer?" It was the relentless bully, Jim Coone. Bigger than most of the boys, Jim was a sure candidate to play center on the only sports team the school had, football. He came towards them, chest pushed out like an angry rooster protecting the hen house. Using her wit and knowing that Jim thought she was pretty, Ginny replied, "Just getting out of the rain, Jim."

"That's okay, Ginny," toned down the seventh grade terrorist. "But don't let it happen again, Palmer!"

They raced toward Academy Road never looking back at the boy and laughing all the way to Ginny's door. She lived right next to the creek on Spooner Road. Larkin really liked that and came over quite often to fish when the creek was up with her little brother, Andrew. Andy, still pudgy with baby fat and somewhat shy, but a real boy, popped his head out the door when he saw them come up on their bikes and said, "Hi, Larkin! Wanna do something?"

"No, Andy. I should go help my dad with the cows. Maybe tomorrow."

"Okay. I'll see ya," Andy replied, waving as Larkin left him and Ginny.

Peddling off towards home on Hwy 99, ball glove flapping on his handle bars, he thought about Jim Coone and how he had always harassed him. Coone did it despite the fact that a couple of years ago they had fought on the playground and Larkin had beaten the tar out of him. He thought Jim wouldn't bother him again, but obviously he had a short memory and Larkin figured he'd have to whomp him again someday. He just hated fighting, that's all, but he wondered, 'Why?'

When he got to his house, he heard his dad whistle for the cows. Following the bell of the lead cow, Helga, the rest of the herd followed her up to the barn for the evening milking. Throwing down his bike by the front door, he went to his room, changed his clothes into his overalls like his dad, ran out the back and made it to the barn as the last cow went into her stall. His dad smiled when he saw him come in and said, "Hello, Son! Glad to see you. How was school?"

Not mentioning the daydreaming or the altercation with Jim Coone he just said, "Fine, Dad. Want me to start with Heidi?"

Moving his stool to the lead cow Lawtin replied, "Sure. I'll meet you in the middle of the line."

Lawtin Palmer had inherited the farm on Waterman Road from Harold Button, his wife Shirley's father. In turn, Harold had inherited it from his mother-in-law, widow of Elton Morgan, who, it was rumored, had stolen it from someone in a game of chance years ago. It was with strange circumstances that Mr. Morgan had died, seemingly that he just plain-old, as they say, "up and died" for no reason at all one night in his sleep, well before his years. Lawtin was glad to have come onto the farm, as his older brothers had inherited The Homestead from Grandpa Elias when he passed last spring. He would have had nothing if not for the generosity of Harold, who loved his daughter dearly. Lawtin thought about his son, Larkin, and what he someday would do with the place. Would he continue in the dairy business? Would he sell the cows and just farm the acreage? Or would he move to the city and give up on the way of life his family had held for so many years?

Hopefully, thought Lawtin, he wouldn't become like the kids that had gone to Woodstock last year. For a bunch of supposed "Peace Loving Kids", they sure wrecked the Yazgur place and were selfish. Someday they would probably wreck the country too, he reasoned, especially if they were like their fathers. Brookfield, much like Bethel before it was invaded, had always been a pleasant place to live, despite the periodic friction caused by The Eraser. A sleepy community, it never became a hub for commerce, much to the dismay of entrepreneurs, but much to the delight of those that hated anything that would destroy the status quo. They liked the town that way. And that's the way it had stayed- all of these years.

Just as they were finishing the milking, Shirley came out to the barn to announce that dinner was ready. "Soup's on!"

"You didn't have to come out to tell us that, Shirley," Lawtin said to her.

As he stood up from the stool at the last cow, she came up to him and gave him a hug. "Oh, I'm just checking up on you two."

"Aw, Mom," Larkin said, as he saw her give his dad a peck on the cheek.

“We’ll be up in a minute to wash up,” said Lawtin and he patted her on the behind as she trotted toward the door.

As Shirley walked toward the house, Sam, their blue healer, came running up to her, tail wagging as fast as a propeller. Getting to the door, Sam just sat down on an old sofa cushion that had flown off someone’s truck and there beside the patio he reclined, always grateful for a place to live.

Shirley was in her mid-thirties, as was her husband, and she was still as vigorous as she was when they had met. She fit the description of “farm wife” to a tee- resilient, resourceful, and always ready to do what was necessary to get a job done. Her hands were strong, yet not hard, still soft to the touch. Lawtin, on the other hand, was a hardened example of farm life; being strong, lean and an inspiration to Larkin. The three were truly meant for the farm life.

As Lawtin went from the kitchen to the bathroom to clean up, he saw through the hall that the dining room table was filled with a mass of papers and what looked like charts. When he got back to the kitchen, he asked Shirley about it. She said, “Grandpa Elias was working on the Palmer genealogy again before he died. I thought I’d go through some of his stuff that he left and learn more about it.”

“Well, that’s interesting. I know a lot about it, but don’t know it all. I heard he was just about done with it.”

“Yes, I think he was. There are only a few names missing and most of them are from recent family names.”

Laughing Lawtin said, “Well, when you get done let me know.” She laughed too, knowing it was a formidable job, and they sat down at the table to say grace. Larkin plopped down in his chair and they bowed their heads. Lawtin led the prayer. “Father, for these gifts which only you provide, we give thanks. Amen.”

“Amen”, chimed in the other two at the table and with that Larkin grabbed a roll and his butter knife.