

## Friends and Strangers

*"I should be wearing a hat. It's hot."*

The old man wiped the perspiration from his forehead and smiled. *"Used to be I loved being outside in the summer."*

We were sitting on a bench in the park. I'd originally sat down with the intention of reading and enjoying the sunshine, but the old man sitting beside me had wanted to talk. He's seemed harmless.

*"Are you retired? What did you use to do?"* I was curious. He was well dressed, and seemed pretty smart.

*"I was a lawyer, believe it or not. And a good one too. But I haven't worked for a lot of years now. Mostly I just sit outside, when the weather is nice."*

*"Any family?"* He looked pretty lonely. I don't know why I was asking him all these questions. Normally I'm pretty shy. But he seemed like a nice man. He probably didn't get to talk to many people.

*"No, everyone is gone now. It's just me, but I get by."* He smiled wistfully. *"How about you? What do you do when you're not sitting in the sun reading?"*

*"I'm in college. In nursing. I really like it."*

*"A fine profession for a young woman such as yourself!"*

I laughed. I liked the way he talked ... so formal. He reminded me of my grandfather.

I'd noticed he had a cane by his side. I asked about it.

*"It's the arthritis in my knees. Makes it a little hard to walk, sometimes. I'm sorry, I don't know your name. I'm Sam."*

*"Hi, Sam! I'm Elizabeth, but my friends call me Beth."* We'd been sitting on the bench talking for a while now. Sam looked pretty frail; I imagined he would have a hard time getting up, and walking would be painful for him. My grandpa had been like that in his last few years.

Sam had originally commented on the book I'd been reading, and we'd both agreed that it was pretty trashy. I'd asked him what he liked to read.

*"I read everything, Beth. I'm not discriminating. Anything to pass the time."*

*"Do you listen to music?"* I had my iPod with me, but hadn't been using it.

*"Not so much any more. I used to love listening to jazz, and some of the 'rock and roll' from the sixties was pretty good. The only kind of music I can't abide is Country. Never liked the stuff!"*

I laughed again. *"I love Country, Sam! It's about all I listen to!"*

*"Ahhh, too 'nasal' for me! And not exactly very uplifting, is it? You know, divorce, drinking, sleeping around ..."* The old man blushed. *"I'm sorry, that's not something ..."*

I smiled. *"That's all right, Sam."* I could see he was embarrassed. *"I don't listen to that kind; mostly it's songs about love, and faith, and, well, inspiring things. Country music has a lot of songs like that ..."*

The old man didn't seem convinced. But he smiled too. *"I don't think ..."*

He stopped suddenly. We both had heard it. A woman had screamed, somewhere further down the path from where we were sitting.

As I looked toward where we'd heard the scream, I saw a young man pulling at a purse that an older woman was trying desperately to hang on to. She was still screaming for help as the man pushed her down and finally wrestled the purse from her grip. He started to run towards us.

*"Sam ..."*

*"I saw it, Beth. I hope he didn't hurt her. And he's coming this way."*

The man was running quickly down the path, with the purse stuffed under his arm. People were scrambling to get out of his way. Nobody was doing anything to try to stop him.

*"We can't let him get away with that, can we?"* I looked at Sam. He had struggled to his feet, and was standing shakily in front of the bench. He looked at me and winked.

*"Sam, don't. He'll hurt you."*

But Sam had turned back toward the man, who was now only about ten feet away and still running hard.

As the purse snatcher sprinted past, Sam stuck out his cane and tripped him!

The man went sprawling onto the hard cement. He rolled a few times, and came to a stop on his back. He looked dazed.

Sam looked at me. *"I think the rest is up to you, Beth ..."* He smiled.

What could I do? I got off the bench in a hurry and jumped onto the man as he tried to roll away. I sat on his chest, his arms pinned between my legs. I wasn't sure what to do next.

But Sam had it all under control. He was looking at the people on the path who had seen what was going on, and were watching. *"We could use some help here, people. Someone call 911. And could someone else help this brave young lady to subdue this nasty gentleman?"*

Several young guys who had been watching came over and grabbed the man and hoisted him to his feet. Meanwhile, Sam had retrieved the purse and was hobbling back toward where the older woman was standing on the path, seemingly in shock.

By the time I reached them, Sam had his arm around the woman, who was tearfully thanking him. Sam looked at me. *“Good job with the tackle, Beth. We make a good team!”*

I laughed. *“I couldn’t believe it when you tripped that guy, Sam. What would you have done if I’d been too scared to jump on him?”*

*“I knew you’d help, Beth. I’m a good judge of character. Even if you do like Country music!”*

I smiled and waved good-bye as Sam and new lady friend headed off down the path. I wondered if I would ever see him again. I realized that I wanted to.