

The Incident

By K.E. Ward

PROLOGUE

In the town of Glenwood, New Hampshire, a large, old school building perched on the edge of a hill some two miles from the center of town. It had gray and brown stones and small, square windows encircling its perimeter.

It was Williams Davis Elementary School, the daytime home for the town's bright young minds.

On a cool September day, the sky was completely white with clouds, but no breeze blew through the trees, some of which were already beginning to turn shades of orange and red. Blackbirds dotted the trees surrounding the schoolhouse. Restless, they flew from branch to branch, seemingly in search of more suitable arrangements. The mighty evergreens stood amongst their coloring neighbors as reminders of the recent, indeed very green summer in Glenwood that year. There had been a lot of rain, and of course, a lot of life to show for it. But the residents of the town were excitedly awaiting the prime of fall, arguably their most beautiful season. Nestled between two

peaks of the White Mountains, the town spread over winding hills patched with large areas of mixed forests.

That year, Glenwood was a town of moderate affluence. A few large corporations owned work bases nearby, and the commute from Glenwood by executives was found to be pleasant and easy. Upper middle-class three bedroom homes were more commonplace here than low-income housing or small, same level houses. In its most expensive neighborhood, one could find a house here and there valued at well over a million dollars, but again, this was the exception.

It was a relatively young community. Founded in the late 1800's, as a tourist spot, Glenwood's oldest buildings were hideaways for vacationers. One of its oldest buildings was a bed and breakfast overlooking the dense forest to the north. Another of its oldest buildings was Williams Davis, the schoolhouse, originally meant for students of all ages. The town still attracted some tourists, but year-round was much more popular, in the mid-1980's, as a residents town, than as a vacation spot. Nevertheless, if a tourist roamed the downtown area, he could dine at a nice restaurant, and afterwards go dancing at the town's very own dance club, *The Steamer*.

It was a tight-knit community, and celebrated very little crime on its well-paved streets. Glenwood liked to think of itself as, "an exceptionally safe town." About ten years prior, there was a rash of break-ins in several

of the local houses, causing mild hysteria. Some families resorted to buying extra locks, fences, or guard dogs. Some people decided to exercise their right to bear arms. For the first time ever in Glenwood, both men and women were keeping guns in their houses for fear of future break-ins, in the hopes that these guns could be used in self-defense. It was the seventies, a time when crime was on the steep upward slope.

But the burglars never did come back to strike again. Two of them were caught and jailed, and if there were more of them, they were neither named nor did they leave any kind of trail. For the most part, peace resumed and residents returned to their normal lives, enjoying the tranquility and the beauty of living in a mountain town seated a bit isolated from the remainder of its home state.

At Williams Davis, school had been in session for only a few weeks now. It was well into the afternoon. Recess was long over, and the final bell was yet ring. Still, there was no breeze, and it was as though the wind, along with the children, was holding its breath in anticipation for the clock to reach three o'clock, and release its prisoners at long last.

A few of the cars with parents had already arrived. There were sedans and station wagons, and a few trucks. As the children were dismissed for the day, loud crunches could be heard as their feet trampled on dead, brown leaves

that had fallen to the ground. Certainly, it was the new season, and excitement was alive in the air.

Two boys emerged from the fourth grade wing, their arms over each other's shoulders as they playfully hit and shoved each other.

"You dipwad," said the blond one. "If you hadn't of said anything, Miss Alcott wouldn't've given us any homework." He lightly punched the other little boy, the one with the head of dark brown hair, in in the shoulder.

Mark replaced his glasses, which had fallen down on the bridge of his nose while his friend was rough-housing him. "C'mon, Cory. No WAY she would've forgotten. It's NOT MY FAULT."

"Noogie-time!" yelled Cory. Mark bent over forwards in peals of laughter. Cory pinned his best friend in a headlock and proceeded with the dreaded operation. "You teacher's pet. You weekend homework-giver."

"STOP it! I didn't do it!" By then both boys were laughing hysterically.

"You know you love Miss Alcott. You know you'd love to kiss her and marry her and have babies with her." Cory was merciless in his teasing.

"Look," said Mark, as he laid his hands out in front of him. "All I did was ASK if she had any work for us this weekend. I'm not the one who GAVE it to us!"

"Yeah, and five minutes before the bell rang, too."
Cory gave his biggest grin, a sure sign that he was not really mad at his long-time pal, Mark.

They put their arms back over each other's shoulders and descended down the hill off school grounds, beginning to make the trek by foot to their neighborhood, which was within walking distance from Williams Davis. The coolness outside was a welcome contrast to the stuffiness inside the classrooms. Just a few weeks earlier, Maine was in the midst of a full-blown heat wave, temperatures soaring well into the nineties, but now, in mid-September, by stark comparison, highs were a mere fifty-eight degrees. It was going to be a cold winter, meteorologists predicted.

As the two young boys crossed the street, Mark turned and spoke. "I thought I saw your mom's station wagon. Was she supposed to pick you up today?"

"No, I don't think so," said Cory. He coughed and then rubbed his nose. "Megan has ballet again. She told me this morning I had to walk home." He got an idea. "Hey, we can hang out at my house for a while, if you want."

It was a commonplace occurrence and almost went without asking. But Mark was glad that he asked. "Sure, I guess."

The rule for the bus system was that if you lived a mile or more away from the school house, then a bus would be assigned to pick you up and transport you, but since both boys lived under a mile away, neither of them took

buses. Cory's house was rather far away-- just under a mile. His mother liked it, though-- she liked to see him get exercise sometimes, considering the fact that Cory was slightly overweight for his age.

Cory was a popular kid. In school, he was a chatterbox and a bundle of activity. All the children at school adored him. He had blond hair and bright, intensely blue eyes. He was an excellent socializer, and not shy in the least. He could come up to someone he had never met before and just begin talking without any problems whatsoever. He was good at sports, despite being slightly overweight, and outgoing in any setting. Girls liked him, too, but Cory would have none of that "just yet." He was intelligent, but his grades were often lagging. He preferred friends and fun any day to completing a stack of homework, and it often showed.

Mark, on the other hand, was very shy and most of the time, very quiet. He made excellent grades and always did his work. He was not nearly as outgoing as his friend Cory was, but when the two got together Mark's whole countenance just seemed to light up and they always had fun together. When present, Cory was to be able to bring Mark outside of his solitary world, when usually he would just stay to his introverted self. Mark wore glasses, and had a thin, long face and pale skin with dark, black-brown eyes. Unlike Cory, Mark was nowhere near overweight. At the age of nine, he was gawky and bony.

They entered Cory's neighborhood, Pinecrest, whose entrance was marked by two elegant stone pillars standing on either side of the road. It was a new neighborhood, the last of the homes having just been finished in the past Spring. They were mid-size homes, mostly two-level.

"So what d'you wanna do today?" asked Cory.

"I dunno," responded Mark. "Do you wanna play with your army men again?"

"No, aren't we too old for that?" said Cory. "We're in the fourth grade now. We may as well be playing with my sister's dolls if we play with my army men. Besides, I'm tired of it."

"O.K. then we can do something else."

"I know!"

"Yeah?"

"We can play with my Atari, that'd be fun."

Mark changed the subject. "Hey Cory, do you like Mary?"

"Ewwwwwwww, yuck!!!" he replied emphatically. "She has a crush on me, but she's gross."

Mark laughed and shoved him. "But she looooooves you, Cory..."

"STOP it!"

"Do you loooooove her?"

"STOP it, Mark, STOP it!" They giggled.

After walking a couple of blocks down the road, they came to the shortcut. Into the woods, a row of trees had

been cut down so that electrical transmission towers could be erected there. This turned out to be a nice shortcut from the school to Cory's house, he discovered. It was a bit overgrown with weeds, but it was the most direct route home. Cory followed this route every single time he walked.

Cory ran ahead, shifting his bookbag more comfortably over his right shoulder. "Come on, dipwad!" he yelled to Mark, who was lagging behind.

Mark began to wheeze a little bit. "Hey Cory, do you ever wonder if you could get electrocuted if you climb on one of these things?" He referred to the electrical transmission towers.

"I dunno. Maybe if you get up to the wires." They looked up at one of them and saw the thick power lines dangling high above their heads.

"I saw a bird once get electrocuted by pecking through wires outside our house. I saw it right as it happened, too."

"Was he all bloody and gross?"

"No, he was just dead."

They walked for a good distance, passing a dozen of the towers before reaching the road again, but not before cutting through someone's backyard. They were finally on Spruce Lane, Cory's street.

The remainder of the walk was a short one. All they had to do was walk up one short hill, and then they were

home. They made the trek easily. Mark's asthma was acting up, but only slightly.

Cory's house was 4236. No car in the driveway. No one was home. He checked the mailbox and pulled out an armload of mail as Mark waited on the front lawn. When he was finished, Cory pulled out his housekey, which was connected to a shoelace tied around his neck, and went to the front door and unlocked it.

"C'mon in," he called. They entered the house, which was warm, empty and silent. It smelled of potpourri and fabric softener, and a hint of homemade bread that was probably prepared earlier in the day. The living room was semi-dark because the translucent linen shades were drawn. Cory turned on a couple of standing lights and tossed his bookbag quickly onto the floor, then kicked off his shoes and rubbed his socked feet onto the carpet. "Make yourself at home," he said. Mark carefully set his bookbag on the floor, next to Cory's.

"Can I take off my shoes too?"

"Sure." Mark sat down in a chair and took off his shoes, one by one. It felt good to sit down. Mark took a deep breath as he sat back into his chair and into the cushions. It looked like they were going to be alone for a while. There was no sign of Cory's mother, who was usually at home to greet him when he arrived home from school. Every once in a while, Cory would arrive to an empty house for an hour or two, but it was a strange day when that

would happen. Today was one of those days. They sat in the living room in chairs for a few minutes, finishing up catching their breaths. Then Cory suggested they go get something to eat in the kitchen, where the bread smell was coming from.

"What would you like? We have cookies, and juice, and milk, and sandwiches, if you want."

"I'll have some cookies and milk," said Mark.

Cory took out two tall glasses from the cupboards and filled them both to the brim with some 2% milk from the refrigerator, then went to the pantry and got out an unopened package of oreo cookies. He opened the package, took two paper towels, and put ten cookies on each towel, then he handed one of the towels and one of the glasses to Mark. Without putting anything back, he said, "C'mon, let's go into the t.v. room and watch cartoons."

"Okay." Carelessly forgetting about the mess they made in the kitchen, they happily parked themselves in the den in front of the Mitchell's five-year-old color television set, Mark on the sofa, and Cory on the floor. Cory flipped the switch on the set and they began snacking away and watching away. If Cory's mother had been there, she would have insisted they eat a healthier snack and perhaps choose "another activity besides television," but since she wasn't, the boys were slacking off a bit. They were having a high time.

After the show was over Cory made another suggestion. He suggested they play with his video games for a while. Mark agreed to the thought. Soon they were attacking electronic enemies with electronic weapons. But the activity soon tired of appeal, and after only about forty minutes of playing, they both grew bored.

Mrs. Mitchell still wasn't back. Not knowing what to do, the boys found themselves brainstorming for ideas. "No army men," insisted Cory, who was positive they were too old for it.

"So what should we do?" Cory chomped on his thumb, thinking pensively. He thought for several minutes.

"Well, we can't go bike riding because my bike needs fixing..."

"...Yeah..."

"...and we can't play ball because I lost it last week..."

"...Yeah..."

Cory's face lit up. He had an idea. "I know," he said. He put his pointer finger up in the air and leaned in close to his friend.

"But this is big, Mark. You've gotta swear to me that you will never tell another soul that I showed this to you, ever. You have to promise me that." His voice was low.

"Okay, I promise. So what is it?"

"Mark, I have something really cool to show you, and you will not be disappointed, I promise you." Cory was

wearing a half-smile. Mark could sense that this really was big. "But you've gotta promise me, you've got to swear to me that what you're about to see you will keep to yourself, because I could get in a lot of trouble for this."

"Okay, I promise."

Cory got up from his sitting position and motioned for Mark to do the same. "What you're about to see, stays between us."

"I know, you already said so."

"So you with me?"

"Yeah," answered Mark.

Cory led him to the front hall to the foot of the stairway. "Just, if you hear my mom's car pull in, tell me okay?"

"Okay." Mark's excitement was growing. His best friend was being mysterious. They both giggled as they marched up the stairs, to the second floor.

"This is gonna be so cool," said Cory.

When they got up the stairs, Mark was expected him to lead him into his room, (I mean, after all, there was *lots* of cool stuff in Cory's room...) but instead, they stopped dead in front of Cory's father's study. Mark recognized that room to be that because the first time he ever came over to Cory's house he got lost on the way to the bathroom and ended up wandering into his father's study. But he had never gone back in since. "You wanna go in *here*?"

"Yeah," Cory said nonchalantly. But then he put his pointer finger to his lips. "Remember, don't *tell* anybody..."

Mark was a little uneasy. "Okay, I guess..."

The room smelled of ink and pipe tobacco. It was a medium-sized rectangular room, with a sliding-door closet to one side, and a window to the adjacent side. In the center of the room was an oak-wood desk with a blotter and a typewriter on top. Other than the desk, the study was bare of furniture. The floor was hard wood, and was not covered with any rugs. The most decorative items in the room were the drapes, which were colored a plain royal blue.

Cory pushed fully open the door to the entrance of the room, which had been only partially open. "Let's go inside," he said, his voice almost in a whisper. Mark slowly nodded in agreement. The two boys tip-toed inside. Cory flipped on the light, and closed the door behind them.

Once inside, Cory no longer spoke in a whisper. "You can see the driveway from the window," he said. "That way, if Mom and Megan come home, we can get out quick. If *Dad* comes home," he said, "we'll see *it, too.*"

Cory approached the desk. He pulled out the chair and proceeded to open the right top drawer. Within a few seconds, he carried a small metal lock-box in his arms.

"Ooooh..." cooed Mark, providing the occasion with sound effects. "What's in it?"

"You'll see," answered Cory, a silly grin on his face. He set it down on top of the desk, and disappeared from the room, leaving a curious Mark by himself for a moment. When he came back, he carried a key. "They keep it in their bedroom," he explained, still grinning.

When Cory turned the key and started to open the box up, Mark leaned over in attempt to get a peek. But Cory shooed him away. "Uh uh uh," he said. "Wait till I say you can see."

"Okay."

"Now close your eyes."

The little boy patiently took off his glasses and shut his eyes. "Is it ready yet?" asked Mark.

"Just a second... okay now. You can open your eyes." Mark put back on his glasses and focused his eyes. Cory was holding something behind his back.

"Lemme see," complained Mark.

"Okay okay. Now get ready cuz this is gonna knock your socks off."

"Stop torturing me and lemme see."

Cory pulled out something small and black from behind his back. Mark knew immediately what it was. It was a gun.

"Cory, your dad has a *gun*? You're messing around with your dad's *gun*?"

"Shhh, shhh. Don't wake up the neighbors."

"Cory, maybe we shouldn't be--"

"Shhh. C'mon, Mark." Cory tossed the device up with his hands and then caught it again. "You're not afraid, are you?"

"No."

"Well then play with me."

Mark was really hesitant about this one. "I don't know, Cory--"

"Just one quick game. It'll be fun. Then we can put it back and that'll be the end of it. No one'll find out. I promise."

"Well... I don't know."

"Please?"

"I don't know, Cory."

"C'mon, it's not loaded."

Mark thought about that one. He did find the thought of playing with a real gun exciting. He had seen them on television and in pictures, but never up close, like right now. "Can I see that?"

He handed it to him. "Sure." It was heavy. He looked at the little hole at the end where the bullet is supposed to come out and at the button-thingy, the trigger, where you're supposed to press when you want to shoot someone.

"It's neat," remarked the boy. Cory retrieved the device and held it up to the window, aiming it at the house next door.

"Think I could get that trash can next door?" he asked.

"Maybe," replied Mark. "You would have to go through the window," he added.

Then Cory adjusted his aim to Mark and started giggling. "I'm gonna get you if you don't start running!" he exclaimed.

Mark relented and started giggling, too. He ducked behind the desk as Cory chased him down and made shooting noises with his mouth. "You're dead meat, sucker!" cried the assailant. "Pow! Pow!"

There was plenty of running space in Cory's dad's study. The boys had little to hide behind, but a lot of floor space to chase each other with. Around and around the room they ran, laughing all the time. Mark died about a half a dozen times before it was all over. Then Cory called time to catch his breath. Half bent over, and in between breaths, Cory asked, "Hey Mark, you want it now?"

Mark eyed the piece of machinery. Timidly, he thought it over in his head. It was awfully appealing. But it was frightening, too. Only, he didn't want his friend to see that. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yeah."

The gun exchanged hands. Mark was shaking a little bit inside, suddenly overcome by an inexplicable fear. He hoped silently that it did not show. Bravely, he wielded

the gun in the same manner that his friend had just done-- pointer finger on the trigger.

"You ready?" asked Cory.

"I think so," responded Mark. Mark lifted the gun up and started chasing his friend. Again, around and around they ran, laughing all the way.

But then Mark backed Cory into a corner. The gun was aimed straight at Cory's head. Cory had nowhere to go-- not left, not right. Cory lifted up his bright blue eyes to Mark, who was still holding the gun. He made a shooting sound with his mouth. "Pow!"

Cory was breathing deep breaths. He said not a word and made not a move. Mark had him pinned.

Cory said quietly, "Shoot me."

Mark was confused. "What?"

"You heard me," he responded. "Shoot me."

"But I already did," replied Mark.

Cory shook his head slowly from left to right and then raised his arms. "No... I mean *really* shoot me. Pull the trigger, Mark."

Mark was silent for a few moments.

"I told you it wasn't loaded. Don't be a wuss. Just do it." His arms were still in the air.

In Mark's memory years later, the moments that followed were little more than a blur to him. But there was one detail that would never, ever escape his mind about that day: more than any other day with Cory as a little boy

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