

**Faith,
Family,
and...**

**FIRE
STORM**



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and...

Firestorm

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Chapter 1

Bright autumn leaves whirled around an even brighter red F-150 spurting down the gravel road. At the wheel, Jim Richards, enjoying the cool breeze ruffling his hair and the warm sun tanning the side of his face, had his arm through the open window. In his opinion, northern Illinois was at its peak in the fall. He glanced around at the walls of corn drying on either side of the road, brown with just a hint of green. *They'll harvest 'em pretty soon.*

Jim returned a wave from the driver of an oncoming car. He didn't know who it was. People were just friendly like that in this small-town, farming community. He and his wife, Jessica, farmed a few acres of hay and bred a small herd on a little horse farm between the village of Oak Creek and the larger town of Spring Valley.

For an average-size guy, Jim's frame sported a lot of solid muscle. He liked to work and enjoyed a healthy lifestyle. His blond hair was dark, almost brown, cut short and combed to the side. His eyes were a soft, sky-blue and held a mixture of humor, determination, kindness, compassion, or anger – whatever the situation called for.

Giant, white, cotton ball clouds made the sky seem bluer than normal. Jim glanced down at the clock. *Better hurry. You're gonna be late for work.* Pushing down on the accelerator, he knew he was going a little faster than he should on these curvy, gravel roads, but he told himself he had grown up around here and knew the area like the back of his hand.

He slowed to the speed limit as he turned onto the main drag going into Spring Valley.

Jim flipped off the radio. It never took him very long to get annoyed with it. It was always on the Chicago "all-news" station, and he really couldn't care less how the traffic was moving on the Eisenhower or the Kennedy. If there was anything else on that station, he never knew, since he always turned it off before he heard it.

Huh, car in my spot, he thought to himself, as he pulled into the parking lot of the Spring Valley Fire Station.

Jim walked into the locker room. "Hey, Thundercloud, exactly what are you doing in my parking place?" Jim asked his best friend, jokingly.

"*Your* parking place? Your deed of ownership, please?" Wade Thundercloud held out his hand.

“Squatter’s rights, my brother. Everyone knows that is my parking place.” Jim took his uniform shirt out of his locker.

“Uh oh, looks like another storm’s a brewin’ between Jim and Big Chief Thundercloud,” Carlos laughed.

“Did I miss something?” a fireman Jim didn’t know asked.

“It’s relentless persecution for my name,” Wade grumbled, buckling his belt.

“His name’s Wade Thundercloud. In case you haven’t noticed, the boy’s a full blooded redskin,” Carlos, a brawny, Hispanic fireman, explained as he buttoned his shirt.

Wade rolled his eyes. “Isn’t that a racist statement?”

Carlos laughed, “Awww...we hurt the little guy’s feelings.”

Wade threw his shirt at Carlos. “Oh, it’s on.”

“Yeah, maybe we should change the subject,” Jim suggested.

“Hey, I was kinda enjoying it. The guys at my last station were, like, way too serious,” the new guy protested.

“Yeah, talkin’ ‘bout that, who are you anyway? Derrick get kicked out or something?” Jim put his foot on the paint-chipped bench to tie his shoelace.

“Name’s Travis. Derrick’s sick or something, so I got called over as his replacement.”

Jim nodded and began to tie his other shoe.

“Yeah, well, it’ll be nice to be partnered with a guy that has a little more experience.” Wade straightened his collar. “Derrick’s been out of the academy for almost two years, but he’s only twenty-one.” He buttoned his cuffs. “He graduated from high school a year early when he was sixteen, took one year of paramedic training, quit for a year, then took the last year when he was nineteen.”

“Why’d he quit for a year?”

“Who knows with that kid.”

Jim gave Wade a sideways glance of disapproval.

“By the way, Jim.” Carlos tucked in his shirt. “Cap’s gone at more divorce proceedings so we got Captain Johnson.”

Jim grunted an acknowledgment and then closed his locker door. He was glad to be back to work and was ready for action.

.....

Today was hay-stacking day. Jessica Richards really didn't mind. She loved being out in the barn with the smell of hay. Besides, throwing hay bales all day was one way of keeping in shape, and what girl didn't want that? Of course, if her husband had been home, she would have conned him into doing it or at least into helping.

She grabbed a bail in each hand and climbed the ladder to the loft. People had commented that she was stronger than she looked. She was only five-foot-three and one-hundred pounds. Her chestnut hair fell thick and shiny to the middle of her back, and her deep brown eyes danced with joy and excitement more often than not. At twenty-three, she was a year younger than her husband and the proud mother of their beautiful baby girl.

After two hours of strenuous hay-stacking, Jess was beginning to wonder if the horses were worth all this trouble. She plopped down on a bale of hay in the loft and sighed. *Halfway done.*

She just sat there a moment, leaning against the stack of hay bales. She seriously contemplated just backing the hay wagon into the lower half of the hay shed and calling it quits for the day. *Why not just leave the wagon there permanently and save all this trouble?* After all, they never used this barn for anything other than hay, anyway. She smiled to herself as she imagined Jim's reaction to that idea. That item of business would never make its way to a serious discussion but... She chuckled at some humorous mental images of his likely aghast response and filed the topic away in her memory as a good conversation starter to lighten the mood some likely evening. Smile weakening, she huffed a sigh. Unfortunately... that topic would have to keep for a while since he would not be coming home tonight.

She stretched. *Maybe I should go inside, get a glass of cool lemonade, and see how Morgan's doin'.* Mrs. Robinson, an older lady from church, had offered to watch Morgan so she could get some chores done. She wiped her face with her sleeve. It felt good to sweat again. She hadn't done much really hard labor since before she had Morgan.

As she got up to go down, the smell of smoke drifted up to her. She looked down the ladder. A thick cloud of dark gray smoke filled the barn. Breathing into her sleeve, Jess practically jumped down the ladder, frantic to get out. She raced for the door, but bright, daunting, orange flames already billowed across that escape route. Smoke burned her eyes. She

darted for the back, but it was no good. Fire devoured the entire frame. Every wall blazed. Her lungs burned from the smoke.

She turned a full circle but saw fire in every direction. *I have to get out, now! Lord, please, please give me a way out! The loft!* Spinning around, she raced for the ladder. The heat grew more intense. Flames crept around the ladder, but she knew she had to go for it. As she raced to the top, the heat nearly overwhelmed her. Her lungs screamed for air. Relief flooded her when she saw that the loft door wasn't engulfed. *Thank you, Lord.*

Kicking the wooden doors open, she jumped, bracing herself for the impact. Pain and gladness swept over her as she hit the ground. Gasping for air, she was so glad to be alive. *Thank you, Lord. Thank you.*

.....

Jim sniffed the air as he walked into the kitchen. "What's that smell?"

"Wade's cooking lunch today. We'll probably all end up in the ER with food poisoning," Dan, their oldest firefighter at forty-three, replied.

"Hey, don't criticize my stew."

"Stew?"

"Yeah, I found a prize-winning stew recipe and a prize-winning soup recipe. I'm just gonna mix everything together, and you won't believe what I come up with."

"I'm sure of that."

"Just wait. You'll love it." Wade stirred the concoction.

Jim looked skeptical. "Did you burn something?"

"Well, the rice got a little done."

BURRRUZZZ... The deafening fire bell sounded. Wade switched off the stove and hurried after the crowd out to the trucks. The address came over the loud speaker. Jim froze as he grabbed his helmet. "That's my house!" Carlos shoved Jim into the engine, flipped on the sirens, and followed the squad out onto the road.

Jim's heart raced, and his adrenaline pumped in overdrive. *What happened? How did it start? Are Jess and Morgan okay? Did they get out?* Jim clutched the handle near the door until his knuckles turned white. *Faster! Faster!*

He could see the smoke billowing as they turned onto the gravel road.

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Fear invaded him as he saw flames plume above the hay barn. *NO! Jess was going to be in there stacking hay today!* His heart pounded.

The engine swung into the driveway. The barn looked like a lost cause. Jim's eyes wildly scanned the area, looking for Jess. She stood in the grass with the elderly babysitter a little ways from the barn, holding their baby. Relief swept over him. *They're okay.*

As the engine came to a stop in the front of the barn, they all piled out. Jim raced to his wife. As soon as he reached her, Jess handed the baby to Mrs. Robinson and fell into his arms. He could smell the strong odor of smoke on her. She hid her face in his shoulder. Now that she was in her husband's strong arms, she let tears flow and allowed herself some quiet sobs.

Jim could feel her shaking. He held her tight, resting his cheekbone on her head. "Are you all right? I almost went crazy when I heard the address and saw..." His voice trailed off.

"I'm fine. Twisted my ankle. Just gla... I'm just glad to be alive." Her voice shook.

"What happened?" He didn't want to let go.

Wade put his hand on Jim's shoulder. "They need your help, man. We'll take care of her." Reluctantly, Jim surrendered her to the paramedics and, after a final kiss, left to help with the fire.

The barn was so far gone that they decided just to contain it. Jim thanked the Lord that there was no wind and that the fire had not spread to the main barn or the house.

After the fire was out, Jim took off his helmet and began looking around for his wife. Seeing her seated on the ground leaning against the squad, he took his equipment back to the truck and joined her.

"So how ya doin'?"

"I have been diagnosed with a twisted ankle and mild smoke inhalation." She coughed into her arm. "For a minute I thought I was a goner, but the Lord showed me a way out."

"I'm just so glad you weren't hurt any worse." He put his arm around her and pulled her into a hug.

She leaned her head against his shoulder, feeling so much safer with him there. "Do they know how it started?"

Jim broke away from her gaze, glancing back at what had been their barn. "They think it was arson."

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“Arson?” Jess sat up straight and stared at him.

“Yeah...they say that someone soaked the walls with accelerant, then came back later and lit it.”

“Why would anyone do that?” She paused. “You mean they came back and lit it while I was in there? They were trying to...?” Her voice quivered.

“That’s not why. Most likely, they got scared off the first time and then came back. It’s probably just teens doing it for kicks. You were up in the loft. They must not have seen you.”

She glanced down at her hands. “I hope you’re right. I just can’t imagine anyone doing something like that for fun. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Some people don’t make sense.”

Wade came over and knelt down in front of Jess. “Are you sure that you don’t want to go to the hospital?”

“Yeah. Mrs. Robinson will drive me to my own doctor after I’ve had a chance to calm down.”

“Do you want me to try and get off work to go with you?” Jim asked.

“No. I’ll be fine. Just so whoever this was doesn’t come back.”

“It was probably just some jerk...”

“I know.... That’s what Jim said.”

“Of course, on the other hand...” Jim lowered his voice and shifted his eyes back and forth. “...it could be the ghost of some long lost second or third cousin seeking *vengeance*.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “Right.”

“Vengeance for what?” Wade grinned.

“Only the *shadow* knows.”

“Uh-huh.” Jess held out her hand to Jim who stood in front of her. He pulled her up.

“I better go find Mrs. Robinson and the baby. I’m pretty sure they went inside.” She reached to put her arms around her husband’s neck. Jim bent down. Usually, she stood on her toes, but that wasn’t going to work with a twisted ankle. Jim really wasn’t that tall. She was just that short.

“I’ll see ya tomorrow.” She finished the hug.

“Yeah, okay.” He kissed her and let her go. “Do you need help getting to the house?”

“No, I’ll be fine.” She smiled and began hobbling toward the house. As she went, she heard the alarm sound on the engine’s radio. Turning, she

watched everyone pile in and the trucks speed out of the drive.

Not seeing Jim for twenty-four hours at a time was what she disliked most about his job, but it was what he really wanted to do, so she put up with it. She limped up the porch and into the house.

Mrs. Robinson sat in a recliner, rocking the baby. “Did Jim leave already?”

“Yeah. They had another call.” Jess coughed into her elbow. She still felt a little shaky, but she was calming down. “Oh, give me my little girl,” she said softly, bending down to gather her little one into her arms.

“Here you go.” Mrs. Robinson smiled as she handed her to her Mama.

“And how’s my little Morgan?” Jess swung the baby over her head, causing the little girl to wiggle and giggle. Sitting down, Jess put Morgan down in her lap as another coughing fit struck.

Mrs. Robinson headed for the phone in the kitchen. “Do you want me to make an appointment with your doctor?”

“I suppose. ... Maybe she won’t have any openings today.”

“Jess-i-ca.” Mrs. Robinson put her hands on her hips reprovingly.

“Well... Can I help it if I’m not crazy about doctors?”

“Jim must be rubbing off on you. I’ll call.”

Jess just stared a moment into the bright, lively blue eyes of her beautiful girl, just so thankful that she could.

Chapter 2

That Sunday Jim and Jessica met up with Wade and his wife, Mellissa, in the parking lot after church.

“So Mellissa, how long till Morgan has a playmate?” Jess asked, handing the baby carrier to Jim.

“Oh, about a month. I can’t wait.” She leaned back against her husband’s chest. “I hope it’s a boy that’s just like his father.” She tilted her head back to smile at Wade.

“Are you sure the world can handle another one?” Jim joked.

“Hey, watch it,” Wade grumbled, “or we won’t come over and help you eat that picnic. Then you’ll be stuck with all those leftovers.”

“Speaking of that,” Mellissa interrupted, “since there isn’t any evening service tonight, I wanted to go home and change into something more casual before coming over for dinner. Do we have time without risking it getting cold?”

“Oh sure, take your time. We’re just gonna grill hamburgers outside so we won’t start ‘em till you get there.”

“But hurry!” Jim quickly added. “I’m starving.”

Jess jabbed him in the side.

“Hey.” He stepped back too quickly, causing Morgan to start crying.

Jess gave him a playful, disapproving glance. “Now look what you’ve done.”

“Me?”

Jess nodded, smiling as she picked up Morgan and rocked her.

“Don’t worry, Jim. You aren’t the only one who’s starving.” Wade pulled Mellissa toward the car.

“Okay,” she chuckled, following him. “We’ll see you in a few minutes.”

.....

Later, Jim and Wade stood by the grill, messing around and cooking hamburgers.

Jess sat in the grass feeding Morgan her bottle while Mellissa sat on the bench leaning back against the picnic table.

She eyed a squirrel circling up around a tree trunk in the woods

alongside Jim and Jessica's property. She always enjoyed being out in the country. They lived in town with about half an acre for a yard. That's what she had wanted, though. She was a city girl ... if you could call Spring Valley a city. New hairstyles, nail polish, the latest clothes, friends, the mall, her job at the lawyer's office... all of those things were very important to her, quite the opposite of Jessica. Sometimes she wondered how people so different could be such good friends. While Jessica liked riding a fast horse through the woods with a homemade picnic in her saddlebags, Mellissa would rather be standing in line at McDonald's, fashion designer purse in one hand and a briefcase full of work in the other.

Mellissa looked down at Jess, noticing the wind blowing through her long chestnut hair – straight and smooth, loose and free. The same wind rustled her own hair – cut short, blonde highlights, layered, and flipped up at the ends. She finally concluded that differences were the spice of life.

Jim flipped a hamburger. "The cow's just about ready."

"It's about time." Jess grinned up at him.

Mellissa smiled.

Jess stood up, holding Morgan at eye level and staring sweetly into the little one's eager face. "I bet you wanna go see Danny, huh? You wanna go see Danny?" she asked the little girl. "We got time?"

"Oh..." Jim lifted one of the burgers. "A minute or so."

"Okie Doke."

Morgan clapped her hands and laughed as they walked over to the corral. Mellissa got up and followed them. "Come here, Danny," Jessica called the horse from the gate. The large buckskin gelding reared up and started running toward them. His jet black mane and tail flew in the wind. Morgan laughed and clapped again as Danny skidded to a stop and walked over.

Mellissa chuckled. "Looks like you have a real cowgirl there."

"Oh yeah. Her daddy's already had her in the saddle. Although, we're still riding double so far."

"I should hope so."

Danny put his head over the fence, so Jess lifted Morgan up close to him. Morgan stroked the gigantic face with her tiny hand a couple of times then jumped and laughed as she turned to hug her mother.

"She's so cute. I can't wait for my little one," Mellissa sighed, looking down at her stomach.

“Did you break down and ask the doc if it’s a boy or a girl, yet?”

Mellissa crossed her arms. “We want to be surprised, and neither you nor Wade are going to convince me otherwise.”

“Oh, okay.” Jess swung Morgan around a little, and then held her up to Danny again. Eyes widening, she once again reached out and cautiously touched the nose of the gigantic animal, turning around again, giggling and hiding her face in her mommy’s shoulder.

“Hamburgers are done!” Jim yelled, setting the plate on the table.

“Cooked to perfection!” Wade added.

“Well, I guess we’d better go eat. See ya, boy.” Jess patted the buckskin’s tan neck. Danny bobbed his head toward the ground and snorted as he backed up. Spinning around and whinnying, he ran back to the herd. Morgan clapped and giggled as she watched.

“Danny put on a show for ya?” Jim asked as they all sat around the large, oak picnic table.

“I think he was showing off for Morgan.”

“I think she liked it, too,” Mellissa laughed.

“Definitely.” They all bowed their heads, and Jim prayed for the food. Jess silently added a request that the police would catch whoever started their barn on fire. She didn’t know why she could not shake this creepy feeling that kept haunting her.

As soon as Jim had said, “Amen,” Wade grabbed the potato salad. “Boy, this looks good. I’m starved.”

“M-e-e too,” Mellissa added, looking accusingly in the direction of her husband. “Wade offered to make breakfast this morning.”

“Uh oh.... You didn’t eat it, did you?” Jess asked.

“Of course not. There for a moment, I thought Wade was going to, though, but as you can see, I’m not sitting in the ER waiting for him to get his stomach pumped.”

Jim choked down a laugh.

Wade just sat there, potato salad in one hand, spoon in the other, looking insulted. “Hey, it wasn’t that bad.”

“What did he make?” Jess inquired as she grabbed a juicy triangle of ruby-red watermelon.

“Science has not advanced far enough to make that type of discovery.” Mellissa smiled at her husband.

Wade turned up his nose and passed the potato salad in the opposite

direction.

After dinner, Mellissa and Jessica sat on a porch swing opposite the driveway as their husbands prepared for a grueling game of basketball—revised. Oh, it always started the same, but the rules tended to change as the game got more intense.

One game, Jess remembered fondly, was their soccer-basketball. However, trying to kick the ball up into the basket kept that game rather low-scoring, and she had never seen any game with those two last long with no contact. That rule was usually dropped.

Both men stood in the center of the drive, leaning forward and staring eye to eye intently. “I’ll throw the ball up,” Jess suggested, handing Morgan to Mellissa.

Jim narrowed his eyes, “Prepare to lose, Thundercloud.”

Wade leaned even farther forward, “Prepare for a storm, Richards.”

Jess walked toward them, bouncing the ball.

Wade stood eager in a fighting stance, every muscle in his small-framed body straining, ready for action. His straight, coal-black hair seemed to shine in the sunlight, accenting his copper skin. His intense brown eyes stared into Jim’s confident sky-blue ones. Jim’s dark blond hair ruffled in the wind. An eager smile of anticipation crossed his face. To Jess, he looked a little more relaxed than Wade, but still ready for battle.

Jess smiled to herself, then stood beside them and held up the ball. She watched the stare-down for a moment to let things intensify then tossed the ball high and quickly backed up as they both jumped for it. Wade came up with nothing but air and a little concrete as Jim dribbled vigorously for the hoop hanging above the garage door.

Shot!

Score!

“One point for Richards! YEA!” Jess yelled, sitting down on the swing and setting Morgan in her lap.

“Really, Thundercloud, are you going to let him get away with that?” Mellissa yelled over to Wade. “We need a little lightning around here!”

“I think the lightning done fizzled out!” Jess joked.

Wade gave them both an unimpressed glance then dribbled the ball to

the other end with a vengeance.

A half hour passed.

Sweat dripped.

Two wives screamed from the sidelines.

The score was 8 to 5 Jim's favor.

Things began to get a little more interesting. Wade was dribbling toward his basket when Jim kicked the ball up mid-dribble, caught it, and headed for his basket. Jess screamed ecstatically for her team while tossing a few boos at team two. It was on! Wade chased Jim down the court, and just as Jim crouched to shoot, Wade tackled him.

"FOUL!" Jim yelled, as they both struggled for the ball.

"Who cares!" Wade yelled back, trying to wrestle Jim down and take possession of the ball at the same time.

"Uh oh, this is where things start to get physical." Jess rolled her eyes at Mellissa.

"Men will be boys. What is this – basketball or wrestling?" Mellissa shook her head and covered her eyes.

"This is what you get when you let two guys in their early twenties, with way too much energy, play without a referee," Jess chuckled.

The two wives watched as their husbands wrestled on the pavement for the basketball. Jess glanced sideways at Mellissa and smiled as the basketball bounced off into the grass, but the two men remained locked in combat.

"Mind holding Morgan a moment?" Jess handed off her baby, got up and headed to retrieve the ball. Jess tapped Jim on the head with the ball as he struggled to keep Wade pinned. "Maybe we should start this play over."

Jim looked up. "Thanks!" He snatched it from her and darted toward the basket.

"HEY!" Wade shouted, stumbling up and chasing after him.

Too late.

Score!

However that would be the last score of the game, as it soon evolved into an intense game of tackle basketball.

"One of them is going to get hurt." Mellissa grimaced as Jim tackled Wade and they both went crashing to the pavement. The ball bounced away again. Wade raced toward it, but Jim was hot on his heels. Just as Wade reached for it, Jim slid under his grasp, snatched it, and began to return it

when...

CRASH! Tackle!

Jessica covered her eyes. "Aren't they supposed to wear padding for games like this?"

"Maybe you should suggest that to the NBA."

The wives tried to each cheer for her husband, but, due to the number of times the ball changed hands, it got harder to cheer for the right one. After about another hour of brutal basketball, both men limped over and sat down on the grass next to the swing... scratched, scraped, jeans ripped, bloody, sore, and dripping with sweat.

Jess shook her head, wondering if they had *fun*. "Is it safe to assume the game is over?" she inquired.

"The ball broke." Wade flattened out on the grass.

"It's a wonder that's all that's broke," Mellissa said disapprovingly.

"You were doing a lot of cheering."

"Well, of course. Jim was ahead since point one. I figured you needed encouragement."

"He needed more than that," Jim joked.

"Watch it, Buddy."

"Time for you to get back into daddy mode. Morgan needs her diaper changed." Jess held out the baby for Jim.

Jim groaned as he got up. "Guess we go inside, little girl," he said, taking the baby into his arms.

"Bring me out a Pepsi!" Wade yelled after him.

"Oh, and a Root Beer for me!" Jess added.

"Mountain Dew!"

"Okay, Okay! I wouldn't want any of you to strain yourselves!" he yelled over his shoulder as he opened the screen door.

Chapter 3

Carlos buttoned up his uniform shirt. It was days like today that made him realize how boring his life was. He was thirty-five and had practically a subzero social life. While all the other firemen on the crew were enjoying a Tuesday off, he was subbing at a different fire station simply because he had nothing better to do. As he slowly meandered into the kitchen, the loud fire alarm shrieked, and everyone raced out to their trucks. The garage doors went up, and the engine sped out, sirens blaring.

They could see smoke billowing in the distance before they were even close.

Other engine companies were also being called to the scene. As soon as they turned into the cul-de-sac, they could see the single story house illuminated in flames and a crowd gathering across the street. At least, it didn't look as badly engulfed as they had assumed from the smoke.

Before the engine had stopped rolling, they were all out and running to action.

No sooner had Carlos jumped from the truck than a woman ran up to him screaming, "My husband's still in there! You've got to get him out! Please, hurry! You've got to get him out!"

"It's gonna be okay, Ma'am. We will. Do you know what room he's in?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe the kitchen."

Carlos had his gear on in a second and was running into the house. The smoke was so thick inside, visibility was near zero. He crawled on the floor to try to escape the brunt of the heat.

He searched the floor with his hands and his ax handle.

Fire crawled along the ceiling and the top of the walls. Heat radiated down on top of him.

Carlos ran one hand against the wall, hoping for a door to the kitchen. Finally finding one, he reached to open it.

The heat was growing unbearable.

He felt the floor with a gloved hand. *Linoleum*. This was the kitchen. He crawled inside and shut the door.

The heat lessened.

The smoke was clear enough in this room that he could make out the

outline of a body by the kitchen table. He crawled toward it, hoping he wasn't too late.

Plaster fell from the ceiling, landing next to him.

A warning to clear the building came over the radio. The roof was about to go.

He sprint crawled. The man first, then the patio door was just a few feet beyond.

He would make it. He had to make it.

Breathing heavily into the air mask, he reached the man and grabbed him.

Just a few more feet.

CRASH!

A flaming beam fell over them at an angle. Propped up by the wall, it sheltered their heads.

The roof began to tumble inward.

Carlos knelt over the man trying to shield his body, then covered his own head as debris began to fall. Pain seared through his leg as bricks from the chimney landed on it.

It all let go.

Carlos could hear debris crashing around him and felt it smashing onto his lower body.

BANG! The stove exploded with a massive concussion, throwing him into the darkness.

.....

“Do you ever get the feeling we always eat the same thing?” Jess asked Jim as they walked out of Wal-Mart.

“Maybe, but I always like what we eat.”

“Next week we’ll have to try for variety. After all, we always get chicken, tuna, or beef. We should try, say... shrimp or salmon or lamb.”

While lifting the grocery bags out of the cart and into their truck, Jim stopped and stared at Jess. “Shrimp or lamb?”

Jess chuckled. “Well, maybe something different.”

“Don’t worry. Whatever you cook always tastes good.” He turned and pulled her into hug. Then he lifted her chin, looking her in the eye. “So far.”

Jess playfully shoved him in the shoulder. He smiled and continued to load the groceries. Jess buckled Morgan in her car seat as Jim returned the cart to the corral.

“So what’s for supper tonight?” Jim asked as he got in the driver’s side. “Chicken or beef?”

“Hmm... tacos, spaghetti, or chicken parmesan?” She looked over at him.

“Well, last week it was spaghetti, tacos, then chicken parmesan, so this week let’s reverse it.”

“We really need a change.” She glanced up in the mirror as Jim backed out.

“Nah, when you find something good, stick with it.”

“Hmm...”

“How ‘bout something different after supper?” Jim turned onto the highway.

“Really? Like what?”

“There’s gonna be meteor showers tonight. Wanna go out and count ‘em with me?”

“Hmmm... That sounds like something I would definitely like to do.”

Jim smiled over at her. “We can ride Danny. I think we’ll both fit on top of him.” He smiled suggestively as he stopped at a red light.

“It *may* be a close fit.”

“It might at that.” He gave her another smile, but looking back ahead, his brow furrowed.

“What’s up?”

“I don’t know. I have to have the pedal all the way down to the floor to stop. There can’t be anything wrong with these brakes. We just replaced them last month.”

“Yeah, I know. Are you sure...”

“Never mind. They ain’t workin’ at all, now.”

Jess’s heart froze. “But the intersection!”

“Just hang on and pray.”

Jess’s eyes widened as she saw all the cars racing across the stop. Putting her hands over her face, she braced her body and prayed. She felt the truck swerving, heard horns honking and tires squealing but felt no impact. Morgan began to scream.

Feeling the truck going straight again, she gained the courage to peek

from behind her hands just in time to see that they were passing five cars at once. There was just one minor detail. Because there were cars in the other lane, the truck hurtled along on the shoulder.

Every muscle in her small-framed body stiffened as the right tires teetered on the edge of a very steep ditch. Seconds before the shoulder ended, Jim pulled the truck back onto the road.

“Can’t you do something to stop?” Jess squealed.

“Not till we get to that gravel road.”

Jess glanced out at the approaching road, then over at the speedometer, *90mph!* Her heart raced, her throat went dry, and her eyes widened. “What are you going to do?” The road came closer. *This is it. Help, Lord!*

Jim jerked the wheel, turning the car 90 degrees onto the road.

Gravel kicked up.

The back tires fishtailed.

Dust flew everywhere.

The car spurted forward.

Finally, Jim was able to put the truck into neutral and let roll it to a stop.

Jess opened her eyes. Relief swept over her. She laid her head back against the headrest, trying to calm her shaking body.

Leaning forward on the steering wheel, Jim let out a deep sigh of relief. “Thank you, Lord.”

.....

Pain seared through Carlos’s body as he slowly opened his eyes. He stared at the white, puffy clouds above him and felt the mattress of the gurney beneath. *What happened?* Eyes blurred, he glanced over at the paramedic standing over him then stared back up. His mind began to flash back... fire, smoke, the roof, *the man! Did he get out?* Someone must have gotten *him* out.

“Carlos. Carlos, can you hear me?” A voice echoed above him.

Carlos tried to move, but pain overwhelmed him, and darkness flooded in again.

.....

Jim lifted his head from the steering wheel and looked over at Jess

who was reaching back to get her crying baby. He could see her arms were still shaking.

“Hush. It’s okay.” She tried to keep her voice steady to soothe the baby. Holding Morgan tight against her, she rocked back and forth, and after a few moments, Morgan stopped crying.

Jess looked at Jim, fear in her eyes. “What happened? Brakes don’t just go out like that without any warning signs.”

“I don’t know.”

“Somebody’s out to get us.” Her voice cracked. She was almost in tears.

“I’m sure this doesn’t have anything to do with the fire. It’s just a coincidence.”

“Some coincidence. Two life threatening *accidents* just don’t naturally happen in less than a week.”

“Come on. Think about it. Who would want to kill us? What possible motive could anyone have?”

“I don’t know, but...”

“Stranger things have been known to happen.”

Jess didn’t answer but bent down and kissed her baby in her lap.

“We need to call 911 in case something happened at that intersection back there. Then we’ll call a tow truck.”

Jess nodded, watching out of the corner of her eye as Jim took his cell off his belt.

.....

Carlos woke up again. Glancing around, this time he saw a white ceiling and walls, an IV dripping, and *Wow! Or maybe I’m just hallucinating*, he wondered as he stared up at a beautiful young nurse with sparkling eyes and fluffy blonde hair pulled loosely back into ponytail.

“Doctor, he’s awake.”

“Can you hear me?” the doctor asked, stepping in front of the gorgeous chick he’d been admiring.

“Ye-essh.” It took great effort for him to speak. His vision again began to blur.

“Can you feel this?”

Carlos grimaced. *All too well*. Darkness overtook him again.

Chapter 4

Two days later, Jim and Jess walked into the hospital to visit Carlos.

“Hi, could you tell me what room Carlos Martinez is in?” Jim asked the receptionist.

She made a few clicks on the computer, then, without looking up, said, “318, 3rd floor,” while pointing to the double doors with her pencil.

“Thanks.” A chaotic mass of doctors and nurses going every-which-way passed them as they went down the hall. Jim stepped to the side to miss being hit by a charging nurse with a wheelchair. Jess noticed Wade walking toward them. He had blood on his uniform shirt.

“Busy day?” she asked, stopping next to him.

“Yeah, five-car pile up.”

“Is that person okay?” Jess pointed to the blood on his shirt.

“Alive. She’s just ten years old and one of many.”

“What happened?” Jim asked.

“Drunk driver going the wrong way on the interstate.”

Jim just shook his head slowly. “What are you doin’ working today, anyway? Our shift’s tomorrow.”

“Fillin’ in for Rick for a couple of hours. He’s taking his son to the dentist for the first time and thinks it may prove to be traumatic.”

“We came to see Carlos.” Jess lifted Morgan higher and stepped forward, allowing room for a couple of nurses pushing a portable x-ray.

“Oh, yeah. I was in to see him earlier. He’s doing a lot better. I’d say he’s fairing better from the explosion than he is from the hit he took from Cupid’s arrow.”

“Cupid’s arrow? Carlos?” Jim sounded shocked.

“Go see for yourself. I better get back to work.” Wade stepped back so a hospital bed had room to get through.

“Yeah. See ya.” Jim had to yell over the noise of a clanging machine.

Jess shifted the weight of her baby to her other arm as they walked toward the elevator.

Opening the door to Carlos’s room, they saw him playing checkers with a beautiful nurse who looked to be about five years his junior.

She leaned on her elbows, studying the board. Her long, shiny, blonde hair fell loosely around her thin, oval face. She pushed loose strands behind

her ear as a sparkling smile spread up to her eyes. Glancing up with a grin, she triple-jumped Carlos's last three out of four checkers. "Deal with that!" she exclaimed, pulling herself up straight and flinging her hair back in self satisfaction.

Jim and Jess glanced over at Carlos, who was just leaning on his elbow, smiling.

"Carlos, quit staring at me and move. You're in serious trouble you know." Her voice and movements were bouncy and playful.

Carlos jerked his head up. "Oh. Sorry. I wasn't paying attention."

Jim took this opportunity to announce their presence. "No kidding."

The young lady jumped. "Oh! Hi."

Carlos laughed. "Hey, man. Where did you come from?"

"How ya doin'?" Jim smiled, approaching his bed.

"Hangin' in there."

The nurse stood up and, still giggling, offered her hand. "Hi, my name's Melinda."

Jim shook it, "Nice to meet you." then turned to his wife. "Carlos, I don't believe you've met my wife, Jessica."

He offered his hand. "Hi. I feel like I already know you. Jim talks about you ALL the time at the station."

Jim laughed, putting his arm around Jess. "Yeah."

Carlos moved his checker absentmindedly.

"Keeping the nurses from work I see," Jim joked.

"No. Actually, she got off a little while ago."

"Well, I, for one, am very glad you came." Melinda looked accusingly at Carlos. "Maybe now I can leave for my appointment."

"Uh huh, you just know you're gonna lose the checker game."

"Oh, really?" She raised her eyebrows as she jumped Carlos's last checker. "I shall see you later," she said, picking up her purse.

"Show off."

With a grin of victory, a playful elbow pump, and a wave, she headed out.

"Bye." Jess returned the wave.

Carlos sighed as he lay back on his pillow. "Ain't she gorgeous?"

"Do you really expect me to answer that in front of my wife?"

Jess gave him a playful jab in the ribs and rolled her eyes. "I think she is very pretty."

“Great personality, too.” Carlos sighed again as if he were on cloud nine.

“Wade’s right. Cupid got you good.”

Carlos stopped staring into space and looked back at him, but before he could answer, Jim decided to change the subject. “And by the way, I thought that you knew better than to stand in front of a gas stove in the middle of a fire.”

“Not funny. Don’t remind me of my injuries,” he groaned.

“I don’t know. You were pretty lucky for bein’ in that kind of an explosion.”

Carlos nodded in agreement. “Yeah.”

“So,” Jess sat down next to Jim who was still standing, and put Morgan down in her lap, “What’s the young lady’s name again?”

“Melinda. Ain’t that beautiful?”

“Uh huh.”

Jim noticed a shade of sadness come over Carlos’s face. “What?”

“Oh, nothing.” He moved his head around as if a little uncomfortable. “I was just thinking....” He looked up at him. “Every time I ask someone about the guy I was going in for, they evade the question.” He paused. “I guess that means he didn’t make it.” His voice indicated he hoped Jim would contradict him.

Jim wished he could. “Sorry.”

Carlos let Morgan play with his bandaged finger. “You know he had a little baby, too? And a five-year-old. I was tryin’ to figure out where I knew him. He was on my bowling team a few years ago. Small world, ain’t it?”

Jim didn’t know what to say. “So’d anyone ever say how they got you out of there?” *Good goin’, Jim. Great way to change the subject.*

“Nah, I think I’m the least informed fireman in the district.” A sparkle came back to his eyes.

“Well, I think you’re looking remarkably well.” Jess clapped Morgan’s hands together.

“Tell that to the doctor. He keeps sayin’ all this stuff about blood and abrasions and internal complications and some mumbo-jumbo that I can’t even understand, much less remember. All I know is that I have a broken arm, and I’m glad that it’s not a snapped neck.”

Jess crinkled her face and put her hand up to her throat. “I agree, but did you have to put it that way?”

Jim chuckled, getting up. “So you wanna challenge the all-time pro to a game of checkers or watch TV?”

“TV. I’ve had enough stress.”

They stayed with Carlos for a good part of the morning. Around eleven-thirty, Jim suggested, “I guess we’d better get going. We have an appointment with Wade and Mellissa for a picnic lunch, and you look like you could use some sleep.

“Guess I can’t argue with you there.” Carlos yawned. “But thanks for coming over. This white-washed, over-sanitized confinary is a lot more endurable with other people in it.”

“Confinary?” Jim gave him a teasing glance.

Jess smiled. “Well...” She lifted Morgan up toward her shoulder and stood up. “We both hope you get better real soon.”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah. See ya again soon.” Jim opened the door.

“Bye.”

Jess called Mellissa on their way out, to make sure they were still on, since Wade was working.

“Okay, sounds good. See ya then.” Jess closed her cell as they walked across the parking lot.

“What’d she say?”

“She said that Wade’s gonna be home by noon so they are still gonna try and make it by twelve-thirty.

Jim nodded.

When they got to the truck, Jess buckled Morgan securely in her car seat, then gave her laughing baby a kiss before she got in the passenger’s seat and buckled herself. Jim turned the key and prepared to back up.

“Check the brakes before you go?” she asked him.

“Jess, that was just a coincidence.”

“Uh huh. We just ‘happen’ to get a hole in our brake line after someone sets our barn on fire,” she tossed her hair behind her and fell back against the seat, arms crossed.

“One has absolutely *nothing* to do with the other.”

“Oh, really. Seems to me, one has everything to do with the other.”

Giving her a look, he backed up a little and stepped on the brakes.

“They are fine.”

She broke his gaze and looked out the window. “Lucky it didn’t blow

up or something,” she mumbled.

“Jess, don’t go paranoid on me.”

.....

“I’m home!” Wade yelled as he shut the heavy oak door to his house. Mellissa came out of the kitchen. “Hi, honey.”

Wade grabbed her in an affectionate hug. “How’s my little Mama-to-be?”

“Feeling very big.” She put her hand on her tummy and sighed. “I love this little one, but I’ll sure be glad when she’s born.” She giggled. “I can’t wait to see her.”

Wade smiled. “Her?”

“Oh, just a relative term, honey. We agreed it would be a surprise, remember?”

“*He* is generally the relative term. You don’t know something I don’t, do you?”

Still in his embrace, she gave him a playful slap on the shoulder. “No. I was just doing the dishes and thinking how nice it’d be to have a little girl to dress up on Sundays and send off to tea parties and buy little dolls for. Things like that. On the other hand...,” she said looking deep in his eyes, “a little boy... just like his father, would be perfect, too.”

“Aren’t gonna get any argument here.” He smiled. “I don’t care what it is. I just want to find out!”

“Well. You sti-ill have a little while to wait.” She wrinkled her nose. “You smell like a mixture of smoke, disinfectant, an-n-d other stuff I don’t care to know the identity of. You need to take a shower before we go over to Jim and Jess’s for lunch.” She pulled away from him and pushed him down the hallway.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. Guess I better get cleaned up.”

She followed him into the bedroom. “Did you have a busy morning?”

“It was a mess. I don’t really want to think about it. Sometimes it’s hard for me not to get emotionally involved.” He searched through his dresser for a change of clothes.

“Hmm,” she stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame.

“There was at least something good that happened today.” He turned around to face Mellissa and leaned back against the dresser.

“I think every time you try to keep someone from dying, it’s a good thing.”

“It’s hard to remember that, with all the screams and pain, groans and blood... and then when it’s caused by a drunk driver... and reality hits that none of it had to happen...” He looked down at the floor, wishing he could ever get through a day without these terrible emotions tugging at his heart.

“Looking back at accidents, you realize that most of them could be prevented, but that won’t stop them from happening. All the suffering you saw today would have been a lot worse if you and the other paramedics and firemen hadn’t been there to help.” She walked in the room and went over to sit on the bed.

Wade looked at her but didn’t say anything.

“So what happened today that was good?”

“I had a young man ask me about salvation on the way to the hospital and was able to lead him to the Lord.”

“Really? That’s great.”

“Yeah, evidently he’d come to our church a couple of times in the past and had seen me there. So the accident got him thinkin’ about it, and he asked me. I kept tellin’ him he wasn’t going to die, but he wouldn’t believe me. He said that in the end he believed his good works would outweigh his bad and God would let him in heaven, but right before the accident his life flashed in front of him, and he knew that even though he had many good works, God wasn’t just going to overlook his sins... any of them, you know, because heaven is a perfect place.”

Mellissa shifted her weight. “Good point.”

“Yeah. So, anyway, I told him some verses. You know, like *‘Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to God’s mercy He saved us’* (Titus 3:5), and *‘For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.’* (Eph. 2:8-9)”

“So he got saved?”

“Yeah, pretty sure he did. I gave him a couple internet sites for sermons he could listen to while he’s recovering in the hospital.”

“Good. So he’s gonna be okay then?”

“Yeah.” He reached into his top drawer and grabbed his socks. “I’d better go clean up. We might be a little late for lunch.”

Mellissa got up from the bed. “They should be getting used to it by

now. I'll call them and let them know. However, sir, you can hurry up.”
She gave him a friendly shove toward the bathroom.

“I’m goin’. I’m goin’.”

.....

Jess walked into the kitchen. She looked over at Jim who sat at the table, drinking a glass of milk. “Mellissa just called.” She walked over to the fridge and opened it.

Jim looked over his shoulder. “Are they coming?”

Jess poured some grape juice in a glass. “Yeah. They are going to be a little late, which is good since we’re getting a late start on making lunch.”

“What? You mean, we can’t run out and get McDonalds?”

“No-o.” She opened the fridge. “Definitely not.” Grabbing a sack of potatoes, she swung around and dropped them on the table with one of her sweetest smiles.

Jim glanced down at the spuds, then up at her. He gave a light laugh. “Uh, honey, you’d better wake me up. I think I’m havin’ a nightmare.”

She put her hands on her hips. “I’ll be doing the eggs and putting the salad and sandwiches together. The least you can do....”

“Jess, it’s women’s work. I’ll take care of the horses.” He got up quickly and headed for the door.

“Women’s work!” She looked appropriately shocked.

He turned and looked at her.

“What do you men do everyday at the fire station?”

Jim nodded. “Yeah, but....”

She threw her hands up, playfully. “What about K.P. in the Army?”

“Okay, but....”

“What about male chefs?”

“Jess.”

“What about bachelors?”

“Jess?”

“And widowers? Men don’t just hire a woman every time they get hungry!”

Jim took a step toward her.

“And another thing....” She waved her finger at him.

He put his hand over her mouth.

She looked up at him.
“I said I’d help.” He took away his hand.
“If you’re *sure* it’s not beneath you.”
He smiled. “Don’t tell anyone.”
She playfully shoved him in the shoulder. “Oh, you.” Grinning, she shook her head. “Men.”

.....
“Hurry up! They’re waiting for us.” Mellissa raced into their bedroom to grab her purse.

“I’m going as fast as I can.” Wade buttoned his shirt.

“We’ve got to hurry. Being late is getting to be a habit with us.” She grabbed Wade’s shoes and socks and rushed out the door. “You can finish in the car.”

“Wait a minute! Slow down!” he yelled after her, hopping down the sidewalk and tucking in his shirt.

When he reached her, he quickly grabbed his shoes. “It would have only taken me a minute to put these on inside.”

“Unlock the car, will ya?”

Reaching into his pocket, his hand felt... nothing. “They are still on the dresser,” he almost whispered.

Mellissa crossed her arms and leaned back against their van. “Wade, you will be late for your own funeral, and sometimes I think you try *too* hard.”

“It’s not my fault! You are the one that rushed me out the door!” He said the second phrase considerably softer as he noticed their neighbor outside working in her flowerbed. What he would give to know what she was thinking. There he was, standing in the driveway – no shoes or socks on, a half tucked in shirt, hair sticking up from not being combed yet – arguing with his wife.

“The door’s locked.”

“Huh?” He jerked his attention back to his wife.

“I locked the front door.” Her voice was weary, but her mannerisms accusatory. She stood with her hand on her hip, staring at him disapprovingly.

Great, he thought, sinking down onto the running board of the van.

“How are we going to get into the house to get the keys?” she asked, impatiently.

Wade started to put on his shoes. “Isn’t our bedroom window open?”

“Yee-eah.”

“I can climb the tree next to it and get in.”

“It’s not safe.” She shook her head.

“I can handle it.”

“It’s too high up. The tree’s not stable enough.” Her arms were crossed again.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Let’s call a locksmith.”

“I WILL BE fine.”

He finished knotting his shoe and got up. Walking over to the tree, he glanced at the gray-haired lady who eyed him suspiciously. “Forgot my keys.” Smiling, he shrugged. He thought he might have seen her roll her eyes.

He turned his attention back to the dying tree, which turned out to be more rickety than he had first expected. *Yeah, little old lady, you want some entertainment? Watch this... then call 911.* He grabbed the lower limb and swung up. His mind went to their new neighbors at the end of the block. They had a great view of this tree, but not the driveway. He hoped they didn’t call the police on him for breaking into his house.

The whole tree seemed to quiver as he climbed. For being such a massive tree, it sure wasn’t very stable, not to mention being half dead. He made a mental note, *Watch out for branches that would rather snap than bend.*

Mellissa held her breath as she watched him get higher and higher in the tree. She knew that “dangerous” was his living, but that didn’t include watching him twenty feet overhead, precariously walking on half-dead branches that were shaking under his weight. *We should have called a locksmith. We SHOULD HAVE called a locksmith!*

She didn’t breathe until he was safely gripping the edge of the windowsill... and that was too soon.

Wade shivered as he looked toward the ground. Shaking his head, he told himself that a fireman wasn’t allowed to be afraid of heights – even if he was standing so precariously on a quivering branch.

He reached down and hit the bottom of the window with his hand,

trying to force it up. He didn't know why this window always stuck.

He could feel the branch giving way. *Hurry u-up.*

Finally! The window slid up. Just as relief swept over him, a mammoth

CR-R-ACK sounded, and the branch disappeared from beneath his feet. Wade gripped the sill with all his might, grimacing as his body flew into the side of their house. The branch shattered on the ground below.

Maybe I should have called a locksmith.

Mellissa gulped. Her eyes widened. Her blood went cold. She stared in horror at the shattered branch in front of her, then up at her husband dangling high above her from the ledge.

By now, Mrs. Wilson, the one gardening, wasn't the only interested party. In fact, half the neighborhood seemed to be standing around holding their collective breaths.

Stay calm. No problem, Wade thought to himself. *What do you mean, 'No problem'? You let go and you're DEAD! Stay calm. HOW?! You really have a knack for getting yourself in the most inconvenient circumstances! You can pull yourself up. No I can't. HURRY UP!*

Every muscle in his arms strained and tightened as he pulled himself up... a couple inches... a little higher... a little higher... and in the window. Panting, yet overcome with relief, he fell inside on the carpet. *You made it.*

Breathing hard, he stood on his shaking legs and grabbed the keys off the dresser.

Spinning around, he closed the window. They should be more careful about that. They didn't want robbers coming in that way. He smiled to himself; *robbers would have more sense.* He locked it and headed downstairs.

Mellissa's heart was still beating a hundred miles-an-hour as she watched Wade, safely on solid ground, come out the front door. "I told you that tree was too rickety," she managed to say.

"Yeah, well, I was right, too. I'm fine."

"Thankfully. Unbelievably."

Wade went to unlock the car just as a police car rolled in the driveway.

"I knew it," he said, tossing his keys back in his pocket.

As he walked toward the police car, he smiled at Mrs. Wilson, who was still giving this whole predicament her undivided attention. "Must be some misunderstanding!" he yelled in her direction.

She raised her eyebrows. Her crackly, shaky voice gave a clear reply. "I don't think so. They should take you away...*somewhere*."

.....

"Jim, could you get a container to put the potato salad in?" Jess asked as she opened the mayo.

"Sure." He put Morgan down in her high chair. Just what he loved to do. His was the great privilege of searching through the piles of Tupperware for a lid and bowl that actually matched. This could take the better part of the day. "I wonder where Wade and Mellissa are. You would think that they would be here by now."

"I don't know, but I'm glad they're late since we got such a late start on making lunch. Could you get some sandwich containers, too?"

"Sure." He knelt down and began searching through the piles of plastic under the counter.

.....

Wade lightly pressed down on the brakes as he turned their van onto the long, circular driveway that led to their friends' house.

"Weeell..." Mellissa let out a long sigh as they pulled up by the garage. "At least, we finally made it. For a while there I thought we never would."

"Feeling's mutual."

They both stepped from the car and headed up the sidewalk.

.....

The doorbell chimed throughout the house.

"That must be them," Jess snapped a lid on the potato salad. "Can you get it, Honey?"

Not bothering to move from his present position halfway inside the Tupperware cabinet, Jim's voice boomed, deep and echoing out of the cabinet. "Hey! It's open! Come on in!"

Startled, Jess dropped a lid, leaned back against the counter and put her hand on her heart. "I could have done that."

"It's energy efficient."

"Another word for that would be 'la-zy'." Her hands were on her hips

but there was a smile in her voice.

Wade and Mellissa entered the room together. “Hey, y’all, what’s cookin’?” Wade inquired cheerfully.

“Cold-cuts.”

“Mmm... my favorite.”

“What isn’t?” Mellissa joked.

Jess smiled. “We thought we could walk down one of our horse paths and have a picnic in the woods. That is, if our future mama’s up to it.” She snapped on the last lid that Jim handed her.

“Sounds great to me. Besides exercise is supposed to be good for someone in my condition.”

“We’ll put the food in saddle bags,” Jim suggested. “Then me and Wade can transport the goods.” The two men exchanged grins of anticipation.

Jess noticed and began to fear for the safety of her picnic.

Mellissa didn’t. “There’s a newsflash for ya. Husband rides horse, forcing pregnant wife to walk,” she joked.

“I’d gladly let you ride except I don’t want my son to get jounced to death before he’s born.”

“Daughter!”

“Ha! Boys run in my family.”

“Well, girls run in mine.”

“That, dear, is beside the point.”

“Really? How do you figure that?”

“Okay. Hold it. Cut. I hate to break up this heartfelt argument, but if we don’t get going, the sandwiches are going to get moldy. We’ll get the lunch packed in the saddlebags, and you two can go saddle the horses,” Jess said, pushing her husband toward the door.

“Okay. We’re leaving.” Jim grabbed Wade by the sleeve as he was pushed past.

.....

Jim slipped a halter on Danny, grabbed the ropes to both horses, and led them out of the pasture gate.

Wade walked beside him toward the barn, hands in his pocket, smile on his face, enjoying the cool country breeze. “Sorry we’re late, but we

encountered a little trouble leaving the house.”

Jim handed him the lead rope of the shiny, high-stepping Chestnut. “How does one have trouble leaving the house? Whoa, Danny.” He held back the frisky buckskin as he pranced in front of him toward the barn.

“Oh, I left the car keys in the bedroom, and we’d already locked the house.”

Jim cross-tied the horses. “Not good.”

“Tell me about it.”

“What? You had to wait for a locksmith?”

“You sound like Mellissa. I climbed that tree by our window.”

Jim gave him a look like, *Wha-at?* “Isn’t that tree pretty much dead wood?”

“Well, the branch I was standing on broke. It’s just a good thing I was hanging onto the window sill or splat!” He made the motions with his hands.

Jim choked on a laugh from the mental image of Wade dangling from a windowsill.

“Oh, go ahead and laugh. You and Mrs. Wilson would make a great pair. I could be decorating a funeral parlor right now.”

“Sorry, I just know how funny you look when you’re...” He couldn’t help leaning against the horse’s rump and letting himself laugh.

Wade just stared, not amused.

“Sorry.” Jim tried to contain himself.

“Yeah, well that wasn’t as bad as when the cops came.”

Jim smiled as he slung a saddle on the chestnut’s back. “Finally decided to come for ya?”

“You know what?” Wade threw a horse brush at his arm.

The chestnut reared a little as the brush landed beside him.

Jim patted the horse’s neck. “Okay. I was just jokin’.”

Jess and Mellissa walked into the barn with the picnic food, exchanging glances simultaneously as they observed the half-saddled horse.

“I take it the horses aren’t quite saddled yet?” Jess held Morgan with one arm and tapped on the saddle with her free hand.

“Almost.” Jim reached for the cinch. “I had to wait and let Wade tell me about how he got arrested.”

Jess raised her eyebrows.

“I didn’t get arrested, although it wasn’t for lack of trying. That guy

really wanted to make me out to be a criminal.”

“That’s because he thought you were,” Mellissa snickered.

“Oh, right. What self-respecting crook would bring his pregnant wife along to stand out in the open beside a locked getaway car? For that matter, why would he climb up a half-dead tree in broad daylight with half the neighborhood watching him, and WHY, I ask you, would he come out the front door without stealing anything and wave to the next-door neighbor? All these are perfectly legitimate grounds for throwing a guy against a car and handcuffing him before he can get a word in edgewise?”

“No self-respecting crook would find anything in your house worth stealing,” Jim joked.

“That does it!” Wade threw another brush only harder.

“Now children,” Mellissa, who was holding Morgan now, put her free hand on her hip, “behave, or there will be no cookies for snacky time.”

Jim smiled as he bent over to pick up the brush. “No kidding. She didn’t make any cookies.”

Jess, who already had Danny saddled, walked over to the crowd. “You two are *going* to spook the horses.” She motioned to the half-saddled chestnut. “Do you mind tightening Thundercloud’s cinch?”

“Yeah, don’t spook the horses,” Mellissa agreed. “My husband’s already emotionally overwrought, today, and he has to ride him.”

“He’s been emotionally overwrought since he was born.” Jim couldn’t resist.

“Hey, how would you feel if you were thrown headlong into a car that didn’t open from the inside?”

Jim pulled the tightened cinch through the last loop and put the stirrup down. Then he turned to look at Wade. “Before I start feeling sorry for you, exactly what was it that you said to the cop? Or should I of heard it all the way over here.”

Wade started nodding his head. “Yep, a host of friends, I have a host of friends.”

Jess giggled. “Come on, boys. Let’s get these horses saddled before lunch gets cold.”

“How cold can cold cuts get?”

“You’d be surprised.” She smiled.

“Uh-huh.” Jim smiled back as he got the bridles from the tack room. Finally, they were all outside and ready to go.

Thundercloud reached back and bit at Wade as he began to mount.
“Hey!”

“Uh oh, looks like we are going to have the battle of the two
Thunderclouds.” Jess started it.

Wade rolled his eyes. “Thanks for giving me this horse. Now I have to
endure the endless name jokes.”

“He came with that name when we bought him.”

“This cinch is too loose.” He lifted the stirrup to tighten it, and the
horse bit at him again.” He gave the horse a dirty look.

“I see a storm brewin’.”

Wade turned toward Jim. “Look, boy!”

“Okay. Okay. I’m done joking.”

“Huh, that will be the day.” Wade yanked the cinch too tight, causing
the horse to whinny.

“Now, Wade, you should be more gentle ... like heat lightning.” Jess’s
voice was bouncy.

“I. Am. About. To turn electrical.” He swung up on the horse.

“Our truck has rubber tires!” Her eyes sparkled.

Wade turned and gave her such a look that both girls broke out
laughing. He threw his hands in the air and looked toward the sky. “What
have I done to deserve this?”

Jim rode up from behind and slapped his hand down on Wade’s
shoulder. “Ask your parents.”

“I know. Right.”

Jim rode Danny up next to Wade. He let his face grow suddenly
serious as he addressed Wade. “You know. I bet... that you can’t stay on
a horse in full gallop anymore.” He gave the challenge a half-moment to
sink in before kicking his horse into a gallop toward the woods. Wade
slapped his reins, causing Thundercloud lunged after Danny.

Jess shook her head. “I hope our picnic makes it.”

“I know. Come on.” Mellissa motioned with her head, and they both
headed toward the trail.

About a half mile down the trail, Mellissa sucked in a deep breath and
looked up at the golden canopy above them. “This is a gorgeous day, isn’t
it?” She took another long whiff of sweet, fresh-mown hay from a nearby
field and listened to the choir of birds singing praises in the treetops.

“Yeah, it’s a perfect day for a picnic.” Jess glanced back. “Look out.”

They both cleared the path as their husbands raced past on horseback.”

“Now, I know that is the third time they went past us. Why don’t they ride somewhere else?”

“It’s their way of ‘walking with us’.”

“For a *whole* half a second as they race past! I feel so special.”

“Yeah.”

“Although, I’m glad Wade’s having a good time. He had kind of a trying day at work this morning.”

“We saw him this morning at the hospital.” She paused. “He had blood all over his shirt.”

“Yeah, sometimes I think he lets that stuff get to him too much, too... but that’s the career he chose.”

“That’s why Jim’s never been interested in doing paramedic training. He’d rather mainly fight fires.”

“I guess when Wade gets to save a life, all the rest is worth it to him.”

Morgan began to whimper a little, so Jess transferred her to the other arm. “I think she’s getting hungry.”

“Maybe you can snag a bottle next time the flying horses race past. Of course, this might be a good time for all of us to eat. I think my baby’s getting tired of walking.”

“*It’s* getting tired of walking?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “It’s telling me to sit down.” She walked over to a fallen log.

“Already giving you orders, huh? Wait till it’s born. Then you’ll really start to hear it. ‘I want to go to sleep, NOW!’ or at three o’ clock in the morning, ‘I’m hungry! Give me my breakfast or I’ll scream!’” Jess grinned, bending to hug her little one.

Mellissa watched. “Somehow, I still can’t wait.”

“I wonder if I should call Jim on the cell or if he’ll be making a round by soon?” Jess pulled off a huge maple leaf that was hanging over her head and handed it to Morgan, who looked at it curiously then ripped it apart, laughing.

“She’s so cute. You’re lucky. The day that Wade remembers his cell phone is the day that the grass turns pink. Maybe you *should* call the boys. Who knows when they will be back.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Jess took out her cell phone and dialed.

It only rang twice when she heard leaves crackle behind her and felt

horse breath on her neck. She turned around to see Jim leaning forward on his saddle horn. He greeted her with a “Lurch” tone of voice. “You rang?”

“Yes I did, and we would like our lunches now, please,” she ordered, holding out her hand.

“Aren’t we demanding?” He smiled, dropping the saddlebag into her grasp.

“Careful. You *are going* to bruise the apples.”

“What’s this talk about lunch anyway?” Wade asked. “It’s three o’ clock.”

“It’s lupper.”

“No, it is not,” Jim insisted. “Just because you guys were late getting here doesn’t mean I’m combining my supper! This is lunch.”

“Because we were late? You weren’t even done making it when we got here.

“That’s beside the point.”

“Seems to me, that *is* the point.”

“Wade, here’s your sandwich.” Jessica handed it to him.

“Thanks.” He gave Jim the reins to his horse.

Jim looked at each of them sitting down enjoying their sandwiches as he stood there holding the horses. “That’s okay. Don’t wait on my account. You all enjoy your meal while I take care of the horses.”

“Make sure you tie them in the shade with plenty of grass... by a stream,” Wade replied, mouth full. “If you’re not back in five minutes, I’ll eat your sandwich.”

“That, my friend, could prove quite detrimental to your health. By the way, you all forgot to pray for that meal.”

“Whoops.” Jess put her sandwich down on the napkin in her lap.

“What starvation will do to a person.”

“Yeah.” Jim muttered something inaudible as he left with the two horses.

When he came back he stopped for a moment to watch Jessica, sitting poised and ladylike, leaning against a tree, with one arm feeding Morgan her bottle and with the other, eating her sandwich. Her shiny, brown hair looked even softer as it blew gently sideways in the breeze. She was thin, yet strong; gentle, yet determined; strong-willed, yet gracious; smart-alecky, yet kind, and always loving.

He walked over and sat down next to her. He could hear the peaceful

Firestorm

sound of the brook rippling over rocks in the background. He grabbed his sandwich, then sat back and put his arm around her.

She smiled as she moved closer, loving the feel of his strong arm around her. In the distance she could see a doe and her fawn bounding through the trees. The soft breeze rustled the autumn leaves, causing many to float down toward the ground. The whole trail was covered by a crisp, brightly colored carpet. This was a perfect day. Everything was so peaceful... she felt like she could fall asleep in her husband's arms.

Chapter Five

Jim tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. He made it a rule to always leave early in harvest season and this was why. He was stuck behind a rusty, green tractor and they were both inching along at ten miles per hour maximum speed. He kept looking for an opportunity to pass, but it didn't look promising. This tractor was just taking up too much road. In fact, he was occupying the whole road and showed no intentions of turning off or pulling over.

He would just have to wait for a side road and hope that it wasn't one of those that wound around ten miles just to come back a couple miles from where you started. He had done that once before, trying to avoid a tractor. After wasting ten minutes, he finally made it back to the beginning road just in time to meet the same tractor and end up right back where he started. That had been a depressing day all around, and today seemed to be starting out the same.

Dust flew everywhere. He closed the air conditioning vents but even that didn't block all of it from coming in. Anyone in the world could guess that he lived on a gravel road. It was getting pointless to wash the truck. He had come to realize that that sparkly, shiny look he loved was never destined to make it through the homestretch.

"Raider's Road." He read the little green sign out loud, and then stepped on the brakes. Decision time. Here it was... the infamous loop job. If he turned, he would have to go almost eighty to beat the tractor. If he stayed behind this guy, he could be here until midnight.

Turning the wheel, he stomped the gas pedal down to the floor. His RPMs gage read five and a half. The speedometer was fast approaching eighty.

Jim slow down, he told himself. What if a car comes off a side road and doesn't have time to get over?

No comment.

Remember that cop that lives in this vicinity?

No comment.

This is deer season. What if one jumped out in front of you?

It wasn't that he was ignoring his conscience. He was just delaying listening to it.

What if your brakes failed again going this speed? He mentally rolled his eyes at himself. ...*Or what if there is an earthquake?* ... *Then it wouldn't matter how fast I am going,* he sarcastically told his conscience. *Now that's one lousy argument to justify yourself. What would Jessica say? ... What will she say, standing at a food pantry while I'm in the unemployment line? Pride, and you know it.* He felt like his conscience was pointing its finger. *Yeah, but...*

Just as he topped a hill he came nose-to-nose with a blue van passing in his lane. Instantly, he swerved down into the ditch without breaking speed and came back up just as fast. He heard the van's brakes squeal, and immediately squealed his own truck one-eighty, racing back to the top of the hill to see if the van had.... *No. Please, God don't let....* His heart froze as he topped the hill to catch a glimpse of... both the cars still on the road and heading on their way.

Relief.

He stopped his truck and put his head on the steering wheel. *Thank you.*

Solemnly, he turned his vehicle back around and started up again, slowly. *What if someone was passing in a 'no passing zone?'* *You could have killed everyone in all three cars.*

Fear of what could have happened clogged Jim's heart, prompting him to promise himself he would never do that again, tractor or no.

Driving the rest of the road at the limit, he reached the end just as the puttering tractor passed in front of him. He sighed, giving a halfhearted smile in response to a wave from the grinning old man bouncing on the seat of the open tractor, before slowly pulling out right back behind him.

After what seemed like the day after forever, he saw a glimmer of hope, a semi parked in a distant field. Maybe there was still hope for his job. Slowly but surely, the tractor inched off into the field. The farmer, widening his smile, gave a farewell wave.

Jim's return wave was much less than enthusiastic as he sped up quickly to the limit wondering if this would be any indicator of the rest of the day.

.....

Parking his truck and jerking out the keys, Jim walked quietly into the

station. He avoided eye contact with everyone as he walked past the guys in the locker room, just hoping no one talked to him until his mood improved.

“Hey, Jim.” Dan acknowledged his arrival.

“Hi.” Jim didn’t look over, but stared into his locker. He noticed Wade come in out of the corner of his eye. His demeanor surprised him. He walked over and stood at an angle to Jim, fury in his eyes. “Well, if it isn’t ‘Hot Rod Richards.’ You’re late.”

Not getting the connection yet, Jim backed up a step and turned to look at him. “What?” *How did he...? The blue van. Oh no.*

“My wife was in that blue van you almost ran over!” His voice was angry.

All of a sudden, Jim felt very defensive. “I almost ran over? She was passing on a hill.” He kept his voice low, yet immediately realized he shouldn’t have retaliated.

“You don’t even care!”

That stung.

“She said that you were going over a hundred miles an hour!”

Ninety. “Not that fast. Don’t lay it all on me.” He still wasn’t yelling, but his voice was growing more intense. *This is not the time to defend yourself and shove the blame. Just apologize.*

Wade stepped closer. “You could have killed her!” *SMACK!* He slammed his fist in Jim’s cheekbone with mammoth force, knocking him back against his open locker door.

Dan jumped to his feet.

Cap took a few steps toward them.

Jim rocked back on his feet, staring at Wade but not responding verbally.

Wade decided not to pursue it. Turning, he went out the door, yet still in obvious anger.

Jim looked down at the ground, then turned back toward his locker. He could feel the flesh around his cheekbone swelling. *Wade must of just gotten a hysterical call from Mellissa. ... How would you have felt?* He didn’t blame Wade. He was mad at himself. He had acted stupidly and irresponsibly, and he knew it. He also knew that he needed to swallow his pride, the thing that had started this whole mess, and go apologize.

Not wanting to talk to anyone, he took his time and got ready slowly.

He leaned his head back against the his locker. *The only reason Mellissa*

would be on that road was if she was going to see Jess. That meant she probably arrived there upset and crying. She probably told Jess all about it, shaking her confidence in my responsibility.

He turned and leaned sideways against the adjacent locker as he buttoned his shirt. By this time, the only one left in the room was Derrick and he was just getting ready to go.

Derrick closed his locker and started toward the door. He stopped and looked in Jim's direction, but not at him. "No one was hurt. In time, he'll forget it." He turned and walked the rest of the way out.

Jim was surprised to hear that from Derrick, but he was glad that he had said it. *At least, there was one person who seems to forgive me.*

Jim walked into the kitchen where the rest of the guys were drinking coffee.

Wade glared at him from across the table as he came in.

Jim stopped and looked at him.

Wade turned away.

Hurry up. "Wade, I know that I acted carelessly... and for that I apologize. You don't know how it would have destroyed me if anything would have happened to your wife."

Wade didn't respond, but looked the other direction.

At least he had said it. He had done what he knew the Lord wanted. It was up to Wade whether he would accept it. He walked over to the counter where Dan handed him a cup of coffee.

BURRRUZZZ...

Everyone headed out except Wade and Derrick, who sat back down when they heard it was a brush fire and the squad wasn't needed. All the other firefighters piled into the engine. Sirens blaring, the huge, tank-like engine rolled out onto the road.

Wade listened to the sirens fade in the distance. He looked over at Derrick who sat down in the chair across from him at the table. He was sitting toward the front of the seat leaning back against the chair with his legs sprawled out in front, swirling his coffee mug in his hands. To look at him, you wouldn't think it would be so difficult to kick-start a conversation. Wade wanted to talk to someone. He felt guilty for not forgiving Jim, but there was still an underlying anger simmering inside him. Mellissa sounded so upset, and her emotions had a real trigger on his.

"So what's been goin' on with you lately, Derrick?"

“Not much.” He didn’t bother looking up. Wade didn’t know why he bothered talking to that guy. He’d had more uplifting conversations with his dog. In all the time they’d been teamed, Derrick probably hadn’t said more than ten sentences of non-work related conversation.

Derrick got up, put his empty cup on the counter, grabbed his laptop, and sat down in an out-of-the-way corner chair, again in a sprawled out position with his computer on one knee.

Wade watched him a moment. Sitting in the corner wasn’t anything new. Derrick went out of his way to be the proverbial “lone wolf.”

Wade stared a moment longer. He’d never noticed before how much they looked alike. They both had a naturally thin frame, though Derrick was more muscular while Wade was more bone. Wade looked down at Derrick’s arms, noticing the veins protruding from them. *Yeah well, some people have more important things to do than spend all day lifting weights,* he twirled his own coffee around in his mug then glanced over at him again. They both had dark skin, though his was copper and Derrick’s was more olive. They even both wore their hair the same – combed to the side, short, cut above the ear. Wade’s, however, was straight while Derrick’s was thick and wavy. Wade’s was coal-black. Derrick’s was dark brown. Wade looked down into his coffee. At least he kept his hair neat and combed, unlike Derrick whose was always messed up and greasy from sweat. For that matter, maybe it was time to get a different hairstyle. If there was one person in this world he did *not* want to be compared to, it was that guy.

Staring at his computer, Derrick sat even deeper in his chair. The edge of the chair caught his sleeve pulling it up a little and revealing a large gang tattoo he had gotten when he was a teen.

There it was, the big difference. To Wade, that said it all. It stood for all the differences between them. It gave Wade every excuse in the world to think of him as the bad guy. After all, what had he done in that “other” life? What crimes had he committed while part of that gang? It was impossible that he hadn’t committed any. Wasn’t it? He refused to admit to himself that he might be the tiniest bit jealous. Derrick was only twenty-one. He acted fifty-two, but he was still just twenty-one. He had graduated top of his class and was beginning to get accustomed to showing up his coworkers, whether it was cleaning the bathroom or arranging the medical supplies. The guy was a perfectionist, and he tried just a little too hard at it for Wade’s tastes.

He glanced back at Derrick. Under the tacky tattoo was a long dark scar that extended from the end of the tattoo down to his elbow. *Just another one of his "heroic" acts.* It had just been the third shift for all of them at this station. They had all come in on the ground floor of a brand new firehouse, yet they all had connections to at least one of the others. Wade and Rick were close friends, so were Wade and Jim. Cap and Dan were close friends, and so were Cap and Derrick. They all had a lot going for them in the way of unity. That was until... until that night of terror.

Three o' clock in the morning, they were called out to a massive apartment fire. It was down town and a total blaze. They were getting conflicting reports whether everyone was out, but the building was so engulfed that Fire Chief McMillian had issued a 'stay clear.' McMillian had said they needed to concentrate their efforts on containment and evacuation of the nearby buildings. Then out of the blue, Derrick and Roger took off against orders and ran into the burning building, just seconds before the roof was expected to go.

Wade grimaced as he remembered the pain of abject helplessness as he watched his best friend disappear behind the wall of flames. Wade glared at Derrick. *There's no way Roger would have been so careless willingly.* Wade's throat tightened as he relived the pain of waiting for what seemed like hours, until the whole structure erupted into a billowing ball of fire. He remembered the horror as he stared into the inferno realizing his best friend was gone. ... Of course, Derrick had made it out... uninjured, except for the cut and burn on his arm... with two of the victims. *Yes, good ole' happy-go-lucky, go-for-broke Derrick, the one who always gets away... but leaves his partner behind.* He had managed to jump from a window after tossing out a mother and her baby to the firemen below, moments before the explosion. *He always manages to make it out.* Wade could count at least five instances since he'd known Derrick where he had played a deadly duel with death and won, but Roger hadn't. *What made Roger follow him? What did Derrick say? How did he coerce him? Had he given him false information? Either way, when the going got tough, he deserted him... just left him... left him in a burning inferno, in order to save his own skin.* Wade's gaze held piercing hatred. His eyes narrowed. *You killed Roger.*

He glanced over at a picture on the desk. It had been taken the first shift at the new firehouse. Everyone in that picture had been changed by that night. Roger was gone. Cap, who had been second in command at that

fire, had lost a promotion. The way he handled the situation, lost him the love of his second wife. Dan, who had been trapped between the buildings when the apartment collapsed, lost months in a hospital recovering and lost his wife to suicide. He, himself, lost his best friend, when Roger died. Both Jim and he had lost a lot emotionally when they had to testify at the numerous hearings following the incident. They had spoken the truth, but the truth seemed to be hanging their friends. McMillian even lost his job. Derrick's the only one that didn't lose anything ... the *big* hero. He sneered. *That's debatable.*

He stared at the young man in the corner. Who was he, anyway? The fire hadn't changed him. He was the same now as he was before... encased in cement, a complete mystery, incapable of showing emotion. There was something about him... something hidden. He may look good on paper, but there was something under the surface, something unusual, something strange ... something dark.

.....

The fire was out. Jim pulled the hose back toward the truck. As he walked past,

he glanced over at the smoke-stained farmer. He felt sorry for him. His neighbor had been burning a large pile of trash right next to the field of dried-out corn. A gust of wind came up and the fire jumped the fence. The hungry flame had quickly consumed most of the old man's livelihood.

.....

Wade looked up from his magazine. He still wanted to talk to someone. Willing to try again, he looked over at Derrick. "So what'd you do last weekend?"

Derrick didn't look up from his laptop. "Nothin' you'd be interested in."

Wade rolled his eyes. *Oh, forget it.*

BURRRUZZZ... The deafening alarm sounded.

Wade and Derrick simultaneously got up and raced out to the squad. Derrick quickly wrote down the address while Wade hopped into the driver's seat and grabbed his buckle. The garage door rose. Derrick jumped in.

Lights.

Sirens.

Action!

Wade stomped down the gas, and they headed down the road. Wade could feel his heart rate quicken and his adrenaline begin to pump. He loved this feeling.

“I know a shortcut that will save about five minutes.” Derrick’s voice was monotone, and he stared straight ahead.

What shortcut? Wade glanced over at him. He knew this part of the country like the back of his hand and he wasn’t aware of any shortcut. However, this was a cardiac emergency – five minutes could make the difference. Still, he didn’t trust Derrick one bit. It turned his stomach every time he conceded to one of Derrick’s suggestions.

“You better make up your mind because we have to turn at the next road.”

Wade didn’t know what to do. Usually Derrick’s hunches were right. His track record could testify of all his narrow escapes, but the point was, he usually could master just barely squeaking by in a hopeless situation.

The road was coming fast. *What should I do?* This wasn’t just his career. It was a life that his conscience couldn’t afford to lose, either way he went. He had a nagging feeling that he should turn. He did, brakes squealing from the last minute decision. “You had better know what you’re talking about, Derrick.”

Derrick continued to stare out the window. His expression didn’t change. “Turn here,” he said, nodding to a small, one-lane, gravel road.

A cloud of dust filled the air as he made another quick turn.

.....

Jim unbuckled his seatbelt as the engine rolled back into the station.

“Who’s cookin’ today?” Cap asked as they all got out.

“I think Wade is.” Dan stepped down on the running board then swung the large metal door shut behind him.

“Oh no.” Jim and Cap groaned at the same time.

Dan looked back at Cap, in comic desperation. “Cap, think of your men. Can’t you overrule this?”

“I take it this guy can’t cook.”

Jim glanced over at Travis who had just joined this shift today as Carlos' replacement.

"Can't cook? That has got to be the understatement of the century. He can't even leave the country because if the enemy ever got a hold of his so-called food, they could turn it into a secret weapon."

Jim smiled at Dan sideways. "We'll just have to try and casually help him out when he gets back."

"Man, nothin' can help his cookin'."

"Don't exaggerate."

"He's not!" Cap yelled over his shoulder.

.....

Wade pressed the brakes as he turned into the driveway. Derrick had been right. The shortcut had saved them valuable time.

No sooner had they jumped out of the squad and opened their equipment doors when a frantic, gray-haired lady rushed out of the rundown, old farmhouse and ran toward them. "Hurry! Please hurry! Please! Please help him! Hurry!"

"Grabbing their equipment, they quickly followed her into the house.

"When they said they had dispatched you boys from town, I was afraid you wouldn't make it in time. Hurry!"

They rounded the corner from the kitchen, entering a small living room. A ghostly pale, elderly man lay on the floor. Both paramedics knelt down, one on each side of him. Derrick grabbed the BP cuff. Wade set up the EKG.

"He just grabbed his chest and fell." Her eyes moved back and forth wildly between the two medics. "Please help him." Her voice began to quiver. "I told him to hire help. He's just so stubborn."

"Defib!" Wade shouted.

.....

Dan grabbed a Snicker bar from the freezer and began to unwrap it. He was in his late forties, but his predominantly white hair, with only few remaining red highlights, made him look a little older. He had been on the job most of his life and was always ready with a story about his days at the Chicago Fire Department."

“Do you always freeze your candy bars?” Travis asked.

“They’re better that way. You want one?”

“Sure.”

Dan threw him one.

Cap walked into the room, anger on his face. “Jim, Travis, the engine needs to be washed.” He had an edge on his voice.

Heading out, Jim wondered if Cap had gotten another one of those phone calls. The divorce he was going through seemed to get kind of nasty at times. He felt sorry for him.

.....

Wade leaned forward, switching places to relieve Derrick as they performed CPR. He could hear the sirens of an ambulance approaching. Their truck, being only a rescue squad, didn’t have space for transporting patients. This man wasn’t yet stabilized, anyway.

He looked up at the quivering lady standing above them. “Please, God, don’t let him die.” Her voice shook. The knot in Wade’s stomach grew and his head began to feel a little light. Sweat dripped into his eye.

“He’s coming back.”

They heard an ambulance spurt down the long, gravel driveway and grind to a stop. The rattle of an unfolding gurney was followed by lighter wheels on gravel rolling toward the house. Wade looked up as he heard the kitchen door open. The man was stable for now. He just hoped he would stay that way.

.....

The squad and engine arrived back at the station at the same time.

The engine company had been called out to a house fire that turned out to be a dinner gone burnt. Jim couldn’t help wondering if their station would soon be subject to the same fate.

“So are you guys hungry?” Wade asked, getting out of the squad. He smiled at Jim, as if to say he was forgiven. Life was just too fragile to hold grudges. He knew it wasn’t purposeful. He also knew it better not happen again, but for now he would put it behind him.

Jim accepted the acknowledgment and returned it with an apologetic half smile.

“Unfortunately,” Cap muttered.

“What are we having?” Jim asked suspiciously, clinging to a ray of hope that Wade felt like ordering pizza.

“Enchiladas.”

Jim wasn’t sure if he should be relieved or not. After all, how could you mess up enchiladas? Just throw the stuff in the food processor, grind it up, mix with sauce, toss in the shells and bake. Just follow the recipe. What could be more simple? Jim leaned back against the engine. Yeah, they were doomed.

“Did you see him bring in the groceries?” Derrick asked.

Jim was surprised to hear Derrick contributing to the conversation.

“No. Why?”

“Maybe *you* can convince him that ham isn’t Mexican.” Derrick turned to leave.

“HAM!” Jim looked at Wade in shock. He hadn’t meant to shout. Still, it seemed appropriate. He ran after Wade into the kitchen. “You’re making *ham* enchiladas?”

“Yeah. It’s all we had at home and I didn’t feel like making a trip to the store. Relax. They have turkey enchiladas, chicken enchiladas, and beef enchiladas. What do ya have against ham?”

“Absolutely nothing... unless you put it in enchiladas.”

“Don’t worry, Buddy.” He slapped Jim on the shoulder. “You’ll love ‘em.”

Highly unlikely. “Wade.” Jim walked over and put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You work too hard. You shouldn’t have to make dinner. How ‘bout we order?”

“Nothin’ doin’.” Wade slid the ten-by-fifteen baking dish from the cupboard. “You all get your chance to cook, ... and you *will* like these.”

“Where’s Cap?” Travis asked, hoping to be saved from this impending experience.

“In the office. He doesn’t want to be disturbed,” Dan answered.

Jim closed his eyes and fell back against the wall with a low groan. He could see it now, half of them would starve to death and the other half would have to be transported to the ER to get their stomachs pumped.

Dan smiled and threw Jim a candy bar.



Jessica put Morgan down in her crib for a nap. She used this portable crib a lot. She liked to always have her baby close by, but she also enjoyed being outside, especially on these gorgeous autumn days. So the crib was positioned securely on the porch, right next to the white wicker lawn chair.

Jessica sat forward in the lawn chair gently humming her baby to sleep, just enjoying the autumn's cool, apple-scented breeze.

It didn't take long for Morgan's big inquisitive eyes to grow drowsy and fall shut.

Jessica decided to wait a few more minutes, and then she would go get their recently born filly, bring her back, and start teaching her some manners. Halter breaking new foals was something she loved to do, and you couldn't ask for a more perfect day for it.

She glanced over at the porch railing. It could use some stain. She made a mental note to put it on the "to-do" list. That made her mind drift to Jim. She wondered what he was doing. She shook her head. *One hundred miles-per-hour*. She thought her husband had matured out of that. He was very mature in almost every area she knew. He was strong and wise, and she never thought twice about completely trusting him. There was just this one "lead-foot" issue that seemed to pop up every now and again. She found herself wondering how it even got started.

Smiling to herself, her mind went back to the first time they had met. It had been four years ago. She was nineteen. Jim was twenty.

She had been walking back from the grocery store with some eggs and milk, crossing the road, when suddenly out of nowhere a bright, red pickup barreled over the hill at close to light-speed. As always, her immediate reaction to impending danger was to freeze. Then, at the last possible second, she dove for the center line at the same time as the pickup swerved off into the ditch.

Indignantly, she had picked herself up out of the puddle of splattered milk and smashed eggs and marched over to give the irresponsible, incompetent jerk a piece of her mind. It wasn't too terribly long after that before they were standing in front of an altar, exchanging vows.

Jessica smiled at the nostalgic memory, but not at the circumstance. If he didn't learn to break this habit, someone was going to get hurt, or worse.

.....

Jim walked from the engine to the kitchen. The smell of *something* cooking reached his nose as he entered the doorway. Whenever someone was cooking something good, it seemed as if they got call upon call, endlessly delaying the feast. Why? Oh why, didn't that bell ever sound when Wade cooked?

Jim opened the refrigerator door. "Where's the cheese?" he asked, looking for a snack.

"It's all gone. I used it for the enchiladas."

Jim felt his mouth drop open. "There were almost four pounds in there!"

"The cheese is what makes enchiladas."

Jim thought he was going to be sick. Maybe Wade's problem was that he tried too hard.

"It'll be ready in about five minutes."

"Can't wait," Jim muttered, walking the other way.

"Uhhh... Never mind," Wade said, opening the oven door and letting out a huge plume of smoke. "I think they're done." He rushed to get some potholders.

Dan looked up and smiled as the smoke alarm went off.

Jim exchanged glances with him, wondering if the old veteran had ever been in a firehouse fire.

"What's going on in here?" The captain didn't sound happy as he entered the room.

"Oh, nothing. Just a little stove trouble." Wade smiled as he waved a dishtowel at the screeching alarm. "Would one of you guys go tell Travis and Derrick that lunch is ready?"

Dan got up and slowly walked by, cautiously eyeing *dinner* on his way out.

"Have a seat," Wade ordered, once they were all gathered together. "Where's Derrick?"

"He's..." Travis eyed the cuisine in the center of the table. "He's, um..." he stared at the bubbling cheese, "organizing the medical supplies for the squad. He said he wasn't hungry."

Smar-rt. Jim wondered, for a moment, if he could use any help. Wade rolled his eyes as he set a plate of *food* in front of Jim. Jim gave a nervous smile. All he could do was stare at it. The two ends were a crispy black

while the middle was a bubbling cauldron of cheddar cheese and red sauce. Cautiously, Jim lifted up the soggy top just to see huge chunks of ham and onion floating in even more cheese and sauce.

He looked up. Everyone was staring at him. He bowed his head to pray. If there was one day his food needed a blessing, this was it. When he looked back up, everyone was still waiting for him. He looked over at Wade and smiled. *He made it. Why doesn't he try it first?*

Jim looked back down at the concoction. He figured he owed it to Wade after this morning. He was just going to have to swallow it. His stomach churned at the thought. Tentatively, he picked up his fork and took a bite larger than he wished he had. As soon as he closed his mouth... FLASHOVER! All his taste buds caught fire. His eyes began to water. The heat was so intense, it made his mouth feel icy, his throat almost numb. He swallowed hard. The gob of cheese and chunk of onion made him feel nauseous as it reached his stomach. Tears ran down his face. He cleared his flaming throat excessively as he ran to the water faucet.

All eyes were on him as he slurped water from his cupped hand. He felt as if his stomach was going to reject its contents and send the flaming mass back up into his throat. If that happened, he was dead. He continued gulping as much liquid as he could handle.

Finally, and not a moment too soon, the water began to quench the burning. *What in the world did he put in that?*

Turning around, he leaned back against the sink, tears still streaming down his face. In a high pitched squeal, he declared, "It's good."

Everyone but Wade simultaneously put their forks down and pushed their plates toward the middle.

BURRRUZZZ...

They all headed out and piled into their trucks.

Going down the road, Jim quickly recovered, feeling so pumped he could hardly sit still as he listened to the radio calling for multiple engines and quads. This was going to be a *big* one!

Jim watched the line of cars in front of them pull over as they raced through town. Looking up, he could see the smoke billowing in the distance. As they turned the corner, he silently prayed that this wouldn't be a tragedy. It was the public high school. Many people would need to get out. He hoped that they all had.

Arriving, they pulled over to the side of the curb near a hydrant and all

piled out.

Children stood in lines organized according to classes, a good distance from the building. One of the policemen on the scene ran over. Sweaty and out of breath, he puffed, "We've got a tenth-grade Biology class on the second floor that didn't make it out."

Cap looked toward the building. The right side was fast becoming consumed, but the left was hardly burning yet. "Which side?"

"Left." He pointed toward the building. "It's about there. It's second to the end of the hall. No windows. So you can't get to them from out here unless they can get to the hall."

Cap jerked his head back, noticing Wade catching a man who was grasping his chest and falling. That medical emergency would take Wade out. He would need someone to go in with Derrick. They were too short-handed for this monster. The rest of the force better get here soon.

He looked at Jim and Travis pulling the hose down. "Jim, you'll go in with Derrick." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder toward the squad. "I'll take over here."

Jim raced over to get his gear. Just as they were finishing gearing up, the ladder truck arrived. Jim looked over his shoulder at it.

"Let's go," Derrick ordered, picking up the fire ax and heading toward the building. Jim followed. Monstrous, orange flames jumped from multiple windows on the east side. Smoke billowed through the roof. Jim figured that side was pretty much a lost cause, but they would need to keep it contained so it didn't spread to the left... at least, until they got the Biology class to safety.

Side by side, they entered the super-heated, smoke-filled entryway.

As they reached the hallway, they both glanced right. The flaming inferno was wasting no time coming. They glanced left. There were flames there, too. They were jumping from the walls and dancing from the ceiling. The smoke was thicker than bean soup.

They hit the ground and began to crawl under the flames. Jim was in the lead and Derrick followed, holding onto Jim's pant leg so that they didn't get separated.

Jim felt Derrick's hand loosen then jerk away. Confused Jim looked back just as...

CA-RACK! A flaming beam fell from the roof.

Jim lunged forward.

Derrick jumped back.

Jim sprint-crawled away from the intense heat.

The beam lay kitty-corner, blocking the hall. Flames jumped up to the roof and down to the floor, making that an impossible route for return.

He crawled toward the staircase, wondering if it was possible for any of that class to still be alive. His mind went back to when he was just outside. There hadn't been many flames or much smoke coming from the windows upstairs. Maybe there was still hope. He glanced up at the fire crawling along the ceiling. As long as the structure held – it wouldn't for long. He glanced back at the glowing, red smoke. Either way, he had to go up to get out.

As he reached the staircase, the smoke thinned a little and the flames were few, but the inferno was advancing and he didn't have much time. He stood and ran up the stairs two at a time.

He reached the second story, grateful for the lack of flames, and took in the welcome relief from the heat.

Racing down the hall, he glanced at the smoke coming from the registers filling the hall. He hoped they hadn't been asphyxiated, then hearing whimpers and cries, relief swept over him as he opened the door to the lab.

Gasps and sighs greeted him as he came in. Some of the kids were coughing, but he was pleasantly surprised at the lack of smoke in the room. One of the boys jumped up. "How do we get out of here?" he asked in obvious panic.

"We're all gonna die!" a girl screamed, before returning her face to her hands to cry hysterically.

"We're all going to be fine." He started trying to get through on his hand radio, but there was a lot of traffic.

"How are we going to get out of here?" The young male teacher looked panicked as well. "There's fire at the bottom of the stairs!"

Jim could tell the man was on the brink of hyperventilation. "We are going to go out on a ladder."

Jim finally got through on the radio and requested a ladder for the hall window. "Okay. I want everyone to follow me out in the hall. We are going to wait by the window for the ladder."

Everyone started in a panicked rush for the door.

Jim waited a moment before opening it to give the ladder time. "I want

you all to breathe into your shirt to filter the smoke. Okay, let's go." He opened the door.

They all rushed out to the window. Almost everyone began coughing on the smoke in the hall.

"Okay. Stand back. Come on, everyone away from the window, please." Jim guided a few out of the way before breaking the glass of one of the large panes.

In a few moments, the ladder was against the sill, and a firefighter was on his way up to help the people down.

As soon as the fighter made it to the top, Jim had to ask. "Is Derrick all right?"

"Yeah, he made it out."

Relief swept over Jim. *Thank you Lord.*

A couple girls rushed over to be first out of the building. Another girl in panic started looking through the group. "Zach? Where's Zach?!"

The teacher jerked his head around from person to person. "ZACH?!" He yelled his name a couple of times.

After helping a couple of kids onto the ladder, Jim turned toward the teacher. "Is someone missing?"

"Zach! I let him out to go to the bathroom before this whole mess started! In all the chaos I didn't realize...! I mean, he isn't here!" The teacher's voice was breathless and panicked.

A large *whoosh* of fire flashed out of an air conditioning vent, starting a wall ablaze. The group gasped, stepping back in the other direction. "Okay. Come on!" Jim motioned for the kids to come to the ladder.

"But Zach! What about Zach?!" The girl bent forward with her palms up.

"I'll look for him, but you guys have got to get out first." He helped another boy onto the ladder. "The bathroom at the bottom of the stairs?" he addressed the teacher.

"Yes."

"What's his last name?"

"Kirksman."

Jim handed his air mask to a boy wheezing from the smoke. As soon as a firefighter came back, Jim asked, "Is there a Zach Kirksman down there?" The firefighter on the ladder yelled down to someone on the ground, who promptly went to find out. The answer came back negative.

Firestorm

After quickly getting the last child and the teacher out, Jim returned his air mask to his face and turned back into the smoldering building, leaving the safety of the rescue ladder behind. The traffic on the radio didn't sound promising for how long this building would stand. He knew he had to hurry.

The hall was now consumed with smoke and crackling with hungry flames. Crawling through the soup, visibility now zero, he ran his hand along the side of the wall to guide him. Extreme heat bore down on him from the fire crawling on the tops of the walls. The smoke only got thicker and the heat only increased.

He knew there was no hope for the boy if he was still in the bathroom, but for his own peace of mind he had to check the other rooms just in case...

"HELP!"

...that happened.

The voice was weak and suffocated, as if it was a last ditch effort. He could hardly even hear it over the loud crackling and popping of the flames.

He crawled faster, until finally his gloved hand ran over a door frame and then onto the door.

Quick as he could, before the heat got him, he reached up and turned the knob while pushing the door in with his shoulder.

He crawled in. The smoke and heat diminished some. "ZACH?!"

No answer.

"ZACH?!" He yelled as loud as he could, but his voice was muffled by the air mask and the fire.

"ZACH?!"

He continued to yell as he crawled outside the perimeter of the room not daring to leave the wall, knowing if he did he would be lost in the smoke.

He extended his right arm as far as he could, searching the inner portion of the floor.

The radio traffic once again caught his attention.

The roof was going to go. Everyone had to get out now!

On top of that, the heat in his room was becoming unbearable. He had to get out now! It was going to flashover!

By now the boy was probably.... His hand felt something.

It was him.

Firestorm

He pulled him close to himself and sprint crawled toward the door.
He couldn't remove his air mask because of the heat so he just went as fast as he could.

When he got to the open door, it was engulfed in flames.
The radio called for complete and immediate evacuation.
The bell on his air tank sounded, alerting him he was almost out of air.
He pulled the boy's body under his own to protect it from the heat and flames.

He had to go forward or he was dead!
He had to go through the flames!
A picture of Jessica and Morgan flashed through his mind.
He had to go through!
Lord, please protect me. Please, let this boy live.
In a last ditch effort, he went forward!
With all his might, he went forward!
As fast and as low as he could, he went through the flames to the other side.

He made it.
Urgently, he crawled toward the broken window.
He stood up and leaned out.
The ladder was gone.
His mask clung to his face.
The air was gone.
It was now or never!
He had one last chance to live, and he knew he had to take it.
He flung the boy over his shoulders.
The roof began to crack.
He jumped.
Still in the air, the building began to collapse behind him.
He hit the ground.
Pain seared through his side and knee.
He covered the boy's body with his own as the huge brick structure behind him split, cracked, and crumbled to the ground.



Jessica turned the next page. She loved exciting books. She felt as

though she was right there next to the protagonist, barely escaping the icy grasp of death. Her eyes widened as they moved down the page. Oblivious, Morgan crawled around on the floor next to her mommy, playing with her little toys. Chills ran up Jess's spine. She read faster, deliciously afraid for the heroine.

Her attention was diverted from the written page as Morgan began to cry. Leaning the recliner forward she bent down to pick up her sobbing baby. "What's the matter with my little girl?" she asked, rocking the child in her arms. Jess's own stomach began to churn. Feeling as though she might lose her lunch, she hurried toward the bathroom.

After returning from the bathroom, she stumbled a little as she went into the kitchen. What was wrong with her? A wave of dizziness swept over her. She could not get her stomach to settle. And absolutely nothing she did worked to calm her sobbing baby. She couldn't figure out why she and her baby would start feeling sick at the same time. The room blurred and then cleared in her vision. Walking toward the phone, she wondered if she should call someone.

Suddenly, Morgan stopped crying! Jess looked down to see that she wasn't breathing. Grabbing the receiver, she immediately dialed 911. Her heart began to race. What was going on?

"This is 911. Do you have an emergency?" The operator's voice was almost too calm.

"Yes! My baby has stopped breathing!" She quickly rattled off her address. "Please, send someone quick! Hurry!" She stepped backward to keep her balance. Suddenly she realized what must be happening. *CARBON MONOXIDE!*

"Ma'am?"

CLICK! She hung up the phone and raced outside.

.....

Jim sat next to the squad inhaling oxygen. He glanced over at Wade treating Zach. They had revived him...for now. It would be a miracle if the boy lived, but Jim believed in miracles, and he was hoping for one now.

He turned and looked in the other direction. A couple of other paramedics worked on reviving an older man using CPR and a defibrillator.

Derrick inserted an IV in the arm of a young girl and got her ready to

go into an ambulance. Jim smiled to himself. He could imagine Derrick's response to a youngster scared to go in an ambulance. *Well, you're going. So live with it, and shut up! Okay. That was probably a little uncharitable,* yet still, he bet it was true. He found himself wondering how Derrick really did handle his bedside manner. There was one thing he knew for sure. *He ain't no pushover.*

He watched Derrick get the girl set in the ambulance, then grab his equipment and head in his direction. He had a feeling that the bedside manner question was about to get answered very soon. Truthfully, though, he just felt so relieved to know that Derrick was all right.

Derrick set the bag of supplies down and knelt next to him. First, he began to take his pulse.

"So you got out all right?"

"Um, hum."

"I was concerned."

Derrick looked up at him with a mocking expression like, *Yeah right.* Then he unvelcroed the blood pressure cuff and wrapped it around Jim's arm.

Jim shifted his position a little. He hated being treated by doctors, and that included paramedics. It was a phobia that took him back a long way. Well, not that long. He didn't consider himself an old man yet.

Looking down, Jim noticed that Derrick's forearm was a bright angry red and covered with blisters. "What happened to your arm?" He didn't allow his voice to betray surprise, as he knew that would generate another mocking glare.

Derrick jerked his jacket sleeve down over it. His reply was sarcastic. "It got burned."

No-o kidding. Jim looked the other direction.

.....

Jess put her hand to her chest. No words could describe the relief she felt when her baby again began breathing. *Thank you, Lord.* She didn't know what would have happened if they had stayed in that house.

She turned her head as she heard sirens approaching in the distance. Her heart pounded as a new realization set in. The furnace was only a year old. How could it be responsible for the carbon monoxide? *First, the fire,*

then the brakes, now CO2 poisoning? Chills ran up and down her spine. *What's happening? ... Who? ... Why?* She watched, almost mesmerized by the spinning red and blue lights as the squad pulled into their drive.

.....

Jim looked down at his arm as Derrick inserted an IV into it. He didn't know why he needed it. The smoke seemed pretty much gone from his lungs and the reason he could not walk initially had been because of the pain of his knee and side, not any *head* or *spinal* damage. He could probably walk now anyway. He really wanted to just refuse medical treatment, but about the time he did that, one of his ribs that he had a pretty good idea was cracked would break, then puncture his lung, then.... Yeah, okay, he'd let them take him in, but he wouldn't relax until they let him out.

.....

"I want to ride with you," Jess insisted, pushing back the hair that was blowing in her face. Her eyes were wide, and her heart still pounded.

"Your baby's going to be fine. If you follow us in your car then you'll have a way to get home."

"I don't care! I want to be with her." She heard the fear in her own voice.

He nodded. "Get in."

As soon as Jessica stepped in, the doors closed behind her. She moved closer to her baby, yet tried to stay out of the way. The smell of antiseptic and medicine gave her an eerie feeling. She wondered who had been the last person to ride in here and... if that person had lived. As the sirens began to blare and the wheels started to turn, all Jessica's thoughts returned to her baby.

.....

In the back of an ambulance, Jim stared at the ceiling. He wasn't exactly sure why, but being on this end of things was beginning to make him feel claustrophobic. He looked sideways at Derrick, who was taking his pulse. "It's the same as it was five minutes ago."

"Actually, it's gone up."

“Yeah, well, what do you expect, being in the back of this thing?” He motioned toward the walls. “Don’t this thing got any windows?”

Derrick pointed toward the window on the back doors.

“Yeah, well, that ain’t enough.” Derrick half smiled. That caught Jim’s attention, probably because it was such a rare occurrence. “Mind if I sit up?”

“Yes.”

“You know you can be pretty hard to get along with.”

“I could also strap you down.”

“Wanna bet?”

They pulled into the ambulance bay right next to another ambulance that was just arriving.

“We’re here. Now you’re their problem.” Derrick opened the doors. As Derrick and the driver took him out, he wished he could just walk. He’d broken his ribs before when he was a boy, and he had *walked* into the ER just fine.

“JIM!”

He quickly turned his head toward the direction of his name, shocked as he recognized the voice that called it. Seeing Jess, his heart stopped and his skin went cold. “Jess! What happened?!” He grimaced as he rolled on his side and propped himself up with his arm.

“Are you okay?” her voice shook. “What happened?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. I’m fine. What are you... What happened!” He glanced over at the attendant taking their baby into the hospital.

“I’ve got to go. I’ve got to be with Morgan.”

“Wait. Jess!”

Jess ran in after her baby.

Derrick turned to leave. “Derrick!” Jim grabbed his shirt. “Take out the IV”

Derrick just stood there a moment staring, as if he was trying to decide.

“Did you hear me? Take it out! Now! I’m refusing medical treatment!”

Nonchalantly, Derrick walked back to the vehicle then returning, dropped him a paper to sign, and proceeded to silently remove the IV

Jim scribbled his name on the paper. As soon as the IV was out, he

jammed the clipboard into Derrick's stomach, jumped up, and rushed in to find his wife and baby. Not seeing them, he ran over to the desk, but Matt, a middle-aged doctor and the only one that Jim usually let near him, intercepted him. "What happened to you?"

"I'm fine. Do you know where...? My baby was just admitted by ambulance and my wife was with her."

"Yeah, I just saw them go in room three." Talking slowly, he pointed over his shoulder. Quickly, Jim headed in that direction.

"Wait!" a nurse came running after him. A little annoyed, he stopped and looked at her.

"I'm sorry, I know you want to check on your baby."

"Yes, I really would."

"I understand that, but I really need some information first."

"Didn't Jessica...?"

"She isn't going to leave that baby's side till she has a guarantee that it is all right."

He wouldn't mind hearing one of those himself. In fact, he wouldn't mind a guarantee that Jessica was all right, too. "Okay. I'll give you your..."

"Good. Follow me."

He followed her to her computer.

"Address?"

You just dispatched an ambulance there. Don't you know? He rattled off the address, then stood there and waited as she brought up his file. Looking over his shoulder, he noticed Matt glancing over at him. Jim rubbed a hand over his face. More black soot came off. He wondered what he must look like. Right now, he didn't care.

"Birth date?"

"She was born here!"

The nurse smiled. "I need it confirmed."

He stomped his foot impatiently as he continued the drill. When he finally got done, he rushed over to room three. He went in, glanced at Jess who was standing in the corner, and walked up to the bed. He glanced up at the doctor and nurses, then down at his little girl, IV inserted, on oxygen.

"Is she going to be okay?" he asked the doctor, in a soft voice.

"She's stable right now."

"Right now?"

The doctor smiled as he looked up. "It looks promising. I think your wife got her out in time. She wasn't very long without oxygen. We'll want to keep her a while for observation."

"Without oxygen? What happened?" he turned to his wife who was standing a little ways away by the wall.

"Carbon monoxide." Her voice was almost a whisper.

Oh, no. His mind went back to the fire and the brakes.

He looked back up at the doctor. "There isn't... I mean... she couldn't have any brain damage, could she?"

"It's not likely. Excuse me." Jim backed up. "We won't know for a while."

Jim nodded, trying to calm himself down. He stepped back and walked over to Jessica. He gently embraced her quivering body and pulled her close to him. "Are you all right?" Jess buried her face in her husband's shoulder and began to sob quietly. Jim held her tighter.

Turning her face slightly to the side toward his face, she spoke softly. "Why is all this happening? What are we doing wrong? What if... what if she isn't all right?" Tears began rolling down her face again. She turned back to hide it in his shirt.

"She'll be all right. I know she will. Please, Lord, protect her. Help her to be all right." He let his head drop down next to hers.

.....
"What do you want now?" Melinda asked, entering Carlos's room.

"I dropped the remote."

She glanced over at the TV remote, sitting under a chair five feet away. "You dropped it clear across the room?" Her hands were on her hips. He just smiled. Knowing full well that he had thrown it, she walked over to it. Her long blonde hair fell forward as she knelt down to grab it.

She's so-o-o beautiful.

Her look was disapproving as she handed it back to him. "Mr. Martinez..." One hand was again on her hip.

"You can call me Carlos." He flashed her a grin.

"Mr. Martinez!" She tried not to smile. "I am very busy, and..."

"I am very bored."

"I, sir, have more important things to do than come in here and play

fetch.”

Carlos stared, mesmerized, into her sparkling sapphire eyes, unable to answer.

Her tall, slender figure began to become animated as she made a desperate attempt at, supposedly, being annoyed. She shifted her weight side-to-side and motioned with her hands. “First the Kleenex box *fell*, you needed water, you wanted the window open, you wanted the window closed, you needed a snack, the batteries *fell* out of the remote, the TV quit, aka *came* unplugged, you *needed* a newspaper. I am not your own personal maid, Mr. Martinez. The next time your room light comes on, I have half a mind not to answer it. Do you realize how many times I have been in here in the last hour? This is unacceptable!” She tapped the toe of her shoe on the floor.

“Sorry.” His face wasn’t sincere.

“You lie.” She started to head out then turned back. “By the way, did you know that your friends are in the ER?”

“What friends?”

“The ones that saved me from that checkers game so I could go to that appointment.”

“Really? Jim and Jessica? What happened?”

“Carbon monoxide, I think.”

“Are they okay?”

“They are. I saw them walking around. Not sure about the baby, though.”

“Man, their baby.... I hope she’s all right.”

“I’ve got to go. I’m running behind with my other patients since *one* of them is taking up so much of my time.”

“Oh, fine. I’ll quit.”

“Good! Maybe, then, I can get back to work.”

He gave her a half-smile as she left.

.....

Jim and Jessica sat together in a room with their baby as they waited for results. Jim kept his arm securely around Jess’s shoulders as she leaned sideways against his chest. Normally, an emergency didn’t get to her this much, but she just didn’t understand why all this was happening... all at

once. Shivers ran up her spine. *What's gonna happen next?*

"I don't know how this happened. That furnace isn't that old." Jim's voice held confusion.

"I do," she mumbled.

"Huh?"

"We didn't understand why someone would burn down our barn or why the brake line just happened to get a hole in it."

"Jess." He lifted her up and looked her in the eye. "Things happen. Sometimes it's weird, but that doesn't mean they're connected."

"You don't agree."

"No. Come on. We live on a farm outside of a small town. This isn't Chicago. Even if it was, we don't have any enemies. There is no possible reason for someone to want to hurt us." He smiled. "Seriously, if there was some sort of killer out there, he sure is rotten at what he does."

"Or the Lord had been protecting us."

"He has been. That doesn't mean we're in the middle of a horror movie."

"Then you explain it."

"I can't. It's just a series of freak coincidences."

"They don't seem like accidents to me."

"They were." He looked over at his tiny, helpless child. *It had better have been.*

Jess looked up as a knock sounded on the door. "Come in."

"Hi." Pastor Thomas walked in the room.

Jim almost smiled. *Now, how did he know?* This sixty-year-old pastor had about three hundred and fifty people in his congregation, yet he always seemed to show up when one of them was having trouble... whether they called him or not.

Jim was glad that he had taken time earlier to wash up a little so he didn't look as much of a sight, although Pastor Thomas had been his youth pastor years ago and, to put it in Pastor's own words, he had "grown quite accustomed to seeing the wreckage in the aftermath of a Jim Richard's disaster." At the time, that had been a pretty accurate description of Jim's life – "the wreckage after disaster," but Jim had been of the opinion that after getting married, life had changed for him.

"What happened?" Pastor Thomas walked over to the crib and looked in, concern in his eyes. "Is everything all right with Morgan?"

“Come over and sit down.” Jess motioned to a chair across from them. The pastor scooted the chair a little closer and sat down.

“How’d you know we were here?” Jim took his arm from around Jess and sat up straighter.

“Well, I’ll tell ya. Usually, the older couples in our church family call me when one of their own is in the hospital, but sometimes with younger couples I end up hearing it from other sources.” He smiled. “Actually, I was here trying to comfort an expectant father and a nurse told me.”

“Is it Karen and Brad’s baby?” Jess’s eyes brightened.

“Yep. Seven pounds, two ounces. A beautiful little girl.”

“How’s the frantic father?”

“You’re a fine one to talk,” the pastor joked. “I take it you’re remembering your own experience.”

Jim gave a half smile. “Yeah, I remember.”

“It’s strange, but some of the strongest men I know are the ones that fall the hardest in maternity. Of course... I never did.” He gave a telling smile.

“Sure you didn’t. Want us to ask your wife about that one?”

He laughed. “No, you better not do that. I’ll lose all my respect.” Pastor looked back at the crib. “Talking about babies, what happened with your little one?”

“Carbon monoxide poisoning,” Jessica answered.

“Is she going to be all right?”

“They think so. We’re still waiting on the last few tests.”

“You don’t have a detector?”

“We do, but for some reason it didn’t go off. ... Things like that have been happening a lot lately.”

She looked up at Jim.

“Oh, go ahead. We may lose all *our* self-respect, but you might as well tell him what you’re thinking.”

“Jim, you two would never lose your respect with me, and anything that you tell me, I can assure you, it won’t be repeated without your permission. You ought to know that.” He paused. “Still, you don’t have to tell me anything that you’d feel uncomfortable with.”

Jess looked again at Jim, then at the pastor. “Well, I for one would like another opinion, especially from someone I know will remain confidential. Let me just point out first, that my husband and I do disagree on this so....”

“I understand. If it’s completely off-the-wall, Jim didn’t have any part of it. Just kidding. I’m sure it won’t be.”

“We-ell, it might just sound a little crazy.”

He shrugged. “That’s okay. If it concerns you, I think you should talk about it. I promise not to laugh.”

“You’d better not.”

As Jess began to talk, Jim’s mind began to wander. Pastor Thomas had quite a history with their church and the people in it. It had been his first and only. He’d gotten the job as youth pastor right out of college and had been there ever since. He was a caring individual with a great capacity for love. He knew everyone in his congregation personally, right down to the youngest baby in the nursery. Jim never wondered how he had time for everyone because everyone knew that the compassionate man would always *make* time, sacrificing his own plans if necessary. Jim, still a boy, had met him when the pastor, serving as a hospital chaplain had been there the day his mother had died. That day still held horrible memories... memories he could hardly bear to remember, but it would have been much worse if it hadn’t been for a total stranger that cared enough to get involved.

It was about a year later when Jim joined the youth group, and, shortly after that, he’d received Christ and given his life to the Lord. After high school, he went out of state for paramedic training, but when he returned, Pastor had been one of the first familiar faces he’d seen.

Jim’s station had been called to a three car pile up at an intersection of a back-country road. A couple of teenage boys had been playing chicken with cross traffic.

One car was crumpled into a telephone pole. The driver had died on impact. The other two cars had flipped. One was the car with the two teenagers pinned inside. The other was the pastor’s car – empty.

Kneeling beside the overturned car, he was holding one of the boys’ hands, praying for him and eventually leading him to the Lord. Though he was injured himself, he stayed with the boys, trying his best to comfort them the whole time while they were being taken out, on their way to the hospital, and until their parents arrived.

The one boy had been permanently paralyzed while the other turned out to be a star athlete. One thing they had in common; they were both in church last Sunday.

“So then, when we were getting out of the ambulance, I saw Jim getting out of the one next to us... Wait!” She turned to Jim. “I never did ask *you* what happened.”

“Yeah, you did. I said that I was fine.”

“Correction. I did ask, you never answered. You were in an ambulance. Something must have happened.”

“Oh, they do that to everyone that jumps out of a second-story window.”

“Window?” It was the pastor’s turn to sound surprised.

“Didn’t think I had it in me, huh?”

“No-o-o. Actually, I just thought you grew out of that.”

Jim returned with a sarcastic grin. “Very funny.”

Jess looked a little worried. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” He wasn’t about to say that he thought he might have cracked his ribs.

“You were limping.”

“I just twisted my knee a little.”

“Shouldn’t you have that checked by a doctor?”

Jim and Pastor exchanged glances. As a general rule, Jim was afraid of, or at least considerably nervous around doctors. It had started when... Pastor knew why, but Jim had never told Jess.

“I think you should get checked out.” The pastor’s words came softly, trying to hide the aspect of concern. Jim looked down at the ground.

“What?” Jess didn’t get the meaning of the silent interaction. She knew Jim was afraid of doctors, but she couldn’t ever figure out why. There were some times she thought she wasn’t getting the whole story. Maybe there had been an incident behind his fear. Was Jim keeping some secret from her?

“Yeah, I will. I just want to find out about Morgan first.”

“That could be awhile. I’ll keep you posted. Besides, if they say we can take her home tonight, then we’d have to wait for you.”

“I wouldn’t make you wait. I can always...”

“Jim, you’re a chicken... when it comes to some things.”

“If I admit to that, does that mean I don’t have to go?” Jim felt a need for humor to divert some of the attention.

Grinning, Jess crossed her arms. “No-o.”

Smiling, Pastor stood up. “I should go back to see how Brad and

Karen are doing. I'm glad I was able to talk with you about your situation. I'll make it a matter of prayer. I'll also pray for your little one, and that the Lord shows you soon what is causing all these incidents."

Jim looked over at him. He didn't really believe they were all accidents, either.

"If you want, Jim, I'll go with you down the first hallway of your long walk, but then I've got to turn toward Maternity."

Jess shoved him playfully in the arm. "Yes, go."

Jim got up. "L-ong walk." He gave Pastor a sideways glance. "Fine. I'll go, but if for some reason I get stuck with Dr. Stanford, I have an out."

"Why? Have you gone to him before?"

"No, but from what I hear, it doesn't take long for most people that get him to decide they aren't sick anymore. In fact, some say that, as long as you're still breathing, the safest place to be is out the door and keep runnin'!"

Pastor chuckled. "I think my sermon next Sunday should be on Christian charity. You really shouldn't judge people on rumors."

"For doctors, I'll make an exception."

Pastor smiled as a response. Already standing, he leaned his hand on the back of the chair. "Before I leave, why don't we pray?"

Jessica quickly nodded, and they all bowed their heads.

Afterwards, the two of them walked out the door and into the hallway.

They walked a few steps before Pastor Thomas began. "So what do you think about Jess's concerns?"

"I don't know. It's hard for me to believe.... I mean we aren't in the middle of some murder mystery here. We live near a small town on a farm. We both grew up in good homes and went to Christian colleges. I mean, how much safer can you get? It's not like we have any enemies. I couldn't think of one person who could possibly have a motive for, you know, doing such things." His voice was soft. Mostly, he looked straight but turned his head intermittently to evaluate the pastor's expressions.

"Still, you want to be careful. Are you planning to check it out?"

"I already called a repairman for the furnace. My neighbor's going to let him in. I told him to call and tell me what was wrong with it."

"Good." The Pastor smiled. "I can usually expect that you have a good handle on things, and I think that's great. Jessica may disagree with you at times, but you can tell she puts great stock in your judgment."

“I just hope I don’t let her down.” A smile crossed his face as he looked over at him. “And keep the advice coming. You don’t know how much it has meant to me in the past.” He chuckled, “One of my first thoughts when I saw you come in the room – Man, I’m glad I called the furnace repairman.”

Pastor laughed, putting his hand on Jim’s shoulder. “I got you trained.”

Jim laughed. “Yeah, right.”

They came to where the pastor would turn.

“Here’s my point of departure.”

“Yeah, thanks for comin’ by.”

The pastor’s face turned serious. “Just make sure that you check every avenue and don’t leave any doubt when it comes to the life of someone you love.”

Jim nodded. “I won’t.” Pastor turned to leave and Jim continued on to the desk, carefully pondering the pastor’s words—*Don’t leave any doubt.*

Jim’s thoughts turned back to his fear as he approached the desk. He was glad that Dr. Fredrick was here. He was the only doctor he had ever felt semi-comfortable with. He had one of the best records in the hospital. He also got the most complaints, but not from diagnosis – from bedside manner. But hey, after working with Derrick, Jim figured he could handle anything in the way of snide remarks. The guy might have made the nurses cry before, but he had also saved his life. He’d saved his life when everyone else had given up. Maybe that was the reason Jim felt like he could trust him. . . . At least, at this moment, he needed to convince himself that he could trust him.

“So did the leg fix itself?” the monotone voice from across the hall startled him.

Jim turned around, trying harder not to limp as he walked over. He watched the doctor stare earnestly at the clipboard. “Something wrong?” He watched him continue to flip through the pages.

“Just ignorant, irresponsible beings masquerading as intelligent life.”

Glad to see you’re in a good mood.

“This guy’s gonna be dead from cancer in a few days and he has the audacity to assume that I can stop it. Just comes in for the first time, two days before his funeral, and asks for some miracle cure.”

Maybe I can come back later when you’re not quite so busy.

“You want me to look at your leg?”

“If you’re too busy....”

The doctor lifted his eyes from the clipboard. “You know you could quite easily be one of those types.”

“Yeah....” Jim cleared his throat.

The doctor hit open a door to a small exam room with the back of his forearm. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Jim took a deep breath as he walked in. He couldn’t remember ever enjoying being in the ER. Morgan had been born in the ER and even that had been a very stressful experience.

He had hated anything to do with the medical profession ever since.... *No. Don’t go there. Not while you’re sitting in the grasps of.... Jim, it would be to your advantage to change the subject while you’re ahead.* He had told himself that he would never trust a doctor again, but that had been before Dr. Fredrick had saved his life last year.

Jim limped over to the bed. As he sat down, a scream of pain shot through his leg. Bending forward to react to the initial pain, a greater pain shot through his side.

The worry for his family earlier had been stronger, drowning out the pain, but now he could feel it.



Jess paced back and forth next to the crib, periodically glancing down to check on her little angel. Part of her wished Jim hadn’t left, though the other part of her knew she was just lucky that he did.

She glanced up at the TV on her way past. “The Andy Griffith Show, starring Andy Griffith....”

Tonight the familiar names and whistling tune got on her nerves. Seriously, what right had Andy Griffith to be happy, even if he was prerecorded?

She stopped next to one of the chairs and began to tap her finger on the back of it. She wished they would hurry up with the results so she could stop worrying. She hoped the results would allow her to stop worrying.



Jim jerked as the doctor examined his knee. He felt like saying, “Just

leave me alone and let me die in peace.” He hadn’t even gotten around to mentioning his probable cracked ribs.

“This is a bad sprain. How’d you manage to twist your knee?”

Jim groaned as he rolled onto his side. He wasn’t going to tell him unless he could see the look on his face. Maybe he could lighten up the situation by joking about himself. “I got caught in a blazing building just on the brink of collapse, crawled through a wall of flames, then, flinging a teenager over my shoulder, jumped out of a second story window just as the whole building crumbled to pieces behind me.” *Now do ya feel like you’re talkin’ to Chuck Norris or what?* If there was one thing he couldn’t stand, it was people feeling sorry for him. He hated that look in someone’s eye. So he had become accustomed, from a young age, to diverting the attention by adding humor. Usually it worked.

Doctor Fredrick just returned it with a strongly disapproving look. “And that’s how you choose to make a living?” At least it wasn’t pity. “This week when you get your paycheck, take a hard look at it and try to decide whether it’s worth it. Then go and compare it to the bill I’m going to send you and calculate how much money you will lose.”

Jim smiled to himself as he returned to lying on his back. “I take it you don’t approve. I have insurance.”

“If they’re smart, they’ll drop you as a bad risk. If they’re loyal, they’ll be bankrupt in less than a year.”

“Do tell.”

“What’s wrong with your side?” His voice sounded weary.

Man, did he wish he could keep it to himself and it would just go away on its own. He just wasn’t up to another lecture.

“I don’t have all day.”

“I think they may be broken.”

Dr. Fredrick rolled his eyes, crossing his arms as he let out a long sigh.

I’m sorry! He didn’t know why this guy always felt responsible to make you feel guilty for hurting yourself.

“Why don’t you just go find a craft store and see if they can glue you back together?”

Deal! He would much rather work with the little old ladies down at the craft store than these headstrong doctors any day.



Jessica was still pacing back and forth next to her baby. Right now, all she wanted to do was pick up her defenseless little girl, hold her tight, and protect her from danger, but she couldn't protect her from this. It was out of her hands. She stopped next to the crib and looked down at her sleeping peacefully. *Lord, please protect her. Don't let anything happen to my little one. "All things work together for good to them that love God."* (Rom. 8:28) The verse had been running through her mind all night. Whatever happened, it would be good. She just hoped that she could accept that.

"The Andy Griffith Show starring Andy Griffith, Ronny Howard, also starring Don Knotts."

She glanced back up at the TV. *You would think that if they intend to have a double feature they could at least leave the opening off the second show.* She watched as the old rerun began. Usually she liked this show, but today she found satisfaction in marching over and hitting the button OFF, probably a little harder than necessary. *Be Quiet!*

As she walked over to her chair, she listened to a couple of nurses laughing in the hall. She wondered how the rest of the world could be so cheerful when it seemed as though her world were falling apart. No matter what happened, the sun would keep on rising and setting and life would go on, whether she wanted it to or not.

As she sat down, her mind drifted to Jim. She wondered what he was doing. She hoped he was okay. She loved him so much. He was her life. She'd been so glad that he was with her today, just to hold her, just to feel the strength of his arms, just to be able to take a little bit of his strength into herself. He was the strongest person that she knew, and he always seemed to show up when she needed him most.

He always tried to put himself last on the agenda. There were times she got the feeling he could be on death's doorstep and not mention it. That had happened last year. She'd almost lost him then. She'd expected too much of him, *way* too much, and it had caused an accident.

She found herself wondering what had happened today at the fire. Sometimes she wished that his job wasn't so dangerous. She tried to trust the Lord to take care of him, but trust had to be one of her biggest issues. No, she wouldn't ever ask him to get a different job. That was who he was. She wouldn't ask him to change himself for her own selfish reasons because she knew he'd try, and it *would* be wrong.

“Mrs. Richards?”

She turned to see a nurse standing at the door.

“Yes?” She stood eager for news, yet holding her breath that it would be good.

“All the tests came back negative. So we can be almost positive there was no damage.”

Thank you, Lord!

“We would like to keep her overnight for observation, just to be sure.”

“I want to stay with her.”

“That can be arranged.”

“Will someone be watching her if I go find my husband and tell him?”

The nurse smiled. “Yes, Mrs. Richards, we will take care of her.”

So she was protective. Could she help it? That side of her seemed to be growing even stronger in light of their present circumstances.

She smiled back at the nurse as she left the room, feeling as though a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Well, at least one of them.

.....

“Mr. Martinez, if you don’t quit beeping that thing...”

“If I die of thirst, I could sue you.” He held up his empty cup.

“Die of thirst.” She jerked the cup from him. “Is this the fourth or fifth time I’ve filled this?”

“The air’s dry in here.”

She gave him a *yeah right* look. “And for the record, you couldn’t sue me if you died of thirst.”

“My mother could.”

“She’d probably be glad to get rid of you.” She spun around to leave.

“Wait!”

She turned her head back, eyebrows raised. “You forget to throw the remote across the room, maybe?”

“I was wondering if you heard anything more about my friends.”

“You know, there is such a thing as patient confidentiality.”

“Right. So I won’t tell anyone you weren’t confidential.” His face began to grow serious. “Why, is there something wrong?”

“No, the baby’s going to be fine. It’s a little curious about your friend, though.”

“Jim? What about him?”

“I’m not sure. I got it from the ambulance grapevine, and it was a little jumbled.”

“Bring it on. I can un-jumble it.”

“Something like... he jumped from a crumbling apartment building and landed on a highschooler?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and something else, like he was poisoned by a flame-broiled ham enchilada.”

Carlos looked over at the window. “Yeah, poisoned by a flame-broiled ham enchilada. If you were mad about having to fill up the water, you could have just said so.”

“I’m serious. That’s what I heard.”

“Ham enchilada?” His eyebrows were raised as he looked back at her.

“Flame-broiled? I know it doesn’t make sense. You said that you could un-jumble it.”

“How high was the apartment building?”

“I heard five or six stories.”

“Yet you just saw him walking around downstairs. Goodbye, Melinda.”

“I’m just sayin’ what...”

“If you want to be like that, then the next time I drop my remote, I’ll just suffer through it.”

“Really?” She raised her brows. “Great things do come from unexpected sources. Goodbye, Mr. Martinez.”

.....

Jess walked up to a nurse staring at her computer and stood behind her. “I’m looking for my husband, Jim Richards.”

The gray-haired nurse looked back over her shoulder. “Let me just go ask Kate.”

Jess waited as she walked over to ask the other nurse.

“He’s in X-ray right now, but if you want to go wait in his room, 103. He should be back anytime.”

“X-ray? For his knee?”

“Ribs, I think, Honey.”

Ribs! Her whole family was literally falling apart. “Thanks.” She turned and walked down the hallway toward the room. Entering the small room, she walked over and sat in the corner... waiting and worrying – her life today.

It seemed like forever before Jim finally came. He was buttoning his shirt as he walked in and Jess could see the white tape wrapped tightly around him.

She looked up at him from her chair. “Are you all right?” her voice was tired.

“I’m fine.” He walked over next to her.

“He’s a liar.” Doctor Fredrick entered the room behind him. “Sit down,” he ordered pointing to the hospital bed.

“Actually, I don’t want to.” He tossed his head in defiance. He was getting a little tired of being bossed around.

“You have got to be, without a doubt, the most bull-headed...”

“If you have something to say, get to the point. I would like to find out about my daughter.”

“She’s going to be fine,” Jess interrupted.

Jim turned toward her. “She is?”

“They said there will be no permanent damage. They want to keep her overnight for observation, but they say she’ll be fine.” Jess could see relief flood over her husband.

“Staying overnight is exactly what you should do,” the doctor added.

“No.”

“Why don’t you let a doctor decide for once...”

“Decide whatever you want. I’m still not staying.”

Jess stood up next to him, but addressed the doctor. “What exactly is wrong with him?”

The doctor stood up straighter, switching the clipboard to his other hand. “It would be much less time-consuming to list the things that are not wrong with him. His heart still works.”

Jim shot him in unimpressed glance. “Come *on*.”

The doctor glanced at Jim then turned his gaze back to Jessica.

“Possible concussion... broken ribs...sprained knee...pulled muscles...smoke inhalation...multiple bruises... possible whiplash...”

“I don’t have whiplash.”

“If I didn’t have the evidence right here, you would debate that you

have broken ribs.”

“You said, ‘cracked’.”

He rolled his eyes. “Let me clarify. Only one of them actually snapped in two.” It was Jim’s turn to roll his eyes. “You can consider yourself plenty lucky that, with all the moving around you’ve been doing, you didn’t drive that rib right through your lung. Now, it will be a few minutes before I return. I would suggest that you lie down while you wait, but if you insist on being stubborn, maybe we will all be lucky and you’ll faint.” If it’s possible to slam a door open, that would be what the doctor did as he left.

Jess couldn’t understand what her husband was mumbling as he limped toward the bed, but on the other hand, maybe she didn’t want to know. She stood next to him as he sat down, too stubborn to lie down. She could tell he was making an extra effort not to groan as he leaned back against the wall. “You know, either I was too worried about Morgan, or you didn’t look this bad earlier.”

“Anyone would look worse after being subject to....” He couldn’t help grimacing, as he pushed himself higher against the wall.

Jess smiled as she noticed his hair -- thoroughly messed, in spots sticking up, going every-which-a-way, still damp from sweat, stained with soot, and decorated with little pieces of ash still clinging to it. “You. Are. *A*. Mess.”

“What? No Prince Charming?”

“Maybe after a shower.”

Moving in the wrong position, he grimaced, bending and grabbing the rail of the bed.

“Maybe you should ask for some painkiller.”

“You know how I feel about that stuff.”

“Yeah, the same way you feel about doctors, but if you need it...”

“I don’t think I do.”

Jess wasn’t convinced.

“So what...” he grimaced as he sat back up and tried to move into a more comfortable position, “exactly did the doctors say about Morgan?”

“Just what I told you. I want to stay with her here tonight.”

“That’s a good idea. Do you want me to stay with you?”

“Are you going to let them admit you?”

“Jess.”

“Then no, I don’t want you staying here, sitting up in a chair all

night.”

Sometimes Jess got a tad annoyed with the thinking process of her husband. He reasoned everything out carefully in his own mind, but would only relay one-word explanations. She had yet to see him change his mind when it was definitely set. “So where will you be?”

“Home. I gotta feed the horses, then...”

“You are not sleeping in that house!” She was not going to allow him to set his mind on that one. “There have already been two attempts on our lives there.”

“You do not know that.” His voice sounded strained. He knew it. In the back of his mind he knew something was going on. He just wasn’t ready to admit it yet.

“Don’t I? All you...”

“Jessica!” He leaned toward her, ignoring the pain. “No one is trying to kill us!” Aware of the people outside, he kept his voice down in a loud whisper.

“I don’t want you staying there. It would make me feel a lot better if you wouldn’t.”

“Well, I’m not staying here.”

“Don’t you think you’re acting a little childish, being afraid of a hospital?”

Ouch. That cut deep. She didn’t know the reason why, but it wasn’t just some freak, unjustified fear that he was immature for believing. His stomach turned from the accusation – from the memory—from the whole day. He didn’t have much left. Scooting closer to the side of the bed, he considered just walking out now.

Jess could see it, and wished he wouldn’t. She turned around and walked a few steps away, trying to quench the anger that was rising inside of her. Why did he have to be so stubborn? She hated arguments. She always ended up saying something she didn’t mean. She wished that she hadn’t put him down in that way. He wasn’t childish. She certainly didn’t want him to start believing it. His strength and maturity were what she admired so much in him.

Looking up as Dr. Fredricks entered the room, she addressed Jim, but didn’t look back at him. “I’m going to be with our baby. Maybe you’ll find time to come over before you leave.”

“Jessica.” She stopped, but didn’t turn around. “I’ll find someplace

else to stay tonight.”

“Where?”

“I’ll tell you before I leave.”

“Thank you. I’ll be waiting.” She pushed the door open then hurried back to her baby’s room. She hated leaving her this long. When she opened the door, she was surprised to see Mellissa and Wade standing next to the crib. “What are you guys doing here?”

Mellissa took a few steps forward. “We just wanted to see how you two were doing. Wade told me about all that happened when he picked me up from work, and we wanted to come over and see if there was anything we could do.”

Jess smiled. “Thanks. That was thoughtful.”

Wade stepped up kitty-corner behind his wife. “The real question is, where have you been? We’ve been waiting for almost a half hour.”

“With Jim.” She pointed toward the door. “Sorry, you had to wait.”

“It’s no problem. How is Jim? Wade told me that he was hurt in the fire.”

Yeah, and that’s about all Jess knew, too. She wished she had time to talk with him and find out more. “Oh, he’s just as stubborn as ever.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“Haven’t quite figured that out myself yet.” She gave a puzzled look up at Wade. “What are you doing here, anyway? You aren’t even supposed to get off work for another ten hours.”

Wade held up a splinted, bandaged finger. “I was injured in the line of duty.”

Mellissa gave a light chuckle, leaning back against his chest. “In such a heroic endeavor.”

“You know what?”

She smiled as he put his arms around in front of her.

For the first time today, Jessica also felt like smiling. “What happened?”

“Well,” Mellissa began, “after surviving the entire fire without a scratch, upon leaving, he slammed his finger in the car door.” She shook her head back and forth.

Jess chuckled, “I see.”

“A lot of sympathy I get.”

“I’m sorry, Wade. I’m sure it must be painful.”

“It is. After all, not everyone can jump from a window of a burning building and be a big hero. Some of us are too busy saving lives on the ground.”

Jump from the window of a burning building? Nah, couldn't be... Yeah it could.

“I'm surprised you haven't been tackled by the press yet.”

Then again... “What press? Who jumped out of a burning building?”

“Jim.” Mellissa and Wade said it at once.

“Jim?”

“Didn't he even tell you?” Mellissa's eyes spelled shock. “Men.” She crossed her arms and gave Wade a look.

“Hey, you'll have to register that complaint with my mother.”

Jess put her hands on her hips. “That man is about as informative as a sea turtle!”

“Sea turtle?”

“Yeah, well, it's the best I can come up with at the moment.”

Wade smiled. “Now, come on girls. He probably just didn't have time.”

“I don't know. I'd like to know how many times I asked him what happened and got the same infamous answer....”

“Nothin'.” Mellissa finished the statement. She looked up at Wade. “Tell me about it.”

“Hey, I always tell you.”

“Yeah, but sometimes it takes you awhile.”

“Okay. Next time I see you in the ER representing your firm while I'm rushing a patient in for emergency treatment, and you ask, ‘What happened?’ I'll stop, hand the patient the IV bag, and ask him to wait a moment so I can come fill you in.”

Mellissa jerked away. “You know, you can just get out of here!” She playfully shoved him in the shoulder.

“Now, now, let's not get physical.”

“You know that only happened once, and I was referring to you, not the patient, and that I was *not* requiring an immediate response.”

“That so?”

“Well, seriously, you had blood all over you.”

“It was *his* blood!”

Jessica chuckled. “You two are crazy, but it's a welcome relief. Why

don't you come over here and sit down."

.....

A half hour later, Jim entered the room where the three of them were talking. Wade greeted him. "So, how's the hero of the week pulling through?"

Glancing over at him, Jim didn't answer, but limped over to where Jess was sitting and stood behind her.

"Do you want to sit here?" Jess offered.

"No, I'm fine."

"You look pretty beat up, man."

Jim didn't answer, but looked down. "Maybe the doctor's right. Maybe you should spend the night." Wade studied his friend's weary eyes. Jim shook his hanging head.

"Well, then you have to come home with us. After all, you can't go home with your furnace on the fritz." Mellissa shifted her weight to a more comfortable position.

"I called a furnace repairman."

"He get it fixed already?"

Jim turned his face away and gazed toward the wall. "There wasn't anything wrong with it." His voice was soft.

Jess jerked her head back. "What?"

Jim glanced down at her but didn't respond.

Mellissa seemed puzzled. "I don't get it. If there wasn't anything wrong with your furnace, how'd your house get carbon monoxide in it?"

"Jim?" Jessica's voice was worried.

He looked back toward the wall, avoiding eye contact. "They say it was intentional. I called the police about it already."

Chills raced up and down Jessica's spine. *I knew it... But who? And why?*

"Intentional!" Mellissa's voice betrayed shock. "Why in the world would someone poison your house intentionally? No one would do that to you two. It can't be true. There must be a mistake!"

Jim shook his head. "I wish it were." He looked down at Jess. "Maybe I *should* stay here." His voice continued soft and a little weak.

"No. You need to get some rest. I'll be fine here. There is security and

he won't come around people. He's never done any of it face-to-face."

"Never done any of it face-to-face! You guys sound like a killer's stalking you! What's going on?"

Jess turned her attention to Mellissa. "It's a long story, but this is the third attempt..."

"Third attempt of *what*?"

"First the arson, then the hole in the brake line, now the carbon monoxide – they were all intentional."

"What? Why haven't you told us this before?"

"We thought they were just coincidences before tonight."

Jim caught himself on Jess's chair as he began to fall forward.

"Mellissa, they can tell us about this later. I think we'd better take Jim home so he can lie down before he falls down."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." She looked at her husband, questioning, with a hint of fear. "Are you sure..." She spoke in almost a whisper.

He shot her back a rebuking glance, but not before Jim figured out their concern.

"Look, if you guys don't want me to come, I'll understand. I know..."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course, we want you to come."

"Seriously, I can figure something else out. You don't have to feel like..."

"Jim, you're coming."

"They aren't after him, anyway. All but one attempt was made when he was gone." Jess couldn't believe what she was saying.

"I didn't mean that. I'm sorry. I was just frightened, I guess. You'd think working for a law office, I'd be used to the dark side of life pretty soon."

"I don't want you two to be afraid." His eyes were hazy from fatigue.

"Jim, let's go. We don't have all night to stand around here arguing. Do you need a wheelchair?"

Jim's face gave a *clearly* negative response.

"I was just asking. Come on." He motioned to him as he headed for the door.

Jim started in that direction, then stopped and turned toward Jess. "Are you sure you will be all right here?"

"Yes. I'll be fine."

"I just don't really feel right about leaving you."

“Whoever this is, he has already tried today. He won’t be back for awhile. When he does, I don’t want my husband to be half-dead. You need to sleep so you’ll be better tomorrow. In other words – GO!”

He didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t argue anymore. His arm shook as he leaned on the chair to bend down and give his wife a kiss.

Jess wished she had stood up when she saw the pain on Jim’s face from his ribs. “Bye. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

.....

Jim looked back as he walked through the hospital’s sliding doors. He hoped he was doing the right thing. He didn’t want to leave her, in light of what he had just found out, yet he could hardly manage to keep walking toward the van. He’d never forgive himself if anything happened to her tonight. However, tonight he didn’t even feel as though he would be capable of protecting her.

He walked up to the back door of the van. *Protect her, Lord.*

He reached for the handle. “What about my truck?”

Wade looked back at him. “We go right past the station on the way to our house. If you want, we can stop and Mellissa can drive it back.”

“If you don’t mind....”

“Not at all. Get in.”

“Jim, why don’t you sit in the front? It will be easier for you, and I’ll be getting out in a minute.”

Jim shrugged. “Thanks.”

As he turned to go, Mellissa stopped by her husband and whispered to him. “You want *me* to drive his truck? What if the guy after them thinks I’m Jessica?”

Wade smiled. “Don’t worry. We’ll be behind you the whole way. If someone starts shooting at you, we’ll rear-end him.”

“It’s not funny.”

“Yeah, but you’re jumping to conclusions. We don’t know the whole story.”

“I heard enough.”

Wade glanced at Jim getting in. “We’ll just be careful. That’s all we can do. Come on.” He helped her in the back seat.

Jim struggled from pain as he buckled his seatbelt. Then, with a sigh of exhaustion, leaned his head against the window.

“Why don’t you just take the drugs?”

“Don’t want to.” It had happened years ago, but he’d said then that he would never take drugs. Not if he could in anyway stop it. He never had.

“You gonna tell me why?”

Jim closed his eyes. “No.”

Wade decided to change the subject as he backed out of his parking place. “Do we need to stop by and feed your horses?”

“No, we fed them this morning, and they still have some grass.”

When they finally got to Wade and Mellissa’s home, there was only one thing Jim could think about—bed. “Thanks for letting me stay here,” Jim said, trying to express gratitude, as his friend unlocked the front door. His voice was barely audible.

“No problem. Just try and make it to the guestroom.”

Jim thought of a response, but decided he didn’t want to expend the energy saying it.

As soon as the door was open, he was through it and making a beeline for the bedroom. When he got there, he managed to kick off his shoes and take off his outer shirt before collapsing on the bed. He was asleep almost immediately.

Chapter Six

Three o' clock in the morning.

The only sounds at the firehouse were the clock ticking on the wall and a train in the distance.

All the firefighters were asleep... all except Derrick. He laced his fingers behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling. Thoughts he didn't want to be thinking kept flooding his mind, keeping him awake. He tried changing the subject, but his mind kept coming back.

The unfamiliar sound of snoring caught his attention.

He rolled on his side to see who it was.

It was Miles, Wade's replacement – just another thing to add to that guy's growing list of idiosyncrasies. Derrick returned to lying on his back, wondering what it was about that guy that got on his nerves. It was probably his cocky, know-it-all attitude. That was one thing that could really annoy him. People that had their life so easy that they thought nothing could go wrong. He was still young, though. He'd find out soon enough.

By young, Derrick meant two years older than himself, yet a year younger than Wade. Derrick didn't usually think of himself as younger than Wade. Though he was young, he felt like an old man. He'd always been serious. He'd never been much on parties or celebrations, but circumstances had hardened him even more, circumstances he wished hadn't happened...circumstances that could have been prevented. His mind again flashed back. Anger welled inside of him. Anger at...

BURRRUZZZ!

Immediately, every man in the room sat up and prepared themselves for the call.

They all rushed out into the bay. Dan listened to the description as he headed for the engine. It was a man over a cliff at the park. He did a double take. *At three o' clock in the morning? What in the world was he doing?* Dan shook his head. *Some people....*

Derrick and Miles swung up into the rescue squad while the rest piled into the engine.

Lights spinning, sirens blaring, and they were off.



As they entered the park, they turned onto the scenic Cliff Road. It wasn't long before they saw a small group of hysterical teens standing near the edge.

As they stopped, a boy and girl came running toward them.

They ran up to Dan. The girl started yelling in obvious panic, and then the boy joined in. "Help! He fell down the edge!"

"He slipped! We didn't mean...!"

"He's hurt! Hurry! We can barely hear him anymore!"

Derrick and Miles grabbed their medical supplies and ran toward the edge after the other firefighters. When they got there, the boy was talking, but his voice was barely audible at the top. "I'm bleeding... I don't know how much longer... Get me out of here... Ple..."

"Are you secure?" Cap yelled down.

No answer.

"Can you hear me?"

No answer.

"If you can hear me, hit something against the side of the cliff."

Nothing.

Cap turned toward Dan. "He must be out. How far do you think?"

"I'd say from his voice, maybe around a hundred feet. I can't be sure."

"Travis, go get the light."

Travis ran back to the engine and returned with their high-powered light. He shined it down the side of the cliff, panning it back and forth.

"There he is!" Miles shouted, pointing.

"Yeah." Cap looked down. The boy lay motionless, mangled, on a ledge about a hundred feet down. Even with the high-powered light it was dim and shadowy, but even the shadows couldn't hide the dangerously large pool of blood around the body.

Dan stepped closer to Cap. "He's not going to have time to wait for a chopper."

Cap looked at Dan then back down the cliff. "I know." He turned and walked through the group of chaotic teens back toward the engine.

"Derrick." He motioned to him to come.

Derrick walked over to him. "What?"

Cap turned toward him. Refusing to look in his face, he gazed past him. "We both know you can rappel in the dark. We'll have the lights

shining down.”

“Yeah, it’s possible.” He tried to get Cap to look him in the eyes.

Cap glanced up then down to the ground. “Do you want to or not?”

“Fine.”

“Then get the ropes.” He turned to leave.

Travis and Miles caught Cap as he walked back toward the ledge.

“What you got planned Cap?” Travis asked first.

“Derrick’s going to rappel.”

“What?”

“You’re crazy! It’s dark!” Miles exclaimed.

“I’m well aware of the situation.” Cap turned to leave.

Miles caught his shirt. “You’re going to get him killed! That isn’t safe even with the light!”

“Let, go. Now!” His eyes narrowed.

Miles released his grasp.

“I’m still in charge around here. If you ever become captain, then you can call the shots; not before.” He turned his gaze toward Travis. “Go see if you can help Derrick with the ropes.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cap gave Miles a last annoyed glance, then turned to leave. As he walked away, he called for an airlift chopper.

Miles followed Travis over to Derrick who was tying the ropes to the tree.

“Need any help?” Travis asked when he arrived.

Derrick didn’t look up as he jerked a few more knots tight. “I have the drug bag tied to another rope.” He thumbed over his shoulder to it. “If he’s in a position that I can treat him, lower it to me.”

Miles sneered. “You’re not just going to get yourself killed. You’re going to get that poor kid killed, too.”

Travis turned his head toward him. “That poor kid isn’t going to have any chance at all if we don’t get to him, now.”

“Yeah, or maybe someone just wants to inflate his ego. After all, good old Derrick could *never* be wrong.”

Derrick jerked his head up, but decided against rebuttal. “I think we’re ready.” He stood up.

Miles eyes were cold and cutting. “You’re an idiot.”

Derrick took a step toward him, his eyes hard as steel. “Get. Out of.

My Face. Now!”

Travis glanced back and forth for Cap and Dan, wondering if these two were going to have it out right here and now. One thing he knew, Derrick wasn't going to back down. When his mind was set, that was it.

They stared for a few moments, then Miles, seemingly beaten, broke eye contact. His eyes moving every way but toward Derrick, he slowly backed up and walked away.

Derrick picked up the rope, and with the carabineers, fixed it to his harness.

“You ready?” Travis stepped forward.

“Yeah, about.”

All the kids started to walk over and form a crowd, talking among themselves wondering what he was going to do. Dan and Cap came over.

“We need you all to please back up. Back to the trucks, please. We don't want anyone else falling off.” Dan guided a few of them back.

Derrick turned his back toward the edge.

“You sure you want to do this?”

Derrick didn't answer, but began to walk backward down the ledge.

Travis shone the light down for him.

Dan came back over and gazed down. He shook his head. There were too many shadows from the ledges and jutting out rocks for Derrick to see where his feet were going. He was climbing blind. If he had been able to get a word in, he would have at least tried to insist that they use a second rope for safety.

From what he knew about Derrick, this guy enjoyed risking his life both on and off the job, almost as if he didn't regard it at all. He'd had many close calls with death and always seemed to escape, but his luck couldn't last forever. Feeling very unsure of this outcome, Dan almost didn't want to watch.

Travis stepped too close to the edge. The dirt under his foot gave way and fell.

“Watch it!” Dan jerked him back.

Travis stood half stunned a moment. “Derrick! Are you all right?.”

No answer. Travis took a few steps forward, pointing the light back over the edge. “Derrick!”

“I'm fine.”

“Hey, I'm sorry!” He panned the light to find him again.

“It’s fine!”

Dan looked over at the captain. “I don’t like this.”

“Well he can’t come back up now.”

“You should have attached another rope for safety, especially in these conditions.”

Cap didn’t respond.

Dan huffed as he looked back down the cliff. *Your track record may be clean, but you make one mistake now, boy, and it’s going to be written in blood.*

Derrick went down a few more feet. Thoughts began to clutter his mind. He shook his head. *Concentrate!* He couldn’t concentrate. He began to flash back.

His feet slipped. He gripped the rope tighter as he swung sideways into the cliff’s rocky side. His left arm slammed into the rock. Pain shot through it.

Lifting it, he clutched the rock, his right hand still hanging onto the rope below him. Every muscle in his firm, lean body tightened.

“Derrick! Are you all right?!”

He looked up, realizing he was under a ledge away from the view at the top. He shook away his hair that had fallen into his face and looked down. Memories tore through his mind. Guilt and anger seared through his soul. Pain ripped through his heart – pain he couldn’t live with. He felt numb...hopeless... empty.... He fingered the clip to his harness. Pictures he didn’t think he could stand to see one more time, flashed through his mind. He unscrewed the safety on the carabineer with his thumb.

“Derrick! Derrick, are you okay?”

Like you’d even care for a minute. He stared down into the looming darkness. He began to press in the clip with his thumb.

“Help... Help me.” The weak voice startled him. Derrick looked down at the mangled boy a few feet away. He wasn’t dead. He wasn’t even unconscious yet.

“Derrick, what’s going on?” It was Dan’s voice.

“Nothing! I slipped!” he yelled back up, letting the clip snap back and screwing the safety up quickly.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine! I’m almost there!” He lowered himself the rest of the way and stepped down onto the ledge.

Firestorm

His mind cleared as he knelt down next to the boy and felt for a pulse. “I’m down. I need the bag.” He talked through his handheld as he scanned the area for something he could use for a tourniquet.

Chapter Seven

Beep... Beep... Beep...

Jim rolled over to hit the alarm but froze as pain shot through his body. Hitting the snooze, he fell back on his back. *Oh, man. Yesterday was some day.*

Rubbing his eyes, he reached back for the metal bedstead and pulled himself up with his right arm. At least both the ribs he had broken were on the same side.

First order of business – call Jess. Slowly, he lifted himself out of the bed. One good thing about sleeping in his clothes, he didn't have to change. Well...okay, maybe he did, but first he had to make sure everything was all right with his wife and baby.

On his way into the living room in search of a phone, he ran into Wade.

“Hey, Jim, glad to see you up and about. Mellissa's just leaving for work so the two of us can ‘batch it’ for breakfast.”

Jim smiled. “You know I always jump at the chance to eat your cookin’.”

“I know. My food has the tendency to do that to people, and those that don't jump toward it always seem to jump away. Either way, I keep ‘em hoppin’.”

“Uh huh.”

“I just hope it'll be up to par with one less finger.” He lifted his bandaged pinkie and tried to wiggle it.

Jim walked into the living room still in search for the phone. “Well, at least you know that you have science on your side.”

“What's science got to do with it?”

Jim moved a few magazines. “It's scientifically impossible for your food to get any worse.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha.”

Jim turned around and stood by the coffee table. “Don't you guys have a phone?”

“I was wondering what you were looking for.” He turned to kiss Mellissa goodbye. “No. We just use cells.”

“Oh.” Jim moaned as he lowered himself to sit down on the couch.

“Mine’s still at the fire station.”

“Here. Use mine.” He tossed it to Jim. “Consider yourself plenty lucky. It’s a rare occasion that I actually remember to charge it. Mellissa’s always getting on me for that.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”



Br-ring... Br-ring... Br-ring...

The telephone startled Jess out of a sound sleep.

That must be Jim, she thought, rubbing her eyes gently and sleepily walking toward the phone. “Hello,” she yawned.

The voice that returned wasn’t Jim’s. It was a deep, eerie monotone. “You won’t escape again. Next time, *It Will Be Final!*”

Click.

Dial tone.

Chills raced up and down her spine. If there was any doubt before, that sealed it. Dazed, she slowly replaced the receiver. Her heart went cold...her skin tingly.

Br-ring...

Her heart jumped then began to race. She stared at it.

Br-ring...

With a shaky hand she reached for the receiver. “Hello?” her voice quivered.

“Jessica? Are you all right?” Her tone startled him.

“I...a...Jim, I...”

Jim stood up, his body shifting to emergency mode. “What’s wrong?” his voice was strong, demanding an answer. He walked toward the door.

“This man called. His voice was.... He said....”

Jim opened the front door.

“Where are you going?” Wade came from the kitchen.

“I’ll bring your phone back.”

“Sure.”

Jim headed for his truck. All pain was replaced with anger.

“Jim, someone wants to kill me!”

They’ll have to go through me first. He jerked the truck into reverse

and stomped the gas. “The Lord will protect you like he has been. He won’t let anyone hurt you.” He turned onto the road. “Neither will I...”

There were a few moments of silence.

Jim’s muscles tensed. He glanced down at the speedometer – seventy miles per hour... in town. *No more.* His tires squealed as he turned.

“Jim, are you coming?”

“Yes.”

Seventy-five. *Slow it down.*

“I just don’t want to be alone.”

“Jess, even if I wasn’t there, you wouldn’t be alone. God’s the one who said, ~‘*I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.*~’ (Heb.13:5) He’s a lot more powerful than me.” *So listen to your own advice and slow down!* “Is Morgan okay?”

“I just woke up.”

“Okay, why don’t you check on her. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Okay, just hurry.”

“I am,” he answered while running a stop sign.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Remember yesterday?

Yeah, but...

You should have learned by now, not to be careless, even in an emergency.

Fine.

The next stoplight he slowed to a complete stop and waited for absolutely no one to come and for a little gadget to turn colors before taking off again.

Good job.

Shut up! He pulled into the parking lot. Tapping his fingers, he searched the crowded lot for a place to park. It would have to be today that he had to park north of Alaska. Parking near the road, he quickly got out of his truck.

He hurried up the lot, wishing he could run, but his knee wouldn’t allow it. They had given him a crutch to use, but he hadn’t remembered to take it with him. Quickly, he limped through the sliding doors and toward the room.

As he entered their room, he saw Jess sitting on a chair, hunched

forward, clinging tightly to Morgan. She looked up as he entered. “Jim.”

“Are you both all right?”

“Yes.” She sniffed, wiping her eye with the back of her hand. “I probably sounded semi-hysterical on the phone.”

“No.”

“It’s just when he called... I mean that’s like something you see in the movies.”

“What’d he say?”

“He said that I wouldn’t escape again and that next time... it would be final.”

Anger lifted through Jim’s veins.

“But it was more than that... It was his voice. It was cold and lifeless. He sounded like he was in a trance almost... like he wasn’t alive.” Silent tears began to stream down her face again.

Ignoring the pain, he knelt down next to her and took his family into his arms. He’d always known that he would give his life for the two of them, but at this moment he was sure of it. He wondered if that would even be enough – if he was even strong enough to protect them. *Lord, you are. Take my family and keep them safe.*

He held them tightly.

.....

Derrick poured himself another cup of coffee. He hadn’t even bothered trying to get back to sleep after the rescue last night. He’d just sat up at the table, spending the remaining night hours on the internet.

He found himself wondering if the boy they’d rescued was going to make it. When they left him, he was critical, yet still alive. He told himself that he didn’t care. Pouring a little milk in his coffee, he took it over to the table and sat back down behind his computer.

Cap walked in and over to the coffee pot. “Some reason you didn’t sleep last night?”

“Didn’t feel like it.” He typed in an internet address.

Cap sat down, looking into his coffee as he stirred it. “Know the feeling.” He let out a deep breath. “That woman.”

“Trouble with Kendra?”

“You wouldn’t have any idea about that.”

“Well, you’re divorcing her.”

“She’s divorcing me. It’s not enough that she’s throwin’ me in the trash for another guy. She has to be nasty about it.”

Derrick stopped browsing a minute.

“Women are more trouble than they are worth.”

Derrick stared down into his swirling coffee, memories again invading his mind.

BURRRUZZZ!

They all jumped up, but since the rescue squad was the only one called, just Derrick raced out to the squad, meeting Miles in the bay. They both jumped in the truck. Derrick hit the lights and sirens, and then stepped down on the gas.

Miles looked over at him as they went onto the road. He didn’t like this guy... more than that, he didn’t trust him. He sneered to himself. *Best record in the city. ...Why does the department even kept him on? He’s careless and if you ask me, emotionally unstable. Exactly what is it he does for hours on the internet, anyway? ... I bet I could tell ya.*

Driving into the parking lot, it wasn’t hard to pinpoint the incident because a large crowd had already gathered. Derrick turned off the sirens and drove the squad over to the group, all gathered around a large Salvation Army drop box.

Getting out, Miles stopped a man walking past. “What’s going on?”

“This kid got himself trapped in the drop box. He must of climbed up on something then crawled in. Some guy heard him yelling when he was going into the store.”

“Oh, brother.” Miles leaned back against the squad.

Derrick remained serious. “He’s conscious?”

“Yeah, he sounds fine. He just can’t get back out. It’s padlocked.”

“Okay, thanks,” Miles said, as they walked over toward it.

After stopping in front of the box, Derrick picked up the padlock and looked at it. Then he opened and closed the hatch a couple of times to make sure the boy had plenty of air.

“Son, are you all right?” Miles yelled at the box.

“Yeah. Get me out of here, will ya?” The voice was muffled.

“Just hang on. We’re gonna get you out.”

“Hurry up. I’ve been in here a long time.”

Miles stepped back. *You’re welcome.* “Guess we should call Salvation

Army and see if they have a key.”

“Wait a minute.”

Miles crossed his arms.

“Boy, are you standing up?” Derrick called.

“Yes. Nothin’ in here besides me... except a pair of shoes.”

Arms crossed, Miles leaned against a light post, staring at Derrick disapprovingly. *Time’s ticking.*

Derrick knelt down. Taking something from his pocket, he used it to pick the padlock.

Miles stood straight as the lock fell open. *Isn’t that illegal? Where’d you learn to do that anyway? Spend your Saturdays robbing the Salvation Army?*

Crawling out of the box, the little boy stood up. Looking up at Miles, he pushed his glasses up on his freckled nose. “I have come to the conclusion, I would not like to be a shoe.”

.....

Wade walked back and forth through his house looking for something to do. Right now, he wished he was finishing his shift at the station. He was bored.

He walked over to the fridge and opened the door, not knowing why, since he wasn’t hungry. He wished he could call the hospital to see if Jim and Jess were okay, but he didn’t have a phone. However, that wasn’t anything unusual since he could never remember to charge it when he did have it.

He walked back into the living room. He could play solitaire on the computer, but he never had enough patience to get through even one game. He slid their wedding scrapbook across the coffee table as he sat down on the couch and began flipping through it. He browsed over all the pictures. *That had been such a special day.* He stopped on the page with them exchanging rings and glanced up at the fancy heading, *Forever and Ever.*

Fingering his ring, he thought about the new member that was soon to join their “endless circle of love,” which was, at least partially, what his ring represented. Leaning back against the couch, he sighed. He hoped that he would make a good father.

The sound of the doorbell pulled him away from his own thoughts.

Tossing the book back down on the table, he walked toward the door. *I wonder who that could be.* As he opened the door, he heard the sound of the heavy truck pulling away. *UPS. I wonder what Mellissa ordered.* However, when he picked up the box, he noticed his own name in the address. *I wonder what I ordered.*

Taking it into the kitchen, he set it down on the breakfast bar, dug out his knife from his pocket, and cut through the tape.

Pulling back the box flaps... *Whoa!* He jumped back in surprise.

It took him a few moments to regain his composure before stepping forward for another look. A slaughtered mallard lay in a pool of blood inside a Tupperware container. He shivered as he backed away from the stench.

Why would someone send me a dead duck...? ...a dead duck? He wished he didn't have to read the note that lay on top. Cautiously, he stepped forward and picked up the folded paper.

~ Bury this next to your wife.

Don't think that you're safe either. ~

He froze. He tried to move, but he couldn't. He felt like a block of ice, unable to think.

Finally, after a few moments, he was able to back up a few steps, slowly, half-dazed.

Mellissa!

The baby!

Off balance, he spun around then caught himself on a chair. *I have to get to her!*

He staggered through the door. *I have to get to her before....*

His hand shook as he reached in his pocket for his keys then his whole body began to shake, and his breathing quickened. *You need to calm down.* He got in his car.

Feeling light-headed, he leaned forward on the steering wheel. *You have to calm down or you're going to faint.* He hated it when this happened. He made his career out of emergencies, yet when all the chips were down, if he didn't keep himself completely detached, his emotions would almost always get the better of him. It had never happened on the job...yet.

He forced his breathing slower, but his hands still shook as he backed out of the drive. A Bible verse his mom had taught him when he was a little boy came to mind. *God hath not given us the spirit of fear but of power, love, and a sound mind.* (II Tim. 1:7) ...*a sound mind*—that’s what he needed now.

Lord, please protect my wife and baby. He slowed to a stop at the sign. *You will not need to fight in this battle: Set yourselves, Stand ye still and see the salvation of the Lord...* (II Chron. 20:17)

.....

Mellissa put down the paper she was reading and rubbed her eyes. She was ready for a break. Yawning, she stretched then picked the paper back up again.

Knock... Knock...

“Come in.”

It was Alex. “This box of candy just came for you.” He walked over with a large red box of Fannie Mae candy.

“How did he know this is exactly what I need right now?”

“Is it your anniversary?”

“No. Actually, it’s a little strange for Wade to be so romantic without a reason, but I’ll take it.”

“You’d better enjoy it while you can.”

“Why?”

“Once my wife sent me my favorite meal and dessert at work. It was great till I got home to find she had broken the lawnmower *and* ruined my best power tools trying to fix it.”

Mellissa looked thoughtfully into the distance. “He couldn’t have burned down my kitchen. ... He was going to eat cereal.”

“Maybe he changed his mind.”

“Nooo. I bet he’s just being sweet. I don’t care why he sent them. I’m just glad he did. It’s just the diversion I need right now. I am so hungry for candy.”

“What? No sardines smothered in chocolate syrup or potato soup with caramel sauce and pickles?”

“Eww. Don’t tell me your wife ate that stuff.”

“Every other day. The grocery store about ran out of ice cream

toppings. She had to substitute raspberry sauce for the caramel once.”

“In potato soup?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, dear.”

“I’d better go. I still have these briefs to deliver. Enjoy the candy.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I will.” She took the little card off the top.

~ *To my darling little wife*

~ *With all my love*

~ *Wade*

If that’s the way he acted when he broke his finger, maybe they should consider making that a permanent arrangement.

Mmm...just what I needed. She took a square chocolate and brought it up to her mouth, ready to indulge.

Ring! Ring! Ring!

Mellissa sighed. *Won’t that phone ever stop?* She dropped the chocolate back in the paper and picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

.....

Wade’s hands tingled as he gripped the steering wheel waiting for the light to turn. His face felt permanent pressed in concern. Car after car passed in front of him, all oblivious to the terror his life was swirling in.

.....

Mellissa hung up the phone and sighed, *Clients.* There were times that she was sure the secretary had a harder job than the lawyer. Oh well, the perfect distraction awaited her. This time she picked up a round chocolate that she was sure was filled with gooey coconut cream. Her mouth watered.

“Mellissa, I need you to take down a letter for me,” the lawyer said, coming out of his office.

“Okay,” she sighed, returning the chocolate and pulling out the keyboard.

.....

Wade zipped through traffic, passing wherever he could. He had to get

there *now!* *Bury this next to your wife. Bury this...* the note echoed through his mind.

Suddenly, the traffic began to slow down.

What's wrong? Every nerve in his body felt as if it was jumping.

Everyone slowed to a stop.

Drawbridge. ... Come on. He gripped the wheel tighter. *Dead duck...*

Bury this next to her... Dead duck... Bury it next to her... Fear flooded over him. *Lord, protect her. Protect my wife, please.*

.....

“Okay, I’ll have it ready to go out shortly,” Mellissa said, backspacing an error.

“Good. Someone sent you candy, huh? Anniversary?”

“No. I guess my husband just felt like being... well, for lack of a better word, weird.” She smiled. “I wish it would happen more often.”

“For no special occasion? Don’t tell my wife.”

She chuckled. “Why don’t you take a couple pieces, Frank?” she addressed the gray-haired lawyer. “If I eat all of these, Wade is going to wish he hadn’t sent them to me especially when he sees our post-birth diet plan!”

He smiled. “You won’t have to twist my arm. Anything to help out..” He grabbed a few pieces.

After he went back into his office, Mellissa carefully picked another piece. *Now it’s my turn!*

Ring! Ring! Ring!

“Urrrr!” she exclaimed in exasperation as she picked up the phone.

“Hello!”

.....

Wade sped the car into the parking lot, then slammed on the brakes in the fire lane. Quickly, he jumped out and ran into the building.

Mellissa almost slammed the receiver back down. If that phone rang one more time, they would just have to talk to her with her mouth full.

Wade’s shoes slid as he raced around a corner.

Mellissa picked up a chocolate.

He sprinted down the hall.

She removed the candy's paper.

Wade burst through the door.

"Wade!"

With a flying leap, he dove toward her. Sliding across the desk, he grabbed her hand and slammed it down.

Face to face, Mellissa stared into her husband's sweat-dripping face. Her eyes locked with his. "Wade. What's wrong?"

"Are you all right?" he asked, breathless.

"Ye-es." She paused. "You came all the way down here to ask me if I was all right? Wade, the baby isn't due for a couple of weeks yet." She looked down at her hand that he was still holding against the desk. "If you wanted your candy back, you could have just said so."

"I didn't send you any candy."

"What?"

"I didn't send you that candy." He stood up. His pulse finally began to stabilize. She was all right.

She jumped up. "Then who did?"

He looked down and then up.

"Wade?! Then who did?!"

Wade glanced down at the candy box, fingering it with his one hand. "What happened to these candies?"

Mellissa froze in shock. Her finger shook as she pointed toward her boss's door. "Frank! I... I..."

Wade walked over and jerked the door open.

Mellissa gasped, putting her hand over her mouth. In horror, she gazed at her boss slumped over his desk.

.....

Jess clutched her husband's hand. A half-smile of relief came across her face as the doctor informed them that their baby would be fine.

"So we can take her home now?" Jim asked.

"Yes, just make sure that you get that furnace fixed."

Jess's face turned back to concern. *It wasn't the furnace.*

Jim broke eye contact with the doctor. "Yes, we'll make sure we take care of that."

"Thanks for your help." Jess forced a smile and offered her hand.

“I’m glad everything worked out all right.” He shook it and turned to leave.

Jim picked Morgan up out of her crib. An ecstatic smile crossed the little one’s face as she reached her tiny arms up, putting one around her daddy’s neck and holding onto his sleeve with the other.

“How’s my little princess?” he asked, giving her a kiss. She laughed and clapped her hands. Jim smiled, rubbing her on the back and positioning her a little higher on his shoulder. He turned to Jess. “So, are you ready to go?”

Somberly, Jess bent down and picked up the diaper bag, then looked back up at Jim. “Go where?”

He sighed. His face returned a serious look. “Home, for now.”

Jess shivered. “You don’t think that there might be someone waiting for us?”

“No. Not right now. Not this soon. We’ll pick up a few things and figure out where we are going to go.”

“Where are we going to go?”

“I don’t know, yet.”

“My parents are still in Europe, but I’m sure they would let us use their house.”

“Jess, we still live here. We aren’t going running to another state because of this guy.”

“What guy? And what does he want?”

Jim walked closer to her and put his hand on her arm. “I wish I could tell you. You don’t know how much I wish I could.”

Jess put her hand up on his. “I know. We’ll make it through. You want to go see Carlos before we go?”

“Yeah, we should probably go see how he’s doin’.” He put his arm around her as they went out the door.

.....
“Carlos, do you do this to all the nurses or am I the only one blessed with all this attention?”

“I’m serious! This remote doesn’t work.”

“What’d you do? Take the batteries out?” She stood with her hands on her hips.

“Like I would do that.”

“Like you would do anything else! I don’t even think this is the right institution for you. What you really need is Juvenile Hall!”

“Melinda.”

“Carlos!” She walked toward the door just as Jim and Jess were coming in. Turning, she pointed her finger toward him. “DO NOT press that button one more time!” Indignantly, she shoved open the door and left. Jim and Jess just looked at Carlos a moment.

He returned a huge grin. “She’s crazy about me.”

Jim looked back at the door. “Yeah, I can see that.”

“So, old buddy, how’s the hero of the week?”

They walked toward him. Jim handed Morgan to Jessica. “Who?”

“You.”

Jim just stared at him blankly.

“Carrying a boy on your shoulders out of a blazing inferno of smoke and flames, then jumping from the grasps of death superhero style, just as the whole building crumbles into glowing coals and smoking cinders!”

Jim didn’t react. “Oh yeah, I forgot about that.”

Carlos mimicked him in a deep sarcastic voice. “Oh yeah, I forgot about that little incident.”

Jess smiled.

“How, Amigo, did you manage to let that slip your memory? It was just last night.”

“Well, I didn’t mean I forgot, actually. It’s just there’s been a lot going on since then.” He put one hand in his pocket.

“I heard about your baby. She okay?” He looked up at her in Jessica’s arms.

“Thankfully, she’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, you gotta keep a good eye on them furnaces.”

Jim looked down at the ground.

Jess smiled politely. “You sound like you’re feeling a lot better.”

“I am. Thanks. Though, if boredom could kill ya...”

“You’ll be out of here before you know it. From what I hear, hero is a word bein’ used here recently to describe you.”

“Well, yeah.” He raised his head in mock pride. “There have been those who feel I go very well with that word. It has always been thus.”

“That so?” Jim relaxed a little. “Seems to me I remember hearing...”

“Rumors. All rumors. You can’t trust ‘em.”

“Do tell?”

“Yeah.” He pushed himself up higher on his pillows and spoke slowly, adding emphasis to his next statement. “I bet you didn’t even know, that last night you jumped out of a six-story apartment building and landed on a highschooler.”

“Wha-at?”

“That was the earliest press release.”

Jim had to smile. “Oh, brother.”

.....

Wade had his arm around Mellissa as they stood outside and watched the ambulance personnel zip closed the black body bag and lift the old man’s body into the ambulance.

“Oh, Wade.” Mellissa put her hand over her mouth. She began to sob. “Poor Frank. His family... I gave it to him... I gave him that poison.”

“No, you didn’t. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Now, he’s after us.” She turned toward Wade with tear-stained face. “He wants to kill us! Why? ... It has to be Jim.” Her voice was high-pitched yet quiet.

“No. No one even knew he was coming home with us.”

“Well, someone must have figured it out. There’s no other reason, Wade.” She sniffed back more tears.

“It doesn’t make sense. He couldn’t have just seen Jim come with us last night and have time to get a package here the next morning UPS.”

“He seems to have his ways. How’d he manage poison chocolate? Correct me if I’m wrong, but it’s not usually sold in aisle seven.” She looked up into Wade’s face. “You think he’s after us?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yes you did. Wade there’s no reason... We don’t have any enemies. It has to be Jim. If we just stay away from them, he’ll stop.”

Wade didn’t answer, but the concern on his face did.

“He will.” Mellissa tried to insist.

.....

Jim buckled Morgan in her car seat. He looked up at Jess standing

beside him. She rubbed her arms, shivering gently from the chilly autumn breeze. Worry was written on her face. "You all right?"

She nodded her head slowly. Jim decided to open her door for her, but instead of getting in, she walked up close to him, her head almost touching his shoulder, offering herself for a hug. Jim, wrapping his arms securely around her, let his head fall down next to hers.

Her heart that had been chilled by hateful threats began to warm. She put her arms around his waist and buried her face in his shoulder. She felt safe with him. She'd never seen him run from danger. He ran toward it, attacked it, at times almost daring it to stop him, yet still, he was careful and wise.

She put her hand on his muscular arm. He was strong, very strong, yet more than that, he was loyal, and he was only hers. His life was governed by God. He always tried to do the right thing. Never once had she questioned her trust of him. She turned her head to look up at him. "I love you."

Without answering, he brought his face to hers, letting their lips connect. She put her hands up around his neck, intentionally lengthening the duration of the kiss.

Afterwards, she kept her face close to his, "You know, I haven't asked you yet how you're feeling today." She kept her voice at a whisper.

"I could use a shower." He returned the whisper.

"I can smell that, just like I can *see* that you slept in your clothes." They were still face-to-face, enjoying the closeness.

"You know, I could spend all day just gazing into those dazzling, chestnut eyes of yours, *but* it may be in both of our best interests if I sit down soon." He accidentally swayed to the side and had to catch himself on the van.

"Yeah, I can see." She snatched the keys from him. "I'll drive." Spinning around, she was over at the driver's side before he could answer.

"Stop by Wade's. I need to give him back his phone." He tried not to groan as he got in.

"Okay."

Jim shifted around in the seat, trying to find a comfortable position as Jess backed the car out. Resting his head on the window and closing his eyes, he tried to relax.... If only he could.

.....

.....

Wade came to the door after Jessica had rung the doorbell a couple of times. His face was unusually solemn.

“Hi, wanted to return your phone.” Jim held it out.

Wade accepted it, but his face didn’t soften.

“And I think I left my jacket in the bedroom.”

Wade stood to the side of the door. “You can come in and get it.”

When they came in, they saw Mellissa sitting on the couch staring off into the distance. Her face was red and tearstained.

“What’s wrong?” Jess looked up at Wade then walked over. Sitting down next to Mellissa, she put her arm around her. “What happened?”

“He’s after us, now.” She wiped her nose with a Kleenex.

“What?”

“He killed my boss.”

Jess jumped up and began to walk backwards. *He did it. He actually... killed someone.* Jess stood shocked. She felt as if she’d been hit by a millstone. Someone *was* dead... murdered.

Mellissa put her face in her hands and began to weep.

Jim looked over at Wade.

“I was sent a dead animal in the mail with a note. At the same time, she was sent a box of chocolates... poison.”

Mellissa looked up still crying uncontrollably. “Go! Please go!”

Jim gently grabbed his wife’s arm, and they began to back up. “I’m sorry. I...”

Wade followed them to the door. “She didn’t mean that. She’s just very...”

“If I would have known.... I mean if I would have even thought that...”

“It couldn’t have had anything to do with you. It just doesn’t come together. She’ll realize that.” He stopped at the door as they walked out.

Jess turned back. “Do the police...?”

Wade shook his head. “They took all the stuff into evidence, but they didn’t sound very hopeful.”

“What about video cameras? The guy who delivered it?” Her voice was hopeful, but Wade was still shaking his head. “Standard delivery boy

from the shop.”

Jess looked down. Why couldn't anyone find any clues?

“Just be careful, okay?”

Jim nodded, and they turned to go.

Jess felt numb as she got back in the truck. They were being stalked by a phantom killer. No one knew who, why, or how to protect themselves.

Neither said a word as they drove home. Neither knew what to say or how to react. They were both absorbed in their own thoughts, yet each felt comfort in the other one's presence.

Jess stared out the passenger's window, dazed, unable to think. Fear, terror, and horror all rose within her. This was something like she had never experienced, never considered, something foreign that she had no clue how to handle. Silent tears streamed down her face.

Jim stared straight ahead at the road. He didn't know what to do. He felt helpless. He couldn't run toward this problem with a hose or a fire extinguisher. He couldn't fix it. He hadn't seen him, heard him, or even felt his presence. He hadn't even known, yet three times this murderer had tried to steal the life of his wife, and he had been helpless to stop it. He wasn't able to protect her. He felt blind, unable to see a killer that had to be right under his nose. *“I will bring the blind by the way that they know not; I will lead them in the paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them and not forsake him. (Isaiah 42:16)”* The words came to him as if a message from heaven. He hadn't heard that verse in years, yet there it was, and it was true. God knew who it was, and He would show them. *“I will bring the blind by the way that they know not... I will make darkness light...and not forsake them.”* Lord, you know what's going on. It's no surprise to you. *Please, show us. Thank you for protecting us. Please continue to.”*

Jim turned into the driveway and pulled to a stop in front of the barn.

“Why'd you stop here?” Jess's voice was strained.

“I want to get the gun and go in the house first.”

“Why?”

“Just in case.”

“Jim?”

“I'll come back out and get you.” Starting to get out of the truck, he turned back and looked her in the eye. “If anything happens, I want you to drive away as fast as you can and don't stop till you get to town. Then call

the police.”

“Jim, let’s just get out of here. Please, Jim, let’s just leave.”

“We have to feed the animals. We have to get food for ourselves. We don’t have any money till next Friday. We have to get things for the baby. We need to be able to go in our own house.” He got out of the truck.

“Jim?”

He stopped.

“You think he’s here, don’t you?”

“I don’t know. Just do as I asked.”

“Be careful.”

He walked away toward the barn. He felt a surge of energy as he walked. All pain was replaced by the effects of adrenaline. Something was about to happen. He could feel it.

Jess scooted over to the driver’s seat, keeping herself low. Even Morgan’s gurgling in the back seat seemed in these circumstances very loud. Squeezing her eyes shut, she began to pray, earnestly.

As Jim entered the barn, all his senses quickly sharpened. His eyes moved swiftly in every direction. He noticed the slightest sound. He felt the presence of a bird in the rafters.

A few minutes later, Jim returned, a handgun hidden under his shirt. He handed a derringer to Jess as he passed by. She continued praying for him as he walked toward the house. She had the feeling, now, too. Something was about to happen. She watched in the rearview mirror as he walked past the porch swing, then, gun in hand, carefully entered the house.

As Jim entered the house, he could feel another person’s presence. He wasn’t alone. Gun ready, he took a few steps forward, looking in every direction. Where was he? *Lord, please make this darkness light before me.* Hearing a noise behind him, he jumped to the side just before a gunshot rang out. Immediately, he dove behind the sofa.

At the sound of the gunshot Jess jerked her head back toward the house, waiting a moment for return fire, but none came. “No. Please, God, no.” *Go.* She glanced toward the house then looked back at Morgan. *GO!* Jerking the gears in reverse, she spun the tires backwards. Then pulling the car around, she sped out of the drive and down the road. *Please, Lord, protect my husband. Please, Lord, please!*

Gravel flew up as she sped around a tight curve. Her hand shook as she tried to open the lid of her cell phone. Before she could dial, she

dropped it on the floor.

.....

Jim crouched behind the couch. He waited several moments. That one shot seemed to be it. Crawling to the end of the couch, he cautiously looked out.

Nothing.

He crawled away from his shield a little further. *GO BACK!*

He swung behind the sofa just as another bullet rushed past him. Twisting too far, he fell hard on his side. He felt something snap. Pain screamed through his ribs and the breath went out of him. He fell onto his back in pain.

Get up! He yelled at himself. Still clutching the gun, he rolled back to his knees. With his free hand he held his side. Where was this guy? Why couldn't he see him?

He took deep breaths trying to lessen the pain. Here he was kneeling between the couch and the wall getting shot at and without the faintest idea of what to do. He could shoot back, but only in the general direction of the sound. He replayed the layout of the house in his mind, trying to figure out where he could be hiding.

.....

Jess swerved off the gravel road onto the main drag. She snapped her cell phone closed. Help was on the way. She just hoped and prayed that it wasn't too late.

She glanced back at Morgan in the back seat, who was crying and screaming from fear of the accelerated ride. Jess glanced down the road. Wal-Mart was coming up. She would stop there and wait for the news.

.....

A shower of bullets whizzed over Jim's head through the upper portion of the couch and stuck like darts in the wall. Jim lay on his stomach, protected by the hide-a-way bed in the lower part. He still wasn't sure how to return fire without getting shot himself. ~ *"I will bring the blind by the way that they know not...."*

Suddenly it hit him. There was a spot in the kitchen where a person

could be in plain sight, yet not seen from the living room. He'd never really thought about it as a "blind spot" before. That didn't mean it wasn't there.

Using his arm to push off the floor, he managed to turn himself without raising his body. When he was in the best position, he prayed while waiting for a break in the firing.

As soon as it came, he rose up and took a shot in that direction.

Instantly, he heard pots and dishes clang and crash on the floor. He quickly lay back down. Either he'd hit him, come close, or hit a stack of dishes. He assumed from the heavy fire earlier that there would be retaliation, but there was none – *silence*. He waited a few minutes then jumped up and took another shot before falling back down.

Silence.

Was he gone?

He lay there for several moments, listening intently for any hint of activity. There was none, until he heard the welcome sound of sirens approaching in the distance.

.....

Jess prayed repeatedly for Jim as she nervously rocked Morgan in her arms. Her mind filled only with desperate pleadings for her husband's safety. *Please, let him be all right. Please, Lord, please.* She looked down at their baby. *We need him.*

"Take me out to the ballgame...."

Her attention immediately drew to the cell phone. Transferring her baby's weight to one arm, she quickly grabbed the phone and snapped open the lid. "Hello?"

"Hi, Jessica? This is Trent." Trent was a police officer who went to their church.

"Is Jim all right?" her voice was urgent.

"Yes, he's okay. They're taking him to the hospital, now. Though, I'm not sure if they convinced him to go peaceably. They might end up hog-tying him." His voice sounded as though he was watching the scene unfold at that moment and finding it humorous.

"He's hurt?" Morgan began to cry. Jess took her mouth from the phone and began to bounce the baby on her knee "Shh, shh, shh."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to make light of the situation. I think it has to do

with broken ribs. He wasn't injured by the bullets." He talked louder over some background noise. "Just a second." He paused to talk with one of his men.

Relief swept over Jess. He was all right. He hadn't been shot. *Thank you, Lord. Thank you.* He was all right.

Trent came back on the phone. "So, yeah, he's going to be fine. He wanted me to call you, and ask you to meet him at the hospital."

"Yes. I'm on my way." Jess started the car.

"Did you see anything when you were here?"

"No. All I heard was a gunshot. Then I left like Jim asked me to." She backed out.

"A gunshot? You must of left in a hurry. Wish my wife was that obedient."

"You mean there was more than one?"

"I'll let Jim show you your house."

She put her head back. *What next? ... Thank you for protecting him.*

"Please... Please, tell me you got him."

There was a pause. "I'm sorry."

No-o-oo. "Don't you have any clues?"

"We'll figure it out."

When? She pulled out of the parking lot onto the road.

"Where are you?"

"I just left the Wal-Mart parking lot."

"Okay. That's where Jim figured you'd end up. I sent a squad car out that way. He should be there shortly to follow you to the hospital. Wait for him."

Jess put her hand over her forehead. Now she needed an escort just to go across town. Why was this happening? She pulled the truck to the shoulder. "Are you sure you don't have any idea who this could be or why he's doing this?"

"I know it's hard... really hard, especially after what happened to Mellissa today. We're working on it. We will figure it out."

Yeah, just make sure it's included in our obituary when you finally do. She felt a pang of guilt. *That wasn't fair. They're trying.* "Thanks for trying."

"We'll find out more soon." She heard more background noise of people talking to him. "I need to go, but sometime today I need to talk to

you both more in depth about this situation.”

“Okay. That’ll be fine. Bye.”

She noticed a police car come up behind her so she pulled back onto the road. The only thing she wanted right now was to see Jim, to touch him, and know he was all right.

.....

As Jess walked into the hospital carrying Morgan in her baby carrier, she looked back over her shoulder, wondering if the police car was going to leave or just sit there and wait. She supposed she should be grateful for the protection, but she had always hated extra attention. It made her feel like she had to watch every move to make sure she was acting appropriate.

She walked up to the desk. “Excuse me, but do you know where my husband, Jim Richards, is?”

The nurse pointed over her shoulder, quickly explaining the way to the room.

“Thank you.” Jess pushed through the heavy double doors and started down the hallway.

“Mrs. Richards?”

She stopped at the deliberate voice of Dr. Fredricks. Actually, he was one person she was in no mood to talk to right now. Why couldn’t he just make an attempt at being congenial? She turned toward him. “How’s Jim?”

“I guess you already know that your husband doesn’t have a great deal of sense.”

Jessica stepped back indignantly, momentarily forgetting her manners. “Is there something you wanted?”

“Does your husband listen to you?”

Jessica just looked at him a moment, wondering what he was getting at. Either way she answered, it could leave her wide open for another series of remarks. “Jim always listens to me then he makes up his own mind on how to proceed. Most of the time, I find his decisions to be ones I can trust.”

He paused, deciding not to respond. Instead, he handed her a paper, which, upon reading, she found to be a prescription. She looked back up at him. “Maybe *you* can try and get this one filled since the one I gave him last night so quickly found its way to the trash can.” Without explaining

what it was for, he turned and left.

Jess glanced back down at the paper as she turned around and continued toward Jim's room. Arriving, she pushed open the door.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, buttoning his shirt, Jim looked up and gave a tired smile when he saw her.

She held up the paper as she walked over. "Dr. Fredricks does not approve." She set the baby carrier on the floor next to the bed.

Jim huffed. "What? He goes through the trash cans, now?"

"I'm surprised he didn't grill you about it."

"That makes two of us." He groaned as he tried to tuck in his shirt. "He has a heart after all."

"He probably figured it wouldn't do any good, seein' how stubborn you can be." She sat down next to him and put her hand on his arm. "Are you all right?"

He nodded. "I'm fine." His face was close to hers. The deep lines on his forehead revealed concern. "Are you?"

Placing her arms around his neck, she embraced him tightly. "I was so worried about you. When I heard that gunshot, I was afraid..."

"I know." He squeezed her close to himself. "We're both fine. We're all fine." Pain seared through his side as he pulled her tighter, but it was worth it just to be able to hold her. A few hours earlier, he was wondering if he would ever be able to do this again.

Tears began to roll down her face again. "I love you so much. Don't you ever leave me. I couldn't live without you."

Jim stared ahead at the wall, his face set in anger. He just couldn't comprehend why anyone would be after Jessica. He brought his hand higher, touching the softness of her nut-brown hair. Whoever this murderer was, he had better pray that he would never succeed.

Jess released her grip. "Are you planning to stay overnight?"

"Don't start that again, Jess." He grimaced as he pushed himself off the bed.

"Well, where are we going to go? We can't go home. We don't have any money for a hotel."

"I know all that."

"Where are we going to go?"

"Pastor Thomas came by a few minutes ago and asked the same thing. I told him we'd probably go to your parents' house. He asked us to come

and stay with them, at least tonight. I told him what happened to Wade and Mellissa, but it didn't seem to make any difference. He just said that he knew we'd be careful and that he'd expect us tonight. Then he left."

"I'm glad we don't have to travel all the way to my parents' house tonight, but I'd just feel horrible if anything happened to them."

"We just have to make sure there is no way for anyone to figure out where we are, for all of our safety."

"Do you think he's going to try and follow us?" She rubbed the top of her arms as if the thought gave her chills.

"I don't know, but I'm not going to stop till no one's behind us."

As they walked out into the parking lot, Jess noticed the police car still sitting there. "So much for no one following us."

"Why?" Jim looked at her.

Jess subtly pointed to the police car. "Trent designated us an escort."

Jim sighed, "That's one escort that we'll just have to do without. Take Morgan to the car. I'll talk to him."

Jess buckled Morgan in her car seat, then sat down on the passenger side. Looking in the mirror, she watched the conversation, which seemed to get heated at times.

Coming back, Jim almost slammed the door as he got in the car.

"What did he say?"

"No."

"I'll call Trent and ask him."

Jim backed up rather fast then started out the drive, and, sure enough, their escort followed.

"It's busy," Jess reported as Jim sped up through a stale yellow light. "Why'd you do that?" She looked back at the police car stopped on the other side, getting her answer. "Jim, all we need right now is a traffic ticket." She grabbed the car door as Jim sped around three cars before turning sharply into a residential area. He zig-zagged through a few blocks then headed back in the direction they had come.

"Jim, you're going the wrong direction. Did you let the doctor give you something I don't know about?"

Jim just gave her an unimpressed glance.

"Why go through all this for that police car? They were gone a long time ago, and they were the only ones following us."

"That you know of."

Jess pushed some hair back behind her ears. “I just can’t believe anyone would be this determined. Why?”

“I don’t know, and I hope he’s not, but at this point, I don’t feel like taking any chances.”

“But why are we going this way? We’re going out of town.”

“Just temporarily.” He sped the car up very fast, leaving all the cars behind him in the dust. When he was a good bit away, he switched off the headlights and squealed a last-minute turn onto a gravel road.

Jess, who had covered her eyes in the process of that last, literally blind turn, slowly lifted her face from her hands. “Are you sure you don’t want me to drive?” She couldn’t see his reaction because of the pitch blackness. The only lights were on the clock and the dash. She felt the car slow down a great deal. “Um, Jim, wouldn’t you like to turn the lights on now? Nothing personal. I just have this thing about driving down gravel roads at night when you can’t see where you are going.”

“That’s why I got the windows down. You can hear and feel the grass when you get to the edge. Besides there’s a moon”

“When exactly do you plan to turn the lights back on?”

“When we’re in the Pastor’s garage.”

Oh, great. Jess leaned her head back against the seat. *Lord, please protect us... again.*

Jim looked out the open window at the stars. “Morgan sure is quiet.”

“Her vocal chords are probably paralyzed from fear,” Jess replied, trying to watch the road, yet not seeing any.

They came into town on a back road, and then wound through a few dark streets and alleys before finally arriving at the parsonage. Looking over his shoulder and in all the mirrors, Jim pulled the truck into the garage.

As they entered the house, it was like stepping into a different world. It was bright and warm and cozy. A fire crackled in the living room, and the delicious aroma of home cooking enticed Jessica to go in the kitchen.

Mrs. Thomas – slightly overweight, short, with blonde hair (probably colored), a sweet, ready smile, rosy cheeks, and kind eyes – definitely the proverbial Grandma, came walking in the room, wiping her hands on her apron. “Hello, you two. Come on in. I know it’s late, but we haven’t eaten yet, so I was just whipping together a little supper. I hope you’ll join us.”

Jess shifted Morgan’s weight to her hip. “That’s very kind of you. It’s

kind of you to let us stay here, especially considering....” She looked down at Morgan.

“It’s nothing, Sweetheart. We are glad to be able to share our house with you. Now, I want you both just to make yourselves at home.”

Jess smiled.

Pastor came in and stood behind his wife. “I hope you guys are hungry. Nancy cooked enough to feed an army.”

Mrs. Thomas playfully slapped her husband. “Oh, you.” Her voice crackled.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Jess said, remembering she hadn’t eaten since breakfast. “I’m starving.” She looked over at Jim. She didn’t think he had eaten all day. “Although I think Morgan could use some shuteye. Maybe we should have bought a portable crib.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, Honey. Frank says, ‘I never throw anything away,’ and he’s probably right, but the good side of that is you always have something when you need it. The crib’s already set up in your bedroom.”

Jess couldn’t help being surprised. “Great! Thanks.”

“Okay, well, your room is the first one when you turn into the hall. Get yourselves all settled then come to supper when you’re ready. It should be done in about five minutes.”

Jess smiled. “Thanks again.” She glanced at Jim as she started walking. He followed, staring straight ahead, acting very tired, almost mechanical. She opened the door to their room and stepped in. “Jim, are you all right? You haven’t said a word since we got here.”

“Just tired.” He walked over and lay down on the bed.

Jess put Morgan into her crib and came over to him, but he was already asleep. She wished he would have eaten something, but she knew he needed the rest. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she looked at him while untying his shoes. His face was sweaty. She figured, from the pain. Even in sleep, it bore the lines of concern she’d almost grown accustomed to seeing, lately.

She took off one shoe and started on the other. He needed a shower and a shave. He still smelled strongly of smoke from the fire yesterday. His hair was beginning to look greasy, and rough stubble covered his face.

She smiled as she looked into his face. He was so strong. That’s probably one of the first things she’d ever noticed about him. Quitting was

Firestorm

not an option until everyone was safe. He could push himself to the limit and then some and still manage to come out on top.

She got up and covered him with a blanket. Then, turning the lights out, she left for supper.

Chapter Eight

The next morning, Wade got up early. He had left his extra set of keys and his debit card in his jacket at the station, so he figured he'd better go get them this morning. He almost wasn't sure that he should leave Mellissa. He would just make sure he was back before she left for work and go over with her.

He poured orange juice over his Cheerios because there wasn't any milk left. If she didn't go get groceries pretty soon, he was going to have to. No, all he would have to do is offer, and she would be running for the store. It was just like his cooking. No matter how hard he tried, no one ever seemed to appreciate it.

It wasn't his fault. It had only taken him four hours because that's how long it took him to figure out the list. Even then, she complained he had gotten it wrong. The list said, "g. crackers." That could very easily have meant Gambini Saltines, but no, she wanted graham crackers. "Org." could have just as easily meant original instead of organic. And "wh. bread" could have meant white, not wheat. Seriously, how's a guy supposed to check every grape and banana to make sure they aren't rotten, and just because he came home with a few extras, like donuts, candy bars, power tools, and a new TV set, you'd think the world was coming to an end.

He opened the drawer to get a spoon. Along with it, he picked up a piece of paper stuck in the back. Sitting down at the table, he smiled as he looked at it. That brought back memories – the very first time he had cooked for his in-laws, just a few days after their honeymoon; only Mellissa hadn't been home to save him.

He put the paper down next to his bowl and began to eat his cereal. He smiled. Practically everyone in town had been involved in that meal: his in-laws, his neighbors, the fire department...the police department...the electric company. He picked up the paper again. Afterwards, he had compiled himself a top ten list of things he had learned.

#1 – Don't invite the in-laws for your first attempt cooking.

#2 – If you do invite said parties, keep Mother calm if fire breaks out. Screams may alert neighbors to call police.

#3 – Don't put so much oil in pan that it boils over on the hot burner (Fire may appear).

Firestorm

#4 – Use timer – that’s what it’s there for.

#5 – If you think a recipe calls for over a cup of baking powder, reread.

#6 – Take the frozen corn out of the plastic bag and add water before boiling.

#7 – When cooking a premade pie, note that plastic wrap is not a suitable replacement for tin foil, when covering.

#8 – Bake and Broil are not the same thing.

#9 – Install smoke alarms so you can call the fire department before your neighbors do.

#10 – If any are available, count your blessings --- At least, the stove wasn’t gas.

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Jessica rolled over half sleep. Realizing she had the whole bed to herself, she woke up with a start. “Jim?”

“What?”

She glanced over to see him sitting in the chair in the corner reading his Bible.

“What are you doing?” she yawned.

“Reading.”

“I expected you to sleep in. You looked dead last night.”

“Trying to figure out what we are doing wrong.”

Jess pushed herself up on her pillow. “What makes you think we are doing anything wrong?”

He looked up from his Bible. “Why is all this happening to us if we’re not?”

“I don’t know.” She looked toward the wall then back at him. “It doesn’t mean we’ve done something wrong.”

“Then why?”

She shrugged. “Don’t ask me. I don’t even know who’s after us.”

Jim gave her a “see” look and then looked back down, turning a couple of pages.

“I do believe that this has a purpose. We aren’t just a victim of circumstances. I’m sure God has a plan through all this.”

“As long as we survive it.”

“Maybe God’s doing something wonderful, and we just don’t know what it is.”

“Maybe we’ll all end up dead.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “Jim you are an eternal pessimist.” Rolling over, she pulled her covers up as she lay down. “Go to sleep.”

“How can you *sleep* at a time like this?”

“*I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, Lord, only makest me to dwell in safety (Psalm 4:8),*” she mumbled groggily.

Jim let his eyebrows jump as he looked back down.

Jess felt a need to pray, pray for protection from Satan’s attack, pray that this trial would have a purpose and that she would see it, and pray that they would be used greatly in God’s perfect plan but also that they would all survive this trial and grow old together as a complete family. She couldn’t pray that none of them would be hurt. She didn’t know why. So, she prayed that none of them would be killed or suffer permanent damage. She had a passing feeling that something was about to happen, but she didn’t feel fear. She had a perfect peace. She knew her Father was in control. Her eyes grew heavy, and she fell asleep.

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After arriving at the station, Wade jerked open his locker to get his jacket. He was surprised to find Derrick’s clothes in it. *I guess they must have switched the lockers.* As he began to close the door, something in the bottom back corner caught his attention.

He knelt down and picked it up. It was a receipt from UPS. He quickly stuffed it in his pocket. *If this matches the ‘dead duck’ box....*

“What are you doing?”

Derrick! Had he seen him take the receipt? He glanced back. He was standing right behind him. Shivers went through Wade. He felt as though he was about to be as dead as that poor mallard. *What am I doing?* His mind raced. How was he supposed to explain kneeling down inspecting the bottom of Derrick’s locker? An open can of pop in the corner caught his attention. *Perfect.* Silently, he grabbed it and dumped some on the bottom of the locker. Then he stood up holding the can. “Your pop got on the floor of your locker.” It wasn’t a lie. He handed Derrick the can.

Derrick accepted the can, but then piercingly stared deep into Wade’s

eyes a moment, causing him to want to back up. He couldn't tell if he had bought it or not. "I take it they switched the lockers."

"Yours is seven." Derrick continued to stare.

Wade took a few steps backward before breaking the gaze to open his locker. Wade felt breathless. That was him. He *looked* like a murderer. His eyes were stone cold and piercing, sending chills up and down his spine. Wade glanced sideways at him as he grabbed his jacket. "What are you doing here today anyway? Isn't this your day off?"

"Filling in. Why are *you* here?"

He held up his phone and keys. "Forgot these." He managed a smile. Derrick didn't return it. After closing his locker, Wade took one more look into Derrick's eyes. His dark skin and hair just made his sapphire eyes even more deep and daunting.

Derrick reached for his locker door and awkwardly closed it with his left hand.

He's right handed. "Something wrong with your right arm?" *A bullet wound maybe?*

"No."

Wade didn't buy it. He had talked to Trent last night. He told him that Jim might have shot the killer. It was him. It had to be. Wade turned to go. He felt Derrick watching him leave. It was all becoming crystal clear. The day of the arson – Derrick had been "sick." The carbon monoxide – time set. Yesterday's poison chocolates and shooting – both after he got off work.

Wade walked out into the parking lot. He'd go home and check the label just to be sure. Then he would accompany Mellissa safely to work. After that, he was going to the police station to put an end to this once and for all.

.....

BURRRUZZZ!!!

Derrick hopped into the squad with Rick, his partner for the day, while the others piled into the engine.

Seatbelts, ignition, lights, sirens, gas!

They headed out toward the reported restaurant fire. As they pulled up, they noticed smoke coming out of the back window, but it didn't seem that

bad, yet. As the guys from the engine company hooked up the hoses, Derrick and Rick got ready to go in and make sure everyone was evacuated.

They weren't.

As they walked in, they quickly noticed a huge crowd gathered around the kitchen watching the action. The smoke was still a thin haze in that room. As they got closer, they heard the sound of breaking dishes mixed with a very heated Latino argument that sounded like gibberish to Rick. Derrick and Rick rounded a table on opposite sides as they heard spurts of frantic Italian join in the mix of the conversation.

"Okay, Folks. I'm afraid the show's over. We need to clear the building." Rick ordered the inquisitive, chattering crowd. "Come on. You need to all leave, now... and stay away from the building." The crowd began to slowly disperse. "Thank you."

Entering the kitchen, Rick had to duck in order to avoid a flying Dutch oven. He looked up a moment, surprised at the chaotic scene. With a growing fire climbing the wall for a backdrop, two Mexican men were yelling and fighting over a tank of something, while one frantic Italian chef ran in and out of the back door, trying desperately to save all his cooking accessories.

"Sir," Rick reached for the chef, but jumped back as... *WHOOSH!* Fire exploded, sucking up the curtains as if they were paper.

Rick backed up, dodging the unfazed, charging Italian who was still violently grasping for his pans. "Wait a minute!" He tried to yell over the ruckus, but no one acknowledged him. He looked over at Derrick, who had joined the Latino argument. He fit right in... but Rick couldn't understand a word anyone was saying. He felt like he had been transported south of the border. Eyeing the fire, he went toward them, hopping out of the way of the determined chef, then turning to tell him... but he was already gone. Maybe he'd stay out this time. He redirected his energy to the looming fight which Derrick seemed to be *joining*... not ending.

The one it seemed that Derrick had joined forces with was a small man, hardly bigger than a jockey. The other man looked like a cross between Goliath and a middle line backer. At the moment, all three were yelling in Spanish and tugging on a can of... *Uh oh*. That label was definitely not in Spanish! Rick got the message loud and clear... PROPANE! Whoa! He walked closer to the commotion. "Guys! Guys,

listen!” No one acknowledged him. “We need to get that out of here away from the fire!”

Derrick paused long enough to shoot him a sarcastic look, “No kidding!” He resumed pulling.

“Derrick, what’s going on?”

Derrick ignored him.

“Derrick!” Rick grabbed his arm.

“The owner...” He jerked at the can. “...is trying to blow up his building... along with half the block... and some of us are trying to stop him.” He yanked harder.

“We need to get out of here!” He had to yell over the fire-noise.

“Brilliant deduction!”

Well, it was Shrimpy and Derrick vs. Goliath, and Rick had no idea how to fit into this equation. His eyes moved back and forth, assessing the scene.

Here was a can of Propane.

Tug-of-war was getting nowhere.

The fire was only escalating.

The chef was back.

Where are those guys with the hose? Rick thought about hitting the guy over the head with something. He wished he could. He glanced around. Besides, due to the rapid pace that the kitchen was being cleared there wasn’t much left to use.

“Excuse me.”

Rick grabbed the Italian’s shirtsleeve as he again passed by. “You need to get out of here.” Rick pointed toward the door.

The man yelled something in his foreign dialect, jerking his arm away and bending down to retrieve his rather large meat cleaver.

Rick smiled nervously at the threat and decided to turn his attention to the larger threat as he noticed Derrick, Shrimpy, and the propane tank getting dragged closer and closer toward the ever-growing inferno.

Rick decided he would try the surprise approach. Running toward Goliath, he made a flying leap up and wrapped his arm in a choke-hold around the guy’s neck, his feet coming almost a foot off the ground. *This guy’s had it.* ... At the time, Rick wasn’t aware he was talking to himself.

Goliath grabbed Rick’s arms, lunged his upper body forward and flipped Rick over his head... over Derrick’s head...over Shrimpy’s head...

over Italian packrat's head... and for a crash finish into the stove.... *Ouch!* Rick slumped down on the floor. *But hey, at least he dropped the can.*

Derrick grabbed it and made a break for the back door. He was almost through it when... *Ouch!* Goliath tackled him.

Well, the scenario *had* changed. Now, they were much, much, closer... *to the fire.*

Shrimpy decided to abandon ship, darting out the front way. Rick really felt like following him.

Grimacing, Rick got to his feet. He still had no idea why this guy was trying to blow up half the block, but he did know that they were running out of time to stop it. He glanced over at the prospering fire. *Where are those guys with the hose?* He'd go out himself to get reinforcements except he was afraid if he left, they would all be blown into next Tuesday. There had to be a solution. He coughed into his sleeve on the smoke. Even with all the ventilation from open doors and windows the room was beginning to fill. His brow furrowed. The greatest concentration of flames was right where the two men were fighting. He felt like diving for a corner and covering his head every time a flame jumped toward the tank.

Finally, Derrick, able to get a good strong kick into Goliath's knee, caused him to reel and drop the tank.

Rick took a few steps toward it, then stopped. Watching the two men wrestle above it, he eagerly waited for the right opportunity. It was like watching a dog and a bear. Derrick was fast, but Goliath packed the punch of a bulldozer, and every time Derrick was hit, it was almost "lights out" ... for all of them.

Rick could hear Derrick wheezing from the smoke. *Come on!* Eyeing the can, he wished he could get to it. The fire was just about a foot away. He didn't know what to do. As his mind searched for options, Derrick pulled all his strength together and with one final blow knocked the man out.

Rick did a double-take, stepping back in surprise. *Whoa.* For a moment, he just stared at the mammoth man lying on the ground then glanced up at Derrick, particularly the protruding muscles on his arms. He'd never noticed them before. *Mental note: don't mess with that guy.*

Derrick quickly grabbed the can and stumbled out the door.

Rick rolled his eyes as Mr. Chef ran past him again. Snagging his arm, he jerked him out the door, crock-pot and all. In the alley, Rick looked over

at Derrick. He was leaning against the adjacent brick building, coughing and hacking uncontrollably.

Rick glanced back toward the restaurant. The fire was closing in, and Goliath was still lying facedown on the floor. Rick ran in after him. Bending down, he tried to pull him out the door, but could barely budge the more than four-hundred pound man. The fire was closing in around the doorway. Rick looked over at his only option. “Derrick! Help me!” The heat grew more and more intense.

Derrick, still wheezing, head throbbing, pulled himself up, took a few steps, and fell back against the wall.

Rick gagged on the smoke. The heat began to burn his arms. Pushing off the wall, hunched over, Derrick staggered over to them. His legs felt like rubber as he bent down and grasped the unconscious giant. Struggling, they pulled him into the alley just as the hungry flames engulfed the exit. Relieved, they both fell back against the adjacent building.

Rick wiped some soot from his face and coughed into his sleeve. He glanced over at Derrick who was kneeling, doubled over, and coughing profusely on his knee. Leaning his head back, Derrick gasped for air, but his lungs again rejected it. Rick went toward him just as two firefighters came past with a hose. “Where have you guys been?”

“Couldn’t get the hydrants to work.”

Rick rolled his eyes. *You might have come to help.*

He walked up to Derrick and put his arm under Derrick’s arms, supporting his body. “Come on.” He helped him walk out of the ally and toward the trucks. Feeling him slipping as they got close, he held him tighter, straining to keep him up until they got to the squad, where he let him fall to the ground.

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Jessica put Morgan in the highchair then sat down next to Jim at the Thomas’s round, oak kitchen table. She took a long whiff as she sat down. The delicious aroma of omelets sizzling on the griddle and bread toasting in the toaster brought a smile to her face.

Standing beside her, Jim just stared ahead at the wall. He didn’t smile. His eyes were tired. Though he hadn’t eaten at all yesterday, he wasn’t hungry. He knew he needed the food, but it didn’t look good to him. He

just felt so weary, so helpless, like his world was falling apart.

Jess glanced up at Jim. Taking his hand and pulling it around her waist, she leaned back against his shoulder out of habit, then remembering his ribs, she got off. Glancing up at him, she wondered why he hadn't reacted. It was like he didn't even notice the pain, and if he did, he didn't care. Her heart ached for him. She just wished she could see him smile again. She glanced over at the kitchen's entryway as Pastor walked in. As always, he had a warm friendly smile on his face. It wasn't hard to believe that he genuinely cared for every member of his congregation. It was in his eyes.

"How are you two doing this morning?" He walked up behind his wife, who was working at the griddle, and gave her a kiss.

Jess smiled. "After that delicious supper last night and a good night's sleep, much, much improved."

"That's good to hear." He turned toward them. His eyes moved to Jim, who didn't look up, but continued to stare down. Pastor just smiled and started helping his wife.

Jess watched the pastor as he began to slice tomatoes. He must have been around here practically forever. He'd been Jim's youth pastor before he became the senior pastor, and she could tell he still had a heart for the youth. He was big on trying to instill Christ-likeness and high morals in the next generation, in a time that they were so rapidly slipping away. He was very passionate about individuals. He greatly believed that every single person's life, no matter how ordinary or extravagant, athletic or disabled, diplomatic or rude; each one was more precious than all the riches of the world.

Letting go of Jim's hand, Jess walked over to the silverware drawer. She figured she could at least help set the table.

Mrs. Thomas glanced over her shoulder. "Oh, you don't have to do that, Honey."

"Oh, it's no problem. I want to." The silverware clattered as she slid shut the drawer. Arranging the forks she looked over at Jim. He was still standing, leaning with one hand on the chair, staring down at the table. Part of her wished she knew what he was thinking about. She sent up a silent prayer for him as she turned to get the glasses from the cupboard.

Pastor walked by toward his chair, lightly slapping Jim on the side of the neck as he passed. "So, how are you feeling this morning?"

Jess glanced over at Jim, wondering how he would answer. He didn't. So she did. "I'm not sure that he's totally awake, yet." She tried to cover for him, but the pastor wasn't buying it.

"Really? I thought I heard him up around four or five this morning." He was still staring at Jim.

So was Jess. "Yeah... he was." She felt like kicking him under the table – too bad they were both standing.

Finally, Jim responded. He stopped leaning against the chair and stood straight. "Sorry, I'm fine." His eyes didn't lighten.

Jess almost raised her eyebrows. *That sounded so convincing.* Maybe he needed to go back to sleep.

Mrs. Thomas came over and set down the plates of giant omelets, toast, and fruit salad at each place. "Here we go. Come on, everyone. Sit down."

"Thank you," Jess said, accepting hers and sliding it to the center of her placemat as she sat down.

"You're quite welcome." She set Jim's in front of him. "I must say that a shower and clean clothes does wonders for your appearance. I hardly recognized you last night."

Jim forced a smile as he accepted the omelet. "Thanks. Looks good." His voice was tired and hoarse.

Mrs. Thomas set down the pitcher of juice on the table, then took her seat.

Everyone seemed to be staring at Jim for a moment.

Jim just looked down, refusing eye contact, and feeling that if some of the attention didn't disperse from him soon he was going to get up and leave.

Jess, sensing the uneasiness in her husband, tried to direct the subject elsewhere after they finished praying for the food. "This morning I was reading in Psalms for my devotions, and I came across the verse, '*In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me. (Psalm 56:11)*' I just thought that went pretty well with our current situation."

Mrs. Thomas answered. "Yes, Honey, that verse has always been one of my favorites, especially during hard times. When you're putting your trust in the Creator of the universe and all mankind, you really don't have to worry about a thing. He knows all the angles to every situation, and He'll always do what's best for his own."

Jess smiled as she cut off another piece of her omelet with her fork. “My only problem is if we don’t agree on the best outcome at the time.” She smiled.

“Well, Honey, many people share that problem and some of them good Christians that turn away from God. The thing is that usually you can’t see the logic in any tragedy till years later. Some people never do. You just have to trust that the Creator is smarter than the creation.”

“Yes. I just have to remember life doesn’t just happen to people. He is in charge.”

Pastor Thomas nodded. “But don’t let your prayer life weaken. Remember the Christian life is a war. *The devil as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour* (1 Peter 5:8).”

That caught Jim’s attention, and he looked up. Jess looked down soberly.

“But you are right.” He smiled. “You can rest in the knowledge that God is stronger. Just stay close to Him.” He ate a piece of watermelon. “And rest assured, we will be praying for you both.”

Jess rushed to finish a bite of omelet . “I really appreciate that.”

“Don’t worry, Sweetheart. The Lord has definitely had his hand of protection on you, so far.”

Jessica smiled, playfully dropping her fork, trying to lighten the conversation. “Why is it that everyone that says that statement always has to end it with ‘so far’?” She cleared her throat and crossed her arms, chuckling.

Mrs. Thomas returned a lighthearted chuckle. “I’ll try and remember to leave that out next time.”

Jess smiled and picked up her fork. “This is really good.” She took another bite.

“Why, thank you. It’s got the works: tomatoes, green peppers, onion, ham, hash browns and, of course, cheese.”

Jess wondered if she was listing off the enticing ingredients for Jim’s benefit. “Well, it’s delicious.” She turned her head to look at Jim. He hadn’t touched his. Instead, he had his elbows on either side of the plate and his head in his hands. She noticed Pastor looking at him in concern, and she was beginning to feel the same way herself. She wasn’t sure what to say. She did know that sympathy made Jim feel very uncomfortable.

“Would you like something different?” Mrs. Thomas asked him.

Head still in his hands, he shook it. “No thanks.”

“How ‘bout some toast?” Pastor asked getting up from his chair. Jim didn’t answer so he figured that meant okay and went over to make it.

“I can do that.” Jess offered.

“No, that’s fine.”

Jess looked back at her husband. Now, she was beginning to worry. She hoped he was all right.

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Wade pulled up to the front door of the law office. He looked over at Mellissa who was just starting to open the car door. “You gonna be all right?”

“Yes. I’ve got a lot to do since....”

“Yeah, just take it easy. No one expects you to be perfect after what just happened.”

“I’ll be fine.” She got out of the car.

Wade watched her walk in, then put the car back into drive. *Now, to take care of the problem.* He stepped on the gas and headed toward the police station.

.....

“Hey, Kate.” A thin, sixteen-year-old girl with thick, dark hair that practically reached her waist, addressed the nurse at the front desk.

“Hey, Sam. How are you?”

“I’m good. You think Mom’s ready to go yet?”

“I doubt it. They just brought some into the ER, and they’re a little shorthanded today.”

Sam bent forward, resting her elbow on the desk and her chin in her palm. “You guys sure lay on overtime fast. How come she had to come in today, anyway? This is like, what, only the second Saturday since we moved here?”

“I don’t know, Sam. That’s just life.”

Sam ruffled the pages on a nearby stack of post-it-notes. “Not that I’d care normally, but I gave up a date for tonight because Dad’s coming home on leave, and *she* wanted everyone to be there. Now, guess who’s AWOL?”

Kate smiled as she began typing at the computer. “They’ll be other

dates.”

Sam shrugged. “He wasn’t so hot anyway, but you would *think* if Mom’s gonna insist that I be there, that she would be, too.”

Kate backspaced a line, and picked up her papers. “I’m sure she’ll be done soon.”

Sam ruffled the sticky-note pages for a minute longer then stood back up. “Maybe I’ll go see if I can catch her in the hall.”

The nurse gave her an unsure look. “Just don’t get in anyone’s way.”

“Have I ever?”

“You’ve only been here for...”

“First thing you’ve gotta learn about me is that I’m 100% reliable!”

Kate wasn’t sure how to interpret the obvious sarcasm in her voice. “Umm...”

“I’ll be good.” Sam smiled. “See you later.” She spun around and pushed open the heavy double doors.

.....

“Trent!” Wade went toward him in the ER hallway. “They told me I could find you here.”

Trent looked up at him. “What’s up?”

“I know who’s been trying to murder Jessica.”

Murder? Sam’s curiosity peeked as she walked by. She stopped behind an open door to listen.

“Who?”

“It’s Derrick. Derrick Lozano. He works with us down at the station.”

Derrick? Samantha stepped back a little further to make sure she couldn’t be seen.

“What’s his motive?”

“Who knows... but I found the receipt to that little death threat I was mailed the other day in his locker.”

Trent took the receipt and looked down at it. “He’s here now, in room five, waiting to be treated for smoke inhalation. Let me just check on this, then I’ll go talk to him.”

Talk to him? Arrest him! “Fine.”

Samantha nonchalantly backed up, then made her way to room five. As she opened the door and walked in, Derrick rolled onto his side and

looked up at her.

“Derrick?”

Derrick did a double-take. “Sam?” He propped himself up on his forearm. His voice was hoarse and his face was stained black.

She nodded her head.

“That’s really you?”

Tears began to roll down her face as she ran over and embraced him.

He returned it wholeheartedly. “I can’t believe it.”

“Derrick, it’s been so long. I didn’t know if you were alive or dead.”

“I know.” He released the embrace. “I wrote you, but you never wrote back.”

“I know. We moved.” She stepped back and wiped her tears with her hand. “I didn’t know where you were, to tell you.” She tried to stop crying and crossed her arms. “After all these years, and I finally find you just to hear that you’re mixed up in a murder somehow?”

Derrick sat up straight. “What are you talking about?”

“I heard some guy named Wade talking to a cop.” She wiped her eyes again. “He said that he had proof you mailed him a death threat or something. It isn’t... I mean, it can’t be true.”

Derrick began to untape the IV from his arm.

“Derrick, what’s going on?”

Derrick didn’t answer. After carefully removing the IV, he began to button his shirt as he stood up from the cot.

“Derrick, you can’t run away. They will think that it’s you for sure.”

She paused. “It isn’t, is it? I mean you couldn’t of... No. you couldn’t have changed that much.

Derrick forced the window up and stepped out.

“Derrick, don’t do this!”

Wade and Trent entered the room.

As soon as Derrick’s feet hit the pavement, he ran as fast as he could.

“Derrick! Please!” Sam yelled out the window.

Quickly sizing up the situation, Wade raced for the window and jumped out. Swiftly moving his eyes, he scanned the parking lot in all directions. “Derrick!”

He was gone.

.....

“Get your little one all tucked in for her nap?” Mrs. Thomas asked as Jessica came back into the living room.”

“Yep. She’s sleepin’ like a baby.”

Mrs. Thomas chuckled. “That’s good.”

“Jim’s still asleep, too. I’m kind of worried about him. He’s been asleep ever since breakfast, but that’s probably what he needs. He’s been getting pretty beat up lately.”

“I’ve heard. Though, if you’ll excuse me for saying, that’s not really too new for Jim, is it?” Mrs. Thomas joked.

Jess smiled. “Yeah, tell me about it. He always needs to be in the middle of the action.”

“And if there isn’t any, he tries very hard to find some. Don’t forget we had this guy in our youth group. Back then, he was always finding quite creative ways to break or dislocate parts of his body. After a while, you just got used to seeing him in a cast.”

Jess chuckled. “I know. I remember many-a-time after we got married, just staring at him in disbelief and saying, ‘Why in the world would you even want to do something like that?’ Response...”

“Because it’s fun.” They both said together.

Jess laughed, leaning her shoulder against the wall. “He’s calmed down a lot since then, though.”

“That’s good to hear.” She chuckled to herself then looked back up at Jess. “I’ll never forget the time he accidentally set the youth room on fire.”

“Seriously? He never told me about that.”

“Really? Now there are some stories I could tell you about that one.”

Jess walked over. Smiling slyly, she sat down on the edge of the couch. “Go ahead.”

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Wade stopped Trent in the hallway. “It’s been hours. What’s going on?”

Trent glanced around as if he wasn’t sure that he should answer him.

“Come on, Trent. I’m the one that called it in. Besides they’re my friends. I have a right to know if they’re in danger.”

“Every minute this guy’s out on the street they’re in danger. Right

now, we don't even know where Jim and Jessica are."

"Huh?"

"They made a point of making sure that no one followed them last night, and his cell phone's off."

.....

Jess sat curled up on the couch, leaning sideways against some pillows as she read her book. She never used to read much when she was younger, but now that she stayed home with Morgan and had more time, she found many books to be exciting.

Mrs. Thomas sat back in their recliner, rocking Morgan and rattling some keys for her to play with. Jess looked up from her story and glanced over at them.

"This little one needs her diaper changed." Mrs. Thomas said, in a loud whisper.

Jess swung her legs over the edge of the couch and put her book down. "We'd better do something about that." She bent down and tickled the baby. "Shouldn't we? Huh? Shouldn't we?"

Laughing, Morgan clapped her hands.

Jess picked her up. "We'll be back in a minute," she said, taking her toward the bedroom.

Mrs. Thomas was still gently rocking back and forth in the brown recliner when Jess returned. She came back and sat on the edge of the couch with Morgan in her lap. "Jim's still asleep. I called his name, and he didn't even stir."

"He's been through a lot. He probably just needs time to heal." She paused for a moment, staring out the window at the pleasant day. "The doctor said he was okay, right?"

"The doctor said that he should stay for observation, but you know Jim."

"Afraid of hospitals." She smiled at her.

"Yeah. You know why?"

Mrs. Thomas glanced back out the window. "Ask him."

Jess looked down at Morgan. "I didn't think we had any secrets between us."

"Honey, it's not a secret. It's just something that is very painful for

him. I doubt he has ever talked about it... to anyone. I do know that he loves you more than anything, and if you ask him, I bet he'd tell you."

"Maybe later." Jess reached over and picked up Morgan's doll. "She's out of diapers. I should go to the store and get some."

"I could call Frank and ask him to bring some when he comes home."

"She'll need them before that."

"I don't know, Honey. Jim was pretty careful that no one saw you last night."

"And no one did. So, no one's going to be watching. I'll just run down to the Dollar Store. It's only a few blocks away. Besides I'd like to get out for a few minutes."

"I don't know, Honey. If I could drive, I'd go, but...."

"I'll be careful."

"Maybe you should wake Jim."

She shook her head. "He's sick. He needs his rest. Besides I can be back in ten minutes or less."

She shrugged. "It's up to you."

Jess got up and handed Morgan to Mrs. Thomas. "Do you mind watching her?"

She positioned the little girl in her lap. "You don't have to twist my arm. I could spend all week with this little angel."

Jess smiled. "Thanks." She took her keys out of her outside pocket as she picked up her purse. "Be back in a minute." She headed for the door.

"Be careful, Honey."

"I will be." She threw her jacket on and went out into the attached garage.

As Jess drove down the road, she found herself noticing everything. Every car within seeing range made her suspicious. She eyed every object that could fit in the category of "out-of-the-ordinary." She couldn't believe how quickly her life had changed. A few weeks ago, these thoughts would have never entered her mind.

She pulled into the small, cracked parking lot and parked the car. As she got out, the cool autumn breeze blew through her hair and refreshed her. She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath of the crisp October air. It was a gorgeous day. A small tree growing just outside the corner of the lot caught her attention. It just looked like the perfect symbol of fall. She watched as crinkly, red and orange leaves let go of their branches and

gently floated down to the ground, joining the other leaves festively decorating the fluffy, forest green grass. She smiled to herself as she walked toward the store. Today was such a peaceful day.

The bell chimed on the door as she pushed it open. It felt so good to get out, but she supposed she'd better hurry.

Soon, she was coming back out with diapers and a bag of Cheetoes that she was looking forward to sharing with Jim later that evening.

As she stepped off the sidewalk, she noticed a black SUV in the corner of the lot. She paused a moment. *Oh, come on, Jess. Don't be paranoid.* She continued walking toward her car.

About halfway between the store and her car she noticed the SUV starting to come toward her. She glanced over her shoulder at it.

The driver stomped the gas.

The brakes squealed.

The car raced toward her.

Her eyes widened. Her body froze like a deer in the headlights. She tried to jump out of the way, but it was too late.

The SUV swerved into her.

SMACK! The impact threw her ten feet across the parking lot.

Her body dropped down on the pavement.

The car sped away.

.....

Jim woke up with a start, and jumped out of bed. Something was wrong. Only sleeping in his jeans, he slipped on his shoes and grabbed a flannel shirt from off the dresser, putting it on but not taking time to button it as he raced out of the bedroom. "Jess!"

"Jim, what's wrong?" Mrs. Thomas came around the corner carrying Morgan.

"Where's Jess?"

"She went to the Dollar Store for some diapers." Almost before she was finished, Jim was out the front door and running down the street. Praying the whole way, he ran as hard and as fast as he could. Something had happened. He knew it.

He raced across the street, not waiting for oncoming cars. He could see the store. It was just a couple more blocks down.

Firestorm

As he drew closer, he could see someone lying in the parking lot and a man standing nearby. *No, God. Please, no!*

Fast as he could, he cut through the grass and sprinted toward them.

“JESS!” He fell to his knees beside her.

The man, a Dollar Store employee, was talking to 911. “She looks dead.”

Jim’s hands shook as he checked her neck for a pulse. There was one. “She’s not. How long till an ambulance gets here?”

“Do you know her?”

“She’s my wife.”

“Did you know this was a hit and run? Someone just rammed right into her.”

“Give me the phone!” Jim grabbed it from him and began to talk to the dispatcher. He squeezed her hand as he talked. *Hold on, Jess. Hold on.*

The employee knelt down on the other side of her, shaking his head.

Please, God, please don’t take my wife. Please, don’t take her. His heart beat hard and fast. Every muscle in his body constricted. Panic filled his soul.

Finally, he heard sirens approaching in the distance.

He looked back down at Jess struggling to breathe. He noticed blood coming out of the side of her mouth. He let his head fall back in anguish.

“No! Please, no!”

.....

Jim paced back and forth in the waiting room. Eyes closed, he prayed earnestly while running his hand against the wall to keep him walking in a straight line. Part of him needed to be close to Jess, while the other part of him needed to be alone just to beg God in the silence.

Feeling the presence of someone coming next to him, he lifted his head just as Pastor Thomas put his hand on his shoulder. “I heard what happened.”

Jim turned and leaned back against the wall, but didn’t look at the Pastor.

“Are you okay?”

“No.”

“Let’s go sit down.” He nodded toward the chairs.

Jim followed, then sat down next to him. Leaning forward, he put his elbows on his knees and stared toward the floor, waiting for the pastor to say something.”

Pastor glanced over at Jim. He noticed sweat dripping down his temples and glistening on his neck. Patches of sweat and spots of blood covered his shirt. Pastor silently prayed that the Lord would direct his words. “Where’s Jessica now?”

“Surgery.” He stared off into the distance. “They don’t think her chances are very good.”

“Jim...”

He stood up. “Jess is going to be there a while. I think I’m gonna take a walk. I just need some time alone.” He turned to go.

“Nancy’s coming. We are both going to wait out here. Do you want me to call you if there’s any news?”

“Yeah.” Jim reached in his pocket and turned on his cell. “Thanks.” He continued to leave.

“Jim?”

He stopped, but didn’t turn around.

“It’s on the prayer chain, and we’ll be praying for both of you.”

Jim nodded and headed for the door. He was beginning to wonder how much good it did. He had prayed for hours last night, and now, his wife was in surgery in critical condition.

The automatic doors slid open and Jim walked out into the darkness. The days were growing shorter which almost seemed like a symbol of his life. A chilly breeze whisked past him, making him shiver.

Putting his thumbs in his jeans pockets, he stepped down off the curb into the parking lot. It seemed to have more cars in it than usual and the ER seemed uncharacteristically busy. Every person in there was going through some trial. Whether an old man with a heart attack, a grandma with a stroke, a little girl with seizures, or a young person on drugs. He wasn’t the only one hurting, clinging to life, clutching at hope. Why did life have to be so hard? Why did there have to be so many tragedies?

He kicked the tire of someone’s rust colored Intrepid then leaned back against the trunk. Who was this guy? Who was this killer, and why? Why was he after Jessica? She’d never wronged anyone. Why take out such a harsh judgment on someone so gentle and sweet, so caring and...innocent? He rolled his sleeves halfway up his forearm to hide the blood-stained

cuffs.

“Hey, Buddy. Get off my car!” a man yelled at him, as he helped his wife walk to the front seat.

Jim glanced over at them. Then he stepped forward and began to walk down the parking lot toward the street. *Thirty percent chance... That was it.* His heart ached. There was nothing he could do about it. Nothing at all.

Coming to the end of the lot, he sat down on the curb. Resting his elbows on his knees and letting his hands hang between them, he watched the glare of the headlights as a few cars passed in front of him. Why was all this happening? Tilting his head back, he stared up at the crystal clear night sky, lit by millions of bright, twinkling stars. The gentle light of the glowing moon cast its beams to the earth. Everything seemed so peaceful up there. A sparkly star fell from its place and shot across the sky, leaving a smoky trail behind it.

He closed his eyes, letting the refreshing wind blow against his face and neck, drying the sweat. He gazed back up – stars, planets, galaxies... many as big or bigger than the earth. God created them all. Planets, mountains and oceans, hurricanes and tornadoes, unstoppable earthquakes and volcanoes – He’s more powerful than them all. He made all of them. Why would a force so powerful even notice this little, insignificant family from a small town in Illinois? Why did he expect Him to? He glanced over at the bright, smiling moon. He felt so small in comparison to the vastness of the night sky. Why would He even care?

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He him. Male and female created he them. (Gen. 1:27) Man isn’t just an animal or even a ball of fire floating in space. He’s special — created in the image of God.

But what does that prove? There are billions and billions of people in the world. That doesn’t mean He would take notice of one – no matter how hard you pray.

Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee.... (Jer. 1:5)

He looked up and gazed intently on a bright, sparkling star. *Are you going to let her live?*

All things work together for good to them that love the Lord... (Rom. 8:28)

Putting his head down, he ruffled his hands through his hair. *Yeah, the Apostle Paul wrote that... before he was martyred.*

*It was good... for him. Everyone **will** die.*

He stood to his feet. "We need her!" He realized he was yelling at God, but at the moment he didn't care.

But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:19)

He leaned against a light post. "Don't take her from me."

My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. (2 Cor. 12:9)

He looked down at the pavement, knowing he shouldn't be arguing with God. He knew that everything the Lord had ever done was good. He knew that if Jessica died she would instantly be in an unspeakably magnificent place with no more tears and no more sorrow... with the Bright and Morning Star... her Savior... her Creator... her God. The only one mourning would be him, and not for Jessica, but for himself... and his baby.

So now what? He walked down the side of the street. *Just let fate run its course.* He knew better than that, too. He kicked a pop bottle out of the way.

The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. (James 5:16)

He needed to pray... more. That was all he could do. There was only One who could heal the sick.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. He'd been praying...even before the accident. What good had it done?

She's still alive.

So far. He stared over at a stop light. She *was* still alive. That was what he had been asking for. Whether it would continue was yet to be seen, but he did know one thing very well. He knew God answers prayer. He'd seen it many times – many times. He'd seen miracles. He'd seen answers to little things like helping him find his keys when he was late for work and had been looking for them for hours. He'd also seen answers to big things, like the time they'd almost lost their house. He would never forget that time.

It had been their first property. Both him and Jess had been saving money for years before they met, and they also had gotten a few large sums of money for wedding gifts, so, when it came time to buy a house, they were able to plunk down every cent they had and buy it outright from the

owner. Everything was perfect... until they found out about the back taxes. That led them into months of fighting for every penny. Working four jobs between them and unable to get a loan, tension was high when they found out they only had two months left. That is when Jim had decided to take a high risk job that might just be their lifeline in the nick of time. It wasn't. A few days later, he was lying in a hospital bed, amazingly lucky to be alive, staring at the notice that told them they would be homeless in a matter of weeks. It was while he was staring at the notice that he got a phone call, right there in the hospital, telling him that the mega company who had bought his taxes declared a sale in error and gave them back... for no apparent reason. Even the county treasurer was stunned, so much so, she informed Jim later that it had caused her to reevaluate her life and start going back to church. Yes, he'd seen some amazing answers to prayer.

However, He'd also heard... "No." As a little boy, kneeling beside his mother's bed when... The scene flashed back through his mind. *Don't go there, not now.* All he could do was try... ask. It could be "No," but it could be "Yes."

The prayer of faith shall save the sick. (James 5:15)

Putting his thumb in his pocket, he began to walk slowly down the shoulder. A few cars whizzed by him. He glanced over at the cars stopped at an intersection, then started across the street. Yeah, the bright orange light clearly read, *Don't walk*, but he ignored it. He just didn't feel like pressing the button.

Stepping back on the sidewalk, he continued walking aimlessly. Passing house after house, he glanced at them absentmindedly. Some were dark and quiet, others were lit and occupied with people. He passed one filled with a group of guys laughing and joking as they watched a football game on their big screen. The large picture window in the next one revealed an elderly couple snuggled on the couch reading together. He looked down at the ground. Would that ever be him and Jessica, or would his picture window reveal a man, alone and lonely?

He continued on, walking slowly as he stared down at the sidewalk – the dirt, the cracks, the dried leaves, pine needles, pebbles. He felt numb. He didn't want to think or feel. He didn't want to be torn apart... again. He didn't know if he could take it. The chilly breeze blew back the end of the oversized jean shirt he wore as a jacket. He stopped abruptly as a cat jumped down from a tree in front of him hissed at him and ran away. He let

his head fall backwards. *Come on, Jim. Wake up. This isn't helping anything.*

He stepped off the end of the sidewalk and back onto the shoulder. He was going out of town. All the traffic and street lights fell further behind him. When he came to a small gravel road, he turned. Stopping, he stared out into the darkness, gently illuminated by the moon.

Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray.

He looked down at the gravel. *The prayer of faith shall save the sick.*

Looking back up, he began to run. *The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*

He adjusted his breathing to match his rapid footfall. *Please, God! Please, don't let my wife die.* He tightened his throat and clenched his fist. *Lord, I need her. I can't live the rest of my life without her. Please, please don't let me lose her.*

Breathing harder, he quickened his pace. *You caused the blind to see and the lame to walk. You can heal her... completely.* Sweat began to drip down the sides of his forehead. *Please, God, please, heal her. Don't let her die.*

.....

Mrs. Thomas walked into the waiting room carrying Morgan. Seeing her husband, she walked over to him. He was leaning forward elbows on his knees, hands tightly clasped together, head bowed, eyes closed, praying.

She sat down next to him and put her hand gently on his back to let him know she was there.

In a few moments, he looked up at her, then sat up.

“Any word, yet, on Jessica?” Her face showed concern.

He shook his head. “Still in surgery.”

She looked around. “Where’s Jim?” Her brow furrowed “How’s he handling this?”

Shrugging, he leaned forward again and looked down at the carpet. “I don’t know where he went. He didn’t look that good when he left.”

“He just left?”

Pastor nodded his head slowly.

She repositioned Morgan in her lap and turned a little sideways. “You know? He knew.”

Pastor looked at her questioning.

“He woke up out of a dead sleep and ran out of his room looking for Jessica, then raced out the door after her without breaking stride. He knew something had happened.”

Pastor nodded and looked back down to the floor. “Yeah. Those two are mighty close.”

.....

Derrick merged his pickup onto the highway, immediately passing the semi so he wouldn't have to slow down. His jaw was set. His eyes stared straight ahead. His hands clenched the steering wheel, and every muscle in his body was tense. He rolled his neck, trying to release some of the tension. It didn't help.

Flipping on his blinker, he merged into the left lane following the traffic heading toward Wisconsin. There wasn't a lot. It was only nine o'clock, but to him, the night seemed blacker than midnight. He rolled down the window, letting the cold breeze blow against his face, but his body wouldn't relax. His mind was blank. He couldn't think about what was happening. Cracking his neck from side to side, he flipped on the radio. He surfed through the channels until he found heavy rock. Turning the volume on high, he let the car shake.

.....

Still running, Jim stopped his earnest prayer for a minute and slowed to a jog, then a stop. Either he had turned somewhere, or his gravel road had looped around back to town. Breathing hard, he wiped some of the sweat from his forehead before it dripped into his eyes. Sweat dripped from his face and arms. His clothes were soaked. Each of his hard breaths looked like steam in the cold night air.

He stepped from his country road onto the main drag and began walking back into town. The cool breeze felt good against his heated body.

A few cars passed by as he stepped onto the sidewalk. He was only a few blocks to the hospital, now. He needed to know what was going on. A continual ache tugged at his heart, telling him things weren't okay, yet, but he needed to know. He needed to be there if she woke up.... if she woke up... as far as he knew, she hadn't awakened since she was hit.... Maybe

she never would. A lump began to grow in his throat.

His thoughts shifted. Why Derrick? How could he do something like this? How could he, himself, have worked with him all this time and not known he was a murderer? That he had something against Jess? What did he have against her? Why would he want to kill her?

Jim crossed a small strip of grass, walking into the hospital parking lot. He jogged through the cars and toward the ER entrance. When he got there, he stopped and just stared at the big glass window a minute, not sure if he wanted to enter. What if...? He didn't know if he could take it if...

The empty admissions desk he was staring at went in and out of focus. Putting his hand over his ribs, he leaned against the brick pillar. His physical pain began to surface above his worry. For the most part, he had been able to ignore it. The great fear filling his heart for his wife was far greater than the pain racking his body, but now it rose to the surface and threatened his ability to handle it. There was one thing he was almost certain he couldn't handle. He rubbed his face and looked back in the window. Was she still alive... or not?

Grimacing, he pushed himself away from the pillar. He had to find out. Walking through the automatic doors, the warm air sent shivers through his now cool skin. He headed toward the waiting room. The bright lights and warm air relaxed him a little. He glanced across four groups of people until he saw Pastor and Mrs. Thomas. He made his way toward them.

Pastor stood up when he saw him coming. "Jim?" He paused, looking over Jim's sweat-drenched clothes, then up into his fearful, weary eyes. "Are you okay?"

Not answering, he reached down and picked up his baby from Mrs. Thomas. He grimaced slightly as pain shot through his side, but then gathered his little one in a tight hug.

Morgan reached up with her short arm and clenched his sleeve. "Da, Da."

Jim's throat tightened. "How's Jess?" He braced himself for the answer.

Mrs. Thomas stood up next to her husband. "The doctor just came out and told us she's out of recovery and in her room. Frank was just going to call you."

Jim let his muscles relax slightly. "So, the surgery went fine? Is she

awake?”

Mrs. Thomas looked over at her husband. Then so did Jim.

Pastor looked from his wife to Jim. “The surgery went as well as they expected.” He paused. Jim waited. “She’s in a coma.”

No...

“The doctor says that the next ten hours are critical. If she can make it through the night... she’ll probably make it.”

Jim felt his heart jump and start to race. His muscles tighten.

Morgan jerked her face around to look at Daddy when she felt it. Eyes wide and mouth open, questioning fear entered her inquisitive little face.

Noticing it, Jim gave the baby a slight smile, kissed her, and after a last hug, handed her back to Mrs. Thomas. He stared down the hallway. “I’m going to see Jess.” Without looking back, he asked, “Can you keep Morgan tonight?”

“Yes. Don’t worry about her.”

“Thanks.” Without turning, he headed down the bright white hallway. It seemed almost ghostly quiet compared to earlier.

He stopped and paused a minute before pushing the door open to Jess’s room. Walking in, he looked over at his wife lying motionless on the bed. He glanced over at the ever-beeping heart monitor, then down at the IV inserted in her arm, then at the tubes going down her throat. Kneeling down next to her, he covered her small delicate hand with his large calloused one. Picking it up, he wished it would squeeze him back.

He looked up at her emotionless face. Putting his hand up, he touched a large red scrape across her cheekbone. Memories began flashing through his mind – the picnic last week, the moment of their first kiss, the instant he found out she was pregnant, all the precious times, the happy moments, even the difficult times that brought them closer together. He’d learned to feel her love... her sweet admiration... her disapproval. He could tell what she was thinking, many times before she said it, and he knew she could do the same.

He brushed back a few strands of hair that had fallen into her face. He loved her more than life itself. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d cried, yet now, he wasn’t succeeding in forcing back the tears. He let his head fall backwards. He couldn’t live without her. He wouldn’t be alive without her. *She’ll be okay*, he told himself. Looking back down, he wasn’t sure about that. He wasn’t sure about that at all.

He stared down into her unconscious face. *Derrick!* Anger exploded inside of him. *You did this.* His face set in a wrathful vengeance he had never felt before. *If she dies, I'll...* Suddenly, he felt the realization of what he was capable of doing. For the first time in his life, he felt as though he could actually kill someone. The realization shadowed him with fear and shame. *Lord, please keep me from this kind of anger. No matter what happens...* His throat tightened. *...please help me to accept it.*

He stayed there, kneeling beside the bed, for over an hour – remembering, battling emotions, questioning almost everything, wondering if he had done right by her. Looking down at her hand, he circled her diamond wedding band around her finger a couple of times. *Forever and ever.*

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! The heart monitor began to scream.

Jim jumped up! His heart started racing!

Nurses and doctors came rushing in. One pushed a cart with a defibrillator.

Jim felt panic rise inside him. *NO! Please, God, no!* A male nurse pushed him out into the hall.

Jim stood back against the wall. He clenched his fist and closed his eyes. He pushed his head back against the wall, straining every muscle in his neck and arms. *Please! Please, God! Please, don't take my wife! Please, let her live! Don't take her! Let her live! Please, let her live!*

He felt a hand on his shoulder. “Jim, are you all right? What’s the matter?” It was Wade’s voice.

Jim didn’t answer. He opened his eyes, but stared straight ahead. His breathing was fast and hard, and his sweat started dripping. *Don't let her die! Please, don't let her die!* The veins on his arms and neck began protruding from the tension.

“Man, are you all right?” Not knowing what was going on, Wade stared at Jim, puzzled, then looked over his shoulder at the closed hospital door. He could hear the commotion of a “Code blue” behind it. “What happened?”

Finally, the doctor came out of the room.

Jim stood forward. His eyes looked up at him, pleading for good news.

The doctor’s face was solemn. “We got her back, and she’s holding her own, for now.” He turned and left.

Jim took a few deeps breaths, trying to calm his shaking body. She

was still here.

Wade turned to him, his face showing fear. "What happened?"

Jim leaned his head back against the wall and ran a shaking hand through his hair. "Jess got hit by a car."

"What?! Is she...? Was it...?"

Jim nodded his head. "Yeah."

Chills ran up Wade's spine. He didn't know what to say. "She'll be fine. Relax."

Jim stiffened, turning toward him in anger. "I'll relax when someone can tell me that my wife's not going to die."

"You can't change what's going to happen."

He stood straight from the wall and spun toward Wade, nearly unable to keep his fist down. His furious gaze pierced through his friend's eyes, causing Wade to back up. Every nerve in Jim's body urged him to punch him.

Wade looked down at the floor.

After another moment, Jim removed his gaze and turned to go.

"Jim, where are you going?"

He didn't answer, but continued walking faster. He didn't stop back in to see Jess. He wasn't going to say, "Goodbye." He went back through the doors and out into the night. He wasn't going to let her go. He wasn't going to sit there and watch her die. He would beg God all night if he had to, until he got a peace that she would be fine. He wanted peace one way or the other. He needed to know the outcome was right.

He jogged across the parking lot.

The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

Running hard, he cut across a few yards.

The prayer of faith shall heal the sick.

He turned onto the gravel road and ran down a little ways until he was far away from town. Then going down into the ditch, he fell on his knees in the grass. Bowing his head, clenching his fist, he began to pray earnestly.

.....

Mrs. Thomas rocked a steady motion in their old recliner, humming a lullaby to the sleeping child she held.

Pastor stepped out of the den and came into the living room. His face

was solemn as he sat down in the blue swivel rocker across from his wife.

“How are you holding up, Honey?”

Pastor sighed, stretching his arms forward then rubbing his face. He looked over at the baby in his wife’s arms. “Is that little one going to have to grow up without ever knowing her mother?”

Mrs. Thomas eyes blurred with tears as she looked down at the innocent child. “Mommy or daddy. I don’t think Jim’s going to be able to handle it, if he loses her. They’re too close.”

“He’ll handle it.”

“It’s just like when....” His voice trailed off.

Pastor nodded. “I know.”

“I should have tried harder to convince her not to go. At the very least, I should have woken Jim. I just never figured he’d be waiting for her. How did he know?”

“I guess he could have figured it out just by deducting what friends he might have stayed with, then going to check their houses.”

“But everyone was so careful.”

“We should have covered the back window in the garage. Anyone could have looked in and seen Jim’s car.”

She looked down at the baby.

Pastor sighed wearily. “If only, we could see the future.”

Mrs. Thomas stood up from her chair. “I better put Morgan in her crib.”

Pastor gave a nod of acknowledgement.

When she returned, she slowly went over and sat down on the arm of her husband’s chair and leaned back on his shoulder. “You know last night, after all Jessica had been through that day, she insisted on helping me clean up and wash the dishes.”

Pastor nodded.

“She’s such a sweet girl.” Her voice broke with tears. She sat back up.

He put his hand on her forearm.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be crying like this. She’s not gone, yet.” She wiped her eyes, trying to sniff away the sobs.

Pastor got up and took her by the hand. “Let’s pray for her together. God can heal her. Let’s ask him together.”

Hand in hand, they knelt down on the carpet and bowed their heads.

.....

Derrick drove the bouncing car down the bumpy Wisconsin road. *You couldn't get more ruts in this road if you hired a contractor to do it.*

After driving for hours, he was finally in the North Woods. He could hide here, and they wouldn't be able to find him. If they did, he would be ready.

He turned into a small one lane, dead end road – if you could call it a road. It was marred by ruts and overgrown by tall grass, half brown from frost. His truck tilted as he went over an occasional large rock. Tree limbs screeched across the roof and the doors.

When he reached the end, he drove a little ways off the road and under the concealing branches of a massive White Pine. Getting out, the strong scent of pine and the night sounds of crickets greeted him.

Mixed emotions flooded him. Soft beams of moonlight gleamed on the treetops. It was so peaceful and tranquil up here. An eerie wind whistled through the branches. He shivered. It was also bone-chilling and ghostly. These woods were haunted – haunted by memories.

He bent down into the truck and grabbed his flashlight, rifle, and backpack. He'd probably taken a chance going home to get them, but like the rest of his life, he had made it out with two seconds to spare before the cops arrived.

Closing the door and flinging the pack over his shoulder, he headed out. His cabin was in the deep woods – five miles from here. This was the shortest point to go in and, as far as he knew, he was the only one who knew about it. He was the only one that knew about the cabin... except his sister. She wouldn't tell. It had been years. They were almost strangers... but they had history. They had the same blood. They had memories. No, she wouldn't betray him.

He yanked up the zipper on his blue parka, flipped on his flashlight, and stepped over a fallen log into the wet grass of the forest.

Chapter Nine

As Jim continued to pray in the ditch, a peace began to flood over him. He prayed for a few more moments, then stopped and looked up. It was over. Whatever was going to happen, did. She was either going to stay with him, or she had gone home to heaven.

He sat back and leaned against the metal drainage pipe, looking up into the morning sky. The glowing, fire-red sun was just starting to peek over the horizon. It rose against a backdrop of wispy, pink clouds outlined in deep purple. Resting his elbow on his knee, he clasped his hands and rested his chin on his knuckles, staring into the sky. He'd shared many beautiful sunrises with Jessica. He wondered if they would ever share another.

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding. (Prov. 3:5)

Okay, God. Whatever happened, it was good. You heard my cry and made your decision. I'll respect it. He'd go back now, find out what had happened, and accept it without blame, bitterness, or revenge.

Holding his ribs, he stood to his feet. Knee buckling underneath him, he grabbed the wire fence beside him and steadied himself. Weakly, he climbed out of the ditch and began walking back down the gravel road toward town.

When he arrived at the hospital, he walked urgently through the sliding doors and toward Jessica's room, but stopped a moment when he reached the waiting room, entertaining second thoughts about whether he wanted to hear the truth if it was.... Staring in the direction of the fish tank across the room, he tried to prepare himself for the worst.

"Jim." It was the commanding voice of Doctor Fredricks. Jim turned to see him standing in the entrance to the hall and then began walking toward him. Halfway there, his knee buckled, causing him to stumble. When he reached the doctor, he leaned back against the wall for support and waited for him to speak.

"Your wife's going to be fine."

Jim stood straight. His heart leaped for joy! Light came to his eyes. A smile brightened his face. He felt a burst of energy renew him. All the heaviness lifted from his heart. He felt like jumping up and screaming,

“Yes!”

“It doesn’t look like there will be any permanent damage.”

He let his head fall back. *Thank you, God! Thank you!*

“She was awake earlier.”

She was awake!

“Go in and see her.”

He didn’t have to tell him twice. He felt like running, but his knee wouldn’t allow it. So he limped fast.

Jess was asleep when he entered the room, but the tubes were out of her throat and her color was much better. He knelt next to the bed, not sure if he should wake her. “Jessica.” He just needed to hear her voice. He needed to know that she was okay.

Drowsily, she opened her eyes and looked at him. “Jim.” She gave him a tired smile.

He brought himself close to her and held her hand. “I love you.”

Weakly, she raised her other hand. “Hold me.”

Not sure if he should but wanting to more than anything, he sat on the side of the bed and carefully lifted her into a gentle embrace.

Grasping his shirt, she buried her head in his shoulder and began to cry. “Don’t ever let go.”

Jim tried to choke back tears, but it wasn’t working. He was so thankful, relieved, and filled with joy.

Jess turned her face in the side of his neck and whispered, “Don’t leave me.”

He touched the side of his face to the back of her head. “I won’t ... ever.”

.....

Derrick got up off the ground where he had been lying most of the night. He walked over to the front steps of his cabin and sat down. Looking up, he stared at the bright rays of sunlight shining through the branches of the thick pines. He figured from its location, it must have been around seven.

Leaning his forearms on his knees, he stared at a pair of foxes chasing each other around a fallen tree. He rubbed his eyes. He hadn’t slept all night. He had just lain there looking for answers to his messed up life...

and not getting any. Why did things always happen to him? Why couldn't anything just work?

He glanced over his shoulder at the cabin door, not wanting to go in. It was haunted with too many memories – horrible memories, memories that made him feel like making the little log cabin into a two person tomb.

He stood up and walked toward the door. Tentatively, he reached for the black metal handle covered with cobwebs. The same handle... the same door he had opened to find... His throat tightened.

The door squeaked as it swung inward. He looked in. It was shadowy and dirty. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling. Dirt covered the floor. A chipmunk scampered out a broken window. He hadn't bothered to board them up. As soon as he could, he had run – as fast and as far as he could. Now, for the first time, he was back.

He stepped in, feeling like he was entering a coffin. Chills ran up his spine. Swallowing hard, he glanced down at the place on the floor. The place.... The memory flashed back. He shook his head.

Walking over to the fireplace, his mind continued flashing back. Sitting together, eating, talking, laughing, just watching the flames dance. He picked up a picture from the mantle and stared into the individual's face. How could one person have so much emotional power over him... still.

He set the picture back on the mantle, and walked over to the corner. How things change. Look at his life now. It was a mess... and it only stood to get worse.

He looked down and then over to a dark and dirty corner. There it was right where he had left it. It would need to be cleaned, but he was sure it still worked. Walking over and reaching down, he grabbed the shot gun from the cobwebs.

Walking over to the cupboard, he took out the items he needed to clean the weapon. Solemnly, he took them all over to the table and sat down.



Waking up, Jim rolled over and sat on the edge of the hospital bed the staff had put in Jess's room for him. He looked over at Jess, who was sleeping peacefully, then up at the heart monitor beeping steadily. She was

still fine, and she was going to get better. He was sure about that now. His heart warmed, and he had to pray it again, *Thank you, Lord.*

Glancing over at the clock on the wall, he saw it was almost noon. He wondered if there were any new developments in the hunt for Derrick. He would call Trent in a few minutes, but right now, he needed to get some water. Putting his hand on the side of the mattress, he pushed himself up to his feet. He walked to the side of Jess's bed and gazed down at her. He hated to leave her for even a minute, but his throat felt like cotton.

After a moment, he left. Walking over to the water fountain, he enjoyed a long refreshing drink of cold water.

"Hey, Jim!"

He turned to see Carlos being pushed toward him in a wheel chair.

"Hey, Carlos. How's it going?" Jim's voice was hoarse and soft.

The nurse pushing him didn't stop, but went right past, swiftly and deliberately as if on a mission.

"Jim, I heard..." He turned slightly as he passed. "Will you stop a minute?" he snapped at the charging nurse. Though she was older and small-framed, Carlos had no trouble imagining this nurse as a drill sergeant in her younger years.

"I don't have all day to stand around while you chew the fat with your friend. You've been discharged, and you're leaving."

"Jim!" He motioned to him to follow.

Jim glanced in the direction of Jess's room, then turned and limped quickly to catch up with Carlos. Hopefully this wouldn't take long. "Hey, Man. What's going on?" he asked, when he caught up. His voice was void of enthusiasm.

"Getting released today. Hey, I heard about Jess. Man, that was close. I'm glad she's all right. How...?"

Jim fell behind, struggling to keep up with the rapid pace. "Maybe we can talk later," he suggested.

"Just wait a minute." Carlos turned back at Mrs. Turbo Speed. "Look, Lady! Stop this thing and let me off!" He leaned forward attempting to vacate the chair.

"You look, Son!" She slammed him back down. "You aren't going anywhere except out to the car!" She gained speed as they went through the waiting room.

Jim kept following, all the time wishing he was going in the opposite

direction.

“LADY!” Carlos was getting mad, but then again, so was the nurse.

“Reg-u-lation.” One of the wheels came up as she whirled it around the corner.

“Watch it!” Carlos clung on to the arm so he wouldn’t fall out. Once they were going straight again, he continued his quest for immediate release. “Let me...” He leaned forward again.

Grabbing him by the collar, she slammed him back down. “Be Quiet!”

“Um, Carlos?” Jim stopped as they came to the exit doors.

“Just wait, man!” he yelled over his shoulder. “I’ll be right back!”

Jim smiled as he watched the nurse push the chair off the curb of the sidewalk, causing Carlos to bounce up, and then proceeded to swerve and weave her way down the parking lot, barely missing an oncoming car. Carlos’ reaction to the near miss was priceless.

When they finally reached his car, Carlos pulled himself out of the chair and snatched his crutch away from the nurse. She put her hands on her hips and yelled something Jim wished he could hear. Then again, maybe he didn’t want to know. Jim could tell by Carlos’s body language that his reply had been formed from his wittiest collection of sarcasm, and with that, he spun around and began to stomp-hobble back up the lot.

Both reaching the door at the same time, the nurse pushed Carlos to the side and came in first.

Rolling his eyes, Carlos nearly tripped in an attempt to make it inside in enough time to yell after her. “Sargento de taladro de la mujer cabeza de toro!”

Jim looked at him puzzled. “Say what?”

Carlos shook his head. “Women.”

Jim glanced back down the hallway, thoughtfully. “I don’t know. Some of them are nice to have around.”

“Yeah, how’s Jess doin’?” He turned and began walking back with him.

“She woke up this morning. The doctor says that she’ll be fine.”

Carlos slapped his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Great. Mind if I come see her?”

“No. Sure.” After all, he was already coming.

Leaning on his crutch, Carlos began walking more vigorously. “So what happened, man? Hit and run?” He looked over at him.

Jim tried to limp faster to keep up. “So, you know what’s going on?”
“Bits and pieces. It’s hard to tell what’s true, with rumors.”

Jim grunted.

“I can’t believe we were working with a murderer all this time and didn’t even know it.”

Doesn’t sound like bits and pieces to me. “He’s just a suspect.” Jim’s eyebrows jumped from surprise at his own words.

Carlos stopped short, and looked him in the eye. “You don’t think it was him?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“If my life was on the line, I wouldn’t be so blind.” He looked sideways at him and continued forward.

“I’m not. I…”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed how weird he acts. He’s wound too tight, has been ever since he came… secretive… never jokes or laughs. Have you ever slept next to him at the station? It’s not normal to wake up in the middle of the night panting and sweating.”

“True.”

“He’s psycho. A psycho wouldn’t look obvious. He ran didn’t he?”

“I’m just saying, we shouldn’t pass judgment till it’s been proven.” He was talking to himself as much as to Carlos.

Carlos stopped as they reached her door. Turning around, he leaned against the door post. “The UPS receipt, this happening to your wife right after he ran. It seems pretty obvious to me. What’s your problem with it?”

“I don’t know,” he said thoughtfully, leaning his shoulder against the opposite doorpost. “He probably is. It’s just he’s a good paramedic. He works hard at it. His life’s dedicated to saving lives. Sure, he’s rough, but is he a killer?”

Carlos crossed his arms and spoke accusingly. “Yes.”

Jim nodded. “I’m just sayin’, you know, rumors. Let’s not ‘drop the floor’ till we know.”

Carlos rolled his eyes. “We know.” he said flatly. “I would think, after what he’s done, you’d want revenge.” Carlos shoved open the door.

Jim waited a moment before following. Actually, his flesh was aching for revenge. He wanted Derrick to pay … to really pay for what he had done to Jess, but his spirit told him that was wrong. He knew it was wrong… but justice was right.

.....

Derrick rolled his shoulders, and wiped off a stream of sweat dripping down his neck. He had already taken off his cardigan and, feeling the warmth of midday, rolled up the sleeves of his light, plaid shirt. The day seemed unseasonably warm.

Setting down the dirty cloth on the table, he looked down the barrel of his rifle. Now, all his admittedly small arsenal was ready to go. He hoped they would be enough.

Putting some bullets in his pocket, he stepped outside and leaned against one of the big wooden pillars on his porch. For a moment, he just stared out into the woods and listened to the birds sing. The veins on his forearm protruded from tension as his hand gripped tightly around the gun.

Bending down, he picked up the hand gun he had left hidden near the stairs and put it in his jeans. If they came looking for him, he was ready. There was only one thing that he knew without a doubt, and that was, he wasn't going to spend the rest of his life in a cage.

He clumped down the stairs. The last thing he felt like doing was eating, but he didn't want to just stay here, sitting in a graveyard of memories. So maybe he would go hunting. Maybe he would just scout around. It felt like an eternity since he'd been... home.

.....

"Well, I'd better be going," Carlos said, slapping his knees and getting up from the chair. "You look like you could use some more rest, and I have a dinner date for a late lunch."

Jess cleared her throat, but her voice was still hoarse. "I take it this date is with a member of the opposite gender."

Carlos smiled. "Oh, yeah. That's one thing she *definitely* is."

"Wedding bells?" She smiled.

"How 'bout our first fight, if I'm not in the cafeteria in ten minutes."

Jess again cleared her scratchy voice. "You'd better go then. We wouldn't want any part in breaking up a romance."

Carlos gave a conceited smile. "Yeah, well, she's finally realized that she has found 'the *man*'. We're talkin' the complete package here." He joked. "She won't leave."

Jim smiled as he stood up. "I guess we'll see ya around."

"Okay. Glad to see ya doin' better, Jessica. Get some rest." He pointed at her.

She smiled.

"Glad you're better, too. Bye."

.....

"Wade, hurry up. It's three o' clock. You're the one that wanted to go see how Jessica's doing."

"I'm going as fast as I can." He yelled back, slipping on his shoe. He glanced up as she came to the bedroom doorway. "I'm kind of surprised that you want to go, after all that stuff about him being after us, because of them."

Mellissa leaned against the frame. "Yeah, I still believe that, but he's on the run now. He's not going to be around the hospital. I heard that they think he's going north to Wisconsin."

"I'd like to hear that they've caught him. Do they know where in Wisconsin?"

"No. Just some cop stopped him around Madison, and got a headache for his trouble."

Wade looked up. "Is he okay?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

Wade sighed as he put his shoe up on the dresser to tie it. *So close and yet so far.* "They couldn't have just got him?"

"I hope Jessica's all right. All they said on the prayer chain was that it was serious. Lynn said that she thought they didn't know if she'd make it through the night. I'd hate to get there and find out...." She looked down. "Maybe I shouldn't of...." Her voice was too low for Wade to hear.

"I just want to find out. I tried calling Jim, but he didn't answer. I hope she's all right, too. She might not be awake when we get there," Wade warned.

"We all go back a long ways, don't we?" Mellissa's voice was reminiscent. "You and Jim, best friends growing up... me 'n Jessica meeting in college."

Wade grabbed his jacket off the bed. "Yeah, old Jim, the proverbial troublemaker. Almost every time I invited him over to my house, I ended

up grounded. Of course, Jim never did. He'd go home and tell his uncle, and they'd both get a big laugh."

Mellissa looked up and chuckled. "Well, you have to admit. From what you told me, some of those times...."

"They weren't that funny for me."

"You never broke off the friendship."

"Yeah, well, Jim was the conniver. He could always think of very creative ways to get out of trouble or fix the problem." Wade chuckled. "He could always think of very creative ways to *cause* a problem. It was just altogether safer to be on his side instead of a witness accomplice."

Mellissa chuckled, leaning away from the post and resting her hand on her rather expanded stomach. "Well, at least, he turned out all right."

Wade pulled the zipper up on his jacket. "That has got to be the miracle of the century right there." He walked with his wife to the coat closet.

"You're glad he did, though." She reached for her coat.

He helped her put it on. "Yeah, he's been a good friend." He grabbed the keys off the counter and helped guide her to the car.

Getting up into the van, Mellissa tried to adjust herself to a comfortable position as Wade got in. "I sure hope nothing's happens to her." She paused, wiping away a stray tear. "She's a sweet girl, and they're so close. They're meant for life."

.....

Derrick cocked his gun and raised it to his shoulder. He heard an animal rustle in the bushes a ways in front of him, but couldn't see it yet. Staring down the sites, he stood statue-still until one of the largest bucks he had ever seen stepped out into the open.

Tightening his grip, he squeezed the trigger. *BANG!* A sound-shattering blast echoed through the forest as the giant buck limply collapsed to the ground.

Lowering the rifle with one hand, Derrick let it fall to his side as he walked over to the buck. Stopping beside it, he looked down at its mangled body. It was one magnificent animal almost just like....

For a minute, he just stared down at the animal, almost in a trance. It was almost exactly like... that one. That one he had spent two days hunting

instead of... His mind began again to flash back. He grimaced at the gruesome picture that once again flooded his memory. It was his fault... all his fault.

He rubbed his eyes and shook his head, trying to shake away the awful memory. He couldn't, maybe he never would. Bending down, he grabbed the deer, and slung it over his shoulders. Slowly, he began to walk back.

.....

Jim stared out the hospital window. The night sky was crystal clear and filled with millions of dancing stars, but most prominent was the gleaming, meticulously round full moon. It was a different moon from the other night. Then, it held uncertainty; tonight, it flooded peace.

Jim sat back further in his chair, feeling much more relaxed. There had been no more attempts. *It must have been Derrick. Since he ran to Wisconsin, everything's stopped.* Knowing who it was and who to watch for should have given him a much greater feeling of security. He didn't know why it didn't. His basis for questioning the guilt of Derrick had been shaky to begin with and now, he just tried to disregard it. It had just been a feeling... a sound... a notion.

When he had been behind the couch getting shot at, almost in the same room with the killer, it just hadn't sounded right. Derrick was lean. This man sounded heavier. Derrick carried himself with confidence. His manner was direct and deliberate; everything, whether good or bad, he thought out carefully. This man seemed nervous, fumbling around, spraying bullets, knocking things over.

He'd seen Derrick meet confrontation before. He'd always step into the open, stand there, stare with piercing eyes, and seemingly dare the attacker to come closer if he had the guts... then he'd beat him up. In fact, he'd put a couple of guys in the hospital after a bar room brawl. Jim hadn't witnessed that one, but he'd witnessed other times at work. Derrick was the "go to" man for cases that couldn't be talked out. He certainly wasn't a gentleman but... was he a murderer? Derrick invited confrontation. The killer always hid in the shadows... every time.

So what? You already established the fact that he must be psycho because he has no conceivable motive. So why can't he have a split personality?

Yeah, but have you ever seen any evidence of a split personality before?

That doesn't mean he doesn't have one.

Irritated, Jim ran his hands through his hair. *Is it Derrick or not?* He just couldn't get a peace about it. He wasn't settled. Even with Derrick somewhere in Wisconsin, he couldn't make himself feel safe.

Laughter broke out, turning Jim's attention back to the group. Pastor and Mrs. Thomas, Wade and Mellissa, and he all sat in chairs around Jess's bed watching an old-time comedy. Well, Jim was only half watching it. His mind kept wandering. He looked over at Wade. He was a little surprised to see them. He still wasn't sure how they felt about this situation. He figured that if the murderer was still around, they would stay away again. He made a conscious choice not to let that knowledge change his attitude toward them.

He glanced over at his wife lying partially propped up in the hospital bed, holding Morgan. She still looked pale and weak, but her eyes were bright and alert, though closing at times, revealing she was again getting tired. The show was almost over. When it was, he would politely suggest that all their friends disperse so she could sleep.

When the names came up, Jim got up and switched off the TV.

"Well," Pastor Thomas stretched as he got up. He looked over at his wife. "I guess we should go, Honey. Let Jessica get some rest."

"Yes, Dear, I expect you're right." Mrs. Thomas picked up her purse as she got up and joined her husband.

Jessica looked up at them. "Thanks for coming." Her voice was soft. "And thank you for taking care of Morgan for me," she added as she let Mrs. Thomas take the infant from her arms.

"Oh, it's no problem. This little dear is a real joy to have around. Though at times, she does make a point of letting us know how much she misses her parents."

"Her parents miss her, too." Jess cleared her scratchy throat. "Sometimes I get really lonesome for her."

Wade smiled, jokingly. "Empty nest syndrome."

Jess laughed. "Hey, not so fast! I've still got a few years before we have to start thinking about college."

"It'll be here before you know it."

Jess sighed, reaching to give her baby a final kiss. "What will I ever

do when that time comes?”

“Oh, don’t worry. By that time, you’ll be ready to get rid of her.”

“Oh, quit.” Mellissa playfully whacked Wade on the shoulder. “Stop teasing her.”

Jess smiled up at Mellissa, but she wasn’t sure that the smile reached her eyes. Truthfully, she was a little disappointed in her long time friend. She’d always figured that if anything ever happened to them that Wade and Mellissa would be the ones that would step up and take care of Morgan, at least until Jess’s parents could make arrangements to return to the country and take up the slack... but now... now that she knew how easily they abandoned the friendship when the going got tough....

“I know how you feel, Honey.” Mrs. Thomas interrupted Jess’s thoughts. “Just because you feel that something’s the right thing to do doesn’t make it any easier. I know when I had my first, I could hardly stand being separated from him.” She smiled at her husband. “Even when he was with Frank.”

Jess smiled. “Well, if there was anyone we’d trust her with....”

Mrs. Thomas patted her on the hand. “Just get some rest, Sweetie, and don’t worry about your little princess. We’ll take good care of her.”

“Thanks.” Her voice was still hoarse.

Wade slapped his knees as he rose from the chair. “Well, I guess we should be going, too.”

Pastor put his arm around his wife, and they went toward the door. “We’ll see you two later.”

“Bye.”

Wade extended his hand to his wife. Grabbing it, she let him help pull her up. As her time drew closer, it was getting increasingly difficult for her to get out of any chair. She walked over and put her hand over Jess’s being careful not to jostle the IV. “You’d better hurry up and get well so you can be there to see whether Junior turns out to be a boy or a girl.” She rubbed her tummy.

“The sooner the better.”

Wade stepped beside his wife and put his hand around her waist, but looked over at Jim. “We can stop by and feed your horses for you tonight, if you want.”

Jim sat back down in his chair. “Oh, yeah.” He rubbed his face with his hands. “I forgot about them. I hope they’ve had enough grass in their

pasture.”

“I’m sure they didn’t starve. There’s still some grass out there.”

“Not much, but I don’t expect you guys to go over and do it. I can get someone else, or I can run over myself. It’s only a few minutes away.”

“Jim, it’s no problem.”

Mellissa looked a little hesitant.

“A drive out in the country would do us both a lot of good.”

“I know how you were both feeling the other day....”

“Jim we want to.” Wade insisted.

Mellissa looked down toward the ground. “That was an emotional day. We don’t want it to ruin our friendship.”

Jim shrugged. “It’s up to you.”

“Fine. Then we will.”

There was silence a moment.

Mellissa yawned. “Well... I guess we’ll see you later.”

Jim walked over. “Yeah, thanks for coming by.”

Wade nodded and walked with his wife to the door. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

.....

A few minutes later, Wade opened the car door for his wife as she reached the van.

“Why thank you.”

“Anything for my little mother-to-be.”

She leaned against the car. “*Your* mother-to-be? Aren’t I a little young for that?”

He put his hands on her waist. “You know what I mean.”

She looked down and rested her hand on her tummy. “I just can’t wait till our little miracle is born.”

“Me either.” He brushed her hair back a little from her face. “It’s going to be a beautiful baby. He’ll have your eyes.” He stared deep into her sparkling, cornflower blue eyes.

“Oh? Still positive it’s going to be a boy?”

“No. If it’s a little girl, I’ll make her the best second baseman in Little League.”

She pointed her finger at him. “And if it’s a boy, he’s not allowed to

play basketball with you and Jim till he's at least sixteen."

"Uh oh, you're going to be a mother hen."

"I'm going to be the one that saves him from breaking every bone in his body in a half hour."

"No one has ever broken any bones."

"Maybe not, but the first time you played with him after we were married, Jim got a dislocated shoulder."

"Ye-ah." Wade shrugged. "But that kind of stuff doesn't bother him."

"My son...!"

Wade interrupted her by bringing his mouth against hers in a kiss. "It may be a girl, remember?" He stepped back and cupped the right side of her face with his hand. "Either way, it's going to have your radiant eyes." He moved his hand to her mouth, "and your gorgeous smile." He moved his head down, preparing to make the last kiss look like a formal greeting, but she stopped him.

"Wade, this probably isn't the best parking lot etiquette." She glanced over at a couple coming to their car. After stepping in the open door and sitting down, she glanced back at him. "We can resume this at home."

"I'll hold you to that." He smiled sideways as he backed up and went around to the driver's side.

Mellissa smiled, glancing at the couple getting in the car beside them, then reached out and pulled the door shut.

.....

Trent stuck his head in the partially open door to Jess's room and knocked lightly. "Can I come in?"

They both looked up at him. "Sure," Jim responded. "Come on in." It was getting late, but capturing this killer was of greatest importance.

"Sorry about coming this late." Picking up a chair, he put it down near the bed and sat on it backwards. "But I need to know if you remember anything about the accident, yet." He addressed Jess.

"Sur-re..." She cleared her throat and propped herself back up. "Yeah, it's been coming back to me in bits and pieces all day. Sorry, but I'm still not real clear."

"Anything you have will be a help." He got out his notepad.

She nodded. "I'm pretty sure the car was a black SUV. I know that

sounds like a spy movie.”

Trent smiled as he sat down. “Maybe he watches TV, too. I don’t suppose you noticed the license plate?”

“Sorry, that really wasn’t...” she cleared her throat, “very high on my priority list.”

.....

Wade turned the van off onto the gravel road leading to Jim’s house. He looked out the front window, then over to Mellissa. “One thing about bein’ out in the country; the sky’s awesome at night.”

Nodding, Mellissa took in a long breath from the hard breeze racing past her partially down window. “It’s such a clear night, and there are so many stars.” She looked up at him, then back out the window. “The moon’s so bright.”

“Yeah.” The car bounced up as they hit a rut. “On the other hand, it’s got its disadvantages.”

.....

“Did you see the driver?”

Jess turned her head and looked at Jim, almost not wanting to remember.

Jim returned a glance. It was a mix of compassion and urgency.

She turned back to Trent. “I saw him. I’m usually horrible with details, but I’ve seen him somewhere before.”

“Do you know where?”

“No. I’m not sure.”

“It wasn’t one of the men your husband works with?”

“Someone he works with?” her voice betrayed surprise. She glanced between Trent and Jim, seemingly shocked. “Why do you....”

“You probably know all the guys.”

“Actually, he transferred to the station right when I had Morgan, and I’ve just never been down there to meet the guys. The first time I saw them was that day at the barn fire.” She paused. “I don’t think he was there. I’ve seen him somewhere else. Like maybe in the park on the trails around our house.”

Trent raised his eyebrows and looked up at Jim.

“I have a picture of all the guys out in my truck.”

“But I don’t think it was....”

“If it’s who we think, he was on sick leave, not with the guys that day,” Trent interrupted, looking back at Jess. “Do you think you could pick him out? If he’s there?”

“I think so. Pro-o-bably.” She glanced from Trent to Jim.

“I’ll go get it.” Jim stood up.

Trent nodded.

“Be back in a minute.” Wade smiled at Mellissa as he got out of the van.

Mellissa watched Wade as he walked in front of the headlights. Opening the door, she closed her eyes and enjoyed a rush of cool autumn breeze refreshing her face. She glanced down at the short green grass blowing lightly. Tiny drops of dew sparkled in the light from the car.

The smell of sweet hay greeted Wade as he opened the barn door. He switched on the light and then climbed the ladder to the loft, more slowly than usual. He had a strange feeling he was being watched causing him to frequently glance over his shoulder.

Reaching the top wrung, he glanced down into all corners of the barn. There was nothing there.

He rubbed his face with one hand and pulled himself up into the loft. Why was he so jumpy? He just had a feeling... that’s all it was, a strange feeling... a feeling that they weren’t alone.

Quickly snatching the hay bale, he hurried down. He wanted to be home as soon as possible.

Jim opened the passenger’s door to his truck and began rummaging through the glove compartment. He still had an unmistakable question in the back of his mind. Was it Derrick? Was he a murderer thirsting for blood... or was he just a guy trying to survive his past? He pulled out a handful of napkins. They were soon to find out.

Closing the glove compartment, he began searching the console.

Finally, the photograph fell out of a pile of folded church bulletins.

There it was. He picked it up and stared at it. This could tell the story.

Leaving the junk on the seat, he shut the door and turned to go. Halfway back, he stopped, startled. Not knowing what startled him, he shook his head and started walking again then stopped. He stared out into the darkness. If it wasn't Derrick... was he still out there. *It is Derrick. Right? Lord, please keep Wade and Mellissa safe. ... Wha-at?* Jim shook his head again and headed inside.

.....

Wade hopped into the car and slammed the door. He reached for his seatbelt and turned the key at the same time.

"Why are you in such a hurry?"

He shrugged. "Just want to get home."

He turned, looking into the rear window as he backed onto the lonely gravel road. Lonely, until... a pair of headlights flashed on behind them.

"Did you see someone coming when we backed out?"

"No."

"Well, there's someone behind us now."

"What?" She looked up into the rearview mirror to see the glare of the headlights. "That's weird... Wade?" her voice turned sharp. "Wade, this road is totally flat! We would have seen him! There are no farm houses around he could have come from. Wade he was waiting for us! ...waiting for us by the side of the road!" Her voice was shrill. Her breathing quickened.

The SUV behind them began to tailgate.

Wade sped up.

The SUV behind them sped up, revving its motor and almost touching bumpers.

Mellissa clutched the armrest on the door. "God, please help us!"

.....

Jim pushed open the door to Jess's room and came in. She looked tired. Both Trent and Jess looked up at him as he entered. "I've got it." He lifted it slightly.

"Okay, good. I've got a few more questions I need answered, then we can show it to her."

.....

Wade fought to keep the van on the road as it swerved from each bumper to bumper contact.

“Wade! What are we going to do?”

BANG!

Bumper hit bumper.

The van surged forward toward the ditch.

Wade jerked the wheel! The tires squealed as the van swerved back to the center!

Mellissa screamed, grabbing the dash. “Wade! Give me your phone!”

“It’s at home!”

“Why?!” her voice broke. “Why can’t you ever remember it?!”

BANG!

Squeal...

Mellissa, still clutching the door, sucked in a gasp. “God, please don’t let him kill us! PLEASE! Don’t let him kill us!”

Slam!

Squeal...

The car behind switched on his brights, glaring them onto Wade’s mirrors. Wade tried not to be blinded.

BANG!

Heading for the ditch, Wade swerved back but only part way. The killer’s car was right beside his!

Wade stomped the accelerator!

The killer stomped his!

Neck and neck!

Seventy miles per hour!

WHAM! The killer side-rammed them.

The van flew up and began to flip.

Wade stiffened.

Mellissa screamed.

The van flipped three times before landing in an upright position at the bottom of the ditch.

Wade felt dazed. His head began to throb from hitting the wheel. Blood trickled down his cheekbone.

“Wade? Wade, are you all right?”

He felt Mellissa touch his arm. *Mellissa! The baby!* He jerked his head sideways too quickly and had to recover from sudden dizziness. He could barely see because of the dark. “Are you... Are you okay?”

“I think so. I just felt the baby move. I hope so!” Her voice was shrill.

“Don’t panic. We’re going to make it through this.”

“Wa-ade?” her voice squealed as she saw...

“Don’t bet on it.” A deep voice growled beside him.

Wade turned his head and came face-to-face with the malevolent killer.

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“That pretty much does it, except for the picture. Jim, you got that?”

“Yeah.” Jim got up from the chair and took it over. Sitting down on the bed, he showed it to her.

“See him?” Trent asked. “Make sure it’s not just someone who resembles him.”

“No. That *is* him.” She pointed to one of the men. “I’m sure.”

Trent and Jim exchanged glances.

.....

“Get out of the car.”

God, please protect my wife and baby. Get them through this somehow. Wade got out of the car.

The killer waved his gun. “Up on the road.” He pointed it at Mellissa. “You too.”

Mellissa stayed behind her husband as they walked on the road. “Wade?” Her voice was quiet but high pitched.

He turned his face and whispered, “Just stay calm. Wait for an opportunity.” He, himself, was anything but calm. His legs felt weak, and his heart felt like a jammed accelerator, but he knew if he panicked, they were all dead.

The whole scene was illuminated by the headlights of the murderer’s car.

They stopped in the middle of the road. “Now what?” Wade tried not to let his emotions show. He could hear Mellissa’s rapid, panicked

breathing behind him.

The killer lifted his gun. “Now, you’re both going to die.” His lips formed into an evil grin.

Mellissa squealed.

Wade’s heart froze. He tried desperately not to show fear. “Why, Cap? What’s the problem?” Now that he knew who the killer was, some of the pieces to the jumbled mystery were starting to fall into place. This had to be linked to that fire years ago. He tried to replay that night in his memory, but he could barely think inside his throbbing head.

He swore. “You’re the problem! You, Jim, and that...” With gritted teeth and nearly spitting, he took the next minute or so to vehemently cuss out Derrick, and then also Roger. “You’re all going to die!” He waved his gun. “You’ve all destroyed me! Now...” He growled. “I am going to destroy you.” He pointed the gun barrel right at Mellissa’s face.

“We didn’t do anything to you!” Wade shouted desperately.

Cap lowered the gun momentarily. “You stole my wife! You killed her love for me from the first day you testified! You turned her against me! You made me look like a callous, incompetent fool! You destroyed Dan’s wife till she finally took her life!”

“We didn’t!” Wade interrupted.

“You did!” Cap thrust the gun barrel inches from Wade’s forehead and continued. “You stole McMillian’s only love!” He stepped back and turned in a circle, waving his pistol around for emphasis. “All to save *your* own skin!” He turned his back.

“McMillian wasn’t even married!”

Cap spun back around. “He was married to his work! It was his life, and *you*,” He touched the barrel right between Wade’s eyes, and pulled the hammer back. “stole it from him!”

Squeezing his eyes shut, Wade swallowed hard and prayed.

Mellissa shook, unable to screech.

“You three!” He returned the hammer, waved his gun over his head, and walked backwards then forward. “You stole my wife!” he shouted then his voice softened. “She was the only one I ever loved.” If not for being petrified with fear, Wade would have rolled his eyes at that. “You stole Dan’s wife! You took McMillian’s life, and you never even cared to look back! I *hope* these past few years have been *happy for you!*” He growled, glaring at Mellissa.

Mellissa moved farther behind her husband as if trying to hide.

Chills ran up Wade's spine. He tried unsuccessfully to keep his voice steady. "We just told the truth. We had to tell..."

"YOU LIED!" He put the end of the gun barrel two inches from Wade's nose, again. "You all lied! You self-righteous..."

"I'm sorry!" Wade didn't know what to say... anything... anything that would pacify that murderous rage.

"You *will* be sorry." Cap backed up a little. "You'll be sorry..." He pointed the gun at Mellissa but spoke to Wade. "When you see your little wife, your *perfect* little family..." He spoke in a trance. "...lying on the gravel in a pool of..."

Mellissa screamed.

Cap jerked his attention from Wade to her.

Wade grabbed Cap's hand and forced it backward.

Cap dropped the pistol but jammed his elbow into Wade's chest, forcing him back. He reached for the gun.

Wade kicked it away.

Cap's face burned with fury.

Here it goes. Wade hated fights. He always lost.

He knew his only chance was to be fast. Still, he had no clue how this could end in their favor.

Cap threw all his weight into a massive, power-packed punch.

Wade ducked, jumping back just in the nick of time. If he let one of those hit him, it would be lights out for sure.

Every muscle in Cap's body strained as he directed all his energy into the next blow.

Wade was just barely able to dodge it.

The misses only kindled Cap's fire.

Wade's fatal problem was that he had absolutely no offence and no current plans on acquiring one.

Mellissa turned around and ran back to the van. She had to do something.

Wade jumped backwards, Cap's knuckles coming within inches from his nose.

Mellissa threw open the glove box.

Cap threw a massive fake to Wade's face, causing him to duck. As he did, Cap slammed his other fist into his chin at the same time as he

delivered a smashing kick to his knee.

OUCH! Pain surging, Wade fell, disoriented, to the ground. As he lay there, Cap walked over and picked up the gun.

Mellissa fumbled through the glove compartment until her hands fell on a small canister of mace. She grabbed it.

“Get back over here!”

She looked up in response to the bellow from the Captain. Slipping the mace in her sweater sleeve, she backed out of the van.

She wished with all her heart that someone had heard the shot and called the police, but she knew all too well, that in the unlikely event that it was heard, way out here, it would likely be passed off as a hunter.

As soon as she reached the road, Cap had his gun on her. She walked toward her husband, barely able to force herself to stay calm.

“I was just about to come and get you.” He gave an evil grin that didn’t reach his eyes.

Wade stood back to his feet. His heart felt like a freight train.

Mellissa let the mace slip down into her palm, yet still kept it concealed.

Cap walked closer, slowly and menacingly, his gun barrel pointed at Mellissa’s face. She forced herself not to look at it. He came closer. “Any last words?” Mellissa turned her hand and sprayed the mace up into his face. “AHHH!” Blinded, he brought his hands to his face.

Wade reached for the gun. Just as he got it, Cap grasped his hand. They struggled for it until the pistol popped from both their hands and went flying into the ditch.

Wade ran after it.

Cap ran for the corn, and racing into the tall stalks, he was gone.

Wade picked up the weapon, and looked for Cap. *Nothing*. Then he looked back to Mellissa, and smiled. They were all okay.

“O-o-o-oh!” Mellissa grabbed her stomach and fell to her knees.

Maybe. Wade ran over and knelt down beside her. “What’s wrong?”

“The baby’s coming! ... Wade! ... The accident! What if the baby’s...” she paused having to breathe through the contraction. “What if something’s wrong?” Her eyes held fear.

Immediately, Wade jumped up, paused to regain his balance from a sudden dizzy spell, and then raced to the Captain’s car. Looking in, he rejoiced to see the keys dangling from the ignition. Racing back to

Mellissa, he yelled, “The keys are in his car.” Reaching her, he helped her up. “Come on. We’ve got to get you to the hospital.”

Mellissa barely had the door closed before Wade stomped the accelerator. The force pushed her against the back of the seat. She grabbed her seatbelt, figuring she had better buckle up. Stopping mid-buckle, she swung her head back and forth, looking both ways as they raced across a country intersection, completely ignoring the yield sign.

“Wade!”

“What?”

“So far, we’re still in one piece. Would you mind trying to keep it that way a little longer?”

He shot her a glare and continued en route without breaking speed.

Mellissa clutched the side of the door. She had thought when they got away from the murderer they would be able to breathe again. Not so.

She held on as they went around a tight curve too fast. *And they trust him to drive an emergency vehicle?* Approaching a railroad crossing, she braced herself as they bounced over the tracks at seventy miles per hour. She glanced over at Wade. She *had* been under the opinion that paramedics were trained to handle their emotions and not to come completely unglued. “Wade, you’re beginning to drive like Jim. Remember the other day, how mad you were...”

“Look, we don’t have all day just to sit here. After that accident we don’t know.... Something could be wrong.”

Thanks for the encouragement. She repositioned herself a little then retightened her hold on the door. *All day to sit here. Talk about the understatement of the....* She saw headlights racing back and forth in the distance. That was the main drag. *He’d better....* “Wade, slow down. This is the highway. We need to....”

He slowed a little but didn’t stop as... *SQUE-E-E-EAL!* ...they scooted between two oncoming cars. Mellissa’s heart froze as they screeched into their lane, cutting it almost too close for any hope of an extension on life. “Wade, could you please.... Ah-h-h!” She bent forward from the pain of another contraction, succeeding only in causing Wade to stomp greater force onto the accelerator.

Mellissa looked up momentarily, just in time to see they were quadruple passing, and the cars coming toward them were.... She covered her eyes. *Lord, help us to get there in one piece.*

She felt the car jerk back over in their own lane, and didn't notice them dying in the process. *And please, help my husband to calm down before he kills us.* "Wade." She wasn't sure what to say to him. *If this is how you reacted when he got emotionally involved....* "I'm not dying." She closed her eyes as they passed again at speeds bucking the speed of light. "Yet."

Eyes fixed straight ahead, Wade continued on as if he were trying to escape a nuclear explosion. Mellissa wasn't sure that they weren't going to start one. "Wade, we're coming into town, now. For my peace of mind..." She gasped, ducking as they went through a red light, getting way too "up close and personal" with an oncoming car. "Wade! Please slow down! And start driving responsibly!"

He didn't seem to hear her. He was on a mission... or maybe it was that bump on the head.

"WA-A-A-AD-DE!" the word came out as a much louder than expected in an agonizing scream from the next contraction.

Wade reacted accordingly. Without slowing, he did a ninety degree turn into a gas station, then slammed on the brakes, jolting them forward.

"What?!" He jerked his seatbelt off and turned toward her. "What's wrong? The hospital's only a couple of blocks away. What do you want me to do?" His words practically ran over one another.

Mellissa sat up, slightly out of breath from the contraction. "Calm down. I would really appreciate it, if you would calm down."

"I'm calm."

"You did better handling the murderer."

"I am not coming unglued."

"You *are* completely unglued. Just relax. Deep breathing or something." She repositioned herself.

Wade gave her another look and jerked his seatbelt back down. "I am *not* falling apart. I have *delivered* babies before. I'm a paramedic."

"You're not acting like one. Remind me ... to send up a prayer ... for your next mother." She panted from a short contraction.

"Look! I just think we should get to the hospital as soon as possible."

"I think we should wait till you calm down."

"I'm calm!"

"Can I drive?"

He shot her a disgusted look and backed out of the lot.

.....

.....

Jim followed Trent into the hallway, leaving Jess alone to rest. “I have to admit I wondered about Derrick being the killer, but Cap. . . that’s almost harder to believe.” Jim leaned against the wall, crossing his arms and looked at Trent.

“Why’d you wonder about it being Derrick?”

“I don’t know. . . sounds when he was shooting in my house.”

“Did it sound like your captain?”

“I sure never would have guessed that, but yeah, more like him I guess. Still, that’s pretty thin evidence against him.”

“Yeah.” Trent began again to walk down the hall.

“Think he set Derrick up?”

“I don’t know. Derrick ran. They could be in it together.”

“In *what* together? This all seems so weird. What is the motive behind this?”

Trent shook his head. “At least with the captain, he has friends and family we can question. With Derrick, all we had was his sister, and she really didn’t want to be that helpful.”

“I didn’t know he had a sister.”

“Do you know *anything* about him?”

Jim raised his brows and grunted. “No, not really.”

“Her mother works here. She warned him. That’s how he got away.”

“Think you’ll be able to find him?”

“We’re getting closer. His sister said that he has a cabin, but we can’t get her to say where.”

“I can’t see him being in on anything with Cap.”

“Why not?”

“They don’t like each other, for one thing. Don’t know why, but they never have, even before....” Jim stared ahead, ruminating.

“Before what?”

“I just thought of something,” He looked over at Trent. “maybe what could be behind this.” They walked toward the hospital exit.

“Don’t keep it to yourself.”

Jim stopped abruptly at the large picture window, jerking his head in the direction of an approaching car.

“What?”

“That’s Cap’s car.”

Trent followed his gaze to the vehicle then headed for the door. Jim followed. They were both surprised to see Wade getting out of the driver’s side and running around to the passenger side to help his wife.

“Wade?” Jim looked puzzled as he watched.

“Are you sure that’s the captain’s car?”

“Positive.” Jim went toward them as they came in. “Wade?” He tried to intercept them, but Wade rushed his wife past to the front desk.

Trent and Jim exchanged puzzled glances and then followed. They listened as Wade explained the situation to the front desk nurse.

An orderly hurried over with a wheel chair for Mellissa. She didn’t take anytime in plopping down. She was drained... *already*. Wade caught her hand before she was taken away. “I need to talk to Trent, but I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She nodded. “Okay. That’s fine. Try to pull yourself together.” She gave a half smile.

Wade rolled his eyes with a tired smile. After they took her, he turned his attention to Jim and Trent.

“You were in a car accident?” Jim was the first to question.

“Yeah. Second lousy attempt at murder, although he was doing a pretty good job for a while.” Putting his hands in his pockets, Wade leaned back against the desk and looked out the window. “It wasn’t Derrick.”

“We know,” Jim began.

“Who was it?” Trent interrupted.

Wade shifted his weight to one foot and waited a moment to reply. “It was Cap.”

“Your forehead’s bleeding.” Jim handed him a Kleenex.

“Thanks. Thought it had stopped.” He pressed it on the gash, swaying back and forth a little as if it made him dizzy.

“So, he rammed you off the road?” Trent tried to bring back the conversation.

“Not only that.” He paused a moment, collecting his thoughts.

“What?”

“He, ah, made us get out. He was going to shoot us.”

“You talked to him?” Jim’s voice held surprise.

Wade nodded.

“Where is he now?” Trent’s voice was urgent.

“He’s gone. Mellissa sprayed him with mace, and he ran into the corn.”

“What road?” Trent got out his phone and began calling it in.

“Locust.”

Jim took the conversation when Trent stopped momentarily to talk on his cell. “Did he say why?”

“Yeah, ah...” Wade put his hand up to the gash as if he had a headache. “He said that we had stolen his wife, and Dan’s wife, and...”

“His wife divorced him, and Dan’s wife...”

Wade nodded. “I know. He says we were responsible because we, um, testified against them. He said we stole McMillian’s *life*, too.”

“His *life*?” Jim raised his eyebrows.

Wade shrugged.

“He’s only... what... a millionaire, now?”

“Who is he?” Trent wasn’t getting the connection.

“He used to be the chief. After being let go, he started McMillian Potato Chips. Last I heard, he had about five plants throughout the state, and a few in Iowa and Wisconsin.”

Trent looked impressed. “It doesn’t sound like the private sector hurt him too much.”

Jim shook his head. “No.”

Wade shrugged. His voice was sluggish. “I don’t think Cap’s got it all together, anyway. He also, um... had some...” He rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to get his thoughts together. “He had some pretty choice words for Derrick... and Rick.”

“Derrick?” It was Trent’s turn for surprise. He *was* being framed.

“Yeah. There was, um, an incident. Maybe Jim can tell you about it.” He looked over at Jim then turned to go. “I need to find Mellissa.” His voice was slow, almost slurred.

Trent nodded. “Yeah. Get a doctor to look at that head.”

“I intend to,” he muttered, already halfway down the hall.

Trent looked over at Jim, who was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, deep in thought. “What incident?”

“Huh?” He looked up.

“What happened that turned your captain, killer?”

“Oh. Yeah. Well. It was a few shifts after we dedicated the new station

and started there to work. We were called to an apartment fire downtown.”

“Uh huh.”

“Some people were so sure that everyone was out that they were willing to swear by it. Others were just as sure that there were some trapped, but McMillian held down the order to *stay clear*.” Jim shrugged. “There was plenty of time to make a sweep at the beginning, but for some reason, he made the decision to concentrate all the efforts on containment and evacuation of the nearby buildings. Rick was convinced there were people trapped, and Derrick backed him up. I guess when they saw they weren’t going to be granted permission, that’s when they decided to disobey orders and go in, but by that time, the building was almost ready to collapse.” He let his eyebrows jump. “They went in anyway. Derrick made it out with two of the victims. Rick’s body was never found.”

Trent looked down shaking his head, slowly. “That’s too bad.” He looked back up. “And from that came all this?”

Jim nodded. “Cap couldn’t take all the whispers, the cruel remarks, the review boards.... He was even called up on trial. They say he turned to alcohol. Some say he beat his wife. In any case, she left him. Dan’s wife was a different story. She was verbally abused by the deluge of reporters and critics. She thought her husband would be deformed and paralyzed for life, if he even survived. I guess, she felt she was all alone... and that was all our faults.” He paused, thoughtfully. “Anyway, they found her one night.... She had taken her own life.”

Trent looked down, shaking his head in sympathy. After a couple of moments, he looked back up. “And the chief?”

“McMillian was found negligent by the review board and let go.”

“You said Cap was on trial?”

“Yeah, with McMillian, it had something to with the motive for not sending firefighters in in the beginning... possible manslaughter charges or something. You’ll have to research the case. I was so consumed with my own problems and responsibilities at the time that I wasn’t following it, really at all.”

“Hum. I’ll have to do that.” Trent shook his head slowly again. “Terrible thing.”

“That’s for sure.” Jim stared a moment toward the floor then looked back at Trent. “At least we know who’s been doing this.”

Trent’s nodded. His mannerisms turned proactive. “We’ll get him.”

Jim gave a half smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Yeah, hurry up."

"I better get on this." He picked up his cell that he had set down on the counter and put it in his shirt pocket while turning to go.

"Yeah. How's Derrick going to know he's no longer wanted?"

Trent gave a huff and smiled. "Maybe someday he'll get tired of running, come back, and find out. It's certainly not my job to tell him. I've got to go." He hurried out.

.....

Trent pulled his car to a stop in front of Cap's house. He glanced down at the clock radio. It was a little after eleven. Hopefully, his wife would still come to the door. He got out and began walking up the sidewalk. The lights were still on, and he could see the TV flashing behind the curtains.

He rang the doorbell and waited. After the second ring, he heard someone come to the door. She didn't open it, but looked out the window. "What do you want?"

"Ma'am, I'm a police officer. He held his badge to the window.

She opened the door a few inches and looked out. "Is he dead?"

"Your husband?"

"Not for long."

"No, but I need to ask you some questions about him."

She didn't invite him in. "What'd he do?"

"He's a suspect in a string of attempted murders."

She raised her eyebrows, more in interest than surprise. "So, what do ya want from me?"

"Can I come in?" he asked, hoping she would give him more information than a few sentences at the door.

She stared at him a minute, thinking. "Okay." She relented and opened the door.

Trent walked in. It was a nice house. He looked around, noting in his memory anything that might be useful in the future.

She walked into the living room and turned off the TV. "Sit down." She motioned to the couch.

She was a thin nice looking young woman. The age difference between her and Cap was staggering. He was sure if she hadn't told him different, he would have mistaken her for Cap's daughter. He sat down,

watching her as she made her way over. She wore a stained and baggy sweatshirt. Her wavy, red hair was loosely held back in a less than centered ponytail. Stray locks fell forward, framing her freckled face. She unwrapped a bubble gum as she sat down and popped it in her mouth.

“Want one?”

“No, thanks. How long have you been married?”

She sat way back in the opposite corner of the couch, crossing her legs Indian-style on the cushion and putting one of the pillows in her lap. “Two years.” She leaned forward with her elbows on the pillow. “When we first met, he was like everything a girl would dream about, but after a while, he really changed.” She rolled her eyes. “He’s great at putting on an act.” Trent glanced at a long bruise on the side of her neck, partially covered by her hair. Noticing him looking at it, she put her hand up to touch it. “Yeah, enter Prince Charming, right?”

Trent looked down. “I’m sorry.” He paused. “Do you think your husband is capable of premeditated murder?”

“I don’t know. There’s something wrong with him. I can’t take it anymore.”

“But you both do still live here, right?”

She smiled at his insinuation that she was crazy for staying. “I deserve this house. He can leave. Besides, if everything goes right, in a few short weeks, I’ll have every legal right to change the locks.”

“I’d change them, now. Legal or not.”

“So he’s really stalking someone? Who?”

“Some of the firemen he works with.”

“Ooh...” She nodded. “Derrick?”

Trent raised his eyebrows. There’s that name again. “Were they close?”

“They used to be best friends, but now he hates him. He *really* hates him.”

“He hasn’t gone after him, yet.”

“Huh.” She let her brows jump. “Probably saving him for last. That’s how his twisted mind works.” She hid her hands inside her hoody’s sleeves, warming them. “How many others is he, um, after?”

“Four. One was hit and run. She’s still in serious condition.”

“Hmm...” She looked down at her sleeve-wrapped hands. “She the only one that’s been hurt?”

“No, actually all four of them have. He’s even murdered a bystander. We believe by mistake.”

She shivered. “Who?”

“Frank Douglas. He was a...”

“Prosecuting attorney.” She smiled, knowingly. “Sure it was a mistake?”

Trent’s face betrayed surprise. “He knew him.”

“They were acquainted.”

Trent couldn’t believe how all the pieces of this puzzle were starting to come together so neatly. “I think you can be a great help in putting this guy away.”

“Hmm.” She let her brows jump. “My pleasure.”

“But first, I need to know if you know where he might be. Just a little over an hour ago, he ran a young couple off the road, and...”

“Are they all right?”

He gave a quick shrug. “No. But, they should all live. At least, until the next time.”

“I don’t know. He was just here, but he left a few minutes before you came.” She stood up, putting her hands in her back jean pockets, not looking at him.

Trent’s stomach nodded in frustration. He had just missed him. “What did he want?”

“He just came in and charged downstairs, hardly even noticed me. He loaded his truck up with some of his army stuff...”

“Army stuff?”

“Yeah, he collects weapons. It’s their *big secret*.” She formed parenthesis with her hands. “There down in their *guy’s room*. Never let me down there. I had to sneak while he was sleeping to get the key so I could...”

“Who’s they?”

“Him and McMillian. Jackson Mc...”

“McMillian!”

“Yes.” Her eyes spelled confusion. “They’re friends. What’s wrong?”

“Live ones?”

“I don’t know.” She put her hands in her side pockets and looked down.

“Please, this is important.”

She waited a moment. “Could be. I doubt half of them are legal. I think they’ve got grenades and landmines.”

Oh, great. Trent put his hand to his forehead as if he had a sudden headache. “Didn’t it ever occur to you that he might use those things in....”

“They’ve just got a few things down there on display. They collect them. It’s not like he’s stockpiling for a war.”

“Maybe a personal war.”

Fear entered her eyes. “I don’t have a key, but you can break down the door. I really never thought....”

“Okay.” He put up a hand to stop her. “Just show me where. We need to stop this guy.”

She nodded. “Come on.” She motioned to him as she headed out of the room.

“Do you know what he was driving?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t look. All I know is that while he was packing stuff up, he was muttering something about Derrick.”

Gre-at. Go after the only guy we can’t find. It was a toss up which would be easier to locate, the murderer or the victim.

“I was debating about calling the cops because he was terrifyingly mad. He said something about killing him. I figured I had some time to decide since he’s all the way up in Wisconsin.”

Trent turned toward her. “Do you know where?”

“No. Just some cabin in Wisconsin.”

He mentally rolled his eyes. *Back to questioning sister Sam.* He’d had greater cooperation with the syndicate.

“Here it is.” They stopped in front of a basement door.

“Okay.” Trent jiggled the knob, but it was good and locked. Guiding her to the side, he prepared to kick down the door.

“I didn’t see what he took. He pushed me away and chased me back upstairs.”

Consider yourself plenty loved. At least, he didn’t kill you.

.....

Lying on the hospital cot in Jess’s room, Jim stared up into the darkness. He glanced over at the clock – midnight. He was tired, but he couldn’t sleep. Too many thoughts kept running through his mind.

Quietly, he got up and went out in the hall. He wondered if Mellissa had had her baby yet. He'd been glad to hear that they didn't think the baby had been injured, but he wanted to hear that the delivery was a success. He also felt sorry for Wade. He wasn't able to be there with her because of his severe concussion. Although Jim had it on good authority that Wade was receiving blow-by-blow text messages from a maternity nurse sympathetic to Wade's dilemma.

"What are you doing out here?" Dr. Fredrick's disapproving voice resonated behind him.

Jim sighed. *I'm sorry I walked in your private hallway.* He turned around. "You seem to be working a lot of hours lately."

"The more the better." His voice was flat. "Looking for someone?"

"Not really. I just couldn't sleep. Thought I'd find Wade and see how things are going."

"He has enough intelligence to be asleep."

"Oh? More than you, I see." Jim couldn't resist the wisecrack. To his surprise the doctor's face lightened, although, not quite in a smile. "So everything's okay with their baby?"

"I heard it's a boy."

"Healthy?"

"Seems to be."

Putting his hands in his jean pockets, Jim smiled, leaning back against the wall and looking up at the ceiling thoughtfully.

"I was just going to have a cup of coffee. Want to join me?" He stared at his clipboard as he asked.

Jim couldn't help feeling surprised. *What? You gonna spike it or something?* "Sure. I'd better make mine decaf." He felt obligated to explain himself, even if the doctor was the one to suggest it.

Dr. Fredricks began to walk. "If you want to get regular, I won't send out a warrant." He stared ahead as he talked.

Surprised, Jim looked over at him. "You all right?"

He looked down at the ground, over at Jim, began to say something, and then jerked his head back again straight. "Yeah, fine. How's your wife doing? Emotionally, I mean."

"Better. I think she's handling it pretty well."

Dr. Fredricks nodded thoughtfully. "Seems to be."

Chapter Ten

The next morning, Jim rolled over on the hospital cot. Rubbing his eyes clear and propping himself up on his forearms, he looked over at Jessica. She was still asleep. He just stared at her a moment. He loved her so much. She looked so helpless asleep. Awake was a different story. He had made sure she knew a thing or two about self-defense. That hadn't helped her in this last situation. Suddenly, he felt a surge of urgency. This killer needed to be caught, and he needed to be caught now!

He rolled out of bed, feeling an immediate need to call Trent and see how things were progressing. He needed to know that they *were* progressing – progressing fast. Leaving her room, he dialed his cell.

Trent answered. "Hello? Trent."

"Hi, it's Jim." He turned toward the wall to muffle his voice. "How are things progressing?"

"I was just on my way to talk to you. I'm about five minutes away. Talk to you then."

"Okay." He flipped the cell phone closed and impatiently walked over to the water fountain. As he was drinking, he noticed a young lady, about sixteen, walking toward him. He looked up as she stopped next to him.

"Hi. Are you Jim Richards?"

"Um hum." He swallowed. "Yeah." Straightening, he turning toward her.

"My name's Sam. I'm Derrick's sister."

He nodded an acknowledgment. She was attractive: tall, slender, deep olive complexion, long dark hair. She looked a lot like her brother. "How can I help you?"

"I wanted to talk to you about what's been going on, and..." Her voice softened. "about Derrick. You probably know more about him than I do right now."

Jim shrugged. "Were you close?"

"I haven't seen him in a long time," She looked at the nearby fish tank, then back at Jim., "but I *know* he's not capable of what they are accusing him." Her voice was strong and confident. She held eye contact.

"You're right."

"What?" She did a double take.

“He’s not guilty. They found out who the real killer is. Derrick was being framed.”

“Framed?” The surprise in her voice change to cynicism. “It figures.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t him.”

“You are?” The surprise was back.

Jim shrugged. “He’s a talented paramedic.”

“Yeah. Till the other day, I had no idea what had become of him. A paramedic... that fits him.”

“Do you know where he is?”

She looked around, avoiding his gaze, not answering.

“Can’t you call and tell him at least that he’s no longer a suspect?

There’s no reason for him to waste his life hiding now.”

She looked at him, accusingly. “You just want to find him.”

He looked puzzled. “I told you...”

“I know what you said.” She crossed her arms.

Trent came walking toward them. Obviously annoyed, he looked over at Sam. “Where have you been? Your mom’s worried about you.”

She rolled her eyes. “She knows I’m independent.”

“She knows you skipped out of the house in the middle of the night so you weren’t there when we needed to talk to you.”

“I had something to do.”

“With who? Derrick?”

She tossed her hair back, not answering.

“If you’d been there, you’d of found out your brother is no longer a suspect.”

“That’s what he said.” She thumbed over her shoulder at Jim who stood behind her.

“I think she needed it confirmed, anyway.” Jim walked to join the conversation.

“Why should I believe either of you?” She crossed her arms.

“Because your brother is in serious danger.”

“Oh, yeah?” She leaned sideways against a beam, not buying it, yet.

“Yes.”

“Mind explaining?”

Trent backed up and crossed his arms. He felt like telling her off. Somehow, he managed to constrain himself. He tried his best to be diplomatic. “Your brother was being framed. When the frame didn’t work,

the killer got angry, loaded an arsenal and went hunting for your brother.”

“Arsenal?”

“This guy’s not gonna be stopped by a shotgun. So, if you know where your brother is you need to tell us.”

Sam looked down.

Jim didn’t get it. “If you know where he is why don’t you tell them?”

“Because they don’t care a bit about my brother’s life! They don’t care if they kill him along with everyone else, just as long as they get their man!” She said it rather loudly.

Trent glanced around, over his shoulder. “Shhh.” He tried to get her to lower her voice, and she did momentarily.

“Oh, who cares who hears me? Why don’t you go tell them yourself? You know it’s true!” She yelled the last sentence.

Trent smiled at the people who turned to look in surprise. “Come on,” he said in almost a low growl. “Let’s go sit down.”

She crossed her arms and followed him, walking perfectly straight, nose tilted up..

Trent sat down first, then so did Jim.

She sat across from them, stiff and poised, almost defiant.

Jim smiled. Her posture, in a way, reminded him of Derrick – never intimidated, but annoyed – never afraid, but energized – never submissive, but passive.

Trent gave a sarcastic smile. “Let’s start at the beginning. Why did your brother run?”

“I haven’t talked to him since then, but probably because cops have *always* had it in for him. After all, it’s always easier to get the good guy. You behind on your quota today?”

Trent tried to smile through his gritted teeth. “No.”

Putting her nose in the air, arms crossed, she looked in the other direction. “That’ll be the day. Ten to one, you peg him for this one, too.”

“Too?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Got a question.” Jim looked over at them.

“You guys are all full of questions,” she muttered.

Jim shrugged. “Never mind.”

“Actually, go ahead.” She turned back toward him, then motioned at Trent. “After all, I’ve been listening to this guy for the last how many

days?”

Trent let his eyebrows jump, grunting.

Jim smiled. “I’ve never heard of him being in trouble with the law. Maybe a couple of times he should have been, but...”

Sam smiled. “Bar room fights?”

“And some dark allies, from what I hear.”

She let her arms drop from their crossed position, and her face softened. “Maybe he hasn’t changed too much.”

Sounds like a pillar of the community. Trent had to force himself not to say it. He certainly did not feel like Mr. Diplomatic this morning. “Why don’t you just tell us where your brother is?”

“So you can kill him in the cross-fire?”

Trent stood up, but before he could say anything his cell phone rang. He pulled it out and checked the number then walked out of earshot before answering it.

Jim moved over to the chair right across from her and bent forward, putting his forearms on his knees. “So, tell me about Derrick while he’s gone? I work with him for twenty-four hours at a time, and really don’t know anything about him.”

“Why would you care?”

“I’m interested. I’m surprised you haven’t seen him before. He’s always in and out of the hospital.”

“We just moved here. Dad’s in the military so we move a lot.”

Jim nodded. “How’d you loose touch?”

“It’s a long story.”

Jim looked over his shoulder at Trent. “Looks like he’s gonna be a few minutes. He smiled at her, and she returned it.

“Our parents were both killed in a fire. I was seven; Derrick was thirteen.”

His brow furrowed. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.” She paused thoughtfully a moment then seemingly jerked her attention back. “So yeah, they sent us to an orphanage. We’d always been close, but then... all we had was each other.” She paused again. “Derrick swore to me that we would always be together.” She looked around, trying not to get emotional.

Jim didn’t know what to say, so he just waited, watching her and looking interested.

She gave him a half smile. “We were, till my parents came to the orphanage. They wanted to adopt me, but said that they couldn’t afford both of us. Are you interested in all this?”

“Yeah. Keep goin’.”

She nodded. “I did want to go with them, but no way, if I had to leave Derrick. I begged them to adopt both of us, but they said that there was no way they could.”

“So what’d you do?”

“I cried. Derrick took action.” She smiled at the memory. “Two o’clock in the morning, he came in and told me we were running away, and for the next three months we dodged every cop in the city. Well... dodged most of them. There was that one that got hit from behind with a metal trashcan lid.”

Jim tried not to laugh from the expression on her face.

“I know, right? That one I’ll never forget. Wide-eyed little girl standing in shock next to her brother. I was like, ‘You killed him.’ He was like, ‘I did not. He’s just asleep.’ Then he gets this terrified look on his face and drops down to check his pulse. I was making a mental checklist of things we would need to hide deep in the African jungle. I mean... it takes him like ten minutes to find it. My heart’s practically beating off the hook. Finally, he leans back on his heels sighing, ‘He’s still got one.’ By that time his partner’s showed up.”

“You get caught?”

“No, actually. It took quite a bit of creativity on Derrick’s part, but we did manage to get away.”

Jim smiled again. “How old were you then?”

“He was sixteen. I was ten. He’d actually just graduated from high school.”

“Yeah, seems I heard he graduated a year early.”

“He was always really smart. I’ve spent many a night staring at my Algebra, wishing he were here.”

“How’d you get separated?”

“It was one night after a really heavy rain. ... He’d tried to find shelter, but the best we could find was behind a dumpster. He used the lid for a roof and turned it into, like a three-sided shelter, then sat in front of the other side to block the rain. The water was still running in on the ground. I just remember waking up sick the next day – shaking and

coughing. I thought I was gonna die. He hardly said a word. He just picked me up and carried me back to the nearest hospital, and that was the end of that. I figured we'd run away again, but later that day, he came in my room and told me that these were good people and that it was better for me to be with a real family. I didn't see him again till right before I left."

Jim could see tears forming in her eyes.

She shook her head and tried to laugh them away.

"Why didn't you email each other, or something?"

"We did, twice a day for a while. One day, we had to pack up all our stuff and leave quickly cause of security reasons related to Dad's job, but naturally we lost our phone line along with the joint email. When I called the orphanage to tell Jim my new contact info, they said he had run away, a few days after I left, and he never told me." Her voice grew even softer, and she stared down as she talked. "Dad used his contacts to try to locate him, but," She shook her head. "No one could find him.

Jim looked down, not knowing what to say. "I'm sorry."

She gave a bitter chuckle. "You almost sound like you mean it."

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't."

"A lot of people would." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

Jim looked up to see Trent standing a little ways behind her. He wondered how long he had been there.

Sam didn't *just* wonder. She turned around. "How long have you been standing there eavesdropping?"

Trent walked over slowly and sat down next to Jim. "I'm sorry if I was too insensitive concerning your brother, but you won't have one much longer if this killer has anything to say about it."

She picked up a Kleenex and wiped her nose. "I don't want him to get killed."

"Then tell us where he is, so we can try to prevent it."

"Derrick can protect himself, but not if there are bullets flying everywhere."

"We're talking more than just bullets. The killer's carrying a small arsenal with him. He has grenades, landmines, and who knows what else."

Sam looked back at Jim. "He doesn't know he's no longer wanted. He isn't going to believe a bunch of cops. What if he starts shooting?"

Trent interrupted. "He's got weapons, too?"

"I'm sure he does." She looked back at Trent. "What *would* your men do if he started shooting at them?"

"Hopefully, your brother has enough sense to know that shooting at police officers is not the most healthy pastime."

"In other words, they would shoot back." She turned back to Jim. "Would you shoot him?"

"I a..." He looked from Sam to Trent then back. "I don't think Derrick's a killer."

Trent interrupted. "But would you stake your life on that?"

Jim paused a long moment, then started a little hesitantly. "Unless he did something to change my opinion... yes."

Trent glared at him.

Sam's expression told all. *Whoops*. He had this sinking feeling he had just gotten himself cornered into going along.

Sam sat up very straight, tossed her one leg over the other, crossing them, threw her folded hands down on her knee, and grinned. "I'll tell you where the cabin is."

Both men stared, waiting.

"On one condition." Yeah, he'd done it. *Here it comes*.

"If *only* you two go up there and tell him." She nodded at each of them.

Trent fell back in his chair, sighing.

Jim looked at her. "My wife's in the hospital."

"Then you know she'll be protected while you're gone." She smiled. "If you start early, you can make it there and back in a day."

Jim looked over at Trent.

Trent threw his hands up. "Will you go?"

"I'll have to talk to Jess."

"Okay. While you're doing that, I'll get directions from Sam."

"Not till I know you're *both* going, and *alone*." She got up to leave.

"You know what you could get for...?"

"Pssh." She cut him off, but didn't turn around. "If you thought I'd care, you'd threaten, but we both know I don't." She tossed her hair and continued walking.

Trent got up. "Hurry and talk to Jess. We need to get this guy before he kills more people. I better go. I'm not letting her out of my sight until we get that map."

“Will Jess be safe?”

“I’ll make sure security is tight as a drum.”

Jim nodded and watched him leave.

Walking into Jess’s room, Jim waited as the nurse finished administering her meds. When she left, he sat down on the edge of Jess’s bed. Smiling, she picked up his hand, playing with it. She loved the feel of it. It was so strong.

Jim squeezed her hand and brought himself closer to her. “I have something to ask you.”

She cocked her head. “Hmm?”

“Trent knows where Cap is.”

She nodded. “That’s good.” Her eyes questioned.

“They think he’s going up to Wisconsin after Derrick.”

“Then they know where he is?”

Jim shook his head. Derrick’s sister is the only one who knows where his cabin is, and she says she won’t tell, unless me an’ Trent promise to go up alone.”

She propped herself up a little. “Why you?”

“I don’t know. I think she thinks that Derrick will trust me because we work together.”

“Why alone?”

Jim shrugged. “She’s trying to protect her brother.”

“But Trent knows better...”

He shook his head. “She won’t listen. Her mind is made up.” He looked her in the eye. “I want this guy caught... not for revenge, but so we can have our lives back without having to look over our shoulders every two seconds.” His voice softened. “But it’s more than that.”

“What?”

“I think the Lord has been burdening my heart about Derrick. I’ve been thinking about him a lot lately, especially last night. He’s not a Christian. If he were to get killed... it wouldn’t be like me or you. He’d go to hell. I just feel like the Lord’s opening the door. I don’t know when or how, but I feel like I’m supposed to tell him about Jesus.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve considered the fact that you all could get killed?”

“I’ve considered it. That’s why I had to talk to you.”

She held his hand with both of hers and brought it up to her face. “You

know I love you... more than anything in the world. I'm not sure how I could live without you, but I'm, also, not going to stop you from doing what you feel like you have to do." She smiled at him. "I'll be praying for you every minute. The Lord can protect you."

Putting his hand behind her neck, and bending forward, he kissed her. "I'll keep in touch."

.....

Jim snapped the clip on the halter. Opening the pasture fence, he led Danny through it and toward the barn.

Trent, who was outside leaning against the barn, stepped forward as Jim passed him and followed him in, through the barn, and out to the trailer. "Load um' up, Tonto."

Jim gave him a look over his shoulder. *Tonto*. "Exactly how far will these guys be taking us?" He led the horse into the trailer.

"'bout six or seven miles."

Jim walked back past him. "He's deep in the woods."

"Tell me about it." Trent followed him back into the barn. "No cell phone or radio reception up there. Once we get in those woods, we're on our own."

Wonderful. Just what he'd always wanted. Out in the woods, all alone, with no backup... just him and Trent trying to find a guy that *nobody* trusted who turned out to be okay, trying to stay away from a guy that *everybody* trusted who turned out to be no good. *Joy*. "What's the plan for catching this guy?" He reopened the gate to the pasture.

"We're hoping we get up there before he does, can warn Derrick, and then set up a trap at the cabin."

Jim slipped a halter on a giant brown horse with a wide, white blaze. "How do you figure we beat him when he started last night?"

"He'll need ammunition for most of his arsenal, so, he'll have to stop somewhere on his way up to get some. It will take him some time to make a deal. Besides, if worse comes to worse and we do meet, what are you worried about?" he joked. "You're going with one of the most highly trained police officers in the district."

He walked out the gate. "I think I'll bring my rifle."

"Maybe you should try and convince that girl to let us go in with more

protection, if it worries you.”

He walked with Trent back to the trailer. “How do you expect me to do that?”

He leaned against the trailer. “I don’t know. First, you have to get around the legal documents she insisted we sign... in triplicate.”

Coming back out from loading the second horse, Jim smiled. “She ain’t no dummy.”

“Yeah. Too bad.”

Jim clanged shut the metal double doors and brought down the latch. “I take it, we drive through the night and then head out around dawn tomorrow?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan. Which horse do I get?”

“The big, brown one. His name’s Sampson. Don’t worry. He’s pretty much bomb-proof.”

“Hmm... Well that’s good to know, just in case, you know, we come in contact with one.”

Jim grunted, giving him a look. “Just don’t drop the reins because he loves to wander.” He picked up his rifle and put it behind the seats in the cab of his truck.”

Trent slapped him on the shoulder. “Yeah, that guy’s no match for a bull’s-eye cop and a marksman hunter.”

Jim glanced over his shoulder. “We’re all set.”

“Okie doke.” Trent went around to his side, and Jim got in behind the wheel.

.....

The drive up through Wisconsin was peaceful and relaxing. They wound around on small, two-lane roads with hardly any traffic for the first couple hours. Large, towering maples lined the road on both sides, creating a picturesque dome of autumn colors. Crinkly red and orange leaves drifted down all around them as they drove through the tunnel of foliage. Talking of family, church, and friends, they both tried to keep the conversation light, despite the seriousness of the situation they were heading into.

The daylight dimmed as they merged onto I-90. The sun was almost completely gone, and the rest of the drive would be in the dark. Jim glanced over at Trent who was leaning against the window taking a cat nap. Taking

Firestorm

this opportunity of silence, he began to pray – for his wife’s health and safety, for Wade and Mellissa with their new baby, for Derrick’s salvation and seemingly troubled life ... for Cap, someone he had looked up to, someone who needed help, yet a cold-blooded murderer after innocent lives. He prayed they would be able to take him down, yet he asked that his own attitude would be right toward this man, and that none of them would make an ill-advised mistake. He prayed for wisdom.

Chapter Eleven

Jim, awakened by the sky brightening into dawn, pulled the lever to release his car seat back into an upright position. They had arrived at this spot around one o' clock, and then decided to sleep out the rest of the night in the car. Jim yawned as he slapped Trent on the shoulder. "Wake up. It's light."

Trent jerked awake. Groaning, he rolled over on his back and looked out the window. "Barely."

Jim opened his door, letting in a rush of cold air. "We still have to saddle the horses. Come on. Let's go."

Trent rolled over and watched Jim walk out into the hazy morning and back to the trailer before he forced himself to sit up and get out.

Jim glanced over at the horses as he jerked down the latch to the trailer. He'd roped them to a couple of trees last night so they could eat some grass and get some air.

Trent turned off the alarm on his phone as he walked back from his car. "You don't even need one of these." He addressed Jim who was carrying out one of the saddles.

"Get the other one, will ya?" His face was serious.

"Sure." Trent jumped up into the trailer to look for the other saddle. When he reached the horses with it, Jim was almost done saddling Danny. "Good. Now you can do this one."

"I thought you knew how to ride."

"Sure. My girls are always wanting me to do trail rides with them. You know at Springbrook Farms. Their horses already come pre-saddled."

Jim bent down to pick up the saddle, and then lifted it up onto the horse's back.

Trent watched with interest as he tied the leather straps into a knot. He raised his eyebrows. "Huh."

Walking to the front of the horse, Jim slipped the bridle on Sampson and then clipped a two-ended lead rope to Danny's halter.

"He doesn't get a bit?"

"He doesn't need one. He's sensitive to commands." Jim swung the saddlebags up on Sampson and clipped them on. "Ready to go?"

"Yep."

They mounted simultaneously.

Waking up, Jess stretched and glanced over at the clock. Jim had called her last night, but she was hoping to wake up in time to call him again before he left. It didn't happen. Jim would be well on his way by now.

She tried not to make a habit of worrying, but she was all too aware of the danger of this situation. Of course, he did dangerous things everyday. He was a firefighter. She knew this was true, but it didn't stop the worry. There was just something about this that scared her. It wasn't just a mishap of nature. It was an intelligent man lurking in the shadows, thirsting for blood.

She reached for her Bible off the stand beside her. "Please protect him, Lord." Opening it, she began to read.

"One thing, you have to admit ... it's beautiful country up here," Trent said, guiding his horse behind Jim's through a shallow stream.

"Yeah, it's nice. Can't argue with ya there." Jim looked up at the tops of the swaying pines above him. He guided Danny over a fallen tree. It was somewhat difficult to navigate through the uncut forest as there was no trail, but it was almost a mystical world – untouched and beautiful. Glancing over, he saw a doe and her fawn watching them from behind a clump of nearby bushes.

Derrick took the venison he was cooking off the fire. He held it a minute, staring at it, trying to decide if he was hungry, then threw it back in the fire. He just didn't have any appetite lately.

Flinging his arm over his bent knee, he looked up at the huge cloud-puff spotted sky then down at the glassy, cool, rippling stream he sat next to. He had this feeling. He could sense something was about to happen.

BANG! A bullet ripped through the air, hitting a log in the fire a few inches in front of him. Sparks scattered in a burst.

Instantly, Derrick spun around on the log where he was sitting and

drove behind it into the tall grass, hiding himself with the thick trunk. He clenched the handle of his rifle, tightly. His body went into high-alert. *Cap remembered. Somehow, he found this place.* He cocked his rifle. The time was now.

.....

Jess picked up her phone and dialed the cafeteria for breakfast. Hospital food wasn't exactly something she looked forward to, but she was starting to get pretty hungry.

"What would you like?"

"Burger King."

"Sorry, honey, I don't think they deliver."

"You work too hard. You should take a break and go eat out... say Burger King?"

"Nice try, honey."

"Okay, well, how 'bout your biscuits and gravy."

"I wouldn't recommend them."

"Oh. Okay. What would you recommend?"

"A popsicle."

Jess raised her eyebrows. Was that a hint? "I take it you're not the one that does the cooking."

"Uh, no. Just between the two of us... the one that does the cooking... she can't cook." The last part was almost a whisper.

"Oh. Well, what would you suggest?" This conversation was doing wonders for her appetite. Either this lady was excessively honest or... yeah... maybe she wasn't that hungry after all.

"Hmmm..." It took a great deal of contemplation. "How about eggs and bacon? I think they're edible."

"Sure. That's fine." Maybe she was the one in charge of portion control.

"Okie Dokie."

Jess stared at the receiver as she slowly returned it to its box. Now that that was settled, she just had to decide if she was brave enough to eat it when it came. *Quite out of the everyday* – then again, compared to the rest of her life lately, what else was new?

.....

Jim pulled Danny to a stop.

“What’s the matter?”

Jim motioned for Trent to come up beside him at the top of the hill. “That may be it.” He pointed toward a cabin in a small clearing. “It’s not exactly where I thought it would be, but maybe I got the map wrong.”

“What? You think you got the wrong cabin?”

“No. I just thought it would be just a little bit further. This is it.” He stared down at it a minute then looked back at Trent. “I’d like to go in and talk to him first.”

“Uh uh. He’s emotionally unstable.”

“Yeah? What tells you that?” He shifted his weight in the saddle to turn toward him.

“Different things.”

“Your computer or your network of charts and scenarios?”

“They’re usually reliable – better than a hunch. Something tell you different?”

Jim returned his gaze forward. “A hunch. I don’t think threatening him’s a good idea.”

“Just going to tell him the facts.” Trent checked his pistol. “If he’s gonna start shooting at people, he’ll just dig himself into deeper trouble. He still has some charges against him, you know.”

“What charges? He was gone before you got a chance to talk to him.”

“Resisting arrest and assaulting an officer. A little ways out of Madison, a cop picked up his plate. Somehow he surprised the officer and knocked him out... with a single punch, say the witnesses. We’ll both talk to him from a safe distance. This guy’s dangerous.”

“He thought he was going down for murder. He didn’t kill the guy.”

“He could have. The officer could have cracked his head on the concrete when he fell.”

“But did he?”

Trent sighed. “What are you getting at?”

“Did he sustain any injuries from the fall or did Derrick catch him before he hit the ground?”

Trent looked around as if he didn’t want to answer. “What makes you think that?”

“I’ve seen him in a couple fights before, and I’ve seen him do it. He

does regard human life, Trent.”

“Yeah, and maybe he’s gone off the edge. We’ll soon find out. Let’s go.” Trent kicked his horse and took the lead down the heavily forested hill.

“Okay, we’ll stop here,” Trent said, looking over at Jim when they were a little more than halfway down. They both dismounted. Holding the reins in one hand, Trent knelt behind a thick cover of bushes. He took his handgun from his holster.

Jim took his rifle from his saddle and knelt beside him. “I’m going to go about twenty feet over there. He began crawling to the right without giving Trent a chance to comment.

“Hey!” The voice came from the cabin. “Whoever’s out there, I suggest you leave!”

Jim knelt behind a large tree trunk a ways away from Trent.

“Derrick! I’m a police officer! You’re under arrest for resisting arrest, assaulting an officer, and fleeing the scene!”

Jim almost rolled his eyes. *So much for the introductions.*

“Good luck!”

“Use your head, Boy! You’re going to end up making this a lot worse than it is!”

“You’re not coming in, so you might as well turn back!”

Jim glanced at Trent. This wasn’t going to work. It was going to turn into a gun battle, and that could get them all killed. Derrick was not going to back down. Trent couldn’t back down.

Jim dropped the reins to his horse and began crawling toward the cabin at an angle. He would circle around back, under cover from the brush, and talk to Derrick from the back door. Maybe he could reason with him. He hoped so. He had a strong feeling that Derrick wasn’t a killer or even a bad guy. Still, he couldn’t be sure. He’d be careful, but he wanted to give him a chance.

Trent scanned over the area with his eyes, assessing the situation and trying to formulate a plan. “Jim?” He glanced over to the spot where he had been. He saw his horse, but not him. “Jim?” He whispered loudly, wondering if he was hiding and couldn’t hear him.



Jim knelt behind a group of intertwined tree trunks for cover as he

looked toward the back door. He wished he could see in the cabin, but all the windows were covered with wooden shutters.

.....

Derrick stood beside one of the front windows. It was half open and half shuttered. Clutching his rifle, he stayed hidden, yet positioned where he could see anyone coming. He glanced back into the pitch blackness of the cabin. He hadn't lit a lamp. The darkness gave him better security. He wondered how long any of it would last. How much longer did he have for life? Everyone was after him. How could he hold off the world?

He clutched the rifle tighter. He could feel the sweat dripping down his neck. He stretched his head back and closed his eyes momentarily. He was afraid. He had trouble admitting it even to himself, but he was. He was going to die, and he was afraid of death. He always had been. He could approach death, but when it came right down to it, when the heart-stopping, brain-freezing reality of death was staring him in the face, the terror could propel his body to accomplish super-human feats. He had done the crazy-impossible before in order to escape death, and he would have to do it again.

A seething cauldron of hatred fueled Cap in his quest for revenge. He was going to make a formidable opponent. He looked back out the window. That cop out there didn't even realize he was marked for death, but Derrick understood it all too well.

"Derrick?"

Derrick jerked his head toward the back door, raising and aiming his rifle. It sounded like Jim. "What?"

"It's me, Jim."

Urgency surged through Derrick. "If you're facing the cabin, take cover of your nine o' clock, now!"

What? Dropping his gun, Jim immediately swung around to the side of the tree just as gun sounded and a bullet whizzed past him. Jim's breath left him. Who was out there? *Cap?*

.....

Trent jerked his head toward the sound of the shot. It hadn't come from the cabin. *What is going on? Where is Jim?*

.....

Derrick didn't know what to do. He took a few steps toward the back door. What was Jim doing here? Did he have cops with him? Had he betrayed him like Wade did?

"Derrick, what's going on? Is...."

Suddenly Derrick didn't care. His life was worthless. Jim's wasn't. Quickly, he yanked open the door. "Get in here." Instantly moving to the window, he flung open the shutters and started shooting. Shots were returned, but staying low and out of the path of the bullets, Jim grabbed his rifle, jumped up, and ran for the door.

Derrick shot out the rest of his bullets one right after another, not allowing the shooter time to worry about Jim.

Jim slammed the door and locked it behind him. Breathless, he fell against the wall and looked at Derrick. "Thanks. Is that Cap?"

"You know about Cap?"

Jim nodded, gasping. "He tried to kill Wade and Mellissa. You're not wanted for that any more"

"Then what's with the cop? He felt it was his duty to come all the way out here to make sure I get thrown in jail for punching one of his associates?"

"No, he found out Cap was coming up here."

"Yeah." Derrick closed the shutter and struck a match. "That's sure what he sounded like a few minutes ago." He lit a kerosene lamp and put the glass globe over it. "So why are you here?"

Jim got up and walked over to the table Derrick was at. "Your sister wanted me to come."

"So, you're doing this for my sister?" His voice was like, *Come on.*

"And Jess. She was the only one who knew the way up here."

Derrick put his foot up on a chair. "How many out there?"

"Just me 'n Trent."

"Ri-ight." He rolled his eyes and dropped his foot back down.

"I'm serious. Have you ever heard me lie?"

"Why?"

"That was the deal with your sister. She didn't want you caught in a crossfire.

Derrick's face softened. He almost looked surprised, but his only response was to pick up his rifle again and head back toward the window.

"Hey, it was hard for me to leave Jessica in the hospital to come up here. The least you could do is tell me what's going on." Jim was surprised to see concern rise in Derrick's face.

"What happened to your wife?" He stared out the front window.

"Hit and run. She identified the man as Cap."

"Cap's out front. He's got someone else covering the back."

"What?" Jim felt confused. "How do you get a partner in a hate crime? Wait. Trent's out front!"

"The cop?"

"You got to let him in here."

"Maybe he'll get himself killed," Derrick muttered.

"I don't think you mean that."

"He wanted to come up here. Any trouble he encounters is his problem."

"If you let that happen, you are just as guilty as Cap." Jim was getting angry.

Derrick jerked his head back at him. "That's stupid! I let him in here, and he's gonna pull a gun on me. Who'd you rather shoot? Him, me or Cap?"

"Is your freedom more important than a good man's life?"

Derrick pointed his rifle at Jim. "Back up."

Jim put his hands up and backed up a little.

"Further!"

When Jim was a good deal back, Derrick went over to the table, picked up Jim's rifle, then returned to his post at the window.

Jim put his hands down. "You really think I was going to use that on you?"

"Wouldn't bet against it."

"I would. Because I don't think I would have to do that." Taking his wallet from his back pocket, he walked toward him, stopping at the other side of the window to look at him. "Here." He took out a picture and handed it to him. "This is a picture from last year's Vacation Bible School at our church. Those three little girls in front; those are his. Do you really want to have the blood of their daddy on your hands?"

"Trent's a good man. He has a family that needs him. You need to let

him in, so we can fight against Cap together and all make it out of here alive.”

Derrick huffed a sarcastic laugh. “You mean, you two will fight while I’m tied up in the corner.”

Jim shook his head. “If he tries to arrest you before this is over, I’ll stand with you.”

Derrick’s voice was soft, yet bitter. “Right, you’ll stand with me.”
“You have my word.”

.....

Trent pointed his gun up, looking around in all directions. He didn’t know what to make of the gun shots. All he could figure was that they were between Jim and Derrick. Everything seemed eerily still. He couldn’t see what was happening and didn’t know what to do. He crawled forward, slowly and cautiously, doing his best to keep concealed.

Stopping, he looked around again, yet found nothing that would clue him in to their present circumstances. His only hope was that Derrick would answer again. He knelt behind a log. “Derrick! Derrick, answer me!”

A shot rang out behind him, splintering tree bark right above his head. Trent hit the dirt and crawled behind a bush. Who was that? He felt surrounded. He heard no one. He saw no one, but he had a feeling they were all around. His heart was racing. He wondered if Jim was dead. He wondered if he had a gun barrel aimed at him right now.

Derrick jerked his head toward the sound of gunfire, then back at Jim who had stiffened from alarm. Glancing down at the second rifle he had, he held it out for Jim. “Get at the window on the other side of the door. We’ll both cover him as he comes in. You talk.”

Jim grabbed the gun and ran over, jerking open one shutter.

Trent jerked back as another bullet grazed the side of his tree, splattering bits of bark and wood everywhere.

“Trent?”

Trent looked back toward the cabin. He thought it sounded like Jim. “What?”

“Both me and Derrick are going to cover you! Try and make it to the door!”

What? Derrick? How’s Jim in the cabin? What’s going on? Is this a

Firestorm

trick? More bullets came at him, then firing began from inside the cabin. Trent was beginning to feel disoriented from all the confusion. He fell to the ground as a spray of bullets from an automatic weapon riddled his tree. He had to trust Jim. His only chance was to get to the cabin.

Jim and Derrick almost simultaneously located the position of the gunman out front and began returning heavy fire on him.

Cap's attention was forced from Trent, and he began returning fire to the cabin.

Trent seized the opportunity. Staying concealed as best he could, he quickly crawled down the hill.

Jim paused for a second to reload while Derrick continued firing.

Trent came to the bottom of the hill. The last ten feet to the door were open ground. He didn't know how to make it across without being hit.

Cap stopped firing.

He's changing clips.

Derrick stopped instantly so his fire wouldn't cross in front of the door.

Jim continued firing, hoping to slow Cap down.

Trent made a break for the door.

Cap fired a single shot from another weapon.

It hit Trent, and he fell to the ground.

Jim reloaded. "You have to go get him!" He resumed firing.

Derrick dropped his rifle, grabbed his pistol and headed for the door. He raced out.

Cap commenced firing, still with single shots.

Running toward Trent, Derrick fired back.

Jim fired.

Cap fired.

Derrick grabbed Trent threw him over his shoulders and raced in the door.

Jim slammed the door shut behind him.

Derrick fell to the ground, letting Trent drop over his head.

Jim returned to the window and commenced firing.

Quickly, Derrick got up and pulled Trent away from the door and behind the ultra thick logs that made up his walls.

Out of breath, Derrick fell back against the wall.

Jim slammed shut the window and came over. He knelt beside Trent

who was lying on the floor groaning and rocking sideways in pain as he held the bullet wound that went through the side of his stomach and his back.

Derrick grabbed his rifle and began to stand back up.

“No.” Jim yanked him back down. “I’ll stand watch. You know what to do.” He looked him in the eye. “You need to help him.”

Derrick broke the gaze and looked down at Trent. After a moment, he knelt forward on one knee and ripped open Trent’s shirt.

Taking his gun, Jim got back up and went over to his window. Cap was still firing, but he was no closer.

Jim decided not to waste bullets until an opportunity arose or Cap made a move.

He glanced back at Trent and Derrick. Trent was as white as a ghost. He groaned in pain, and Jim could see his strength already waning. Derrick leaned over the wound doing what he could to treat it with his limited resources. *Lord, let Trent live. Tell Derrick what to do to help. His family needs him. He glanced into Derrick’s hard-set face. And help Derrick, please. Show him the truth.*

Jim looked back out the window. He hadn’t heard a shot in a few minutes, and it didn’t set right. Seeing a bush shake out of the corner of his eye, he raised his gun and fired.

Something came through the air toward them. It landed a few feet in front of the porch.

Jim jumped back.

Derrick stood. “What?”

KABOOM! Explosion.

The cabin shook on its foundation, but nothing gave way.

“Grenade! Jim went back to the window and returned heavy fire back at the bush.

No response... until...

Another grenade came flying toward them. It had enough momentum to reach the roof. Instantly, Jim aimed his gun up and shot, exploding the miniature bomb in the air. He breathed long hard breaths. His heart raced faster than ever before.

.....

“And how are you feeling today, Jess?” Mellissa asked as she walked in, grinning from ear to ear, holding her new baby – proud father beside.

A smile widened on Jess’s face as she raised her bed up. “Oh, let me see your new little one.”

“Mellissa came over and sat on the bed. “Oh, I know. My little Davey is just way too adorable. Isn’t he just the most perfect baby you’ve ever seen?”

Jess raised her eyebrows and cleared her throat. “Well, second most.”

Mellissa chuckled, “Oh, really?”

Jess laughed. “He’s the most perfect male baby I’ve ever seen.”

Wade chuckled as he came closer, “Nice out.”

Jess gave him a sly smile. “Oh, can I hold him?”

“Sure.” Mellissa carefully placed her little bundle in Jessica’s arms.

Davey squirmed a little but didn’t cry.

Jess touched her finger to his nose. “Oh, you are just the sweetest little thing, though. Yes, you are.” She played with his tiny fingers. “Yes, you are.” The baby squirmed and gurgled as Jess tickled him.

Mellissa smiled. “I think someone’s missing her own little someone.”

“I’m missing two someones. Mrs. Thomas hasn’t been by with Morgan yet, and Jim’s *still* out in the wilderness.”

Wade stepped forward. “When do you expect him back?”

“He was hoping to be back sometime today. I don’t know when. He said that he’d call before he starts home and then it’s about an eight hour trip.”

Mellissa glanced at the clock. “It’s noon, now.”

“Yeah, but he’s still got some time. I sure hope he makes it back today so I can stop worrying. It’s probably just taking him a little longer than expected.”

.....

Jim continued his vigil by the window. There hadn’t been any threats for a while now and he was getting edgy, figuring one was due.

Derrick came over and leaned his shoulder against the wall on the opposite side of the window.

“How’s Trent?”

“Not good.”

“All that stuff you were doing to him – isn’t that going to help?”

“It may prolong the inevitable. If you want him to have any chance at all, he needs a hospital and probably surgery. Soon..”

“You got any ideas?”

Leaning back against the wall, thumbs in his pockets, Derrick shook his head forcefully. “Nope.”

Jim returned his gaze back out the window. “Jessica’s gonna be worried about me. I told her I’d be back tonight. That’s impossible now.”

Derrick grunted, leaning further back and looking toward the ceiling. “She’ll be happy as long as you come back.” His voice held bitterness.

Jim wondered why. “Yeah, guess so. Still, I don’t like her to worry,” Jim sighed. “Especially when she’s alone in the hospital.”

Derrick glanced in Jim’s direction. “She gonna be all right?”

“Yeah. It will just be a little while till she can come home.”

Derrick looked toward the ceiling again and crossed his arms. He let his eyebrows jump. “Glad she’ll be fine.” His voice held more bitterness than it did concern.

Jim jumped back as a long spray of bullets came through the already mutilated window pain.

Derrick didn’t move – didn’t even flinch. He just stood there casually back against the log wall and waited until the shooting subsided.

Jim looked over, staring into his emotionless face. “Don’t you care?”

“I stopped caring a long time ago.” He paused. “Mostly.”

“You cared about me, about Trent,” he huffed, “enough to save both of our lives in just the past few hours.”

Derrick continued staring straight ahead. “Maybe your life’s worth something. The cop was just a fit of temporary insanity.”

Jim gave him a sideways half-smile. “Yeah, we both know that isn’t true.”

Derrick cracked his neck hard, turned, and looked at Jim harshly. “I’ll watch. You’d better go see your ‘friend.’” The word carried a bad taste. “He might not be able to understand you that much longer.”

Letting his rifle fall to his side, Jim nodded and walked away. He knew better then to pursue this conversation. He couldn’t figure Derrick. Under it all, he seemed like a nice guy, but soon as anyone started to see it, he would throw up a wall that could be so harsh and demeaning that no one would dare approach it. He glanced over his shoulder at the hardened

young man staring out the window. It was his way of keeping people away, but why? What had turned him into such a loner?

Arriving at Trent's bedside, Jim glanced down at the carefully treated wound. How could someone that acted so rough and harsh also be so precise and gentle? Trent's groan brought Jim back. He quickly kneeled beside his friend's bed. This was not the time for trying to figure out Derrick's sordid past.

.....

After about a half hour, Derrick turned to see Jim walking back from Trent. Jim acknowledged him and, putting his hands in his pockets, leaned back against the brick fireplace. "He's not looking good."

"No, he's not." Derrick paused and softened his voice. "You two good friends?"

Jim shrugged. "Not especially. He goes to our church. He's a nice guy, and he's got a sweet family. We're not close, but, yeah, you could say we are friends." He slowly leaned his head back against the brick, stretching his neck. "I don't want to see those three little girls come to church every Sunday without their father."

"Yeah, well, we're gonna have to get on the offensive pretty soon anyway. We can't stay like this. The longer we do, the more power we give him."

Jim looked at him questioningly.

"He thinks he's already got us jailed, and he's just trying to figure out how he's going to kill us." He paused. "And what he's going to do before hand is to make sure we want to die. If we don't figure something out soon, Trent may be the lucky one."

Jim stared at him a moment before realizing the full extent of what he was saying. "You don't think he's trying to kill us, now?"

"Not yet."

Jim shifted his weight as chills went up his spine. What were they in for? "How well do you know him?"

Derrick shrugged. "We used to be pretty good friends." He gave a sarcastic huff. "Not any more."

"Yeah." Jim glanced toward the ground. "Would I be prying if I asked why?"

“Yes.”

Jim didn't feel shut out by his tone, so he continued. “I might anyway.”

Derrick waited a long moment before answering. He felt uncomfortable, but something inside him caused him to answer anyway. “When he was having trouble with his first wife and they were in the middle of a divorce, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Cap took that opportunity to conclude I was hitting on her. He refused to listen and rather, decided he'd use me as a scapegoat to cast the blame.” His voice was rough.

“Sorry.”

“His problem, not mine.”

Jim shrugged and then nodded. “I wish I knew why he decided to go after Jess first. I was the one who testified against him.”

“Jealousy. He wanted you to lose your wife like he did.”

“He's never even met Jess.”

Derrick huffed. “Everyone at the station has met her.”

Jim didn't get it. “When?”

“The way you're always talking about her, most of the guys could probably pick her out of a police lineup.”

“I've never said anything bad about her.”

Derrick nodded in agreement for a couple of moments, and Jim finally got it. Thinking out loud, Jim spoke softly. “He's never said anything good about his. Man, how could that cause such a hatred.”

Derrick turned, looking in another direction. “He probably hates you almost as much as he hates me – not quite though.”

Jim looked down at the wood floor. It was all beginning to make sense. He glanced back at Derrick. Some things were becoming clear; others were still shrouded in mystery.

Derrick jerked his head to the side and spun around to look out the window.

“What?” Jim stood forward and grabbed his gun.

“He's down here.”

Jim walked over beside Derrick and looked out carefully, making sure to keep himself covered.

“Derrick!” The voice from outside was sharp and startling.

“What?” Derrick put the barrel of his rifle out and tried to follow the

voice.

“First of all, I suggest that you do not shoot in my direction because I am sitting behind a box of explosives, and if they blow, you’re comin’ with me!”

“Yeah, well, if I go, you go!”

“I wouldn’t count on that!”

“What do you want?”

“We’re going to play a little game of survival!”

“Get at the back window,” Derrick ordered Jim.

“What?”

“Hurry up!” His voice was loud.

Jim turned quickly.

“Very perceptive, Derrick. You’ve just won the right to play.” The man’s voice held an evil humor.

Derrick glanced over his shoulder at Jim who was walking past the cupboards. “Throw me another box of cartridges.”

Jim rapidly grabbed two and threw one to Derrick. His heart was beginning to pound like a sledge hammer. *What are we in for?* He slammed open the shutters, broke the glass, and pointed his rifle out.

Derrick began to sweat as he waited. He cleared all invading thoughts from his mind and forced himself into deep concentration.

Jim breathed heavy as he stared out into the dimming late-afternoon. He wished he knew where to look, what to expect, how to prepare.

A large pump of adrenaline shot through Derrick’s veins as, suddenly, a grenade came flying toward him with a high arch. He snapped the gun up, aimed, and...*BANG! KABOOM!* The grenade exploded on contact.

Glancing over his shoulder, Jim’s mouth dropped. This was the game? And the stakes were their lives! He hoped Derrick was a good enough shot.... A grenade came hurling toward him! He raised the gun. *BANG! KABOOM!* Exhaling forcefully, he hoped *he* was a good enough shot.

BANG! KA – BANG! BOOM! KABOOM! Another pump of adrenaline shot through Derrick’s veins as he fired. Almost every time, Cap threw up two at once. *BANG! KA – BANG! BOOM! KABOOM!* So far Derrick hadn’t missed any. If he did, he would not have time to feel regret. Just one miss and....

Jim could feel the sweat drip down the sides of his forehead. He aimed. *BANG! KABOOM! Please, Lord, don’t let me miss. Please, don’t let*

Derrick miss. Keep us alive, please. BANG! KABOOM!

Derrick quickly reloaded his clip. He kept in total concentration – refusing distraction – refusing to let his heart rate or breathing quicken. Three went up! He aimed. *BANG! KA – BANG! BOOM! KA – BANG! BOOM! BANG! BANG! KABOOM!* Derrick gritted his teeth. He'd come too close. He almost hadn't made it. That last one took him three shots, and he only got it in the... Two up! *BANG! KA – BANG! BOOM! KABOOM!*

Jim tightened the grip on his trigger. How much longer was this going to last? Two up! *WHAT?!!! Help me make them! PLEASE! BANG! BANG! KA – BANG! BOOM! BANG! BANG! BANG! KABOOM!* Jim let out hard long breaths. He felt as if he was going to hyperventilate.

Silence.

“Well, Derrick! You both surprise me! Next time, don't plan on it being so easy!” Cap shouted.

Momentarily, Jim's head felt light. They were done. He let his rifle barrel drop to the sill.

“Wait!” Derrick ordered.

Jim lifted it back up. His hands were almost shaking.

Staring out, they both waited.

Nothing. Until...

Four up for Derrick!

Three up for Jim!

Multiple shots and explosions shattered the sound waves. They had just barely, within a fraction of a second, gotten them all.

They both waited a few moments until Derrick heard the bushes rustle as the captain left. Once satisfied, he slammed his shutters shut. Jim followed, and they both weakly fell to the ground.

Derrick, sweat dripping down his throat, looked up and puffed out a hard breath of air. “Round one of psychological warfare.”

Jim closed his eyes and let his head bang back against a large log of the wall.

After a few moments, Derrick rose to his feet. “We have to do something,” he muttered, walking to the center of the room.

Jim watched him curiously. After grabbing a hammer from a cupboard, Derrick knelt down in the center of the room and, with the back of a hammer, began pulling up some floor boards. “What are you doing?”

“There’s a cellar. It comes up on the left side of the house. I can get out from there without being seen.”

Jim sat forward in interest. “You gonna go for help?”

“No.” He pulled up another board.

“You aren’t going to try to fight him alone?”

“No. Not him. I can get the guy in the back. At least we’ll have increased our odds.” Grabbing a cast-iron frying pan, he began digging through the dirt.

Jim got up. “How do you know you can get him? He’s probably got everything Cap does.” Still feeling weak, he grabbed a bowl, knelt down on one knee, and began helping.

“He’s not as experienced.”

“How you figure that?”

Derrick looked up at him. “All the time we were shooting it out earlier with Cap. He was silent in the back. He hasn’t made any advances on his own. Even in this little game Cap had for us, your guy was usually only throwing one while Cap was throwing two or three every time.” Derrick commenced digging again.

“I’m not sure I get it. Why do you think he was only throwing one?”

“Probably that’s what Cap told him to do.”

“In other words, he’s Cap’s puppet.”

Derrick shrugged, but didn’t look up. “I think it’s McMillian.”

Jim stopped digging and leaned back on his heels in surprise.

“McMillian!” His mind went back to the apartment fire and the hearing afterwards. It could fit.

Derrick didn’t respond.

“Want me to fire at Cap for distraction? You know… give you more cover?”

Derrick jerked his gaze up, his eyes piercing with hard rebuke. “Just drop him a note that I’m coming.”

Jim raised his eyebrows but dropped his gaze, deciding not to retaliate.

Fine.

Derrick resumed digging.

A few minutes later, after formulating another plan, Jim stared back at Derrick, asking for attention.

Derrick glanced up, acknowledging him.

“Why don’t we go together and try to get Cap?”

“No.”

“I think we can do it if we....”

“No.” His voice held finality.

“Why. Not?” The words came choppy and blunt. “We’re talking about all our lives here. It’s not just your decision.”

“You don’t know a thing about Cap.”

“I know if we can get him, then this is all over. I know that it could make the difference in whether Trent lives or....”

“And I know that you will be *dead* in less than a minute.”

“I’ve got a plan.”

“No.” His eyes met harsh contact.

The word seemed to Jim as an end-of-discussion command. “Why?” Jim’s voice was deep and slow. He could hear the anger in it.

Tension mounted as they stared for a moment before Derrick’s response. “He is going to be watching everything. I’ll have enough trouble not being seen without having you tagging along.” The words were harsh and demeaning.

His condescending response tightened Jim’s stomach and heated his anger. He now understood how Derrick could ignite a violent bar-room brawl with just a few words. He silently prayed the Lord would quench this fire kindling inside of him so that he wouldn’t retaliate. The last thing they needed right now was to be fighting amongst themselves. “Maybe you should just go and get help then, while you’re out there.”

“Not now. Not in the daylight.” He didn’t look up from his work.

Jim just stared irritated, wanting an explanation without having to ask for it.

Derrick knew it, and for a moment, ignored him defiantly before deciding to relent. He stared back at him with piercing gaze and spoke deliberately. “He wants to play with me. That’s why we’re still alive. He figures out I’m gone. He’ll kill you both and come after me.”

Jim looked down and resumed digging. *Okay. That makes sense.* The anger inside him started to wane.

After about ten minutes, Derrick’s skillet reached the end of the dirt. “Okay, that’s good.” They stopped digging, and Derrick stood, kicking the rest of the dirt in with his foot.

Jim listened to it fall. “How far down is it?”

“Eight feet – two inches.”

“Exactly?” Jim smiled.

“I ought to know. I built it.”

“Really?” Jim looked up around the cabin. “You built all of this?”

Derrick nodded.

“Huh.” Jim raised his eyebrows in surprise and looked around a little more closely. “I thought the map seemed a little off.”

“That’s for the old fishing lodge down a little ways.” He kicked in more dirt, widening the hole.

“You buy this land?”

“Father’s.” He stopped, walked over to the kitchen drawer and took out a flashlight.

Jim stood up and looked down into the hole. “You sure you want to do this?”

Derrick looked at him questioning.

“I don’t want you to get killed.”

Coming back over, Derrick rolled his eyes. “It wouldn’t bother you for long.”

“Yeah it would.”

Without reacting one way or the other, Derrick stopped on the opposite side of the hole and took his mini revolver from his jean pocket so he could jump.

“Hey.”

Derrick glanced up quick.

“Be careful.”

“Yeah.” Crouching, he jumped, hitting the ground with a thud.

Jim knelt down. “You okay?”

“Fine.” Derrick switched on his flashlight as he stood to his feet.

Looking around, he glanced at the little cobweb-tangled whisk broom propped in the corner; the empty, dust-laden jars sitting on the heavy wooden table; the canned goods still stacked on the home-made shelves. He paused, seeing for a moment two people joking and laughing as they happily stacked the shelves.

He walked a few feet then stopped. He stared at the jars on the table, remembering.... He shook his head as his mind began flashing back. *Man, this place is worse than the cabin. Too many memories... Come on, Derrick, knock it off and pull it together.* He forced himself forward, but his mind didn’t listen as it went back to.... His heart sped up and his muscles

tightened. Feeling disoriented, he turned too early and ran into the heavy wooden table. Falling forward, he caught himself with his hands, causing the table to screech as it slid a few feet. A jar rolled off and crashed on the floor.

Hearing it, Jim looked back down into the darkness. “Derrick? You okay?”

Still leaning on the table, Derrick put his head in his hands. *Come on!* he ordered himself.

“Derrick?”

He stood back up. “Yeah. I’m fine!” His voice was angry. He continued toward the door.

Jim stood back up. He sent up a prayer for Derrick as he went back to check on Trent.

Opening the wooden cellar doors, sunlight flooded over Derrick’s face, causing him to feel better. He stepped one higher on the ladder then pulled himself through. A surge of adrenaline pumped through his veins as he closed the doors. A half smile crossed his face. He loved this feeling. It brought hot, sizzling life back to his cold and hardened veins.

Falling to his stomach, he army crawled through a short distance of tall pampas grass over to a thick clump of trees that started the forest. Once he got deep enough, he rose to his feet, yet still remained low. Crouched down and leaning forward, he began quickly maneuvering toward the back end of the cabin, doing his best to stay completely silent.

Every nerve in his body filled with an over abundance of energy. Every sense he had became razor sharp. He heard, saw, smelled and felt absolutely everything. Every leaf, every critter, every change in the wind; he noticed it. Soon he heard the distant roar of a waterfall in the background and knew he was getting close.

He was pretty far behind the guy, so all he had to do was sneak forward toward the cabin until he reached him.

Heading forward, he rapidly moved his eyes back and forth scanning every inch of acreage, until out of the corner of his eye.... *There he is!*

.....

Jim looked down at Trent. His face was covered in sweat. He thrashed back and forth, mumbling out of his head.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Jim pulled down the blanket and loosened the makeshift bandage to look at the wound. It was getting infected. He looked back up at Trent's delirious face. This wasn't good.

Getting up, he walked over to the kitchen, picked up a bowl, set it in the sink, and grabbed the handle to the old fashioned water pump. With one hand he pumped the water into the bowl while with the other, he opened the drawer to get a towel. For a moment he stared thoughtfully into the drawer. For being abandoned, this cabin sure had everything in it. He picked up the towel and rinsed out dust.

Turning, he leaned back against the sink, glancing over the whole house once again. This place sure wasn't a man's fishing lodge. This was a home – a home Derrick had built for someone.

For her? He glanced over at a picture on the fireplace mantle – a younger happier version of Derrick sitting with his arm around a pretty young lady about his same age, both of them laughing ecstatically, under a brightly colored autumn tree. *Who is she? What was their relationship?* He studied the girl's face as she looked into Derrick's. She wasn't a casual friend. He looked up at the meticulously crafted carvings in the wood bordering the roof. Had Derrick been...? He shook his head. *Nah, not him.*

Hearing Trent groan, he directed his attention back to him. Carrying the water and the towel, he hurried over and sat down on the edge of the bed. He would clean the wound again and sponge him down. Hopefully, the cold water would help to bring down some of the fever running rampant through his friend's body.

.....

Derrick crept closer to the man, who, reclining back against a fallen log, was holding a black semiautomatic in his lap, staring at the cabin. Derrick snuck quickly – carefully – silently – skillfully – making sure he wasn't seen or heard. He flipped the pistol around in his hand, holding it by the barrel as he got closer.

20 feet...

10 feet...

5 feet...

2 feet...

WHAM! He slammed the handle of the gun into the back of the man's

head. Instantly, the scared-faced McMillian fell forward to the ground.

Derrick looked around, then knelt down and checked the man's pulse. It was steady. Pulling the man onto his shoulders, Derrick grabbed the black semi-automatic and hurried for the cabin.

.....

Jim jumped to his feet and grabbed his rifle as he noticed the knob to the back door begin to turn. He stepped to where he could get a good shot and raised the gun to his shoulder. Relief swept over him as the door opened, and he saw it was Derrick. He let out a quiet sigh as he lowered the gun. "You got him."

"Yeah." Derrick placed the limp body down in a kitchen chair, grabbed a rope and a towel, and began to tie and gag him.

Letting himself relax, Jim put his foot up on an opposite chair. "McMillian. You were right." Derrick didn't seem to gain any satisfaction from that fact. In fact, he didn't even acknowledge Jim's statement, but continued his work silently, tying the ropes and then yanking the knot tight.

"Any trouble?"

"Nope." His voice sounded annoyed as he yanked the last knot, grabbed McMillian's rifle he had set on the ground, and stood up.

"No knock-down, drag-out fight, huh?" Jim was trying to lighten up the circumstances, but he figured he must have struck the wrong cord because Derrick just shot him an angry look and turned to put the semi-automatic on the counter.

Jim decided to change the subject. "So why'd you run up here, anyway?"

Derrick jerked himself around. "Because I wasn't thrilled with doing weekends in the electric chair!"

Okay. Wrong subject to change it to. Jim decided not to retaliate.

Derrick leaned back against the sink and crossed his arms, looking over at Trent.

Jim stared for a moment at Derrick's eyes. They were a very bright blue. Sometimes their gaze was as hard and cold as steel, other times, quiet with lethargic professionalism. At times, they would fill with eager energy to challenge danger; other times they looked fatigued, battered and hopeless. He'd never seen them lighten with laughter or sparkle with joy.

He glanced over at the mantle – only in that picture. He looked back into Derrick’s eyes. They never opened to people. They never welcomed a friend. They were filled with cold intelligence, fierce determination, obstinate disregard for pain, and unyielding stubbornness. If there was anything else, it was deeply hidden.

He looked up at the wood planked roof, then at the beautifully carved wood cabinets. Even through the dust and cobwebs, the talented craftsmanship was evident. He had to wonder. Who was Derrick? What was his story? What was locked away within that unmovable concrete wall encasing his heart?

“If you want the cop to live, we’re going to have to make a move soon, to get him out of here.” He continued looking at Trent, not even glancing at Jim.

“You gotta plan?” Jim figured it was more efficient just to ask, rather than taking time to devise one of his own just to have it shot down.

“You stay with the cop. I’ll go get help when it gets dark.”

“Wait a minute. Uh uh. Cap’s got his quarrel with you. You said it.”

“Don’t tell him I’m gone.”

“I’ll go.”

“You can find your way out of here in the dark?”

“What happens when he figures out you’re gone, and, to put it in your words, ‘he kills us and comes after you?’”

Derrick shrugged. “I’ll go as fast as I can. You’ll have to figure how to keep him from finding out.”

“Yeah.”

“It’ll be dark in less than an hour.” He glanced sideways at Jim. “I know a short cut that will lead into town in half the time.”

Jim didn’t answer.

Derrick looked over at the wall and let out a huff of air. “You don’t trust me to come back.”

Jim looked back at him. “How am I supposed to? I hardly know you or anything about you. No one does.” He paused. “I’ve never seen you act without integrity at work. So far, you’ve shot straight with me here. I want to trust you, but you’re asking me to trust you with my life, Trent’s life, when you don’t trust me with something as simple... as who’s the girl in the picture?”

“That’s not simple.”

“I’m not asking you to tell me. I just don’t know what to do here. What if Cap does something like earlier? We needed two people just to stay alive.”

“I can’t pretend to guess what he’ll do next. All I know is the quicker we get out of here, the more chance we have.” He paused. “He doesn’t have his number two man anymore, and he might do less in the dark. That’s all I can say.”

Jim looked him in the eye. “Does death even bother you?”

Derrick glanced down, then back up, making eye contact. “If it didn’t, you would still be outside trying to get in.” *Yeah.* That was true. “I can’t guarantee I’ll make it back ‘in time,’ but I *will* be back.”

Jim paused a long moment, staring the other way. *Lord, should I trust him?* Feeling a peace, he looked back at Derrick. “Then we’ll be waiting for you.” Derrick’s eyes softened, and Jim could tell he wasn’t expecting that response. Then picking up his rifle, Derrick went back to his vigil at the front window.

Jim took his foot from off the chair, walked over to another one and sat down. Resting his elbows on his knees he began to rub his temples. He sighed. Letting his head hang, he stared down at the floor. He was weary. He needed rest. He needed peace. He needed closure.

Derrick watched him a moment. “We’ve still got some time before it gets dark. I’ve got some venison. You want me to cook some up?”

Not really, but he knew he needed the strength. “I guess.”

Derrick handed him the gun and walked over to the fireplace. Bending down, he picked up some old newspapers from a box and shook off some of the dust before beginning to crumple them up. As he crumpled, he glanced up at the picture a minute then over his shoulder at Jim, who was watching him. “Her name’s Monica. She was my wife.”

Jim glanced from Derrick to the picture and back to Derrick. *His wife?* It was true. “You were married?”

Derrick threw in some sticks. “Yeah.”

“DERRICK!” The scream from the malevolent killer came from out front.

Derrick stood and walked halfway to the window. “What?” He kept his voice calm.

“You took McMillian!” His voice betrayed rage.

“Maybe you don’t have exclusive rights to be on the offensive after

all.”

Jim’s heart rate quickened. He readied the gun, watching Derrick intently, silently praying he would say the right thing.

“That’s where you’re wrong, boy! The only reason you aren’t dead is that I haven’t killed you yet.”

“Your point being?”

McMillian was awake and trying to yell through the gag, but he couldn’t.

“You send him out, now, boy! Or, you have had it! I will make you die in terror! You will wish you’d never been born.”

“You want him? Come get him!”

Cap cursed and swore as he left, his profanity fading with him as he retreated further away.

.....

Jess stared down at her hospital food, stirring it lethargically with her fork. Her eyes drifted up to the Thomases who were sitting around her bed, also enduring the perils of the hospital’s food in the name of having supper with her. Morgan was in her carrier so Jessica could eat... something she really had no desire to do right now.

“Honey, you really should eat something. I’m sure Jim’s fine. He’s not even late yet. He just hasn’t called. Something may have happened to his phone.”

Jess gave a forced smile that didn’t lift to her eyes. “I’m sure you’re right.” *Liar*. Actually, she wasn’t sure at all. Jim had promised to call, and he always found a way to keep his promises, especially when he knew she would worry. The only reason she could figure for him not calling was ... that he couldn’t. “Jim’s worried me plenty of times before and always made it out okay.” She said this more to herself than she did the Thomases. Hopefully, this time would be no exception.

.....

Derrick pulled the venison out of the fire. “This looks like it’s ready.”

Jim glanced over at him and closed the shutters. “Be over as soon as I check the back.” He walked over to the back window.

Derrick put the hot meat on a plate.

“Smells good,” Jim said, looking out the window in all directions. “Sun’s settin’.” He closed the shutters.

Derrick gave a nod of acknowledgement as he walked over to McMillian. Standing in front of him with the plate of steaming meat, Derrick looked deep into the man’s evil, despising eyes. He saw nothing but hatred and murder. After a moment, he walked back to the fireplace.

“Aren’t you gonna give him some.” Jim came over.

“No.” Derrick sat down on the brick ledge at the bottom of the fireplace and scooted the plate toward the center, inviting Jim. Jim glanced over his shoulder at McMillian. “You should give him some.” Looking back at the man, Derrick relented, handing a hunk of meat to Jim. Jim took it over, but soon as he neared the man, McMillian snapped his leg up, thrusting the ball of his foot into Jim’s shin. Jim stumbled backwards, wondering why he didn’t do that to Derrick.

Derrick hardly acknowledged the scene, but continued eating. Jim decided to go over and join him. Taking another piece, he sat down on the other side of the brick ledge. Leaning forward, he rested his forearms on his knees as he ate. Derrick sat sideways with one foot on the ledge his knee bent up and his arm resting on it, looking into the fire.

“This is good.” Jim tried to break the silence, noticing Derrick just staring into the dancing flames, not eating. Jim looked up and down at the fireplace. “This is really beautiful. So you built all this?”

He nodded slowly. “Monica had a thing for fireplaces. I wanted to make this one special.” He didn’t take his eyes from the fire.

Jim just stared at him a moment, not knowing how to proceed. He offered him a chunk of meat.

Derrick shook his head.

“Derrick what happened?”

“I killed her.”

Jim couldn’t help portraying the shock he felt, but he quickly thought better of it. “You didn’t kill anyone.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yeah.”

Derrick looked back into the fire. “Why?”

For a minute or so, Jim was quiet, thinking as he took a bite of the venison. “You talk in your sleep, you know.”

Derrick’s eyes jerked toward Jim.

“Usually, you can’t understand it. It’s just like low groans.”

Derrick broke eye contact, looking down, then back at the fire.

“But there was one time I was awake, and I could understand it. You kept saying, ‘I love you. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.’ I could never figure what it meant... until now.”

Derrick grimaced.

“What happened to her?” Jim’s voice was soft and compassionate.

Derrick stretched his neck up then cracked it. “I’ve never told anyone... other than her parents and the police. He’s a little late, you know.”

“Who?”

“Cap. Trying to make me wish I was never born. He’s quite a bit late to do that. I should have ended it back then. They could have buried us together.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Derrick continued staring into the flames. “Yes, I do.”

“If you did, you would have done it by now.”

Derrick looked down, not responding.

“You’ve had the opportunity. You’re afraid to die.”

Derrick jerked his face toward Jim, wanting to kill the conversation with a snide remark, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t even deny it. He was right.

“God doesn’t want you dead. He’s stopped you.”

“I don’t believe in God.”

“Well you should, because he has plans for you. I know that now. Just like I know you didn’t kill your wife.”

“Then you don’t know everything.”

“You built this cabin in love. You loved her. That’s something I’ve never seen in you before.”

“It died with her.”

“No, she died, but you still love her.”

Derrick rubbed the bridge of his nose, stretching his neck as he brought his hand down. “She was the only one that ever loved me. I don’t even know why she did.” His voice broke. “She was beautiful. She could have had any guy she wanted.” He let his head fall against the brick in emotional pain. “Why’d she have to pick me?”

“Tell me about it, Derrick. How did you meet?”

Derrick was silent a moment. Leaning slightly forward, arm draped over his bent knee, he gazed into the flames. "I was about thirteen when our parents were killed in a house fire."

Jim watched him as he talked, silently praying the Lord would give him the right words when the time came for him to respond.

"It was around Christmas that me 'n my sister were sent to the orphanage. The first week we were there, Monica's family came delivering Christmas presents to the kids." A slight smile crossed his face as he remembered. "I guess you'd call it love at first sight... for both of us." Derrick's face was soft as he stared into the jumping flames. She invited me over to her house for Christmas Eve, and we exchanged gifts in front of a fire like this one. "Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem" was playing in the background, and the tree seemed to be dancing with their sparkling lights." He spoke as if almost in a trance. "Her face looked like an angel's face, glowing from the firelight, evergreen garland dangling behind her from the mantle."

Jim couldn't help being surprised by the gentle tenderness in Derrick's voice. The Derrick he saw now was so vastly different from what he'd ever imagined.

"I didn't tell her that I loved her that night. I couldn't even kiss her cause her dad was always just a few feet away, but that night we both knew. We knew we were meant to be together." He paused, staring into the flames as if he was lost in his own thoughts.

Jim tried to bring him back. "Then what?"

"We spent quite a bit of time together. It took a while for her to convince her dad to let her date me, but she did. No one could ever say, 'No,' to her." A smile crossed his face. After my sister was adopted, there wasn't any reason for me to stay at the home, so I went out on my own and just lived in the streets. I joined a gang for a while, got in some trouble, but then I straightened up when it looked like I might lose Monica over it. I stayed in school, so I could see her more. We were in the same class, and then we got married as soon as we were eighteen." He looked around the cabin. "A good deal of the money I used to build this house was a wedding present from her parents." He stopped.

Jim could see tension mounting in his face, the muscles in his neck tightened and his voice strained as he again began to talk. "When we were kids, we made a blood covenant with each other. I told her I would always

be there for her. I told her I'd always take care of her and protect her." His hand tightened in a fist and his whole body seemed to tense. He stared deeper into the flames. He began to flash back.

"Derrick?"

He didn't answer as his mind replayed the scene again – the horror and screams he imagined in his mind.

"Derrick!"

Derrick looked back. He noticed himself breathing hard and felt a drop of sweat rolled down his forehead.

"What happened?" His voice held concern.

For a moment, he didn't continue. He didn't know if he could. He had to force himself to get the next words out. "We moved up here. She got pregnant right away. ... I left her when she was too far along and went hunting." His voice broke. "Evidently, she went into labor while I was gone and..." His voice broke.

"And?"

Derrick gritted his teeth. His throat was so tight, he could hardly get the words out. "A wild cat got in the house. By time I got back, he'd already..."

Jim looked down at the ground.

"Do *you* have any idea what he did to her? How he..." His voice strained. "My wife. . . my baby. . ." His face was anguished. "I would have died for her! I should have been here!"

Jim didn't know how to respond. All he could do was convey the horror and genuine sympathy he felt through his face. The words wouldn't come.

"She trusted me. She came out here ... in the middle of nowhere, because she trusted me. I *swore* to her, I'd always be there when she needed me, that I would protect her." He let his head fall back against the brick and closed his eyes in pain. "I loved her!" The knuckles on his clenched fist were white. "I killed her. I brought her out here. I gave her that baby. Then I left her. ... I killed them both." Derrick turned. Putting both feet on the floor and leaning forward, forearms on his knees, he hung his head. "I killed them."

"You didn't kill them. It was an accident."

He shook his head. "It never would have happened if I had stayed in town."

“If it was her time to go; something would have happened in town.”

He jerked his gaze to Jim, eye to eye, teeth gritted, voice almost a growl. “What. Makes. You. Think. it was her time to go?” Jim couldn’t tell if this anger was directed at him or someone else. “She was young and happy and full of life. She didn’t deserve to die! My parents didn’t deserve to burn alive in a fire.” His voice turned hard and bitter. “Your God...” He gave a sarcastic laugh. “Your God doesn’t care a thing for me. He hates me... ever since I was born.” He turned away. “Everything I ever loved, he took from me.” His voice held pain. “Monica used to say, ‘He’s good, and He cares. Like He cared! Like He cared about her!’”

There was a short silence.

“Did she want you to accept Christ?” Jim didn’t know why he asked that, but it came out.

Derrick looked up, blinking back tears that he refused to produce. “There were times that’s all she’d talk about.” Craning his neck, he gave another bitter laugh. “She used to say she’d be willing to die for me to become a Christian,” he blurted without thinking, not realizing what he was saying until the words came from his mouth.

Jim looked up at him. Derrick glanced at Jim then down, thinking a moment. Neither knew how to respond, so there were a few moments of silence.

“Derrick, if Monica and your baby are in heaven, they are better off than anyone here on earth can even imagine.”

Still staring at the floor, he shook his head. “She’s dead.”

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16). She’s not dead.”

Derrick shook his head as he raised it. He looked straight ahead. “There is no happy ending for reality.”

“It’s true. I know it. Monica knows it, and she wants *you* to know it.”

There was another silence. Then Derrick rose to his feet. “It’s dark. I better get going.” Jim stood, too, nodding in acknowledgement.

Heading toward the hole to the cellar, Derrick stopped and glanced over at Trent a moment. His voice softened. “He’s not going to make it.” He paused. “You go. Get out of here while you can.”

“No. We’ll be here when you get back.”

“You’re going to get killed.”

Jim shook his head then added, “That wouldn’t be a tragedy for me... or Trent.”

Derrick looked down a second, formulating a response. “It would be for your wife and baby.”

“Not like it’s been for you. Jessica knows the truth, too. No matter what happens, she knows we’ll meet again.”

Derrick didn’t know how to respond. He just stood there.

“You’d better get going. Lord willing, we’ll see you in the morning.”

Derrick didn’t answer, but looked from Trent to Jim, not sure if he wanted to go. He was a paramedic. He’d told himself he was hardened to death, that Monica was his only weakness... but right now, he wasn’t sure if he could take coming back to find... them dead.

“Derrick?”

Derrick glanced sideways at Jim, then nodded toward Trent. “Clean the wound every couple of hours. All the drugs I have are on the counter. Check the expiration dates. Try to keep his fever and infection down. That’s all you can do.” Jim nodded.

Without another word, Derrick grabbed his flashlight, walked over to the hole in the floor, and jumped down into the cellar. Using his light, he made his way through the musty room, once again up the rickety ladder, and out into the darkness of the chilly night.

Jim waited until he heard the cellar door close then walked slowly to the front window. Standing to the side, he opened it slightly and looked into the darkness. *Lord, help him to get through, and please, send help in time, ... and Lord, open Derrick’s eyes to the truth. Don’t let her death have been in vain. ... And, please, give him peace about what happened.* He stared out into the still and dark night, listening to the night sounds, and the ghostly, eerie wind whistling around the cabin corners and through some gaps between the logs. He glanced over at Trent, moaning in the corner. *Please, God, get us all home alive.*



Derrick put his hand against the trunk of a tree for support as he stepped over a high log. It was difficult maneuvering through the woods at night, but it wasn’t like he had a choice.

He walked cautiously through this section, as the thick tree cover

obstructed any light from the sky. Moving his flashlight beam back and forth in front of him, he ducked a thick oak limb and moved a pine branch from his way. A strange flood of emotions seemed to be struggling within him. He couldn't quit thinking about his wife's death. He felt guilty, angry, defeated and indignant, all at the same time. Stopping a moment, he pulled the already rolled up sleeve of his flannel shirt higher on his arm. The scar was still there on his forearm. The blood covenant he'd made as a teen – broken.

Remembering her smile and feeling her joy, a warmth came over his heart. His mind went back to the happy times, their long walks in the woods, the romantic sunsets, their heart-to-heart talks. Walking into a small fallen branch, Derrick kicked it to the side as his mind began to flash back.

It had been mid-May. They had been walking through a meadow of daffodils on a lovely, sun-kissed, spring morning. The sun had been bright and warm. Birds sang, and butterflies danced from flower to flower.

“But, Derrick, heaven’s a wonderful place. The streets are made of pure gold. The gates are pearls. There’s trees and crystal clear rivers and everyone gets a mansion! What style d’you think we’d get, Derrick?” Her hands muffled inside her fluffy sweatshirt for warmth, she grabbed Derrick’s hand and began swinging it back and forth. *“Of course, that isn’t much of a question.”* Her sparkling eyes danced. *“I already know what you’d get.”* She swung around in front of him, giggling. *“Early American Cowboy in the rancher’s section.”* Her long hair blew in the wind as she giggled. Holding his hand tighter, she spun around leaning back against his chest. He put his other arm around her, too, and rested his chin on her head. *“I want my mansion next to yours, Derrick. We can both be in the cowboy section. I don’t want to be separated when we die. I want to be with you forever and ever.”* The sun enhanced the blonde highlights in her hair.

“I’ll think about it.” He really hadn’t thought about it much at all... until now

Coming back to the present, he pushed a pine branch out of the way. *“I’m waiting for you, Derrick.”* The thought seemed as real as if it came whispering off the rustling pines.

Coming to the edge of a meadow, he clicked off his flashlight and began to run in the moonlight.

They’d been messing around at the orphanage together outside. *“Oh, Derrick, you’re so funny. I love you.”*

Derrick stopped. "You do?"

"Yeah, I do."

What was love? She'd been the only one to ever love him. He'd loved his parents, but they hadn't loved him. He'd been a mistake. His mother had wanted to abort him. She didn't, but it was very evident at times that she wished she had. She even said it sometimes. Most of his growing up years had been spent perfectionistically trying to find a way to please his father. He never had. He told his sister once that he loved her, but even she never returned it. The only one that had ever loved him was dead.

"You know, you're the first to ever say that to me."

"I mean it, but I'm not the first."

"Huh?"

"God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." She said it slowly and with meaning in her voice.

"Gave Him for what?"

"To die so we could go to heaven."

"Umm, my family wasn't ever big on religion."

"It's not just a religion. Jesus is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother, and I'm one of His people, so you better get used to me talking about Him."

"You just said He was dead."

"Hum." She smiled, leaning back against the siding of the old building. "This may take a while."

Derrick smiled to himself and from then on she committed herself wholeheartedly to explaining it.

Coming back into a thinner forest, Derrick left the light off and continued running, weaving in and out between trees. Soon he met the river. This would be his first obstacle. He would have to cross this thing twice and climb up a hundred and thirty foot cliff before getting to town. For a minute he just stood and listened to the forceful power of the rushing water. It was fast and raging, even more than he had remembered it. Torrents of swirling, frothy water raced downstream and tumbled over the edge of a monumental waterfall just a couple hundred feet away.

He needed a way to cross this monster. Moving the beam of his flashlight around, he walked beside it, searching for a way across. Finally, the beam landed on a fallen tree. His feet slid on the mud a little as he

headed down to it. The torrent got louder the closer he got to it. He could feel the water splashing on his pant leg as he came to the edge. He moved his light down the length of the tree, making sure it was sturdy and went all the way across. It wasn't terribly thick, but it looked strong.

Quickly, he unbuckled his belt and pulled it out of the belt loops. Cold water splashed higher on his leg as he stepped into the edge of the river and flung the belt over the log. Buckling it around the log, he grabbed the loop with one hand and put his other on the log as a guide. Sliding the belt with him, he waded forward – deeper and deeper.

The water rose higher and higher, splashing forcefully against him until his feet no longer felt ground. He turned his head, trying not to breathe in the water splashing vehemently up into his face. Using the log, he strained his arms to keep his face above the waves, struggling along inch by inch.

Halfway, a strong, swirling current thrust him down, pulling his head a few inches under the water. Holding his breath, he struggled for over a minute, trying to break the force that endeavored to suffocate him. Finally, with a good jerk on the sturdy leather belt, he was able to pull himself back up.

Freed from the swirling killer, he gasped violently for air. The cool breeze refreshed his hot dripping face. For a few moments, he just stayed there holding tightly to the belt, gasping for air. Realization crept over him. Jim was right. He didn't want to die, not now, not until he knew.

As soon as he got his breath back, he jerked himself forward. Waves splashed against his head and neck. He turned his head and kept going. He was almost there when he was jerked under again. The current quickly released him, but the fast action forced some water down his throat. Choking and coughing, he struggled to breathe as water splashed in his face. The current slammed him sideways against the log.

Becoming disoriented, his grip on the log loosened. He began to be pushed underneath it. He gripped the belt with white knuckle force. A surge of adrenaline shot through him as it began to slip. With all his might he thrust his body against the current. Able to get his other hand around the belt, he clutched it tightly.

He jerked himself back up. Gripping the belt with one hand and the log with the other, he desperately tried not to inhale any more water. Arms straining, muscles burning, he asked his body for every ounce of strength as

he vigorously pulled himself forward – inch by inch, foot by foot, until he reached shore.

Finally, his feet touched bottom, and he was able to stand. Gasping, hacking, he leaned on the log trying to support himself as he stumbled up the muddy edge. Falling to his knees, he collapsed on the grass.

.....

Jim paced back and forth in the cabin. He was uneasy. He had this feeling that something was about to happen. He had no idea what or how to prepare. He tapped his fingers lightly on the side of the rifle he clutched. Cap was out there. He could feel it.

The sound of a large can banging against the side of the cabin caused him to jump. He lifted his gun, not sure how to respond. *This is it.*

.....

Derrick rolled over in the muddy grass of the rivers edge. He had to get going, now!

A few minutes ago his body had been sweating from the exertion, but it had since rapidly cooled. He had to keep moving or he would die.... Jim would die.... The cop would die, and all of it would be his fault.

He forced himself to his knees, then, with a nearby branch, pulled himself to his feet. The world began to spin. His knees went weak. He felt as if he were going to fall back down. Breathing deep and clutching the branch, he refused to allow it.

Falling forward, dripping, shivering – he began to walk, hunched over and tripping, but he refused to stop. He continued forward.

.....

Jess lay on her side, staring at the small digital clock. She wished it wasn't digital so she could hear it tick. *Nine-thirty*. Everyone had left, and Jim hadn't returned. He hadn't even called. Something was wrong. She could feel it.

She'd tried calling the police, but after literally hours of being yo-yoed around from person to person, she had no more information when she hung up than when she had called. The point was, no one knew what was going

on, and no one was going to find out, at least not tonight.

Jess had long since graduated from worrying and was now well through her first semester of “What if . . .ing,” and she knew if this lasted too much longer, she would end up enrolling in Panic 101.

Pretty soon the fret lines on her face would be permanent. *Where is he? What had happened to him? Hurry up, Jim. Come home, and please be all right. Oh, please be all right.*

.....

Jim stood in the middle of the room, where he could see all corners of the house. He held his gun ready and moved his eyes urgently in every direction. Every nerve in his body stood ready for action. He just wished he knew what to expect.

All the doors were blocked. The windows were shuttered and locked, but it didn't make him feel easy, if anything. . . it made him feel trapped. This man had something planned and blocking the doors wasn't about to stop him.

He caught a faint whiff of something. Hearing the sound of wood beginning to crackle, he glanced at the fireplace. His fire was just coals. He stepped forward, smelling. *Gasoline!*

Smoke began seeping through the cracks in the walls. Crackling came from all sides. Jim spun around three-sixty. *We're trapped!* Window glass began to burst. Heat radiated inward. Time was running out.

Grabbing a knife, he raced over to McMillian and cut the ropes. McMillian didn't move. His eyes seemed lifeless. Jim grabbed the front of his shirt and jerked him to his feet. The man stood but didn't move. Jim didn't have time to puzzle over the behavior. He jerked the center leaf from the table and ran over to Trent, placing it on the floor beside him. Picking up Trent, He carefully placed him on the board. "Come over and help me carry him!" Jim ordered before coughing into his shirt sleeve.

McMillian just stood there, silent and defiant.

"Now!"

McMillian crossed his arms. "No." He'd long ago perfected the art of holding his breath for several minutes and was perfectly willing to wait until Jim had passed out from smoke inhalation before making his escape. Then, he would find Cap and....

“I said, ‘Now!’” Jim picked up his rifle and aimed it at McMillian. He felt like threatening to tie him up and leave him, but he couldn’t make threats he refused to carry out.

McMillian didn’t budge.

Jim had no other choice. He pulled back the trigger and let out a shot that tore through the edge of McMillian’s sleeve. It wouldn’t maim him, but judging from his reaction, it did get his attention. “Let’s go!”

McMillian came over.

“Grab...!” Jim coughed on the smoke. His eyes watered. “Grab the other side!”

McMillian reluctantly picked it up.

“Okay. Come on!” They lifted Trent and carried him to the hole in the floor. All the time, Jim prayed McMillian wouldn’t drop his end and try to jump him. He didn’t.

The heat was growing intense.

Just as they set Trent down, a flaming chunk of ceiling fell in from the other side of the room. Smoke was creeping through charred pieces of logs.

Jim grabbed a rope and quickly tied it length-wise and width-wise around the leaf. “Okay! Jump down!” He yelled over the crackling flames.

McMillian just stood there, staring defiantly, trying to formulate a plan that would leave his enemies to the flames. “Go, now!” Jim raised his gun again, but McMillian didn’t move.

More chunks of flaming ceiling fell in. The heat and smoke were taking over.

“Fine!” Jumping up, Jim grabbed the front of his shirt and jerked him forward, causing him to fall through and land with a thud.

Smoke stung Jim’s eyes and throat. He could barely see through the water clouding his vision. His lungs began to burn. Quickly leaning forward, he sucked in the clean air from the cellar. Then, coming up, he grabbed the rope and slid the leaf over. His arms strained as he lowered him down. Soon as he hit the floor, he let the rope drop down beside him.

About six feet in front of Jim, a log in the wall exploded, shooting sparks everywhere. He jumped back. Holding his breath, he spun around and grabbed the flashlight from the counter, the picture from the mantle, and the rifle from the floor. Then, he jumped down into the cellar.

Soon as he hit, he heard a thunderous crack. Immediately grabbing the leaf, he jerked it forward just in the nick of time as the roof came

crumbling in, and red-hot, glowing debris fell through the hole, landing right next to them.

Jim flipped on his flashlight and shone it around. As he expected, McMillian's attempts at escape while within the pitch blackness had failed. In fact, he was going in the wrong direction and if it hadn't been for Jim's light beam, would have walked with a smack, into the wall.

"McMillian!"

McMillian turned around just to be confronted, again, with the end of a rifle barrel. Remembering his shirt sleeve, he relented, walked over, and picked up the other end of the table leaf.

The journey was anything but smooth, but they managed to get Trent up the ladder, then out in the woods for cover.

After tying McMillian to a tree and trying his best to assess Trent's condition, Jim looked back at the flaming pile of rubble that was once a cabin. He sent up a prayer of thanks that they had made it out against what seemed like impossible odds. He thanked the Lord that Trent was still alive and holding his own, and looking around, seeing only darkness and shadows of trees in all directions, he prayed that the Lord would show him what to do next.

.....

Derrick ran, weaving through clusters of cottonwoods and maples, directed by the bright moon shining through their nearly leafless branches.

Running kept him warm and his blood moving. His body was worn out. The fact that he hadn't been eating or sleeping much lately was beginning to take its toll, but his spirit felt alive and renewed. He fueled himself on strong determination – determination that this situation would not have the same outcome as last time. He knew he wouldn't be able to live with that. Jumping over a mangled stack of fallen logs, dodging a low branch, he continued his quest with vigor as he weaved through trees. He didn't feel tired. He wouldn't allow it. He knew his body was capable of more, much more.

He slowed to a jog and then stopped at the base of a rocky cliff. Taking a few steps back, he looked up, unable to see the top in the darkness. Going around it would take way too long. He had known all along he would have to free climb it. He'd done it before ... just not in the

dark.

There was about twenty feet of a steep slope composed of dirt, grass, and rocks, before reaching the actual jagged cliff that he knew to be about a hundred and thirty feet to the top.

He started toward it. The bright moon made it possible, but the many shadows and crevices kept it extremely dangerous. Bending forward, he grabbed large rocks in the ground to help pull himself up the slope. His feet slipped on the dewy grass, but he managed to keep his balance.

He continued up. He kept his feet against rocks and roots, anything that would provide traction as he climbed. He turned his right foot sideways as it slid on a couple inches of loose dirt.

Grabbing a large root, he pulled himself higher until he reached the cliff section. He paused, looking up to assess the rocks, ledges, cracks, and trees that would throw up barrier after barrier the entire climb. The cliff was almost perfectly vertical, yet the surface was anything but smooth. Thankfully, there were plenty of places for hand and foot holds. He just had to pick the right ones that would support his weight.

Finding the first holds for his hands and feet, he began to pull himself up.

.....

“Jim?” the sound was strained and weak.

Jim jerked his head around, surprised at Trent’s voice. “You’re awake?” He knelt on one knee beside him. “How ya doin’? You okay?”

“What’s...? Where are...? What’s going on?” His sweating head turned back and forth from fever.

“It’s okay. Everything’s fine. Just relax. Everything’s going to be okay.” Maybe if he said it enough, he would start to believe it himself.

“Jim, I...” His voice trailed off.

“Trent?” He felt for his pulse ... still alive. He sat back on his heels wondering how long that would last ... for any of them. Listening to an owl hooting in the distance, he wondered how one man could cause all this trouble.

.....

Derrick strained every muscle in his arms as he clutched a juttied rock

and pulled his body a few feet higher. He was sweating profusely.

Holding his weight with his arms, his feet searched for footing. His foot skidded on some loose rocks, and he listened as the pebbles tumbled off and down the side. It was a long ways down. Finding no footing quickly, but losing the strength in his arms, he let his feet hang and forced his hands higher, jerking his body along with him quickly, until he reached a small ledge. Pulling himself up, he collapsed on the large cold stone, shaking and gasping from the effort.

Leaning his head back against the rock, he drew in deep, hard breaths. Heavy streams of sweat tumbled down his temples and dripped down his throat. He was tired. Looking down, the cliff beneath him seemed to be swallowed up in bottomless darkness.

He looked up. The rock moved in and out in his vision. He shook his head and tried to blink it away. He could see the top. Long blades of grass blew gently near the edge. Moonlight glistened on the tiny dew droplets clinging to the blades.

He was almost there, but he didn't feel like he could make it. He wasn't sure he could even stand. He had to. He grabbed the cliff and began to pull himself up. His arm shook. His legs felt weak. He tried to pull himself upward, but breathing hard, he fell back down. Taking deep breaths, he glanced over at a patch of moss. It seemed to slide back and forth. He closed his eyes and rolled onto his knees. He had to do this. He had to.

Forcing himself, he stood back on his feet. He stepped a few inches forward. Still breathing hard, he leaned his shoulder against the rock for a few moments, resting.

Finally, feeling a new release of energy, he wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans and looked up for a good hold. Finding one, he lifted his arms and grabbed on. His arms burned as he pulled himself up. He only had to make it about eight feet.

He was less than a foot up when his arms gave and he fell back down. Without resting, he stood back up. He lifted his arm to see a stream of blood extending from his wrist to his elbow. He threw it back down.

Anger welled inside of him. He slammed his foot against a piece of protruding rock shattering it. He was mad. He didn't care if he could do it or not, he was going to!

He threw his hand back up into the hold with a vengeance.

Firestorm

He jerked his body up, forcefully.
His arms burned, but they didn't shake.
He lifted his right leg at the same time as he threw his left hand higher.
Higher.
He was halfway when his arm began again to shake.
He didn't allow it.
Gritting his teeth, he forced every muscle in his arm tighter and continued.
Higher.
His arms, legs, and abs all burned.
He was almost there. He forced a grunt through his clenched teeth.
Higher!
He threw his hand up. It touched the grassy top. He tried to clench the earth, but his hand slipped from the dew and the sweat. Finding a rock embedded in the ground he grabbed it.
His arm began to shake.
Sweat dripped in his eyes.
He could hardly catch his breath.
Putting every ounce of strength in it, he pulled.
He rose a few inches and fell back against the side.
He hung on, but he couldn't get himself up.
He tilted his head back, trying to catch his breath.
He waited a moment.
His left knee began to shake.
NO! He was NOT going to fall!
He clenched the rock harder, and in a quick motion jerked his body up ... and fell back against the side.
He couldn't ignore the burn much longer.
His other arm began to shake.
He glanced down into the bottomless darkness.
He was going to fall.
He looked up into the starry sky. "Fine! I'm sorry! Help me!"
His arms quit shaking. They were still burning.
He tried again.
He thrust his body up.
High enough.
Pulling himself up, he fell over the edge and down onto his back.

He made it.
He made it.

.....

Jim stared toward the cabin. There was nothing left but a pile of smoking, glowing ash. He wondered if they'd seen the smoke in town. He wondered if Cap would find out they had made it out. He wondered if Derrick would make it through... if Trent would make it. He wondered how Jess was doing. He wished he knew the answers.

He knew one thing; the one thing he wished wasn't so. Probably no one would be here until morning. He needed to find a hiding place. Looking over his shoulder and straining to see in the dark, he looked, knowing they couldn't stay here behind these bushes much longer. Getting to his knees, he quietly crawled into the darkness.

.....

Derrick's legs felt like two tons of cement as he continued to jog, not fast, not smooth, but at least he was moving. His breathing was softer and somewhat in rhythm with his feet. Though he was dead tired, he refused to let his mind go there. Instead, he thought about other things. So far, it had kept him going.

He slowed to a stop in front of the last river crossing. This was his last obstacle. He was nearly there.

As he walked toward the edge, his knee buckled beneath him. He grabbed hold of a tree limb. He was about at the end of his rope. The lack of sleep and food was really working him over. He leaned against the tree and put his head back. He was so close.

You can do it. You've almost made it. You're almost there. Come on, Derrick! You're almost there!

He looked down into the water. It was deep, but the current was relatively light. His stomach began to churn, and he had to look back up, before he got sick.

Don't quit! You're almost there! You've made it. You can do it – you're almost there. Try!

He stepped away from the tree and staggered a few steps forward before stopping at the river's edge. Looking into the water, his head began

to feel light. He leaned forward, catching himself on a branch as he threw up.

Straightening, he stepped sideways as the trees spun momentarily. They stopped, and he staggered down to the bank, unable to walk in a straight line.

He tried not to look at the water as he stepped toward it. Stumbling forward, he fell down with a splash but caught himself on a rock. The cold water sent shockwaves through his nerves, reviving him a little.

He shivered, as he stood and walked forward the icy water rising up to his chest. When the water reached his shoulders, he stopped. He looked back. He had to turn around. He couldn't do this. He was too weak. His knee buckled, and he fell forward. The ice water went over his head, but he came back up. He was almost too tired to gasp for air.

Moving his arms he struggled to swim across, but he was too weak to lift his body. For several minutes he just struggled to keep his head above water as the gentle current took him downstream.

After a few moments, the river had taken him out of the woods and into town.

Looking up, he saw the street lights running parallel to the canal he was now in. Shivering uncontrollably, he knew he had to get out... now. The current had almost totally disappeared and the water had become shallow.

Finally, he was able to pull himself over far enough to touch bottom. His feet and legs were partially numb from the cold, making it difficult for him to stand, but slowly, he managed to wade over and stumble up the cement sides.

Standing, he fell forward, stumbling as he stepped on the pavement. He looked left to right... there wasn't another car on the road. His gaze lifted to a large illuminated sign. The large letters spelled relief – Wal-Mart... open twenty-four hours. He struggled to keep his body upright as he headed toward it.

Nearly running into a streetlight, he stepped sideways and went into the store's parking lot. The lot seemed almost desolate, about thirty cars were scattered about. He kept his eyes fixed straight ahead to the door, mastering great effort to push his body forward. *You're almost there. Keep going. You made it. You're almost there.*

Floods of light greeted him as he approached. The double doors slid

open, and he went in. Everything looked hazy to him. Noticing a large round clock on the wall, he looked up at it, but couldn't read it. His vision was too blurred. He took a few disoriented steps toward it – a little after midnight. Turning back, he lost his balance. Falling sideways, he caught himself on the wall. He staggered in the next set of doors.

A middle-aged lady looked up at him from behind the service desk. Unshaven, limping, rips in his clothes, scraped, bloody, and dripping wet, he walked toward her, hunched over and dazed.

She cocked her head at him, her curiosity rising. “Sir, may I help you?”

He stumbled toward her. “I need a phone.” She put the phone next to him as he caught himself on the counter. He glanced at it. His hand shook as he picked up the receiver.

The lady turned the box back toward herself, knowing he wouldn't be able to dial. “What's the number?”

“911.” He leaned on his forearms.

“What?”

“Hurry up, will ya.” Her face went in and out of focus.

She raised her eyebrows as she dialed the number.

“911. Do you have an emergency?”

The room began to spin. He looked down. “Yeah. There are two guys out in the woods, Jim Richards and Trent Mackenzie, a cop from Spring Valley Illinois. They were trying... to take down a murderer, but they're pinned down ... and the cop's been shot – critically injured.” The room spun faster and blurred.

“Sir?”

He lowered the receiver partway. His head went light.

“Sir?”

He dropped the receiver and fell to the ground, losing consciousness.

Chapter Twelve

Sitting on his heels, Jim moved over to the mouth of the cave. He couldn't stand because the ceiling was too low.

He'd found the cave around midnight and then got them all quietly moved into it. He'd not seen any sign of Cap, which in itself was odd, but on top of that, he kept getting an eerie feeling they were being watched. Kneeling down on one knee near the cave's mouth, he looked out. The sky was lightening into dawn. The birds were singing. The dew was sparkling. Everything looked so peaceful – too peaceful – too normal. It made him want to retreat farther back in the cave.

Cap was out there somewhere, lurking... waiting. ... Was he waiting? Did he know they were still alive?

He glanced back at Trent. He was doing better – not as delirious, and he was having bouts of consciousness. Still, in their current, less than sanitary conditions, he didn't count on it to last.

He looked back outside. If they could just hold out until help came.... Help was coming. He knew it. If there was one thing everyone knew about Derrick, it was that he was stubborn. When he set his mind to do something, he did it ... if he got through. *Please, Lord, make help to get here in time, if not through Derrick, then some other way.*

.....

Derrick groaned as he rolled over in the bleached, white sheets of the hospital bed. He jolted awake at the realization he didn't know where he was. A chain rattled and his arm jerked back. Glancing down, he saw he was handcuffed to the bed.

Last night flashed back into his memory, though some of the details were cloudy. He didn't remember anything after the phone call in Walmart. Raising his eyebrows as he stared at the cuffs, he wondered what he had told them. He wondered if they were sending help to Jim and the cop.

Pulling himself up, he noticed the IV in his other arm. Squinting from instant throbbing pain in his head, he wondered if the drugs were working. Reaching for the button, he called the nurse as he downed the glass of water next to him.

A few moments later, the door swung open and a stocky, gray-haired

nurse with a clearly noticeable, commanding demeanor walked in. “What do you need?” Her voice resembled that of a marine on active duty.

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat trying to remove the hoarseness. “Do you know what happened last night?”

Crossing her arms, she shook her head. Her hair was cut short in a masculine fashion. “You don’t remember anything?” Her voice was accusatory.

“No.”

“You passed out. The ambulance brought you in. The cops came. You talked to them. You went to sleep. End of story.”

“I talked to them?” He said it half to himself. “What’d I say?”

“I don’t know why you expect *me* to know. I didn’t make a recording of the conversation. I wasn’t just standing around listening.”

“Okay. Fine.” He grimaced from the pain in his head. “Do you know if they are going to send people out for the guys in the woods?”

“Yes.” She sighed, impatiently. “They said as soon as it got light.”

“Do they know...?”

“There is supposedly a killer out there, and a wounded cop. Yes.”

“Do they believe it?”

“Obviously, they do. They’re sendin’ people out there. If we could end the interrogation now, I have work to do.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” It was anything but sincere.

She raised her eyebrows, and with an about face, turned and forcefully pushed out the door.

The cop standing guard had to jump away to keep from getting hit.

Derrick smiled, wishing it had nailed him.

Derrick glanced down at the bed railing. He had every intention of keeping his promise to Jim to come back, even if getting out of here would require some creativity. He found a tiny pin that was holding together the bed railing and began to work it out. No cop had stopped him before, and they weren’t going to now. He continued working it loose, as he pressed the button for the nurse. The window didn’t open, and that could be a problem. Also, he was on the top floor with no fire escape in sight. That could be another problem.

The door swung open.

He stopped his work on the pin.

She walked toward him and crossed her arms. “What do you want

now?”

“Water.” He held out his glass.

She jerked it from his hand.

“By the way, what’s my room number?”

“One eighteen.” Her voice held annoyance.

“Thanks.” It still wasn’t sincere.

“Oh, no problem. Anything else I can do for you? My entire day is at your disposal.”

“I’ll let you know.”

She rolled her eyes, spun around, and stomped out the door.

Yeah, that nurse was not going to work with his plan. He resumed working on the pin as he picked up the phone to dial the desk.

He held the phone to his ear with his shoulder and continued his work as he waited. Soon as he got an answer, he began. “Yeah, I’m in room 118. I was wondering if I could have a different nurse.” *Preferably someone young and gullible.*

“Do you have a complaint about your current nurse?”

“You got five hours?” It was easier than being diplomatic.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.”

He hung up the phone and mentally crossed his fingers. He had a story to sell, and he needed someone who was going to buy it.

He twisted the pin the rest of the way out and hid it under his blanket as the new nurse walked in. Looking up at her, a smile crossed his face. *Perfect.*

She smiled back. “Hi, my name’s Rena. I’ll be your nurse. Is there anything you need?”

“No. I think I’m good.” He kept his face innocent and gave his best movie star smile.

“Oh, you’re all out of water.”

“Yeah. The last nurse never brought it back.”

“Oh, well, I’ll go get you some.”

“Um, could I ask you something first?”

She turned back around. “Sure. What is it?”

“You might think it a little strange.” This subservient tone and weaselly deception was going to make him sick. He wished he could just bonk the cop over the head and run out, but in his current physical state,

winning by brawn was impractical.

“Let me be the judge of that.”

Just as long as you buy it. “Last night I thought I saw an old friend of mine on this floor. I haven’t seen her in years, but we used to be close and, you know...” He held up his cuffed hand, “...when a guy’s in this kind of situation, he needs someone to talk to.”

“Sure. I can understand that.”

He smiled again, sweetly. “The problem is, I heard that last year she changed her name and I don’t remember what room she’s in.”

“Oh.”

“You’ve probably seen most of the patients. Maybe I could describe her to you.”

“We could try. That might work.”

Okay, Derrick, keep the description narrow enough to get the right type, but broad enough so you don’t come up empty.

She came over and sat on the bed. “Okay. What’s she like?”

Derrick resisted the urge to move over. “Well, she’s quiet, kind of shy. I don’t think she has a lot of confidence, but she’s got a way about her. You know... understanding and kind, always trying to help. She’s trusting to a fault. Kind of a loner, but you know, sweet.” *Please don’t ask me what she looks like.*

“Hmm . . . I don’t know. I can think of a couple of possibilities.”

That’s fine. I could always use a backup.

“What’s she look like?”

Yeah. “That would be hard to say.” *Actually, it would be impossible to.* “You know women. They’re always changing – new hair cut, style, or color. They gain weight and lose it. They’re always adaptin’ to the new fashion. Man, it’s been so long. I’m sure she’s not the same as last time I saw her.” *Especially since we’ve never met.*

“But you recognized her last night?”

Yeah, you would remember I said that. “Last night’s still a fog.” *In fact, I don’t even remember coming here.* “You said that you had a couple of possibilities. Maybe if you give me both their numbers, I can risk calling them and see if either remembers me.”

“Sure. I can do that.” She scribbled the numbers on a scratch paper.

“Thanks. This is a big help.” The word of courtesy gave him a bad taste in his mouth. It had been years since he’d played con man. It wasn’t

hard for him to remember why he gave it up. He hated deceptive insincerity, and even more, he despised liars ... of which he was about to become world champion. It seemed so wimpy. At the moment though, he figured it was his only option.

“Don’t mention it.” She stood and handed him the paper. “Anything else I can do for you, just give me a ring.”

He smiled, “I’ll do that.” and waited for her to exit the door. Quickly returning his face to normal, he chose one of the numbers and picked up the phone. Holding the receiver with his shoulder, he picked up the pin and began to work it in the handcuffs.

“Hello?” The voice was sad and quiet.

Derrick quickly detached himself from his emotions. “Hi! Name’s Derrick..” He kept his voice upbeat and cheerful. I’m in a room a couple down from you. I saw you last night.” *Liar*. “You just stuck in my mind, and I really need someone to talk to.”

“Really?”

He heard her voice perk up.

“Why me?”

He let his voice get soft. “I don’t know. You looked like an understanding person. I just had to talk to someone. I got no one. If you knew what happened to me.... Well, let’s not go there.” He continued moving the pin around in the lock trying to locate the little spring that would set him free.

“No. Go ahead and tell me. I’m a good listener. Maybe I can help.”

“I doubt it. Lately, it seems as if every force in nature is against me.” This bleeding martyr act was beginning to turn his stomach, but it seemed to be working. “So, what happened to you? Why are you here?”

“Oh, I slipped and broke my ankle. I’m a real klutz.”

“Hey, don’t sound so derogatory. I happen to be a member of *Klutzes Anonymous*’ myself.” He laughed.

Got it. The cuffs snapped open and fell onto the blanket. He rubbed his wrist, feeling a new shot of urgency.

She laughed. “Come on, now. Tell me what happened to you.”

He kept the phone to his ear as he attempted to stand. “Oh, just another victim of human hate, I guess.”

“Hate? What do you mean?”

Soon as he stood, his head felt very light, and he fell back, catching

himself on the railing. Luckily, he didn't drop the phone. He tried not to sound out of breath or disoriented as he continued. "My wife," he sneered, "the love of my life. She gets herself in a pack of trouble and finds a way to conveniently wrap it all up – simply frame her husband for murder." Noticing the IV, he sat back down and commenced to remove it from his arm.

"That's terrible."

Feeling nauseous, he leaned on the railing, trying again to stand. The room began spinning slowly. He closed his eyes. "Yeah, tell me about it." He kept his voice low so the guard outside wouldn't hear. "I may be in the hospital, but I got the jail suite all to myself," he added, an edge of bitterness to his tone. Finally, getting his bearings, he straightened. Grabbing the phone box, he carried it with him over to his clothes.

"You mean you're innocent? What are you going to do?"

Though unsteady on his feet, he made it to his clothes. He set the phone box down on the chair. His legs felt weak. "End up with the lethal injection if my dear, little wife gets her way. I can't believe.... I mean, I must be so naive. I had no idea." After putting on his jeans, he buckled the leather belt around his waste. Lately, he had to tighten it a little farther than he had in the past.

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

He grabbed his shirt. "There's only one chance. If I could get out somehow, I could get the evidence that would clear my name, but my only opportunity is one hour from right now, and I have to go alone." He began buttoning his shirt.

"Then you have to do it!"

"How? The only way out is past the guard at the door." His voice held deceptive desperation.

"I can help you."

"No. No, you've been kind to me. I don't want you to get in any trouble."

"I won't. I want to help. I really do."

"What can you do?" *Need some suggestions?* He rolled up his sleeves.

"Well, I can scream and get that guard away from your door for a few minutes."

"You'd do that for me?" He stomped his right foot impatiently.

"Sure I would."

“You are sure different from most the people in my life. You know I don’t even know your name?”

“It’s Margaret – Margaret Vanderbelt.”

“If you have a number, I’ll call you and tell ya how everything turns out.”

“Sure. I’d like to hear. It’s...” She rattled off her cell for him.

Derrick wrote it down. He would call her back later and tell her the truth. It was the least he could do. “Okay. I guess we’re all set. Hey, thanks again. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“Sure. Bye.”

“Bye.” He hung up the phone and waited. He knew if this worked, he was going to have to move fast.

A shrill blood curdling scream sounded, followed promptly by another one.

Derrick heard the cop start to go. He waited a moment then opened the door. He glanced down at a crowd gathered by a room about three doors down – the cop inside, then the other way at the near vacant hallway. *Good job.* He was grateful for the woman’s help, even if she did have no idea who she was really helping.

He walked quickly to the stairs, though not too fast as to attract attention.

.....
Jim kneeled back down at the mouth of the cave and looked out. He was just beginning to formulate a plan when....

“Hey, you in the cave!”

Oh, great. He let his eye’s blink shut. *Now what?* It was a desperate prayer for guidance. He chose not to respond.

“I know you’re in there. I suggest one of you answer me.

Jim froze. *We’re dead.* “Derrick’s not talking with you anymore.” It wasn’t a lie. He couldn’t talk if he wasn’t there. “What do you want?”

“You should know that by now. I could kill you at any time, but first Derrick is going to know the defeat that he caused me. I want to see him begging like I had to do.”

“Yeah, well, he’ll have to wait his turn because I get the chance to take you out first, and after what you did to my wife, don’t think you’ll find

it that easy.”

“So, he’s hiding behind you now?”

I just wish he’d come back. “I said, ‘I’m goin’ first!’”

“Fine! I really don’t care how you arrange it! You *both* have until ten-thirty! Because at ten-thirty, a very powerful rocket is going to blow your little cave into the next century! Only one of you is allowed out – anymore and I’ll blow ya now! You’ve got until ten-thirty to try and disarm it!” He gave an evil laugh. “Good luck!”

Jim swallowed hard. Looking down at his watch, he set the alarm to give him a ten minute warning. Now what?

.....

“Stop here.” Derrick ordered the taxi driver, not looking at him, but staring out the window.

“Here?” Taking his eyes from the road, he looked over at Derrick.

“Yes. Here.” His voice held annoyance.

“Okie ... Dokie.” He slammed the brakes. “You do know that this is out in the middle of Nowhere’sville?” He chomped his gum.

Derrick rolled his eyes. “Wait here.”

The driver noticed Derrick’s truck just as Derrick flung open the door. “Hey, you’d better be planning to pay me, boy!”

Derrick slammed the cab door without answering. He limped over to the truck, still stiff and sore from the night before. Every muscle, joint, and ligament in his body told him to lie down and sleep, but he refused to acknowledge them. He said he’d be back, and he *was* going.

After typing in his number code to unlock his truck, a dinging sounded from the dash as he opened the driver’s door. He couldn’t stop from grimacing as he leaned forward to get some money from a small safe under his front seat. This is where he kept most of his important items like extra keys, driver’s license, debit card, checks, and some extra cash. Maybe it had been the way he was brought up or maybe he was too cautious, but he never carried items of value or identification on him. In this instance, that was good since the cops had taken all his personal effects, ending up being nothing more than a flashlight and a knife. He’d lost his mini-revolver somewhere in between the start of the first water crossing and getting out of the canal in town.

He walked back to the cab and handed the money to the driver.
“Here.”
The driver accepted it with a nod. “Thank you. That your truck?”
Derrick glared at him without answering.
“You ain’t much the friendly type, are you?”
Derrick backed a few steps from the car.
The driver raised his brows, put the cab in reverse, and nodded to him.
“See ya around.”

Derrick looked out into the woods. This route was twice as far as the way he’d taken last night, but it was flat with just a few rolling hills – about all he’d be able to manage today.

Resting a scraped hand on a branch above him, he closed his eyes and let the cool breeze and warm beams of sunlight come against his face and refresh him. He felt so much better out here. He wished he could just stay here, block the rest of the world out, and forget it. He opened his eyes. Yeah, he’d tried that once before. He let his head drop. Tragedy still found him.

Letting his hand fall to his side, he started out into the woods.

He had to find out if they had made it. He had to go back. He had to finish what he had started. He wanted more than anything to find a fairytale ending when he got there – Cap to be gone, Jim and Trent to be fine, the good guys to win. He was beginning to wish that life had a place for Cinderella as well as John Wayne.

He moved a pine branch out of his way. But he knew all too well, *life ain’t no fairy tale.*



Br-ring... Br-ring...

Mrs. Thomas switched Morgan to her other arm and let her hold her own bottle as she reached for the phone receiver. “Hello.”

“Hi, it’s Jess.”

“Oh, hi, Honey, I was just giving your little one her breakfast.”

“I bet she’s enjoying that.”

“Seems to be.” She smiled down at the feeding infant.

“I was wondering if you and Pastor would pray about something for me?”

“Of course. You know we will, Honey. Is it about Jim?”

“Yeah, I just got a call from the police up there. They said they are still in the woods. They’ve been there all night! Evidently, Derrick made it back to town and told the police that Cap has got them pinned down. They said one of them is shot... maybe fatally.” Her voice broke.

“Oh no,” Mrs. Thomas replied, softly.

“They said that they sent people out there and that they were going to leave at dawn. It’s eight-thirty now, so that would have been a little over an hour ago. They don’t know if either of them will still be alive.” Her voice quivered.

“Just wait a minute. I’ll go get Frank, and we’ll all pray together now.”

“Okay.” It was barely audible.

.....

Derrick stopped as he heard a soft whinny in the near distance. He turned to the side and walked to the edge of a wide, shallow gully. At the bottom stood one muddy, yet still saddled, buckskin gelding. He quickly assumed it was one of Jim’s horses.

The horse stopped eating and looked up at him as he came toward it, but didn’t run away.

Derrick walked toward it, slowly, holding out his hand and speaking to it softly.

The horse held its head high, ears pointy, watching and listening intently to him.

Derrick wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or not. He moved carefully. “Hey, Big Guy. If I’m not mistaken, we both have an invested interest in finding the same person. How ‘bout givin’ a guy a lift?”

The horse snorted and pawed the ground with his right front hoof as Derrick got close.

Derrick lifted his hand and touched the horse’s neck. It felt very tense. “How ‘bout we work together here.” Danny again pawed the ground.

Though he was sure that he was twice as nervous as the horse, Derrick kept his true feelings concealed. Continuing to rub Danny’s neck, he stepped to the side. Glancing over the saddle, he hoped it was still right.

Coming from Chicago, his total knowledge of these powerful creatures was derived from Westerns.

Without another thought, he jumped up, grabbing the horn and throwing his feet in the stirrups. Soon as he hit the saddle, the horse was off in full gallop. Leaning forward, he grabbed its mane. The bridle and reins were gone, and he hadn't the faintest idea how to steer.

They raced across the gully and started up a hill. Derrick leaned way forward, clinging to the mane, holding on with his knees, desperately trying not to slide off the back as the animal's whole body slanted up as he climbed. Reaching the top, Derrick had to duck even with the saddle horn, as they ran under a very low branch.

For a few minutes, he did nothing but dodge limbs and try to survive as Danny ran full speed, aimlessly. Suddenly, Danny made a quick turn to avoid a tree. Losing his balance, Derrick fell horizontal on the horse's side, nearly going over completely. Arms wrapped around the horse's neck, feet stuck in the stirrups, holding on for dear life, he tried to formulate a plan to get back up top, but all he could think of was being drug upside down if he lost hold on the horse's neck. He could come up with only one idea, which was more of a reaction, "STOP!"

Danny skidded to a stop, mid-stride, nearly tossing Derrick. Then reaching down for a clump of clover, he thumped Derrick's head against the ground causing him to lose his grip. *Ouch*. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see the world if it wasn't right-side up. He tried to look on the bright side. After all, he may be hanging upside down, his bad leg twisted all the ways he didn't want it to go, completely stuck, but at least the horse was standing still. Danny started walking to another patch of clover. "Hey, knock it off! Stop!" Danny didn't listen this time. "Hey, I said stop!" Derrick kicked his leg until the nearest one came loose. "Will you quit it?" Danny stopped. Turning his head back, he snorted, ears flickering, watching in interest as Derrick stood up, hopping on one foot, struggling to get his other one loose. "Thank you," he muttered to the horse sarcastically as he returned to standing on his own two feet. Danny snorted. Derrick just gave him a look.

Deciding to give it another go, he swung back, and like all good cowboys gave a good swift kick. Danny was off full-speed. *Not again*. Derrick clung to the mane, knees holding tight. "Don't you have a low gear?" Swinging toward the side, he ducked to avoid a branch, loosening

the grip of his legs in the process. He noticed Danny had slowed, ever so slightly, but he had slowed. He squeezed again with his legs, and Danny sped back up. Derrick dodged another branch. Well, he had found the accelerator. Now, if only he could discover the steering and the brakes.

Derrick breathed a soft sigh of relief as they came to an open meadow. The absence of limbs to dodge would give him some time to find the controls to this unpredictable form of transportation.

Looking down at the flying mane, he wondered if it would work the same as reins. Deciding to test his theory, he jerked back hard on his mane. Danny did not slow, but stopped immediately, mid gallop.

The sudden stop lunged Derrick forward, slamming his chest into Danny's neck. His breath left him, and he fell to the ground, landing with a thud on his back. For a moment, he just lay there, staring up at the confused animal looking down at him. "So, is that your permanent set of brakes or is it like 'Stop' --- hit and miss?" Danny put his nose down, nudging Derrick's shoulder.

Shaking his head, Derrick groaned as he got back up. This was one week he was never going to forget. Limping over, he put his foot in the stirrup and pulled himself back up...again. Testing him, Derrick gave a gentle squeeze with his legs. The horse walked forward, and with a gentle pull back on the mane, Danny stopped. "Okay, Old Paint, we found the accelerator and the brakes. Now how 'bout the steering?"

Danny twitched his ears back, listening to Derrick's voice, yet not understanding.

"Okay, let's try this." Gently, he pulled the mane to the right. Danny turned to the right. Mane to the left. Danny turned to the left.

"Okay. I think we got it." He squeezed his legs against Danny's sides with again too much force. Danny lunged forward into a canter. Derrick sighed. Wanting to turn, he jerked the mane to the right. Danny spun around quickly, full-circle, and Derrick spun back off onto the ground. Sitting up and resting an elbow on his bent knee, he looked up at the animal. "That is not what I said."

Staring down at him, Danny grunted and bobbed his head.

Derrick smiled. A warmth filled his heart as he stood back up. He rubbed the side of Danny's face. "Let's give this another go."



Jim army crawled behind a large fallen tree and peered over it. *There it is.* For a moment, he just stared at the rocket, an ominous piece of machinery perched on a ledge about fifteen feet off the ground, but then his eyes moved down to its guard, Cap, standing stiff – evil smirk on his face – leaning against the side of a thirty foot shale cliff. The cliff was a narrow c-shape. Meaning to get to him, Jim would have to hike around back and go up the grassy slope to the top and then climb down or walk in the front door.

The back way seemed the easiest... until he had to climb down. There was no way to do that without getting shot, simply because there was no cover. He would have to go in the front door, yet that seemed equally as impossible.

He looked up at the rocky platform near the top. There stood the rocket – aimed at the cave and counting down.

.....

Derrick let his body move with the rhythm of the animal's gait. He loosened his grip on the horn a little. The horse was still charging full throttle, but he was beginning to discover his balance. One thing that amazed him was the horse's stamina. He could feel the strength beneath him, and he loved it.

He pulled gently back, slowing the horse to a walk, then stop, as they came to the bank of the river. It was calm and flowing gently, such a contrast from his crossing last night. "You'd better know how to swim." He commanded the horse forward.

Danny walked down the bank. Tentatively at first, but then without fear, he stepped into the water.

The cool liquid splashed up on Derrick's pant legs. They went slowly forward as the water rose higher up Derrick's leg and Danny's side until as they neared the middle. The land dropped off. Derrick slid off Danny's back and, holding the horn, floated beside him, making it easier for the horse to swim. Then he got back on as they reached solid ground.

Shivers shook Derrick's body a couple of times as they exited the water and walked up the muddy bank. He stopped the horse and turned him to look back a moment at the shimmering water.

The nearly permanent lines of concern, worry, and anger had lifted from his face momentarily. He wondered if this could be a new beginning. He wished so hard for a happy ending. He wondered if everything might work out, after all. He turned the horse's head back en route. He wondered what life would be like if it didn't.

.....

Jim remained behind the log, not knowing what to do. He had to figure something out. Time was quickly fleeing. He looked back up at the weapon. He couldn't get to it without going by Cap. He couldn't see anyway to get to Cap without getting shot, and he couldn't see a way to use his gun because the unique formation of the rocks created the perfect barrier. *What am I supposed to do?* He looked up as he prayed, but no answer seemed to come, at the moment. He looked down at his watch. *Thirty-three minutes.* "Cap!"

"Figure it out, yet?"

"Come on, Cap! Why do you want to kill all these people? We can talk, figure something out!"

"Okay!"

Jim watched puzzled as Cap took his gun and set it down a few feet away.

"Come on in. We'll talk."

Confused, Jim began to rise until a strong grip from behind grabbed his shoulder and thrust him back down. His heart jumped.

"What's the matter with you? You can't just walk in there."

"Derrick?"

"Where's the cops?" They both said it at once.

Jim looked back over the log. "They obviously aren't here yet. They are coming though?"

"Yeah. They supposedly left at dawn."

"Great that's all we need. I bet they got lost or something."

Derrick crawled closer to the log and looked toward the rocky fortress. "What's going on?"

Jim glanced down at his watch. "Twenty-eight minutes that rocket up there is going to blow up a cave with Trent and McMillian in it."

Derrick began digging an embedded rock from the ground. "He's still

alive?”

“Doing better. What are you doing?”

“Got a feeling...”

Still confused, Jim watched as Derrick picked up the large rock and threw it toward.... *BANG!* The ground exploded, spurting pieces of earth in all directions.

Jim ducked. He felt chunks of dirt landing on his back. When he looked back up, a thick cloud fogged the air. He looked down at the crater at the mouth of the c-shaped cliff then looked over at Derrick. “Land mines? How did you know that?”

“No time. We’re going to use them for our own cover.”

“The mines?”

“He’s probably got a row across the mouth, maybe even a double row. You throw the rocks, and I’ll run in while he can’t see.”

“How are you gonna get past the mines?”

“Go where they’ve been blown.” He began digging another rock.

Jim looked around for a rock to dig. “You just said that he might have more than one row.” He found one.

“If I get blown up, you’re in charge of plan B.” He tossed his rock over by the log.

Jim tossed his on top of Derrick’s. “Do me a favor. Don’t get blown up.” For a few minutes, they both worked rapidly to collect as many rocks as they could. “Okay. That’s it. We’ve got to get going,” Jim said, glancing at his watch. Derrick nodded.

They both crawled back to the log and looked over. They didn’t see Cap. Jim glanced at Derrick. “Think he’s somewhere watching us?”

“Where ever he’s at, he didn’t come out of there, so we can still blind him.”

Jim let out a long breath as he picked up a rock. “Ready?”

“When I get close, blow one on the left side. It should be in a straight line from the one I blew. Keep it far enough that I don’t get the shrapnel. Then keep ‘em comin’ fast until I get back.”

“I hope there’s enough.”

“That makes two of us. They should be set the same distance apart. So once you find the pattern...”

Jim nodded. “Good luck. Fifteen minutes.” Derrick crawled away and then stood up behind a large tree. Jim lifted the rock and threw. Nothing.

Firestorm

He aimed a little farther to the side, and *BANG!* Dirt flew up, and the ground shook. Derrick raced forward toward the smoke.

Jim watched Derrick. He made it almost to the mouth before the smoke began to clear. Standing behind a tree, he waited. Looking at the spacing of the craters, Jim picked up another rock and hurled it. *BANG!*

Derrick waited a moment for the large debris to settle then raced in. He was quickly swallowed by the smoke.

Jim threw another. *BANG!*

Derrick held his breath as he jumped up on the side of the cliff. Unable to see Cap, he only hoped it was mutual. *BANG!* Quickly he climbed higher, almost jumping from rock to rock. The higher he got the less smoke he encountered, letting him breathe easier. *BANG!* Derrick reached the ledge and swung up next to the rocket.

Jim picked up another rock – hoping with all hope. He threw it. It landed. Nothing. He threw another. Nothing. That was it... no more mines. Four minutes.

Derrick jerked at the heavy weapon. Tugging with every ounce of strength, he was barely able to budge it a centimeter.

Staying low, Jim ran forward.

The smoke began to clear.

Derrick pulled.

Jim ran in.

Cap, standing by the cliff on the opposite side of Derrick, finally able to see, grabbed his hand gun from his holster.

Jim ran at him and tackled him before he could fire. The two men fought.

The bomb moved about an inch. Derrick put all his strength into it – a second inch.

Cap slammed the side of his gun into Jim's cheek bone.

Reeling, Jim grabbed Cap's arm and twisted it with a fast jerk.

Cap dropped the gun.

Jim slammed his fist into Cap's face.

Cap stepped back. Tripping over a root, he fell to the ground.

Jim looked at his watch. "FIVE SECONDS!"

Cap ran!

Derrick jumped!

Jim hit the dirt!

Sque-e-eal...!

KABOOM!

Jim looked up. When the smoke cleared he saw the rocket had blown a good distance from the cave. He sat up and drew in a long sigh of relief. He glanced over at Derrick, who was coming toward him.

Derrick stopped and stood next to him.

Jim looked up at him. "We made it."

"Yeah. Ridiculous things *do* happen."

Jim huffed a laugh as he stood up. "Man, these past few days have got to be ones for the history books."

Derrick turned his head. "Hear that?"

"What?"

Derrick looked at Jim, a smile crossing his face. "I think the Cavalry has finally come."

Jim draped his arm over Derrick's shoulder. "My friend, lets go meet 'em."

.....

Jessica stirred her breakfast around with her fork as she stared at the red number changing on the digital clock.

She slammed the fork down on the tray. Where was he? Why wasn't he here? Why hadn't he called?

She looked over at the sun-brightened window. Was he the one that was hurt? *He's not dead*. She would know it if he was.

She glanced down at the telephone. Why didn't it ring?

Br-ring! Br-ring!

She snatched the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hi! Jess?" Jim had to yell over the noise of the chopper starting up.

"Jim? Is that you? Where have you been? I was so worried. What happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine! We just got a little delayed!"

"I heard someone was shot."

"Yeah! Trent, but he's gonna be fine!"

"Oh, good. Where are you at?"

"Still in the woods! I'm calling from the Medivac! Look, I've got to go so they can take him out of here, but I wanted to let you know I'm fine,

and I'll be back tonight! It might be late!"

"Thank you for calling. I'm *so* relieved. Hurry back."

"Okay! See ya tonight!"

"Love you. Bye."

She let out a long sigh of relief as she hung up the phone. *Thank you, Lord.*



Jim backed up and watched the chopper take off. He glanced over his shoulder at Derrick walking down the slope toward the charred remains of his cabin. He decided to follow him.

Stopping at the foundation, Derrick stared into the pile of remaining cinders.

Jim picked up something from beside the cellar and put it in his jacket, then came over, stopping next to him a few feet away. "Sorry about your cabin."

Derrick kicked at a pile of fluffy gray cinders. They scattered and floated away on the crisp autumn breeze. "It was never my cabin. It was ours, and *we* no longer exist." He sighed. "This part of my life's over... forever."

"No." Jim looked over at him.

Derrick met his gaze.

"It will never be completely over. You'll always remember it. You'll always remember her." He took the picture that had once decorated the mantle and held it out. "Let the memories be about her life ... her smile." He looked down at it. "And a beautiful fall picnic. Let the memories be happy ones about her life. No one wants to be remembered for their death."

Derrick accepted the picture and then returned his gaze to the rubble. "I just wish it didn't have to end." He paused. "I'll never see her again."

"You could see her again."

Derrick looked off thoughtfully into the distance. He heard Monica's voice seemingly whispered on the wind. "*Derrick, God isn't just a religion. He's a person. He's my Father. Christians are all family.*" He gazed over at a tall pine. "*I want my mansion next to yours, Derrick. We can both be in the cowboy section.*" She always called him a cowboy. He laughed under his breath, wondering if she had seen him ride this morning. *Yeah, cowboy.*

Jim heard the grunt of laughter. "What?"

Derrick shook his head, turning his face back toward Jim. "Nothing. By the way, I think it's your horse that's around here somewhere."

"Huh?"

"He gave me a lift this morning."

"You know how to ride?"

Derrick grunted, a half smile brightening his eyes. "Yeah. Well. It was kind of a crash course, but we made it." He glanced at Jim sideways.

Jim smiled, knowingly. "I think I would have liked to seen that."

Derrick smiled. "I'm glad you didn't. You have a very patient horse."

"Buckskin?"

Derrick nodded.

"Yeah, Danny. He is a good 'ol boy. Got a lot of energy in him, though."

"No-o kidding."

Jim laughed. "I wanted to tell you..."

Derrick looked over at him.

"Trent insisted on making a few calls from the chopper before he left. There aren't any more charges against you."

Derrick raised his eyebrows as he returned his gaze ahead. "Maybe he ain't too bad... for a cop."

Jim slapped him lightly on the shoulder, grinning. "Help me find Danny?"

"Sure." Derrick turned to the side and began walking with him.

"You'll have to come over sometime, and we can ride together."

Derrick nodded, looking down toward the ground.

"Maybe we can talk about things." Jim's voice was soft.

"Maybe." Derrick said it thoughtfully.

.....
Knock... knock.

Jessica yawned as she blinked her eyes open. "Come in."

Mrs. Thomas walked in holding Morgan. "Sorry, Honey. I didn't mean to wake you."

She pressed the button to raise the head of her bed. "Lately, it would be difficult not to. All I seem to do anymore is sleep."

“You just have to let your body heal.”

Jess’s eyes brightened as she looked into Morgan’s sparkling face. She held out her hands. “Oh, let me hold my little girl.”

Mrs. Thomas smiled as she handed her the baby. “This little one has been wanting her mommy all day.”

Jess gathered the baby close to her. “This mommy has been wanting her baby all week.”

“Don’t worry, Honey. You’ll be able to go back home soon.”

“I wish soon would come sooner.” She smiled down into Morgan’s face, then glanced back up. “I can’t wait to see Jim again. I’m just so glad he’s all right.”

“Did they finally get this guy?”

“I think they did. Last I heard, they were tracking him down in the woods, but you know, he was on foot with no fast way out. I’m sure they’ve gotten him by now.”



Jim jumped into his truck and turned the ignition. Finally, he was on his way home. Finally, this nightmare was over.

Mud flew up from under his tires as he backed onto the small dirt road.

He was so glad to finally be off. He would have left over an hour ago if it hadn’t been for his trailer breaking down. Rather than waiting for it to be repaired, he made the decision to board the horses up here and leave the trailer in the shop. He would come and get it later. Right now he needed to be home.

He wished he’d heard before he left that Cap had been caught, but he had no doubts that he would be. He wouldn’t be able to escape the nose of a K-9 cop.



Derrick staggered as he stumbled up the hotel steps. He would just have to stay up in the North Woods one more day because he was just too exhausted to drive home.

He fell sideways, catching himself on the railing as the room blurred in and out of focus. He was overexerted, battered, and starving. A bed never sounded so good. He was sure he looked half drunk as he stumbled

and weaved down the hallway, until finally reaching his room.

He slipped in the room key and pushed open the door. Relief swept over him as he saw the large soft bed. His eyes fell half closed as he limped inside.

The door slammed with a thud behind him.

Without turning on the light, he staggered a few steps forward and fell on top of the quilted comforter, falling asleep instantly.

Stepping behind his wife who was sitting at the kitchen table, Wade leaned forward, draping his arms around her neck.

Tilting her head back, she looked up at him, and he smiled down at her. She put her hand on his forearm that rested on her shoulder. "Are you going to join me for lunch?"

"That looks more like breakfast," he said, looking down at her bowl of Corn Flakes and orange juice.

"It's easy to make. Why don't you go get some?"

"Don't we have any milk?" He got up and walked over to the cereal box.

"No. We need to get some groceries."

Wade got a bowl from the cupboard and began pouring cereal into it. "Where is Davey, anyway?"

"Napping. He got worn out after his demanding job of keeping me up all night." She sighed as she rubbed her face. "Talk about not giving a person a moment's rest."

Wade poured OJ over his flakes. "You should have woken me. I would have helped out." He took his bowl over to the table and sat down.

"No need for us both to be sleep deprived." She swirled her cereal around with her spoon. A familiar cry sounding from the bedroom, Mellissa dropped her spoon and put her head in her hands.

Wade smiled as he got up. "I'll get him."

"Mrs. Richards. Mrs. Richards."

"Huh? What? What is it?" Jess yawned, forcing her eyes open and looking up at the nurse shaking her awake.

“I’m sorry, but there’s a bomb threat. We have to evacuate the building.

Jess’s heart froze. *Oh no. They didn’t get him?* She glanced over at the gurney beside her bed.

Her pulse sped up in fear. She quickly sent up a prayer for the Lord to calm her heart and keep everyone safe.

Wade put his spoon down in his cereal. “Pass the sugar.”

Mellissa picked up the sugar bowl then dropped it as the sound of eerie music startled her. “What’s that?”

“It’s coming from the living room.” Wade glanced around. “Someone must have just put it in our window as a Halloween prank.”

“Halloween isn’t for two weeks. It couldn’t be...?”

“No. He’s still up in Wisconsin.”

“He could have hired someone.” Mellissa jumped up as a loud, shrill, ghost scream sounded. “Wade!”

“Okay.” He got up. “Let’s just go out the back door and call the police.”

“I’ve got to get the baby.” Mellissa headed toward the bedroom, but stopped after passing the small kitchen window. “Waaade?”

Wade came next to her and peered over the curtain. Two men wearing black ski masks were coming up the sidewalk. “Come on!” He grabbed her hand, and they ran for the hallway.

“We’ve got to get the baby!”

“I know!”

Beep! ... Beep!

Derrick groaned as he rolled over, waking up on a cold cement floor. He winced and grabbed the back of his throbbing head. Someone had given him quite a lump, but he didn’t remember any of it.

Beep! ... Beep!

Still groggy, he sat up. A dim light bulb hung from the ceiling, revealing his location. *Bath towels, cleaning solution, Kleenex – I must be in the supply closet.* A thunder clap of pain shot through his head. He

closed his eyes and breathed through it until it passed.

Beep! ... Beep!

What is that? ... Oh no. He noticed smoke seeping under the door, and the smell finally greeted his nose. Determination shot through him. They hadn't gotten him yet.

Getting up too fast, he had to catch himself on the wall to keep from blacking out.

Falling against the door, he grabbed the knob, pushing and jiggling it.

No use.

Locked.

Stiffening his neck and squinting from the pain radiating through his skull, he slammed his shoulder a couple of times against the door.

Locked.

Backing up, he lifted his leg, and with all the force he could muster, slammed his foot right under the knob.

No good.

He fell back against the wall – Breathless, weak, drained, and in pain.

He was going to die.

He wasn't ready.

.....

Jim tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to the music coming from his CD player. He really didn't pay any attention to the SUV passing him, until it boxed him in with a semi to the left, then slammed on the brakes. Jim quickly swerved onto the off ramp to avoid the collision. *Either that guy is off his nut a mile and a half, or... Oh great.*

The SUV spun around and followed him onto the ramp.

That's him.

Soon as they were off the ramp and on a small two lane, Jim stomped the gas.

The SUV found no problem in keeping up.

They were the only two on the road.

A surge of adrenaline shot through Jim's veins as the car sped up beside him. He caught a glimpse of the driver – Cap.

.....

Jess tried to stay calm though panic was rising in her soul as they wheeled her down the hallway.

An out-of-breath nurse running the other way stopped them. “You have to get out now! They found the bomb! It’s going to blow in two minutes!” He left.

Both attendants began running with Jess’s gurney down the hall.

Lord, help! Please! Please! Don’t let us die!

.....

Kneeling next to Wade in the bottom of their closet, Mellissa clutched her newborn next to her chest. She clung to Wade, listening to the sounds of the murderers rummaging through her house. *Please, God, protect us.*

The sounds, footsteps, and mumbling grew louder as they came down the hall, as they came closer ... and closer.

.....

Derrick rummaged wildly through boxes – tearing, dumping, searching for something, anything to get him out of here. For the first time in his life, he felt extreme panic.

He tore open a cardboard box letting the paper towels inside spill to the floor. *I don’t want to die!*

He ripped open another one. Nothing. “God, I’m sorry! Please get me out of this! I don’t want to die!”

A haze was beginning to fill the room. There wasn’t much time!

.....

The SUV beside Jim slammed sideways into the back of his truck, causing its back tires to squeal to the side. Jim pulled his truck back toward the middle.

The SUV, now behind him, burned rubber, accelerating fast and... *WHAM!* It crashed into his back bumper, pushing him forward and out of control.

Jim jerked the wheel back, but over compensated. He couldn’t gain control before...

CRASH! The SUV delivered the death-blow, side ramming him and sending him flying toward the ditch.

Firestorm

Jim stiffened as his truck flew up and began to flip.

The nurse that had warned Jess's attendants, grabbed what he had come for and ran after them.

They all swung around the corner together.

Jess grabbed the sides of the gurney so as not to fall off.

They all raced toward the approaching door, through it, and out into the parking lot. They were barely a safe distance away before...

KABOOM!!!

The entire hospital wing erupted into a gigantic fireball!

Mellissa's heart went cold as she heard the killers enter their room. She felt Wade nudge her deeper into the large walk in closet.

Silently, Wade grabbed a giant, black, wool blanket and put it over them all.

Mellissa clutched her baby closer, praying as she lay flat next to her husband that her little one wouldn't cry.

Footsteps approached.

The closet door opened.

The light flipped on.

Wade and Mellissa held hands, both silently praying under the blanket.

One of the evil men held his gun up, taking a step forward to search the closet.

The sound of sirens approached from the distance.

Please, Lord, protect us.

The footsteps backed away and back down the hall.

Relief. *Thank you. Thank you, God.*

Still ripping apart boxes, Derrick coughed on the thickening smoke. He tore open another box of paper towels and threw them down on the floor.

Nothing.

He coughed again.

There was no way out – no way that he saw.

Backing up, he knelt down in the middle of the small room and looked up. “God, I need your help. I’m going to die in here ... and go to hell! I want to go to heaven... but I don’t know how! I know I don’t deserve it, but give me a second chance. Please, give me a second chance!”

His eyes moved over to a large box under all the shelves in a back corner. Coughing, he crawled over to it and pulled it out. Before he could open it, he noticed something else behind it, way in the back. He leaned forward to grab it – a screw driver! His heart leapt for joy.

Gasping for air, he ran over to the door and popped out the hinges.

Greeted by a soupy hallway, he held his breath and made a mad dash for the stairs but skidded to a stop at the top. They were engulfed in flames.

He glanced over his shoulder – end of the hall – window. Without hesitating he raced toward it.

Reaching it, he spun around and kicked out the pane.

The glass shattered.

He jumped.

His lungs filled with precious, life-giving air.

He hit the ground.

Relief. He made it. He was alive. He had another chance.

.....

Jim unbuckled his seatbelt, letting himself fall onto the roof. Blood dripped down into his eye. He wiped it away with the back of his hand.

“Get out of the car.”

He looked over at Cap, pointing a gun through the window.

Crawling out, Jim subtly reached for his....

“Keep your hand away from that gun unless you want your brains blown out!”

Jim pulled his hand back and got out of the truck. Feeling disoriented as he stood to his feet, he grabbed a tire to pull himself up.

“Over here.” Cap motioned with his pistol, smiling. “I just had to take care of you and that....”

“Derrick.”

“Yeah, personally.”

Jim crossed his arms and leaned back against the front of his upside down truck. "I'm touched."

"Yeah, well, Derrick was first."

Jim didn't know why emotions didn't come over him. He didn't believe him. "Yeah? How'd you manage that?"

A smile crossed Cap's face. "He burned alive in a small, cleaning closet."

Jim wasn't sure why, but he still didn't believe him. "I wouldn't bet on it. Derrick has a way of escaping at the last minute."

"Not this time. He had just as much of a chance as your wife – none."

Jim's expression turned to concern, but fear didn't fill his heart. He had a feeling so strong, as if God Himself was speaking it. *"They're okay. I protected them."*

Jim couldn't keep from staring into the man's eyes. They looked as if they had real fire in them – blazing with a fierce, satanic hatred.

"Come here!"

Jim walked forward, taking the opportunity to get in the man's space.

"You're next."

"I wouldn't bet on that either." He stopped less than a foot in front of the man, continuing to stare into his eyes.

He raised his gun. "I *am* going to kill you this time."

Jim stood with confidence. "You can't ... not permanently."

The fury grew hotter. "Watch me!" His voice was a growl.

"The worst you can do to me is kill this body, because I have a promise from God of eternal life." His voice was soft and calm. "You can still..."

"Kneel!" The fire in his eyes exploded.

Jim hesitated a moment.

"Now!" He raised his gun higher.

Immediately, Jim ducked under the gun's level and slammed his shoulder into Cap's diaphragm.

The gun went off.

Cap reeled, stepping back.

Jim grabbed Cap's wrist, trying to make him drop the weapon.

Cap stomped Jim's instep.

Jim grimaced but refused to let go.

Jim lifted his knee and thrust it into Cap's stomach at the same time as

Cap brought his free forearm down in a striking blow to Jim's neck.

Both men reeled, drawing their hand back.

The gun flew into the ditch, firing on impact.

Cap jerked his head around to see a car going slowly by at that same moment. Turning, he raced for his car.

Jim chased after him.

Cap jumped in his car.

Jim reached for the door.

The door slammed shut, and Cap stomped the accelerator. The SUV jumped forward, squealed, and raced away.

In a last ditch effort, Jim tried to flag down an oncoming car, but it had no intention of stopping.

.....
"If you need anything else, just let me know."

Jess nodded and watched the nurse go out the door. She turned her head to gaze out the window. It was dark, and Jim wasn't back yet. She knew he said it would be late, but she needed him here with her.

Turning her head, she stared up at the white ceiling. She wondered if he'd even find her tonight. She was in a different hospital across town, and he would have to do some searching to even find out if she were still alive. Still alive – she was, and she was very grateful, but she didn't feel safe. She thought this murderer had been caught – evidently not. Still, she had felt safe at the last hospital with all the security and the guards. Now... now some of those same guards were patients just like she was. One was even dead.

Silent tears began rolling down her cheeks. Why did this all have to happen?

.....
"MacGyver or Bonanza?" Mellissa looked up from the stack of DVDs she was rummaging through.

Wade yawned. "Mellissa, it's getting late. Aren't you planning to ever go to bed?"

"Oh, it's not that late, yet. We can stay up a while longer. Want some more popcorn?"

Wade leaned his head back against the top of the couch. "You are going to keep us up all night."

Melissa snapped open a case and put the DVD in the player. "After this afternoon, that might not be a bad idea." She walked over and sat down next to him.

"They caught the guys that did it."

"Hired guns. Even eight hours away, he's still after us. What's going to keep him from hiring more? They haven't caught him yet." She picked up the flipper and pressed the menu key.

"There is going to come a time when you have to sleep."

She looked toward the TV. "It hasn't come yet."

He slipped his arm around her. "You haven't had a good night's sleep since the baby came."

She looked down and fingered the buttons on the remote. "I don't think it's safe for us both to sleep at the same time."

"Okay. If it will make you feel better, I'll stay up tonight and sleep during the day."

"You don't look like you can stay awake."

He gave her a look. "I think I can manage it."

"Okay, but let's watch one more. I'm not ready, yet." She clicked play.

.....

Unable to sleep, Jess lay on her back, staring up into the darkness.

"Jess?"

She quickly turned toward the door. "Jim?" Finally! He was back! "Come in and turn on the light!" Her voice betrayed excitement at his return.

"I shouldn't keep you awake. I just needed to know you were okay."

"I won't be until you come in and talk to me."

Jim walked in and turned on the light. "You should be resting."

"You expect me to sleep after the last hospital I was in got blown halfway to Mars? I mean people got hurt. Some even got killed. I thought they were going to get that guy. What happened?"

Jim shrugged as he sat down on the edge of the bed. "I thought there wasn't any way they wouldn't be able to get him."

“But they didn’t.”

Jim shook his head. “No, they didn’t.”

Jess’s face turned to concern. “What happened to your face?” She reached up to touch the gash above his eye.

“I met up with Cap again on the way home.”

“What?” She sat up.

“Yeah.” In weariness, he let his head hang. “It has been a rough past few days.” He brought his gaze up to her. “But the worst part was coming back and not knowing if you were okay, not knowing where you were. It’s more than just love between us. You’re my life.”

Tears coming to her eyes, Jess offered herself for a hug.

Jim gathered her into a secure embrace.

Tears rolled down her cheeks freely as she leaned forward into his shoulder. “Don’t let go. Don’t ever let go.”

.....

Behind the wheel, Derrick’s eyes began to close, and his head started slowly drifting downwards. His arm fell, and the car swerved.

He jerked his head back up. *Come on, Derrick. Wake up!*

He circled his head around. Rubbing his eyes with one hand, he turned the steering wheel to pass a semi. He felt like he could sleep for a week.

After his near miss with death this afternoon, he’d felt such an urgency to get home that he just had to go. He yawned. He’d gotten some sleep before that, but not enough, not near enough.

His truck began to vibrate as his tires went over the grooves on the shoulder. He shook his head hard and turned the car back onto the road. His head began to throb and the car in front of him began to blur in and out of focus. He had to stop. He had to get some sleep.

Rest stop – one mile ahead.

He would stop there and sleep in his truck.

Chapter Thirteen

The next couple of days went by pretty uneventfully, for which everyone was thankful. Today, however, would be quite a different story.

“Mr. Richards?” the nurse whispered quietly so as to wake Jim up without disturbing Jess.

Rolling over, he propped himself up on his elbow. “Yeah?”

“We got a call. He said he had to see you right away. He said he’d be here in five minutes and asked if you could meet him in the lobby.”

“Who?”

“He didn’t give his name. It sounded pretty urgent.”

“Thanks.” Jim sat up. His mind began to race over the possibilities. Wade? Pastor Thomas about Morgan? What was wrong? He quickly got up and went down to the lobby.

Soon as he got there, he looked around and saw Derrick coming in the front door, but his manner wasn’t urgent.

Derrick walked toward him, nonchalantly. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Jim glanced around for someone else.

Derrick followed his glance then looked back at him. “Looking for someone?”

Jim glanced back. “Huh?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Did you tell the nurse to have me meet you down here?”

“No.” Derrick glanced toward the stairs, and Jim read his mind.

“Jess!” Jim turned and made a mad dash for the steps.

Derrick followed.

They raced up the stairwell, through the door, and down the hall.

Jim burst through the door to her room.

Cap stood over Jess with a knife. She was sleeping.

“Hey!” Jim yelled.

Jess jerked awake.

Derrick ran at Cap.

Cap spun around and hopped out the window onto the fire escape. Derrick chased him up.

Jim raced back out the door and toward the stairwell, yelling for security on his way.

Cap jumped from the ladder onto the roof.

Derrick reached the roof a few seconds later.

Cap raced across the concrete toward a parked Medivac.

Derrick pursued faster. Catching him halfway, with a flying leap, he tackled Cap from behind. They both tumbled to the ground.

Rolling on top, Cap slammed his fist into Derrick's face.

Derrick's head jerked back from the impact, slamming down hard against the pavement. *WHAM!*

Cap came down on top of him, kneeling, yet nearly sitting on Derrick's stomach. Grabbing the front of Derrick's shirt, Cap pulled him partway up, ready to....

Derrick thrust his arm up, blocking the next blow. Still stunned, he tried hard to regain his senses as he brought his knee up. Able to get them up to Cap's chest, he jammed them into him, pushing Cap backwards off his body.

Cap tumbled backwards to the ground, but didn't remain there long as he jumped back up, but Derrick managed to get to his feet before Cap could kick him back down.

Cap's face filled with violent rage. Every muscle in his face and neck strung tight, veins protruding, he charged at Derrick like a wild man.

When Cap reached him, Derrick grabbed his shirt. Cap stomped his instep, and as Derrick reacted to the pain, he thrust a power-packed fist into his stomach.

Reeling, Derrick bent forward; then before Cap could react, he rammed his shoulder into Cap's diaphragm. All the air in Cap's lungs released in one giant breath.

He was pushed back a few steps, but he returned with even greater force and anger. He gave a powerful cross to Derrick's cheekbone and followed it up with a crushing jab to his chin, then, with uncontrollable rage, grasped his hand around Derrick's throat.

Derrick gagged, but was able to bring up his arm to block Cap's other hand from grasping around his throat. With his other hand, he grabbed Cap's wrist and tried to force his hand away. Unable to breathe, every nerve in Derrick's body began to jump. He clasped Cap's wrist tighter, slammed his left foot into his knee, twisted his arm quickly backwards and slammed his free fist into Cap's eye.

Cap released his hold and fell backwards.

Derrick stepped back, doubled over, gasping for air.

Jim raced up the stairs two at a time, going as fast as he was capable. Security guards followed close behind. He glanced at the floor number as he rounded the corner – two more levels.

Standing close, facing each other, Cap and Derrick wrestled fiercely. As Cap tried vehemently to get his hands around Derrick's throat, Derrick called on every ounce of his remaining strength to hold him back.

Raising his leg, Cap kicked his foot hard in the front of Derrick's thigh, pushing him backwards. Then, quickly pulling a switchblade from his pocket, he charged Derrick again. Derrick jumped out of the way, but Cap continued flinging the blade around, cutting it through the air. Derrick dodged each attempt until Cap swung around behind him, slicing the blade through his shoulder. Derrick grimaced, reeling in pain. Cap yanked out the blade, and with a yell, Derrick fell to his knees.

Cap raced for the chopper.

On his knees, clutching his shoulder, Derrick just stared at the chopper as the blades began to spin. Bringing himself to his feet, he took a few steps forward before falling back to the ground. Watching the blades spin faster, Derrick gritted his teeth. *No! Not again. He is **not** going to get away again!* Forcing himself to his feet, Derrick ran toward the chopper.

Jim raced through the door and onto the roof.

Derrick grabbed the handle on the chopper's back side door.

The chopper began to lift.

Defying the pain, Derrick jumped inside, and fell to the floor.

The chopper went up.

Jim stood watching in disbelief. The security guards joined him.

Derrick lay on the floor of the chopper holding his shoulder, out of breath, losing blood.

"Autopilot engaged."

Smirk crossing his face, Cap got out of the pilot's seat and made his way toward Derrick.

Derrick was at the end of his rope. Panting, he just lay there watching Cap advance toward him with a knife. For a moment, he wasn't sure if he had the strength left to react. Just as Cap got too close, a surge of adrenaline shot through Derrick's veins. Without thinking, he rolled sideways and thrust his leg up, slamming his shoe into Cap's chin.

Cap fell backwards to the opposite wall of the chopper, and dropped

his knife.

Derrick used the seat in front of him to pull himself to his feet.

Again, Cap, in wild rage, came at him trying to clasp his hands around Derrick's throat.

Derrick stopped the hands on his shoulders, with all his strength holding them down. His breaths were long and hard as he tried to stay above the excruciating pain. His head began to feel light.

Cap unlatched the door with his foot.

It flew open.

Cap twisted his hands, forcing Derrick toward the open door.

As Cap swung him sideways, Derrick forced his body backwards just in time to cause himself to swing into the wall and not out the door.

In rage, Cap grabbed the front of Derrick's shirt and swung him back toward the open door.

This time Derrick managed to push himself forward, again avoiding the fall and instead, slamming into the wall. Disoriented, Derrick stepped back in front of the open door.

Growling, Cap violently accelerated toward him.

Just as he was about to be shoved out, Derrick dropped to the floor.

Flying over top of him, Cap screamed as he fell out the door and to his death.

Grabbing his shoulder, moaning, Derrick rolled on his back, feeling too weak to get up.

.....

Not having the faintest idea of what to do, Jim stood in a line with the security officers looking around for something, anything he could do, anything that would give him an idea. He jerked his head to the side as he heard one of the officers say that someone had fallen out. "What?" He had not been watching the chopper and had not seen it.

The officer looked at him. "Someone fell out."

Jim's mouth dropped as he looked back in the chopper's direction, but saw nothing, as it had already gone out of view. *Cap or Derrick? Please, don't let it of been Derrick.*

He looked down just then noticing a red spot on the pavement. *Blood.* He walked toward it.

.....

Derrick stumbled to the front of the chopper.

Leaning on the seat for support, he stared blankly at all the buttons, meters, and dials. *Now what?* Sitting down in the pilot's seat, he put on the headset. Hopefully someone could explain to him how to land this thing ... before he passed out.

.....

Jim knelt down by the puddle of blood on the roof and the bloody handprint beside it. The wounded person had been down for a few moments. If it had been Cap, Derrick would've had him. He looked thoughtfully in the distance. So Derrick was at best hurt, and one of them had gone out of the chopper. Who was still alive?

"Look, he's coming back!"

Jim looked to the sky. *There it is!* It was coming back. It had to be Derrick! He watched it a moment as it came closer into view, his heart rejoicing. Then, His heart froze as he watched the chopper go into a nose drive for several hundred feet before bobbing and weaving back up. Yeah, that was Derrick all right. Cap knew how to fly. Stepping back, Jim sent up a quick prayer as the helicopter began to spin.

All the men on the roof seemed to relax a little as the chopper straightened itself out, momentarily. However, that was short lived as it started weaving and jerking – back and forth, up and down, side to side ... one-eighty.

It was almost back to the hospital when ...

Nose drive!

Watching, Jim froze momentarily before joining the security guards in running for safety as the bird headed straight for the roof.

Just moments before explosion, it jerked back up.

Jim let out a sigh of relief, but apparently too early as the next two landing attempts were just as heart-stopping.

Finally, to everyone's surprise, Derrick got it right and landed safely.

Jim ran over to him and opened the door. "Derrick!"

Slumped forward on the controls, Derrick didn't answer. Barely conscious, he turned his sweat-drenched face and tried to push himself up

but fell forward back on the dash.

A huge, red splotch covered Derrick's shoulder. Blood dripped down his arm.

Derrick jerked as Jim applied pressure to the wound.



As they took Derrick inside on the gurney, Jim matched the fast pace of those pushing him, in order to stay beside him.

Derrick turned his head. "Jim?" The voice was barely audible.

"Yeah?"

"I thought after my near miss with death a few days ago, I was safe for a while. Apparently not." He paused, grimacing in pain. "I'm not ready to die. Would you pray for me?"

That had to be the biggest shock Jim had had in a while. The Lord was working on Derrick's heart. "Sure I will." *Thank you, Lord.*

Derrick's head fell to the side, unconscious.

"You need to stay here," a nurse instructed as they rolled him into a room.

Reluctantly, Jim stopped. *Please, protect him, Lord. He wants to know. Don't let him die without you.*

Chapter Fourteen

Jim flung his halter and lead over the top board of their white, split-rail fence. Jess walked up behind him and put her arms around his waist. “What ya doin’?”

He put his hand on her arm. “Just workin’ with Danny.” He pulled her around in front of him, quickly noticing her smile as she came into view. He loved that smile. It warmed his heart and brought a smile to his own face. “What are you doing out here? You are supposed to be resting.”

“Jim, how long have I been *resting* in that hospital? I’d almost forgotten what it was like out here.”

Jim smiled. “This is just your third full day. Don’t overdo it.”

“I won’t. You call the hospital yet, to see how Derrick’s doing?”

“No. I should go see him today.”

Jess nodded, smiling. “I’ll go with you.”

“Jess-i-ca.” He pulled her closer to him.

“Oh, seriously, don’t be such a mother hen. I’m fine.” She looked up past Jim. “Al-though, it doesn’t appear that you’ll have to make that trip.”

Jim turned around to see Derrick walking toward their property. He laughed under his breath. “Yeah. That guy *did not* get released yet.”

Jess, holding her husband’s hand, swung it, gently. “I don’t want to hear any more about *me* pushing recovery.”

Jim smiled back at her. “Come on.” They both began walking toward the drive to meet Derrick.

They met in the middle. “Hey, Derrick. You’re sure lookin’ a lot better than yesterday.” He looked tired. Bruises marked his chin and cheekbone. He limped and his arm was in a sling, but Jim was still amazed he was not only out of the hospital, but he was walking.

“Yeah. Getting out helps a lot. Hi.” He nodded at Jess to acknowledge her.

“Hi.” She smiled. “I must say, I’m surprised they let you out this soon.”

Derrick cocked his head in a shrug. “They didn’t.”

Jim laughed.

“What?”

“You have just restored my faith in normalcy.”

Derrick rolled his eyes, light-heartedly. “Yeah, well, I think they try to keep you in there longer than necessary.”

“Ex-actly,” Jess agreed.

“Derrick. You just...”

“Yeah, I know. I’m fine.”

Looking around, Jess had to ask. “They impound your car? Or-r did you just feel like walking... all the way from town?”

“Some guys slashed my tires.”

Jim let his eyebrows jump. “Sorry.”

Derrick shrugged. “I probably had it coming. Got in a fight with them a couple weeks ago.”

Jim nodded. “Why don’t you come on in and sit down.” He nodded at the house.

Derrick glanced at Jess. “A few days ago you offered to show me your trails.”

“Sure. This is a great morning for a walk.” He just hoped Derrick was up to it. He looked weak, and he noticed drops of perspiration on his neck despite the cool temperatures and despite he was only wearing a light cardigan compared to Jim’s Sherpa-lined jean jacket.

Jess smiled at them. “How ‘bout I have a hearty, “down on the farm” breakfast waiting for you when you get back?”

“Jess.” Jim frowned.

She put her hands on her hips. “If you don’t stop making like I’m an invalid, I’ll... I’ll not make you any and just let you smell mine.”

“Don’t...”

“Over do it.” Jess joined him. “I won’t – for the fifteen hundredth time! Have a good walk.” Her hair bounced as she turned to go.

Derrick gave a partial smile – half compliment and half regret. “You got a good one.”

“Yeah.” Jim nodded in agreement as they began walking toward the woods. He looked up at the nearly bare limbs swaying in the wind and the few remaining leaves falling to the ground. “Awesome day, isn’t it?”

Derrick drew in a deep breath of the crisp, chilly air. “Yeah, it doesn’t get much better than this.”

Jim caught the passion in his voice and glanced over at him. “Great day to be alive?”

He looked toward the ground thoughtfully. “I almost never saw it.”

Jim nodded. Smiling to himself, he stopped as they came to the trail entrance. "I can't believe you left the hospital already."

Derrick grunted a laugh. "Yeah, the paramedic that enjoys hospitals as much as the fireman who won't go near them."

"Hey, I can face my fears. I even slept there with Jess a few nights."

Derrick chuckled. "Now, there is true love."

Jim huffed a laugh, glancing sideways at him. "Yeah." He put his hands in his pockets to warm them from the cool breeze.

Side by side, they walked silently for a few minutes down the trail, just enjoying the morning.

Jim broke the silence. "Been thinking about Monica lately?"

Derrick stared in the other direction. "I've never stopped thinking about her... from the moment we met."

"Come up with any answers?"

He stopped and looked toward the ground. "I guess I'd like to know how to get to heaven."

Jim could hear the bad taste in his voice. "Why? Because you want to see Monica again?"

Derrick glanced up at him. "Is that wrong?"

"No, but it's not going to work if you still have a strong dislike for God. You can't just be good for a few years to earn an admission ticket. You have to change from following sin, accept Christ's free gift, and follow Him. It's about changing sides in the battle, from the devil to the Lord."

Derrick started walking again. "He doesn't care about me. Why should I care about him? My parents didn't deserve to be burned alive in a fire."

"Life isn't fair. Little girls don't deserve to die from cancer. Little boys shouldn't be killed in crossfire from drive-by shootings. Innocent children shouldn't be raped. Athletes shouldn't be crippled. Sweet little Grandma's shouldn't die, but it happens every day."

Derrick glanced up. "And He doesn't care."

"Doesn't He?"

"I don't know."

Jim glanced sideways at him. "Having doubts?"

Derrick shrugged, staring in the other direction. "Maybe."

"When God created the world, it was perfect. There was no sin and death of any kind. Animals were even vegetarians. So were people. There

wasn't any violence, but when man sinned the world changed."

Derrick leaned sideways against a tree, listening.

"It won't be perfect again till Christ returns, but Christ has conquered sin and death. He provided a way so people could live perfectly again. When He came to the earth, he was perfect and he remained perfect his entire life."

"He lived in this world and remained perfect?" Derrick's voice held disbelief.

"Yeah, He did. He was God. He is God. That's why he could die for our sins. Because He is sinless and the begotten Son of God, He could make that payment and take away the sins of everyone that would accept him – past, present, and future."

Derrick's knee buckled.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Derrick limped over to a fallen log and sat down on it sideways with one leg on each side, leaning back against another tree.

Jim sat down on the other side. "You're really sweating."

Derrick rolled his eyes. "God sent his Son to earth to die. Seems like that comes up every time someone talks religion. Why?"

"Because if he hadn't, no one could be saved."

"Saved from what? Hell?"

"Yes."

Derrick shook his head. "And you call that a God of love. Someone that I am suppose to serve? My father didn't love me, but he would never have made me burn in a fire if I didn't do what he wanted."

"Hell wasn't made for humans. It was made for the devil and the demons. He made humans perfect. In the garden of Eden before sin, God even came down and talked with them."

"Then they deserved Hell because they ate the wrong piece of fruit?"

"No, because they became sinners. They self-destructed themselves. Suddenly, they became capable of twisted premeditated murder, disgusting sexual sins, horrible abuse and torture, hurting innocent people in so many different ways and, in many cases, enjoying it. All the things we were saying earlier were unfair in life, that's sin. Compare that to a completely holy, sinless God – never lied, never cheated, never mocked or bullied, never sinned. Heaven is a perfect place. There has never been one sin ever allowed there, and there never will be.

Derrick put his foot on the log and lay his forearm over his knee. “So, if He created people, why doesn’t He just not allow them to sin?”

“Derrick, you can program a computer to say, ‘I love you.’ Would it have meant more coming from your computer or Monica?”

Looking down at the log, Derrick nodded.

“Because she didn’t have to love you, she chose to. God gave us a free will. He didn’t make us robots. He gave us emotions. He tells us what is right and wrong, then lets us choose. We can either accept or reject his gift.”

“His gift?”

“*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16).* Eternal life’s the gift, and it’s free to anyone – the rich and famous as well as the murderer on death row.” He said it slowly and with meaning.

Derrick glanced down then back up, waiting for more.

“We were talking about God’s love. After sin, He decided to make a way so that man could have another chance. The Bible says that God is *not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9)*. He sent His only begotten Son. The only One He had. The One that had been with Him before the earth was formed – who, like His Father, knew no sin. He sent Him down to a sin-cursed world to be born as a baby and live as a man with physical limitations and temptation, yet He never sinned. Jesus, God Himself, accepted the task of redemption willingly. He died for us. When he was a little over thirty years old, the time came that He would do what he was sent for – be crucified, sacrificed for our sins.” Jim snapped a tiny twig with his fingers. “Before they took Him, he was kneeling in a garden praying, asking God if it was possible to take this cup from Him. The Bible says that He was so sorrowful that his sweat was like great drops of blood. This wasn’t something easy for Him to do, but He did it.” Jim paused.

Derrick waited.

“They took him and put Him on trial, lying about Him so they could kill Him. They mocked and spit upon Him and hit Him. They took a crown of long thorns and pushed them into His head and pulled out His beard. Then they whipped Him. The Bible says that when they got done beating Him, He didn’t even look like a man.”

Derrick’s face turned even more serious. Looking into the distance, he

could see the scene as Jim described it.

“Then they took Him and nailed His hands and feet to a cross, then stood around and laughed, mocking and scorning Him as they watched Him die. The Bible says that at anytime He could have called ten thousand angels to set Him free. Instead, as He hung, bleeding and dying on the cross, He looked out over the laughing crowd and said, ‘*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*’ (Luke 23:34)”

Brow furrowed, Derrick looked down at the log thoughtfully.

“There was still the spiritual side. While He was on the cross, He took the sins of every person that would repent--- past, present, and future--- on top of Him. He, who’d never experienced sin or guilt from His own actions, yet while He was there, He took it all – every rape ... every murder, all the crime and shame of the world,... He took it all.”

Derrick looked up at Him.

“And God can’t look at sin. For the first time ever, God had to turn His back on His own Son. Hanging there dying, Jesus cried out, ‘*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*’ which means, ‘*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*’ (Mark 15:34) He was all alone.” Jim paused. “Then after crying with a loud voice, ‘*It is finished,*’ He died. The earth shook. The rocks split open. And the vale in the temple was rent in two. The soldiers standing around were afraid and said, ‘*Truly this was the Son of God.*’ (Mathew 27:54) Then, they buried Him, as if that was it. He was dead, but He didn’t stay dead. Three days later, he physically rose again, victorious over death and hell. What we call death is just going to sleep. Every person will wake up somewhere – eternal life in heaven or eternal death in hell. We will all stand before God one day. He will sort the true Christians from the unbelievers. Anyone whose name is not written in the *Lambs Book of Life* will not be able to go into heaven, and there are no more chances after that.”

Derrick stared down at the log a few moments, thinking.

Jim waited.

Derrick glanced up, then looked up at Jim. “I could find more reasons to argue with you if it wasn’t for the fact I know I’m wrong.” He looked down.

“Many people are. You have to realize it before it’s too late.”

“I guess I’ve always known in the back of my head.” He rolled his neck. “I just didn’t want to admit it. Monica used to read about the

crucifixion at Easter. I listened for her, but I never really got it. I think I understand now.” He shook his head. “But it’s no use now.” He let his head fall back against the tree. “After all the things I’ve said about Him, after all the things I’ve done, I could never be good enough.”

“No, you can’t. It’s only a great deal of pride that causes people to think they can. This is what Jesus said about it, *‘Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity’* (Matthew 7: 21-23). No one will ever get to heaven on their good works. *‘Jesus saith unto them, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father, but by me.’* (John 14:6) It’s a gift that can’t be bought, yet it cost Jesus a great price, and *He* will give it to anyone.”

“How do you get it? Just believe that He’s God?”

“Partly, but that’s not all. James 2:19 says, *‘Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.’* That’s not good enough. You need to believe in the gospel ... and say you do. Romans 10:9 says, *‘That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.’* You have to repent of your sins, acknowledging they’re wrong. Acts 17:30 says, *‘God...commandeth all men everywhere to repent.’* Then you need to ask Christ to save you. Romans 10:13 says, *‘Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’*”

Derrick nodded. “Okay.”

“You want to pray then?”

“Yeah.” Derrick grimaced as he pushed himself up from the log and knelt on the ground.

Jim got up and knelt in front of him. Putting his hand on Derrick’s shoulder, he silently prayed for Derrick as Derrick prayed aloud.

“God,... I’m sorry.... I was wrong. I’m sorry it took me so long to realize it. I guess it’s pretty obvious I’m a sinner. I’d like to ask your forgiveness, and that you would... pay for my sins, too. I do believe that you are God’s Son, that you died on the cross, and rose again the third day. I’ve heard it so many times. I guess it finally got through. Thanks for finally making me understand. Please ... save me. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Derrick looked up. A joy he'd never known filled his heart. He felt like a new man, like a heavy burden had been lifted from his back.

Jim slapped Derrick's arm as they got up. "Welcome to the family, brother."

Derrick smiled. "Brother? Did we just become related or something?"

"Oh, yeah. You just inherited one large extended family, aka, every born-again Christian in the world."

Derrick raised his eyebrows. "That may take a little getting used to."

"Just remember, like any family there maybe quarrels and disagreement at times, but love can cover anything and hold ya together."

Derrick nodded slowly. "I don't know a lot about family."

"You'll learn." He slapped his shoulder. "Ya gotta come to church with us this Sunday."

"Okay."

"Just keep in mind, there are a couple of older ladies that always mean well and are very sweet and caring when you get to know them...."

Derrick smiled at the subtle hint. "But?"

"Don't get offended and leave the church like the last two visitors did."

Derrick laughed as they began walking back. "You'll have to point them out to me."

"Good idea. If you can make a great first impression, you may be set for life. Just be charming."

Derrick kicked a branch out of the path. "Please, don't repeat that word to me."

"What word? Charming?"

"Yeah. I had to use a young lady in order to get out of that hospital up in Wisconsin. I called her this morning to explain."

Jim grabbed a leaf off a tree and began tearing it as he walked. "Use? ... Did she understand?"

"She cried ... too long and too hard."

"What did you promise her?"

"Absolutely nothing. All I did was give her a story that was a little simpler and more dramatic than the truth."

"If you want a biblical answer try, '*Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor.*' (Eph. 4:25)"

"That one of those commandment things?"

“Ten commandments? No, it isn’t. I’ve got a couple of extra Bibles. I can give one to you.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ve got Monica’s.”

“You kept it?”

Derrick shrugged. “Don’t know why?”

Jim nodded slowly. “Most Christians believe it’s good to read it every day. I usually read mine right after I wake up so it’s with me throughout the day, but I know some people that read it at night. There’s not really any rules, just as long as you have time to think about it.”

Derrick nodded.

“If you start having flashbacks again, get it out and read it.”

Derrick looked up at him.

“It’s God’s words to his people. It’s powerful.”

“Okay.”

They walked together for the next few moments in silence. It was a good silence – a relaxed silence – a silence where he could actually walk beside Derrick without feeling his tension. He glanced up at Derrick’s face. The suspicious eyes were calm. The tense muscles were relaxed. The hard set determined jaw was loose. He seemed quiet, as if his mind had finally stopped its constant jumping from one thing to the next. For the first time, he looked like he felt free.

The path began to narrow as they came back to Jim’s property.

Jim took a long whiff of air as they turned off the path onto the grass. “I think I smell breakfast.”

Derrick nodded. “Smells good.”

They walked together toward the house.

Wade and Mellissa stood in front of the porch talking to Jess. Both women stood holding their babies, laughing.

Jim glanced sideways at Derrick, seeing, as he expected, his expression grow solemn. Watching Wade as they approached, he saw the same change in him. Wade had stopped laughing, and stood stiffly with his hands in his pockets.

Jim and Derrick came to a stop by the group. Mellissa acknowledged them. “Hey, Jim, I brought back some books I borrowed from Jess. She invited us to stay for breakfast.”

Glancing down at the plastic bag of books beside her, Jim smiled and nodded, “I’m glad you can stay.”

Wade and Derrick just stood staring soberly at each other. Jim could feel the temperature drop twenty degrees.

Jess glanced from man to man. Trying to lighten the mood, she let a wide smile cross her face. "I hope you're all hungry. I made plenty. Your choice of the works egg omelets or waffles loaded down with strawberries and piled with whipping cream. I spared no calories."

"Sounds great. I'm starved." Jim slapped Wade on the shoulder. "Great to see you guys again." He glanced at the baby. "How's the little guy? Got him enrolled in Little League yet?"

Wade didn't answer, so Mellissa did. "We aren't even going to bother with Little League. Little Davy here is going to be the youngest member in the NFL. No... wait."

Jim and Jess began the round of laughter. Derrick and Wade couldn't help joining in.

Still laughing, Jess leaned forward, putting her hand on Mellissa's arm. "I think Mommy's got some research to do before Junior hits the Major Leagues."

Mellissa held Davy tighter as she bent forward laughing. "Oh, don't worry. I'll get it right."

Morgan squirmed in her mother's arms, laughing too and clapping her hands.

Still giggling, Mellissa leaned forward, offering her free hand. "Hi, you must be Derrick. I'm Mellissa. Wade talks about you a lot."

Derrick's smile turned slightly sarcastic. "I hope he told you that I'm not the murderer he thought I was."

Jess and Mellissa simultaneously turned and looked at Wade.

Wade stiffened and crossed his arms. "I guess I was mistaken."

Derrick let his eyebrows jump up. "I guess."

There was a moment of silence. Everyone seemed to be staring at Wade.

Wade stepped forward, offering his hand. "I was wrong. Accept my apology?"

Derrick took his hand. "Yeah."

Jim smiled, stepping up next to them. He draped one arm over the shoulders of his old friend and the other over his new one. "I'd say it's time we go sample those killer waffles." Together, they all three walked toward the house.

Firestorm

Bouncing their babies, Jess and Mellissa followed.

Jim looked from one friend to the other. “Then after breakfast, me n’ Wade can demonstrate to you the basics of that All- American sport – tackle basketball.”

Jess and Mellissa exchanged glances.